



PLANNING UNIT

Focus Groups and In-depth Interviews

Focus groups are a qualitative research method that involves bringing small groups of people together for a guided discussion with a facilitator. The idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less accessible in a one to one interview. It is important that the facilitator is knowledgeable about the project and ensures that all topics and materials are presented in context. Generally, focus group sessions are video taped or recorded so that information provided by respondents is captured verbatim and replayed after the discussion for analysis.

The size of a focus group must promote discussion, but still be manageable for the facilitator and allow all participants to contribute (i.e. not too large). A focus group will therefore typically consist of 6-12 people. A session is generally run with members that share similar characters (e.g. age, education status), with a cross section of views obtained by multiple sessions. The time for a focus group session can vary from one hour to several. In this case respondents are usually compensated for their time. While focus groups are an excellent method of receiving specific feedback from each individual, it can be a very labour intensive process.

In-depth interviews are similar to focus groups however are conducted on a smaller scale, usually on a one-to-one basis. A researcher would generally set very specific selection criteria for each person.

A brief step-by-step guide for undertaking a Focus Group

Before the focus group session/s:

- 1. Define the purpose/s of the focus group:**
The objectives should be clear and specific to assist the design and implementation of the study.
- 2. Establish a timeline:**
Make sure you include sufficient time to identify participants, develop and test questions, locate a venue, invite and follow up with participants, and gather any required materials.
- 3. Identify participants and number of sessions required:**
Identify potential participants using key attributes based on your objectives. The number of focus group sessions required will also be guided by your research question and the number of potential participants. For example, if obtaining feedback from all international students on services offered at Deakin University you may require focus groups to be conducted at each campus location.
- 4. Generate the questions and write a discussions guide:**
To be effective, focus group questions should be open-ended and move from the general to the specific. For example, you might first ask "What services have you found useful while studying at Deakin?" and follow this with "What aspects of these services have you found most beneficial?" and eventually become even more specific like "Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the library?". It is important to review and test questions to ensure that they will best meet the study objectives during the session timeframe. To assist the facilitator a discussion guide is often created. Use the guide as a template outlining the desired questions, possible prompts and questions to open and close the session. The use of a discussion guide helps to keep the focus group discussion on track.
- 5. Select a venue and time for the focus group sessions:**
Convenience and accessibility for the target population should be considered when selecting a time and venue for the focus group sessions. The room should be of suitable size, provide adequate comfortable seating and be well lit and ventilated. When booking timeslots anticipate the potential for session to run a little run over time. If sessions are long or over lunch time refreshments should be provided.

- 6. Invite participants and inform them on the study and focus group details:**
It is standard to invite more people than required (typically twice as many) as no shows are common. To maximize participation and attendance incentives such as food or vouchers can be offered.

During the focus group session!

- 7. Setup:**
The facilitator should arrive before the participants to set out the room and any refreshments. Seating should be arranged so that all participants can view one another.
- 8. Opening:**
The facilitator welcomes the group, introduces the purpose and context of the focus group and explains how the session will work. Participants should also be reminded that the session is being recorded and by what means. It is also recommended that some ground rules are introduced to ensure that all people participate in the discussion and interact in a respectful and effective way e.g. don't interrupt people when they are speaking.
- 9. Questioning and discussion:**
During this time the participants should be talking to each other (rather than addressing the facilitator), asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each others' experiences and point of view. Here the facilitator is assisted by the discussion guide but also adapts their responses to best utilise the current discussion e.g. ask spontaneous questions that arise from the discussion and probe deeper into unexpected responses. During this time it is important that the facilitator encourages quieter group members to contribute to the discussion while keeping the group on track and on time.
- 10. Closing:**
The facilitator thanks the participants and provides an opportunity and avenue for further input. They also detail how the data will be used and reassure the participants that they will have access to the results once collated.

Interpretation and reporting of results.

- 11. Summarize each session:**
Soon after each session transcribe the notes and write a summary of the focus group based on the recording and any notes taken during the session. As well as quotes the notes may include details on body language/behavior, tone etc.

12. Analyze the summaries:

Look for trends (comments that seem to appear repeatedly in the data) and notable unexpected comments in the focus group summaries. Keep in mind that context and tone are just as important as the reiteration of particular words. If a comment (or a number of comments) seemed to be phrased negatively, elicited emotional responses, or triggered many other comments, they are worth noting in the results.

13. Write the report:

The final report can take many different shapes. Nonetheless, it should include: information about the background and purpose of the focus group, details of the sessions, results, and conclusions. During the report a researcher typically draws together and compares discussions of similar themes and examines how these relate to the attributes within the sample population. It is important to try to distinguish between individual opinions expressed from the actual group consensus. Furthermore, a report usually includes at least some illustrations of the talk between participants, rather than simply presenting isolated quotations taken out of context.

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