Focus Groups – Staff Guide

**LONDON’S GLOBAL UNIVERSITY**

A group of people sitting on steps

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# What are focus groups and what is their purpose?

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?

## Number of participants:

Focus groups are ideally made up of between **six and twelve participants**, with a **diverse group of participating students**. Less than six participants may result in a limited amount of participation needed for the focus group to be beneficial and over twelve participants may be difficult for any single mediator to handle.

## Types of participants:

You should try and have a **diverse set of participants**, such as those from different academic departments and levels of study, as well as different genders and nationalities. Your type of participant may also need to change depending on the aim of your focus group and the types of students you are hoping to gather feedback from. More information can be found on this in the [Finding participants for focus groups section.](#_Finding_participants_for)

## Types of Focus groups:

Focus groups have predominantly always taken place in person in a **face-to-face** setting. However, the current climate has opened up the possibility for **online** focus groups. When designing your focus group think about whether you would like to have it in person or online and the deferent challenges that each may pose.

### Face-to-Face Focus Groups:

Face-to-Face focus groups provide an opportunity to activity engage with participants in a close and personal setting. They offer a great opportunity to read participant body langue can give a rich amount of valuable feedback. Face-to-face focus groups can sometimes be limited by location and space, for example you may be confided to a room that can only take a certain number of individuals and participants may have to travel to get to the session. Please also make sure that when you hold a face-to-face session it is booked in a location that is accessible, some students may use disability aids, such as wheelchairs and it is important to book the space that will allow them to easily attend. **Currently Face-to-face session are unable to take place due to the covid 19 pandemic. Please check the** [**Information for UCL staff website**](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/coronavirus/information-ucl-staff-0) **for updates.**

### Online/Virtual focus groups:

Unlike face-to-face focus groups, Online/Virtual focus groups offer an opportunity to engage with a larger and more diverse group of students. You are no longer limited by room capacity or location and can have participants joining you from around the globe. The success of a virtual focus group is tied closely with the technology that you are using, things such as internet connection access to a web camera and a set of earphones and a microphone are things to consider before undertaking this type of focus group. Added to this not everyone is comfortable appearing on camera, so it worth setting out some ground rules where you might state having a camera on is mandatory.

**When setting up an online focus group please make sure to send the joining instructions to students at least 24h before the session.**

# How to Lead a focus group:

Ideally the discussion in a focus group 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](#_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.

**Please note**: the type of ‘stim’ material will of course depend on what type of focus group you are facilitating. For online sessions we recommend sending the stimulus to students at least 24-48 hours ahead of the focus group so participants are prepared for the session

# Finding participants for focus groups

If you would like to gather feedback from students in a specific department or faculty, there are several options for organising focus group participants:

* Post on Moodle boards to encourage students to sign up
* Post on your department or faculty social media accounts
* 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 students, or students in several different time zones it may be worth suggesting a few different dates, with a list of different time option where students can choose the best date and time that suits them. Using tools such as [Doodle Polls](https://doodle.com/free-poll) or an [MS form](https://www.office.com/) often works well for this.

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](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/student-engagement/student-experience-panel). The Panel has over 1,000 members who receive an email newsletter approximately 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 are often gifted as a voucher, we encourage staff to try and use vouchers that will be able to be used globally where possible whilst our students are learning remotely. To submit a proposal for a focus group to feature in the newsletter is please contact [student.engagement@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:student.engagement@ucl.ac.uk).

# 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.
6. Online etiquette should be agreed beforehand e.g. all participants asked to leave cameras switched on but microphones off when not speaking.

# 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:

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.  

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.  

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?” 

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:

* “*What do you think are the reasons for* so few students meeting their subject-area librarian?”
* “*What would encourage you* to attend hustings between candidates for election as SU sabbatical officers?”
* “*What problems do you see* with module evaluations in your department currently?”
* “*What was the most valuable* piece of academic advice you received this year? Where did it come from?”

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?”

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# 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

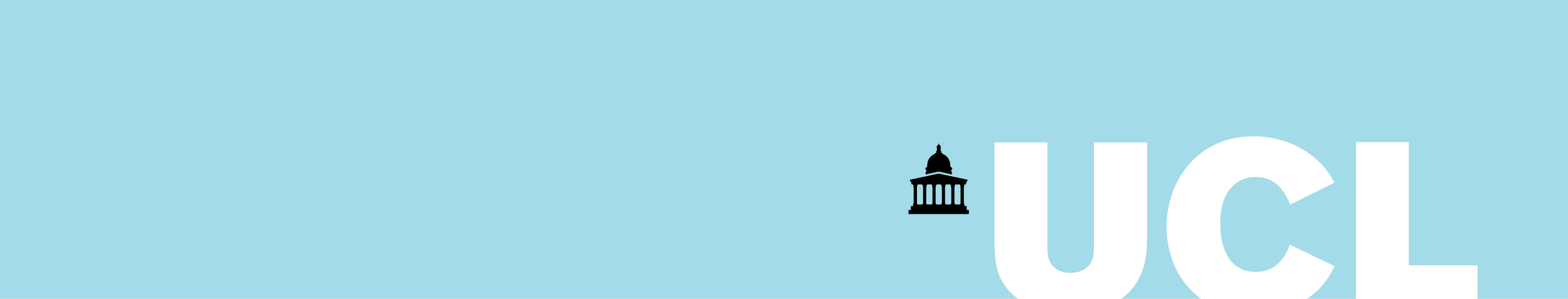
If you are looking to assess student preferences, you could consider using an online poll where options are ranked e.g. first to fifth. Participating students can then be prompted to add the reasons for their rankings in open comments. These are also useful when in a large town hall/conference event, processors such as [Menti Meter](https://www.menti.com/) are really good for a live setting. For a take away poll try [doodle poll](https://doodle.com/free-poll) or even [MS forms](https://www.office.com/) which you can access via your office 365 account.

### 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.

# Contact us

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

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# 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 either **a)** set up a zoom or teams meeting and made sure to send the participants the joining instructions at least 24h before the session. OR **b)** I’ve booked a venue which has sufficient seating space, is accessible for all students and has appropriate A/V resources.
* I’ve considered the need for “stim” materials, and have either **a)** sent the materials to the students at least 24-48 hours before the session. OR **b)** 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/online session.
* If using Teams or Zoom I have tested using these platforms and feel confident in using them before the session.
* 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.