



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

The International Journal of Management Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijme



Feeling able to say it like it is: A case for using focus groups in programme evaluation with international cohorts

Miriam Marra^{a,*}, Clare McCullagh^b

^a ICMA Centre, Henley Business School, University of Reading, Whiteknights Campus, RG6 6BA, UK

^b Centre for Quality Support and Development, University of Reading, Whiteknights House, Whiteknights Campus, RG6 6AH, UK



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Verbal feedback
Focus groups
Programme evaluation
Internationalisation
Students as partners in T&L
Intercultural communication

ABSTRACT

In today's cost- and efficiency-conscious environment there may be resistance amongst HEIs to use informal verbal approaches to programme evaluation, such as focus groups, due to their resource-intensive nature. There may also be a lack of confidence amongst staff working with international cohorts about having the necessary skills to facilitate evaluative discussion and create an atmosphere of trust and openness. Drawing directly from three years' experience of directing a Finance programme with an international cohort of four to ten students in a UK University, this paper argues that focus groups offer an invaluable source of rich feedback. As the HE sector prepares for the TEF, and Business, Management and Finance dealing programmes continue to rely on high numbers of international students, this is an opportune time for programme directors to reflect on how their commitment to teaching excellence is evidenced beyond rhetoric and box-ticking. The value of making space for the student voice is not limited to T&L enhancement, but includes:

- helping students to develop reflective and critical thinking
- enabling them to negotiate programme changes
- engaging students with issues concerning their learning experience
- ensuring that diversity and inclusion are central to discussion agendas
- forging HEI-students partnership in the learning process.

1. Introduction

This paper explores and promotes the use of focus groups for collecting student feedback on teaching & learning at the Programme level. The University concerned is a research intensive institution and enjoys a world-class reputation for its Business and Management programmes. The specific context concerned is the review processes for the MSc in Investment Banking and Islamic Finance with an international cohort of four to ten students.

The specific theme of focus groups meets three core objectives for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in gathering students' evaluation data, as defined by David (2013): 1) improving the quality of teaching; 2) enhancing the students' experience; and 3) providing information for decision-makers. As David (2013) highlights, student evaluation and feedback processes are no longer considered by HEIs as a 'tick-box' exercise for institutional quality assurance; universities are now encouraging varied and innovative mechanisms to drive forward enhancement and to allow for comparison at an institutional level.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: m.marra@icmacentre.ac.uk (M. Marra), c.e.mccullagh@reading.ac.uk (C. McCullagh).

The paper also considers an additional objective for collecting student feedback, which is promoting a dialogue within HEIs and building “a genuine partnership between teachers and students” (David, 2013). The concept of partnership is at the centre of this paper focusing on how to improve feedback collection, interpretation and application at the MSc programme-level within a business and management context.

The context for the work described in this paper is significant for two reasons. Firstly, during a time when HE management approaches are increasingly relying on metrics and there is nervous anticipation in relation to the impact of the TEF, it is timely to ensure real voices are listened to and heard. Secondly, as student fees increase and HEIs strive to meet the needs of increasingly diverse groups of students on business and management programmes, with growing international cohorts, HEIs need to be fully informed in order to meet high student expectations, to provide them with the best possible experience and value for money.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a brief clarification on the nature of focus groups in social science research. Section 3 presents an outline of the specific institutional context in which the evaluation approaches based on focus groups have been developed and considers some of the benefits and challenges of collecting verbal feedback. Section 4 reviews relevant literature including the Realist Evaluation theory (Pawson & Tilley, 1997), which underpins the approach advocated here. Section 5 considers the use of verbal feedback processes more specifically within international cohorts. Section 6 presents the outcomes from our experiences with focus groups to date, leading to a proposed plan of action to enhance future evaluation processes. Finally, in Section 7, some concluding remarks are presented.

2. What is a focus group?

This section briefly clarifies the general characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages of focus groups for research in social sciences and, more specifically, in education.

Focus groups are used to elicit opinions, feedback, suggestions, and foster an understanding of how a specific group of people think and feel about a certain topic or experience. A focus group is a “*technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily representative, sampling of a specific population, this group being ‘focused’ on a given topic*” (Thomas, MacMillan, McColl, Hale, & Bond, 1995).

There are many ways to organize a focus group. First, there is no ‘magic number’ of participants; however, a relatively smaller size helps to foster the discussion in a more intimate way. Second, the focus group is generally group-led, with the help of one or more facilitators or interviewers. Third, it can be run face-to-face or online and it normally consists of open-ended questions which aim to achieve higher reflective thinking, deeper discussion and higher confidentiality.

Amongst the advantages of using focus groups, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) point out that “*the participants interact with each other rather than with the interviewer, such that the views of the participants can emerge – the participants’ rather than the researcher’s agenda can predominate*”. Focus groups can also help to develop collective identity (Munday, 2006). In addition, they represent more informal, relaxed way of conducting an interview that feels more like a conversation where “*participants are explicitly encouraged to talk to one another, as opposed to answering questions of each person in turn*” (May, 2011).

The “*contrived nature*” of focus groups is “*both their strength and their weakness: they are unnatural settings yet they are very focussed on a particular issue and, therefore, will yield insights that might not otherwise have been available*” (Cohen et al., 2007). The management and facilitation of focus groups can be challenging. It is not easy to understand how to capture a lot of discussion in a short space of time and to ensure that all participants discuss their views, also those with less dominating personalities. Goldfarb and Morrison (2014) identify as other potential barriers “*the time and resource intensive nature of the model*” and “*the need of skilful purveyors of feedback*”.

Several more advantages and disadvantages will be highlighted in this paper at Sections 3 and 6, as they emerged from this specific experience of focus groups to collect students’ verbal feedback for the evaluation of a MSc programme.

3. The need for verbal feedback in HEI evaluation of programmes

This section outlines the broader HE and institutional context in which the demand and need for verbal feedback has developed in recent years and addresses some of the benefits and challenges of such approaches to evaluation.

The UK government’s White Paper response to the Browne Review (2010), appropriately entitled “Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System” (2011), set out proposals in response to the new Student Finance Plan through which students are now the main funders of higher education in the UK. The aim is to improve the student experience by offering high-quality teaching, assessment and feedback. The latter “*will take on a new importance to empower students whilst at University.*” Under this general guideline more specific provisions are offered in the same document, particularly in Chapter 3 (“A better student experience and better qualified graduates”). Besides well-established formal practices like surveys for student evaluations of teaching, the document seeks HEIs’ involvement in informal feedback on the students’ learning experience. It also poses great emphasis on the need of publishing and disseminating the information obtained by the feedback. The report aimed to make universities more accountable than ever before. Greater ‘accountability’ is now encouraged through the introduction of the National Student Survey since 2005, the International Student Barometer (ISB) also since 2005, the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) since 2009 and, controversially, through the publication of university league tables.

The UK Quality Code for HE published in 2012 introduced the terminology of ‘partnership’ used to indicate a mature relationship between students and staff based on values of openness, trust, honesty, agreed shared goals and values, and regular communication between the partners “*in informal and formal arrangements.*” The Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the UK has produced a number

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6841789>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6841789>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)