

Focus Groups for Students and Staff in Higher Education Institutes

Overview for Facilitators

Planning the Focus Group

Ahead of running a focus group with members of a higher education institute (HEI), you will need to make a number of key preparations:

- Check if you need permission from any college body (for example, an ethics committee) to hold the session.
- Consider how you are going to record the information and discussions accurately.
 - If you intend to record the focus group session, ensure you have permission letters for participants with you and keep the signed copies for the record.
 - If you intend to use flip charts or other resources during the sessions, keep the raw material for records, as well as for informing the report to be written.
- Consider how you have included women with disabilities, ethnic minority women, and representatives from other marginalised communities. This includes ensuring the space for the focus group is accessible for the needs of participants.
- Keep the focus group session to a half-day: they can take considerable commitment and organisation to attend, so this is respectful of their time and contribution.
- Aim for an attendance of 15 people per session: this is a good number to ensure you can hear from everyone in the group. If your numbers are much higher and you are able to facilitate this, do go ahead. You could also consider holding a second focus group to accommodate the extra participants.
- Keep an attendance record. Advise participants that they do not need to give a name if they do not wish to, but ask them to sign in as 'Staff' or 'Student' instead if this is the case. It is recommended to record:
 - Students: Name (if possible), Email (if possible), Gender, Subject/Faculty, Year of Study.
 - Staff: Name (if possible), Email (if possible), Gender, Faculty/Service, Length of Employment at the HEI.
- Write a list of basic ground rules in advance of the session and post this to the wall so that all participants are aware of it throughout the session.

Preparing for Discussions

Ahead of the focus group, it is essential that you:

- Understand the institute
 - Be familiar with the HEI's policies and procedures, particularly in advance of the staff focus group.
 - Check if the HEI has a sexual harassment and violence procedure or not.
 - Check if the HEI has services or not.
- Understand the legal situation
 - Know the legal definitions of harassment, sexual violence, consent and related issues. You may find yourself having to clarify this type of information in the focus group.
 - Have familiarity with the legal requirement in your country regarding reporting and disclosure; if the requirement is unclear, know where this lack of clarity lies.
- Understand the context
 - Bring some key data and research with you (the summary page of the Ending Sexual Harassment and Violence in Third-Level Education [ESHTE] review of data on the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment against women students in Europe may be useful for this)

Considering Trauma and Support

Take a trauma-informed approach to delivering the focus group sessions by:

- Sharing information about support services
 - Bring contact details for the HEI's support services with you.
 - Bring contact details for local specialist services and/or rape crisis centres.
 - Contact support services in the HEI in advance to advise them that the focus group is taking place.
 - Prepare a contact sheet to give to participants as they leave in case anyone experiences delayed reactions.
- Having a plan on how to support in-group disclosure or trauma
 - Check that you have access to a private space.
 - Consider whether you have enough staff with you so that one might leave to support a participant if needed.
 - Check that the staff person with you is trained to support someone. If not, consider asking a specialist to attend with you; if this is not possible, ensure you have specialist service contact details with you.

- Debriefing staff
 - Make some time to ensure staff running the focus group with you are ok with any disclosures or discussions that may have occurred.

- Following up with participants
 - Bring your contact details, as well as any relevant information on your project or campaign, and invite participants to contact you after session with any questions or queries.
 - Send a follow up email to all participants, thanking them for their contribution and reminding them of support services available if anything was raised for them.