

## Focus groups and the ethics review process

Focus groups are a good way of collecting data from participants but there several things you need to think about first and explore in your ethics application.

### Recruitment

The first thing to think about is how you might recruit people to take part in your focus group. From the start, you should make sure that your potential participant understands that the research is hosted by the University, so always use your UoS email to contact potential participants.

### Personal social media

We strongly advise not to use personal social media accounts to recruit for your research to ensure a safe professional distance between your personal online spaces and your research ones.

Where possible use research study specific accounts, one setup with your university email / contact details, ask institution accounts to post information (e.g. @SurreyPsych), or ask the gatekeepers of locked groups to post your recruitment advert (with gatekeeper permission).

Best practise in social media recruitment would be that the post links to a University-specific contact or online survey, and where possible the “reply” function should be disabled with no research discussion to take place in social media spaces.

If personal accounts are required, we strongly advise to contact already existing contacts (inc. personal and professional), networks or friendship groups.

If you wish to use personal accounts for public posting, making new contacts or posting to closed groups, please ensure you have an adverse publicity procedure in place (such as contacting your supervisor or assurance for advice) to ensure your safety online.

The best practise in social media recruitment also applies when reposting a recruitment advert from a dedicated professional research account from your personal account.

You should detail how you will use social media recruitment in the Study Protocol.

You can also use a gatekeeper (see 'Recruitment, gatekeepers and the ethics review process) to contact participants. A gatekeeper could be the owner or moderator of a social media group or the publisher of a newsletter who agree to allow you to post in their space or post your recruitment material on your behalf. In your ethics application state who this might be, how they have access to your participant group and send us a draft version of an email they could send on your behalf. Make sure you include your UoS email and do not include your personal mobile phone number. You can also recruit via your school's social media and email networks, providing you have their permission as gatekeeper to do this and provide evidence of this with your ethics application.

## **Organizing your Focus Group**

Whether you want your focus group to take place online or in person, you need to think carefully about how you will run these spaces to make sure that participants are safe and understand fully what the group discussion is about beforehand in a detailed [Participant Information Sheet](#). Please ensure participants understand the confidentiality of what is discussed in the group and not shared outside of the Focus Group. Agree on what to do if a participant becomes upset etc

**In person focus groups** – Firstly, you will need to find a safe and quite space for the focus group to take place. Will this be in a room on campus or at an external space maintained by a gatekeeper (such as a community hall or room within a gatekeeper's office building? In both cases, you will need permission by whomever is responsible for the space to hold your focus group and make yourself aware of the health and safety requirements e.g. test fire drills, nearby fire exits and assembly points, toilets etc. access routes to the room public transport, parking, stairs, lifts etc.

It's also a good idea to think about how accessible the space is, do people have to climb lots of stairs, to get there (you should consider if you need to write a risk assessment for this activity and consult with your Schools H&S officer). It is good practice to have a second person with you to help facilitate an in-person focus group but if this is not possible, you should ensure you consider lone working practice (with your Schools H&S officer).

You are also going to have to consider whether you will reimburse people for their time at the focus group, will you give them a drink and/or travel expenses/parking? Please ensure you have the financial resources/code, with full details in the Protocol and participant sheet of how and when payment will be reimbursed. Reimbursing participants is a complex area and needs to be fully considered in your ethics application.

**Online focus groups** – Online focus groups are a little easier to organize but still require careful consideration. Please -only use your UoS MS Teams to host these sessions and make sure that participants are fully aware of what the session will consist of beforehand. Remind participants that details of their name will be shown unless this is removed from the chat Are your participants able to talk openly and safely if they are at home or work? Will they be using a personal or shared laptop or device to take part etc?

**Starting your focus group session** – The first thing to think about is how you will get consent from your participants. You can either send each participant a Consent Form (adapted to your project) to complete before the session or read out a Consent Form (also adapted to your project) before you start and record this process (using your UoS

MS Teams account or a school issued digital audio recording device). You should also discuss with the group what confidentiality means inside and outside of your session. You should make it clear that you cannot be responsible for what happens outside of the group. For example - what happens if a participant sees another participant after the group has taken place, can they discuss what happened or not? The Consent Form template has consent items relating to Focus Groups and you should use these in your submission.

You should also make it clear to participants that whilst they can leave the focus group (in person or online) at any time, you cannot remove the information they may have given from your research. The reason for this, is that it is far too complex to untangle conversations within a group once they have taken place. State clearly to the focus group what you will do if someone is distressed because of taking part. The Consent Form should also state that the data cannot be withdrawn (although the personal data of the participant and their contact details can be).

## **Recording your focus group session**

You should only use your UoS MS Teams account, or a school issued digital audio recording device to record your focus groups even if they are taking place offline. If your focus group is taking place in person and you are using your UoS MS Teams account, take your laptop with you, open your UoS MS Teams platform, turn the camera off and record the session that way. This also allows you to record verbal consent from the

group. You will need consent from your participants to record both their audio and video and make sure this is stated in your [Consent Form](#). Please note that you cannot use any personal devices such as phones to record your focus group session

You should also consider the power dynamic between yourself as a researcher, representing an institution and your focus group. How might you feel if you were asked the questions you want to ask of them? What might you want to happen to make your experience safer or what extra information might you want to have included.

### **What do I need to include with my ethics application if my research involves focus groups?**

- [Study Protocol](#), which should contain:
  - Details of how you will recruit your focus group should be detailed in your Study
  - Details of how your focus group will take place – online or in person?
  - Details of what platform you will use if you are holding your focus group online (UoS MS Teams) and where the data will be stored (UoS OneDrive)
  - Details of who will know where you are (if you are holding in person focus groups)
  - Details of how you will record your interview (Use UoS MS Teams where possible)
  - Details of how you will make sure your focus group understands the limits of confidentiality (what happens if participants see each other after the group) and what you will do if someone is distressed during the session
- [Consent Form](#) and [Participant Information Sheet](#) tailored toward your focus groups.
- Recruitment materials - emails, posters, social media text
- A draft topic guide for your focus group