TUS: Midlands Midwest, Guidelines for Conducting Focus Groups for Quality Assurance Processes 2022 – 2025

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Contents

1.0   Introduction

A focus group is a gathering of purposely selected individuals with the aim of participating in a planned discussion intended to prompt insights and analysis about a particular topic or area of interest in an environment that is positive and facilitates constructive engagement. Focus groups allow members to interact and influence each other during a discussion and a consideration of ideas and perspectives. In this context, they function as a collective on purpose and aim at group discussion to complement and enhance individual responses to formal questions and produce qualitative data. In this context, Krueger et al (2015) noted that *"A focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment."* [1]

The use of focus groups provides a fundamental tool in self-evaluation exercises. Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest, has a broad range of quality assurance fora and processes during which self-evaluation plays a critical role. These include *Academic Faculty, Department and Programme Reviews, Reviews of Technological University Support Units*, and targeted *Thematic Reviews* of specific topic areas critical to the University Vision, Mission and Strategic Planning. The production of a *Self-Evaluation Report* is a frequent output of such quality assurance processes and, in this context, the deliberative and discursive aspect of focus groups have the potential to provide valuable inputs to such self-evaluations and the resulting reports. In addition, University staff may run focus groups with students both in the context of self-evaluation exercises and as a teaching and learning tool.

2.0   Scope of Document

This document is a reference guide for planning, structuring and implementing a focus group session. It has been created as a resource to support staff who are running focus groups as an approach for self-valuation exercises, information gathering and collation with TUS: Midlands Midwest Staff or Students.

3.0   Focus Group Planning; Overall Considerations

While the overall aim and objectives of focus groups will vary, there are key components around planning and structuring a session that can be followed to ensure the required information is gathered. Different approaches provide opportunities for gathering input from individuals and groups and ensure that the appropriate emphasis is placed on key topics to obtain the necessary information.

The format of a focus group will depend on the number of participants and the way it will be moderated. *"Participants are selected because they have certain characteristics*
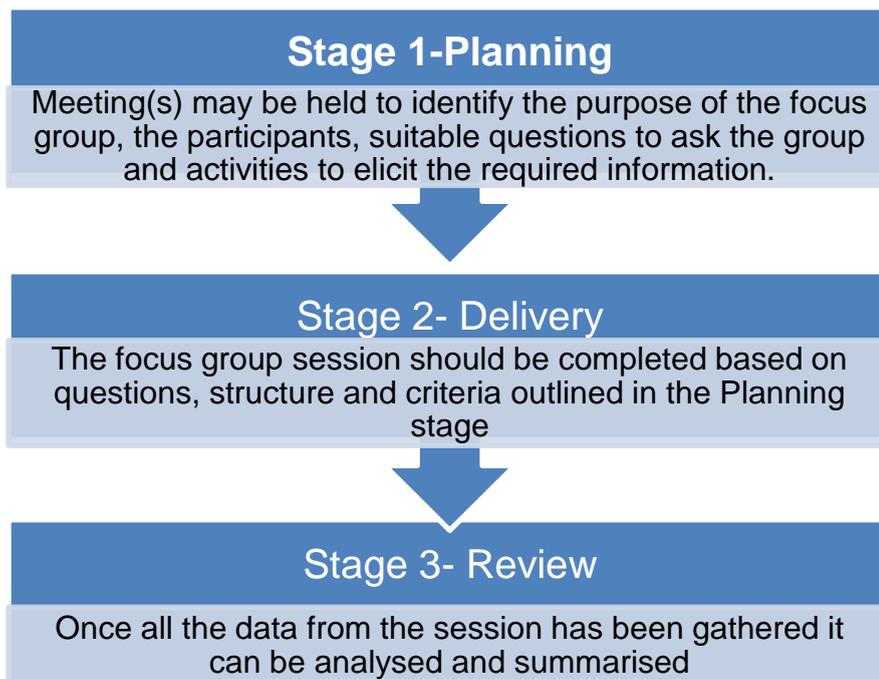
in common that relate to the topic of the focus group" and the *"intent of the focus group is to promote self- disclosure among participants"* [1]. It is important to establish the purpose of the focus group early on in the planning process. Some key preliminary questions to consider include:

- What is the purpose of the focus group?
- What is the key information that needs to be gathered?
- For what themes and/or topics is the information being sought?
- Who are the participants needed to gather the required information?
- What activities and tasks can be utilised to assist the deliberations of the group?
- How will the focus group be moderated?

These general considerations will determine the questions and topics to ask the group. The questions should be sequenced so that they focus on specific key topics relating to the purpose of the focus group and allow the group to progressively discuss the topic in more detail as each question is answered sequentially. Identifying the participants will inform what activities and tasks are most suitable so that the work of the focus group and its outputs can be optimised. The remaining considerations centre on how the group will be moderated, and the resources and tools required for information collection and collation.

4.0 The Typical Stages of a Focus Group

The typical Stages of a focus group include *Planning, Delivery, and Review* and an overview of these is provided in Figure 1.

Stage 1-Planning
Meeting(s) may be held to identify the purpose of the focus group, the participants, suitable questions to ask the group and activities to elicit the required information.

Stage 2- Delivery
The focus group session should be completed based on questions, structure and criteria outlined in the Planning stage

Stage 3- Review
Once all the data from the session has been gathered it can be analysed and summarised

Figure 1: The typical three Stages of a focus group.

4.1   Stage 1. Planning

Careful planning is the key to the success of a focus group. It is recommended that the individuals organising the focus group have an initial planning meeting. The aim and purpose of this planning meeting is to identify the following criteria:

1. Establish the aim/purpose of the focus group;
2. Identify the required participants needed to complete the focus group;
3. Decide on the type of moderation for the session;
4. Design the questions for the focus group and map the questions back to the aim of the focus group session to ensure the correct information is being gathered;
5. Structure the session (outline of the session activities and session details including time, location, duration and resources needed for group activities).

A follow up meeting will normally be required to review the questions and the proposed session structure. The critical considerations in the planning process are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. The Planning Phase; Key Considerations

1	*Establish the aim/purpose of the focus group*
	• It is important to identify the aim/purpose at the start as questions and activities will be based on this:
	• What are the aims/objectives of the session?
	• What is the issue/topic that is being reviewed?
	• What information should be gathered and why is this information required?
	• How will this information be used?
2	*Identify the required participants*
	• Which participants will the topic/issue be most relevant to?
	• Are all relevant stakeholders included?
	• How will participants be asked to take part?
	• Do participants need to be nominated by designated parties/entities (e.g. management/staff/external members/others)?
3	*Decide on the type of Moderation for the session*
	• Who is a suitable person to provide an open atmosphere for discussion and that can facilitate participants giving their opinions and feedback?
	• Will the moderator be external or internal to the group?
	• Depending on the size of the group and the type of activities, is an additional person required to run the focus group and gather feedback from the group?

4.1   Stage 1. Planning

4	**_Questions and Topics_**
	It is important to allow enough time for participants to complete and answer each question. Consider how much time is needed per question, especially if they are group questions (10-15 minutes per question; note that this typically gives 5-7 questions that can be asked in a 2-hour focus group session).
	It is important that questions are designed to:
	• align with the aim/purpose of the focus group;
	• focus on one aspect or issue at a time;
	• be relevant and address the interests or concerns of the participants;
	• allow for open discussion.
5	**_Structure the Activities_**
	Once the questions have been selected, different approaches can be used to gather feedback from the participants. Participants may be asked to give individual feedback using online survey/questionnaires on some questions and then asked to discuss other questions as a group using flipcharts, etc. Depending on the duration of the session the format will vary but will include the following sections:
	• Introduction ;
	• Icebreaker;
	• Questions;
	• Summary and Wrap up.

4.2   Stage 2. Delivering the Focus Group

The focus group session should be completed based on the criteria, structure and questions, developed and outlined during Stage 1. It is important that the agreed planning outcomes are used as the basis for delivery.

At the start of the focus group, the moderator should welcome and thank participants for attending the session. The group should be provided with an overview as to what the focus group is about, and its overall aims.

The moderator will outline that all data gathered and outputs from the focus group will be fully compliant with the *Data Protection Acts* 1988 to 2018[3] and the *General Data Protection Regulation (EU)*[4] 2016/679". The moderator should also provide the focus group members with an outline statement informing participants and all contributions during the session will be aggregated and anonymised so that the contributions of individual participants cannot be identified.

This can be followed by the moderator asking the group to create their own the code of practice. This is an important part of establishing a positive and constructive dialogue among participants and an atmosphere that encourages maximum participation. This should only take a few minutes and refers to respecting different opinions and being respectful towards other participants to allow each voice/opinion to be heard.

The moderator can then begin with the first question which may be an 'Icebreaker' question to ease into the dialogue.

The Delivery Stage can be comprised of the following:
1. Introduction;
2. Icebreaker question/activity;
3. Completing questions;
4. Gathering feedback;
5. Summary and wrap up.

The critical considerations in the Delivery Stage are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Delivering the focus group; key considerations

1	*The Introduction*
	• It is important that the moderator gives an introduction and overview for the focus group to identify what the aim and purpose of the session is.
	• Participants should be given an outline of the focus group.
	• The group should come up with their code of practice.
2	*The Use of Icebreakers*
	• Depending on the size of the group and duration of the session and the participants the type of icebreaker question will vary.
	• This can be a basic question where each participant introduces themselves or a group activity where participants are encouraged to work co-operatively on a task.
3	*Completing Questions*
	• Participants will be asked to answer or think about the different questions.
	• Active group participation can be encouraged using some of the following approaches such as Think-Pair-Share or DeBono's Thinking Hats (C.f. Active Learning Methodologies[2]).
	• Working in groups, participants are asked to give suggestions and solutions to issues they identified in the earlier session. Here groups can be asked to think about all topics or just to focus on specific ones.
4	*Gathering Feedback*
	• The moderator asks a question to the. It is important to allow time and wait for a participant to contribute. When participants respond the moderator can then ask follow on questions to get more specific details.
	• Participants can be provided with resources/media to record their answers (for example using flipcharts to answer questions or use Mentimeter for online activities- (Mentimeter).
	• Feedback can be gathered via an online questionnaire or survey tools. This allows each participant's contribution to be gathered.
	• If feasible, a dedicated note taker can be assigned to the focus group to aid with the information gathering process.
	• Audio recording may be taken if appropriate in accordance with the principles of informed consent and the *TUS Data Governance Policy*.

5	***Summary and Wrap up***
	• In the final section the Moderator will summarise the main points of discussion including: the main themes/issues should be highlighted; and any potential recommendations arising should be identified and any final perspectives may be captured.
	• Participants may be provided with the opportunity to affirm agreement/disagreement with the main points emerging.
	• It is important that participants are thanked for their contribution.

4.3   Stage 3. Review of the Focus Group Outputs

During this stage the data can be analysed based on the Aims and Objectives of the focus group. The Analysis Stage should be a systematic process which completes the following phases:

1. Analysis during the session;
2. Gather data and feedback from the group;
3. Review data and analyse feedback from the group;
4. Generate a report on the findings.

The critical considerations in the Review Stage 3 are summarised in Table 3

Table 3. Review of the Focus Group Outputs

1	*Analysis during the session*
	• Identify the key issues, concerns or topics that emerge from the dialogue during the focus group.
	• The Moderator then follows up with participants and seeks clarification or further information on a topic or issue.
	• This process feeds into the Summary and Wrap Up session (Stage 2, Step 5).
2	**Collate data and feedback**
	All sources of data can now be gathered and analysed; these may include:
	• Written group contributions that were completed by the group on flip charts, etc.
	• Any notes taken by a dedicated person tasked with taking notes.
	• Any audio recordings that were taken, these may need to be transcribed and then summarised.
	• Any online surveys/questionnaires.
3	*Review data and analyse feedback*
	• Analyse feedback and identify key findings for each question.
	• Based on the findings, the themes will emerge based on each question and also main themes for the overall session
	• It is important to identify the following areas:
	• Areas of agreement, disagreement and improvement
	• Possible solutions and recommendations.
4	**Generate a report on the findings**
	The report should present a summary of the responses from the questions asked and also identify the key themes that emerged from the discussion.
	It is important to identify where there are issues, concerns and suggested ways for improvement and enhancement.
	• The report should reference quotes from participants where suitable.
	• The structure of the report will vary but may include the following sections:
	• Overview and Objectives;
	• Structure/Methodology;
	• Summary;
	• Main Findings;
	• Conclusion.

5.0 Additional Resources

The following links contain sample focus group templates and activities that may serve as a resource for adaption

1. [De Montford University - Questions for student focus groups](#)

2. [Resource: Planning and Conducting Transfer Student Focus Groups](#)

3. [A Guide for Planning, Organizing and Managing Focus Groups](#)

4. [Boston College – Focus Group Protocol](#)

5. [Rosanna L. Breen (2006) A Practical Guide to Focus-Group Research, Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 30:3, 463-475](#)

6.0 References

1. [Krueger, R. and Casey, M. (2015). Focus Groups. Thousand Oaks, SAGE NA, 5th Edition](#)

2. Active Learning Methodologies. Available from: [Active Learning Methodologies.pdf](#)

3. [Data Protection Acts](#) 1988 to 2018

4. [General Data Protection Regulation (EU)](#) 2016/679