

The Social Accountability Framework for Health Workforce Training (Version 2, June 2014)

Guide to conducting Focus Groups / Interviews

Training for Health Equity Network

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Introduction

The below Guide has been created for you to consider the steps of organising, recruiting, and conducting focus groups / interviews.

Qualitative focus groups and interviews aim to uncover deep and rich descriptions and understandings of topics under investigation. They are used to find out the 'why', or the 'patterns of meaning' in the collected data. In this evaluation they are also used to uncover information which is not written down but is stored within corporate memory of participants.

When using multiple collection methods, such as in this project, focus groups/interviews assist in the development of themes with the collected data. The data collected can be triangulated with information collected from documents, research and other written corporate information.

The process below can guide both focus groups and interviews, unless specified as one or the other. Please note: interviews are generally with one participant only, whereas focus groups are for multiple participants

If you wish to know more, a good Interviewer book is:

- King, N., & Horrocks, C. (2010) Interviews in Qualitative Research. Sage Publications, London

1. Participants and Recruitment

The participants you may wish to question for this project have been identified

- Academic and professional staff members of the School
- Students at different levels of the course
- Community members and/or health sector representatives/preceptors

There are a number of ways of recruiting participants which are relevant to the evaluation focus groups / interviews:

- Purposive – Contact individuals relevant to this project and request to meet
- Convenience – Contact individuals who are easy to access
- Snowball – Request the 'purposive' and 'convenience' participants to find/recruit other participants
- Theoretical - Participants who are determined by the data analysis

2. Preparing for focus group / interviews

It is important that any ethical considerations have been met (i.e. ethics applications submitted and approved), and that the interviewer is familiar with the open-ended style questions recommended (see below).

If voice recording of participants is used, the voice recorder will need to have its batteries, and tape or electronic capacity checked and/or updated prior to starting. A mobile phone can be used to record data.

Who should run the interview? If your school has funding, you should employ a research assistant to undertake interviews. There could be issues with data collection if a lecturer or faculty member interviews students or community members. Students may say what the faculty member wants them to say as there are issues with power differences. There needs to be a balance: the interviewer should be familiar with the school and social accountability; but not too “close” to those being interviewed.

3. Starting the focus group / interview

To meet the ethical guidelines, informed consent forms and information sheets will need to be handed out and/or completed prior to starting the focus group / interview. Ethical guidelines require that participants are advised that the interview is a voluntary process and they can leave at any time during the interview or refuse to answer any questions. For a focus group it is important to make sure the informed consent form advises that ‘due to the nature of focus groups, confidentiality cannot be assured’.

When starting an interview it is important to start with relatively unthreatening questions. Building rapport is important to gather information from participants. It is best to ease participants into an interview and ask basic descriptive questions first, such as ‘how long have you worked/studied at the School?’, ‘when did you become the academic advisor?’ Allow the interview to be a smooth transition to the main topic while providing you with necessary descriptive information.

Placement of the voice recorder is to occur unobtrusively in the middle of the table.

4. Questioning

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups are designed with a framework of questions in mind. They are designed to open up a conversation, with the questioning flexible based on participant feedback.

The focus group questions recommended for this project have been pre-determined by the key components. The questions developed are traditional qualitative questions that are open-ended and designed to be used in a semi-structured interview. Interview questions are most specific to a school context, if you wish to develop some for your school, please use the evaluation framework key indicators and aspirations as a guideline.

During focus groups, it is important to manage the group process, specifically making sure that each participant has a chance to answer each question. Some strategies include: 1) Ask the question then

have each participant respond one by one; 2) Ask the question, follow the organic participant response around the table, then ask the thoughts of the participants who had not responded.

Therefore both an interviewer (someone who asked the questions) and a moderator (someone who helps record non-verbal communication and helps manage the group) should facilitate a focus group. Focus groups ideally involve six to eight participants, more than eight participants can become unmanageable.

Depending on the participants, the questions can be asked in a different way. For example, for staff ‘what is your understanding of the values of the School?’ can be turned into ‘What do you think the School believes in?’ for students.

When preparing to facilitate a focus group / interview, prepare some probing questions. There are a number of probing questions; the two most used are elaboration and clarification.

Probe Type	Detail	Example Question
Elaboration	Encouraging participants to provide more information. Usually ‘how’, ‘when’, and ‘what’.	(1) Aha, go on (nodding of head) (2) You mentioned... How does that work? When did that occur? What strategies might you use for that process?
Clarification	For information you have not understood (i.e. acronyms, names and places)	(1) Could you explain to me what...(ABC)...means (2) Which campus did that occur on? (3) Could you tell me more about ...(scenario)

5. Finishing the Focus Group / Interview

It is also important to ease participants out of an interview or focus group. It is unpleasant for both parties to end on any difficult questioning. Plan closing questions that are non-confrontational and allow participants to add anything they wish to the interview process. Examples are:

- Is there anything you wished I asked about?
- Is there anything you want to talk about regarding the evaluation itself?

Leave the recorder on until the end of the focus group / interview as often these closing questions will prompt valuable information.

After you finish each focus group / interview, write down the key themes that came out of the discussion. This will help you when it comes time to analyse for key themes across all focus groups / interviews.