Staff Guide – Running focus groups

What is the purpose of a focus group?

Focus groups are a popular method of gathering qualitative feedback, where the organisers can gain insights from a structured or more open-ended group discussion. Focus groups are useful for understanding the reasons behind preferences and exploring the participants' more emotional reactions to the topic under discussion. The ebb and flow of a group conversation produces points, ideas and observations that might not appear in quantitative feedback.

What should a focus group look like?

Focus groups are ideally made up of between six and 12 participants, with participating students (as far as possible) representing a mix of genders, levels of study and academic departments.

Ideally the discussion should be led by two moderators:

- One moderator can guide the conversation while the other records participants' contributions, or;
- In the 'duelling-moderator' format, the two moderators can deliberately take opposite sides on the issue under discussion.

The moderator(s) open the session by introducing themselves and explaining the purpose of the focus group. They should also set out the ground rules of the session and explain how points raised in the group discussion will be recorded and used in the context of the wider project.

It is often beneficial to provide focus group participants with visual or physical materials to stimulate conversations in the group. This "stim" could include draft marketing assets, or a PowerPoint presentation showing how a new initiative will work.

Is a focus group the most appropriate option for gathering feedback?

Focus groups are excellent for gaining a snapshot of how students will respond to a new idea, service or proposition. They also allow students to put forward their suggestions and ideas on how certain propositions could be improved.

However, the nature of a focus group means that the sample size of the feedback gathered will be small and not necessarily representative of UCL students at large. While focus group organisers will often attempt to construct a diverse group of participating students, there is a very wide range of backgrounds and characteristics represented at UCL, meaning that groups can never be taken as representative of the wider student population.

Focus groups can also be susceptible to "groupthink", or one participant dominating the conversation, although these risks can be mitigated by skilful moderators.

Potential alternatives to focus groups

While conventional focus groups have their own benefits, there are alternatives that can also gather useful qualitative feedback:

- **Online polls with ranking options and open comment sections** – If you are looking to assess student preferences, you could consider using an online poll where options are ranked e.g. first to fifth. Participating students can then be prompted to add the reasons for their rankings in open comments.

- **Voting pads in larger venues** – If you're holding a "Town Hall"-type event in a lecture theatre or large seminar room, you can issue the attendees with voting pads to indicate their preference between a range of options e.g. different covers for a prospectus. This allows the host to break down the proposition and the various options verbally, without "groupthink" taking hold of decision-making in the room. Voting pads can be borrowed from the AV Centre at UCL.

- **Interactive workshops / hackathons** – To determine or define the best possible user experience for a new product or service at UCL, it may be useful to work through the process in a workshop-style session. These sessions are more task-focussed and less exploratory than a focus group, while still giving students a strong sense of agency and influence over UCL's projects.

It's worth noting that focus groups can be used in combination with other feedback methods. For instance, if staff are unsure of why their department received a certain result in a survey, they may decide to hold a focus group to explore the issue further.

Finding participants for focus groups

If you want to gather feedback from students in a specific department or faculty, there are a number of options for organising focus group participants:

- Post on Moodle boards to encourage students to sign up
- Post on social media
- Ask Student Academic Representatives in your department or faculty to promote the opportunity: Academic Reps often have their own channels of communications with students, such as WhatsApp or Facebook groups.

Think carefully about your students' needs when scheduling focus groups. For instance, if you have a lot of part-time or commuter students, it may be worth scheduling the session immediately after a well-attended lecture or seminar to make it easier for students to attend. You could also use Doodle Polls to determine the best date and time for the focus group.

If your topic, service, proposal or idea is relevant to students across UCL, you can promote the focus group opportunity via the Student Experience Panel. The Panel has over 1,000 members who receive an email newsletter every six weeks, offering them opportunities to give feedback at UCL.

Activities featured in the Panel newsletter typically include an incentive in recognition of the participating students' time and engagement. Incentives for an hour-long activity usually have an approximate value of £10 and could include a voucher or a free lunch.

Submitting a proposal for a focus group to feature in the newsletter is straightforward, using the Panel's digital opportunity form.

Ground rules

Before the group conversation gets underway, outline the rules for how the conversation should proceed. These rules can be adapted as necessary, but should always be transparent and made explicit to the participants:

1) Participation in the focus group is voluntary, even if you receive an incentive.
2) You can abstain from any question you don't want to answer, and are free to leave at any time.
3) There are no right or wrong answers.
4) Participants should respect the views of others, even if they disagree.
5) Points raised in the discussion will be recorded anonymously, and names of participants will not be shared.

Types of questions

While one of the advantages of the focus group format is that it allows conversations to flow organically, the group moderator(s) will occasionally offer prompts and questions to the participants. There are a range of different questions / prompts they can put forward:

1) **Free listing / "brain storming"** – Participants freely suggest solutions to a problem e.g. slow turnaround for academic feedback. The group can then dive into the proposals that seem most popular or feasible.

2) **Ranking** – The group is asked to collectively decide upon their preferred ranking for multiple statements / propositions. Conversations between participants can be very illuminating in this scenario. In a university context, focus group rankings can be particularly useful when trying to discern what students think is the most pressing issue e.g. timetabling, facilities or academic guidance.

3) **Thinking of the future** – Questions that ask how participants would advise future students can be a provocative prompt e.g. "*How would you advise future students* to get the best out of the careers service?"

4) **Digging / exploratory questions** – These questions are particularly useful once the topic and subject of the discussion has already been introduced. The questions should be open-ended and encourage participants to put forward answers that would not be possible in quantitative feedback. Examples of exploratory questions include:

        (a) "*What do you think are the reasons for* so few students meeting their subject-area librarian?"

       (b) *"What would encourage you* to attend hustings between candidates for election as SU sabbatical officers?"

       (c) *"What problems do you see* with module evaluations in your department currently?"

       (d) *"What was the most valuable* piece of academic advice you received this year? Where did it come from?"

5) **Exit questions** – These are valuable in "sweeping up" any perspectives that may have been missed during the main discussion. For instance: *"Is there anything else you would like to say about why you would or would not* want to stand for election as a Student Academic Representative in your department?"

Preparing to host a focus group – a checklist for organisers

✓ I've considered the goals of the focus group in relation to my project. I know what information I'm seeking and what needs to be discussed in the group conversation. I've considered if any or all of this information could be more effectively gathered elsewhere e.g. online polls posted on Moodle.

✓ I've promoted the opportunity to join the focus group via the appropriate channels, considering whether it is a faculty / department-level discussion, or a UCL-wide topic.

✓ If using the Student Experience Panel, I've planned an incentive in recognition of the participating students' time and effort.

✓ I've selected my focus group participants, making appropriate efforts to bring together a demographically varied group of students to reflect UCL's student population, considering: gender, level of study, subject area, ethnicity.

✓ I've booked a venue which has sufficient seating space and appropriate A/V resources.

✓ I've considered the need for "stim" materials, and have printed any relevant materials in advance of the session. When using electronic or A/V equipment, I have tested this in advance of focus group participants arriving at the venue.

✓ I've got a colleague or Student Rep who can act as co-moderator / scribe and record the participants' feedback throughout the session.

✓ I've prepared a list of questions / prompts for the focus group discussion and have sense-checked it with relevant colleagues.

Contact us

Send an email to student.engagement@ucl.ac.uk with any queries and the Student Engagement team will be happy to assist you.