

# TESTA Tools

*Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment*

## Assessment and Feedback Focus Groups



Focus groups are a great way of getting a detailed sense of students' experiences of assessment and feedback. They allow you to explore issues raised by other data (e.g. from audits or questionnaires) in much greater depth, as well as to raise topics not otherwise covered. This document contains information about why focus groups can be helpful, how to run focus groups around assessment and feedback, and how to explore the data.

### Why are focus groups useful?

Quantitative evidence about assessment and feedback – such as from the Assessment and Feedback Audit, or the Assessment Experience Questionnaire – has many benefits but it also has drawbacks. It can give an excellent overview, the ability to benchmark, and can be relatively easy to collect and analyse. However, often it does not provide the rich and detailed information we need, and is limited to the particular questions on the questionnaire (for example). By discussing assessment and feedback in detail with students, we can get a much richer picture of their experiences, and respond to their views rather than being limited to pre-determined topics.

Focus group data can be particularly effective when it is used alongside quantitative data, as they can explain surprising findings and help us to develop ways of responding. Similarly, it is useful to have quantitative data – which are often more objective – to provide context to the focus group data.

Focus group data can also be more engaging than quantitative data. When using the findings to prompt reflection, discussion and action by teaching staff, quotations from focus groups can hit home in a way that charts and tables do not. Students can be very eloquent when describing the challenges they encounter around assessment and feedback.

### How do we run Assessment and Feedback Focus Groups?

#### *What is a focus group?*

A focus group is fundamentally a conversation between the researcher as facilitator, and a group of students. It is guided by the facilitator, but it should allow the participants to open up new topics and to chat with each other. It is not just a group interview; while the facilitator will ask initial questions and direct the discussion, the interaction between the participants is also

important. A focus group will ideally have between five and eight participants, but if necessary they can be run with groups as small as one (i.e. as an interview) and as large as 15. With groups much larger or smaller than five to eight, it can be particularly challenging to generate discussion between the participants. 60-90 minutes is a good length for a focus group, as it allows enough time to discuss issues in detail. With topics such as assessment and feedback, students normally have a fair amount to say.

#### *What are the ethical issues around focus groups?*

As students are being asked to offer personal opinions about topics that are often quite emotive, and the context is not anonymous, it is important to manage the ethical issues around focus groups. Students should be given an information sheet about the work that you are doing, as well as a brief verbal explanation. They should also be asked to sign a consent form (an example is provided in the Appendix). You should explain the confidentiality of the process on the information sheet, on the consent form, and verbally: that you will be recording, transcribing and analysing what they say, and that anything they say may be used as a quotation in reports that are given to academic staff, but that their name will not be attached to the quotation, and their participation in the focus group won't be known by anyone other than you.

If possible, it is a good idea to have someone external to the Department facilitate the focus group and manage the recordings, so that no one in the Department is aware of which students participated in the focus groups.

#### *How to recruit?*

Recruiting students for focus groups can sometimes be a real challenge, particularly (and unsurprisingly) in programmes where students spend less time on campus. Recruiting students face-to-face is normally most effective, and it is helpful to consult their timetable in advance to schedule the focus group at an appropriate time. Incentives can be persuasive, such as cakes/coffee/lunch or Amazon vouchers.

#### *What questions should we ask?*

It is useful to prepare a full set of notes prior to the focus group, containing the areas you want to cover, questions to use to get discussion started, and examples of follow-up questions you might want to use. A sample 'Discussion Guide' is included in the Appendix. It can also be helpful to create a summary version that you can consult during the discussion.

The broad topics you might want to discuss include:

- Basic information about how students are assessed on the programme
- Which assessments they find most and least useful, and why
- Whether feedback is helpful, and whether they use feedback to improve their work
- Whether they know what is expected from them, both for specific assessments and more generally in the programme

## Key elements for a successful focus group

### *Involve everybody*

Sometimes a couple of participants can dominate the conversation. Make sure you get views from everyone, for example by asking specific individuals whether they agree with comments that have been made. Just because a student has agreed to participate in a focus group doesn't mean they will be talkative, they may need prompting with specific questions, e.g. 'does that fit with your experience?'

### *Make sure you get enough detail*

It's important to get lots of detail about students' experiences. If they mention an assessment that they feel is particularly helpful/unhelpful, ask them precisely what the assessment looks like, why it is helpful/unhelpful, whether there are other assessments on the programme that are similar. If someone makes a general comment that, for example, feedback is of poor quality, ask them why they think that, ask for particular examples of poor feedback and ask them what they think feedback should ideally look like.

### *Move the discussion beyond moaning*

The students may feel like getting some complaints off their chest. It is important to record those complaints, but you should move them beyond those concerns to the particular topics you want to discuss. They may see the focus group as an opportunity to communicate their complaints, but you should maintain a neutral position and make sure you cover the intended issues.

### *Don't talk too much*

You may need to provide a fair bit of background explanation so that students understand the kinds of things you are interested in talking about, but beware of talking too much. If students are hesitant to respond, you can rephrase the question but don't be in a rush to fill the silence.

### *Maintain a balance between participating in the conversation and guiding the discussion*

It is important that you listen closely to what the students are saying, and that the focus group has the feel of a genuine conversation. However, it is also important that the discussion covers the intended topics, so you need to be engaging in the conversation while also thinking about where to take the discussion next: do you need to get more detail, do you need to involve other participants in the discussion, is there a related topic that you want to move on to, do you need to move on to a different topic entirely.

## How do we collect the data?

A dedicated MP3 voice recorder, or a voice recording app on a smartphone, can be used to record the discussion (and consider both so that there is a backup). This allows the facilitator to concentrate on guiding discussion rather than taking notes. There are a number of ways of dealing with the recording. It can be professionally transcribed: there are a number of online companies that can provide a transcript in a few days, for around £1 per minute (£60-

£90 per focus group).<sup>1</sup> You can also transcribe the recording yourself: this is free, eliminates the need for ‘cleaning’ the transcript provided by a company (e.g. misheard words) and can be a good way of familiarising yourself with the data; but it can take a long time – around 5-8 hours per hour of recording. Or you can dispense with full transcription and just pull out key themes and quotes from the recording. This is less thorough, and limits your ability to identify themes across different focus groups, but it may be sufficient for your purposes.

### How can we analyse the data?

Analysing qualitative data is a complex research skill, and there are lots of different ways of doing it. In many ways the most straightforward is ‘thematic analysis’, where data are simply explored to find patterns.<sup>2</sup> The standard approach is to first ‘code’ transcripts, by identifying interesting parts of the text and labelling them. These codes can either come from a pre-existing set (e.g. the topics that originally guided the focus group), can arise out of the data, or a mixture of both. If the focus groups are being used alongside the Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ), then the areas from the AEQ can be useful as an initial guide to the codes you could use. Once the transcripts have been coded, the codes can be grouped together into higher-level themes.

The process of coding a transcript, and drawing themes out of the codes, can be done using Word and Excel etc, but it is much easier to use a dedicated piece of software such as Nvivo. It does require a bit of time to become familiar with, but Nvivo allows you to assign sections of transcript to particular codes, and then to manipulate those codes and sections of transcript to create themes and sub-themes.

Qualitative analysis is complex and sometimes time-consuming, but with some practice (and training or use of online guides) it is a great way of providing a detailed and nuanced picture of students’ experiences of assessment and feedback. If you are new to analysing qualitative data, pairing up with someone else can be useful, so you can compare your thoughts about the important messages emerging from the transcripts.

#### Things to remember when doing qualitative analysis

Qualitative analysis is as much art as science. When looking for the themes in transcripts of focus groups, there isn’t a straightforward ‘right answer’. The task is to provide an interpretation of the students’ experiences that is as accurate and coherent as possible. Whether or not drawing out the themes is a simple task will depend on factors like how much agreement there was between the participants, and how complex (and perhaps contradictory) their perceptions were. It is always important to bear in mind the purpose of doing this work: it is not primarily a research process, the intention is to help teaching staff to understand the impact of assessment and feedback on students’ learning. The priority is therefore on presenting clear findings about things that teaching staff can usefully reflect on and improve.

### How do we present the findings?

There are lots of different ways of presenting the findings of analysis of qualitative data. To make sure that the messages from the data are clear, it can be helpful to focus on using

<sup>1</sup> We have used Go Transcript (<https://gotranscript.com/>) in the past with reasonable success.

<sup>2</sup> A very influential and reasonably accessible account of thematic analysis is provided in Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) ‘Using thematic analysis in psychology’, *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77-101.

quotations from students' own words rather than extensive commentary. Hearing directly from students can also make more of an impact with teaching staff.

One simple way of presenting the findings is to provide 'headlines' under a particular theme, with a couple of illustrative quotation. For example, under a theme of 'Feedback', headlines could be 'Feedback was seen as too slow', 'Feedback was usually helpful', 'The amount of feedback varied between markers', etc. with two or three short student quotations illustrating each headline.

While it is useful to presentation the themes using these headlines and quotations, it can also be helpful to provide a short explanation of the key messages. This is particularly important if more than one kind of data have been used. For example, if focus groups have been run alongside a questionnaire, then some commentary that highlights the common themes from both, as well as any differences, can be particularly useful.

### **TESTA Tools**

TESTA ('Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment') is way of helping teaching staff to work together to improve assessment and feedback across whole programmes. By providing evidence about how well assessment and feedback supports students' learning TESTA can help staff to improve the coherence and coordination of programmes. A centrally-resourced version of TESTA is provided to Schools/Departments by in the year prior to their Internal Review. Alternatively, this guidance is provided so Schools/Departments (or individual programme teams) can make use themselves of the tools that make up the TESTA method: the Assessment Experience Questionnaire, the Audit, and the Focus Groups.

For more information about the TESTA Tools, please visit

<https://www.strath.ac.uk/sees/educationenhancement/innovationandgoodpractice/TESTAtools/>

If you have any questions about the TESTA Tools, please contact

[educationenhancement-quality@strath.ac.uk](mailto:educationenhancement-quality@strath.ac.uk)

## Appendix A: Example discussion guide

### Introduction

Thank the participants, hand out consent forms and information sheets, introduce yourself.

“I’m interested in understanding how you feel about the way you are assessed, and the feedback you receive. Does the assessment and feedback help you to learn? Does it help you to get better at your subject, during your time from coming on to the programme to leaving at the end? This is a ‘focus group’, which basically means that we’re going to have a discussion about how you feel about assessment and feedback. I’ve got some things I’d like to talk to you about, but feel free to talk about anything you want. I don’t expect you to have immediate answers to my questions or even any ideas in your head at all to start off with – you might not have thought much about this before – but if we discuss this I’m hoping we will help each other to explore this topic by talking to each other and exploring issues about assessment on your degree programme that seem important to you. I’m going to record the discussion so I have a record, a professional transcriber will listen to the tape and write up a record of the discussion – no-one will be identified by name in the recording. I will use direct quotations of things you say in the report that I write up, but your names won’t be included.

### Prompts for discussion

1. "Tell me about how you are assessed – what assessment on your degree programme consists of".

*This is to define the domain of the focus group and get them thinking in specific terms rather than starting off making generalisations before they have engaged their brains. It is an easy thing for them to start talking about so they don't feel foolish or confused. Get everyone to chip in very early on so a pattern of discussion is established rather than one to ones with you.*

- Can you give an example?
  - Is that a general feeling – do you all think that?
  - Why do you respond like that? Frowning? Smiling?
  - Keep them to the programme you are interested in
  - Prompt them to mention all aspects of assessment (especially including feedback, but also the form assignments take, criteria, marking schemes) so that they come to understand what you mean by assessment and by an assessment system or regime.
2. “Tell me about the feedback you receive – what do you think of it?”
    - Prompt them about what they think about feedback – the various forms feedback may take, how they use feedback, what its limitations are, what the point of feedback is, whether they read it when they receive their marks, whether marks are more important than words, how many of them have received oral feedback on work in tutorials, how useful they find whole class feedback, whether they get this, how long it takes to get feedback and whether this has an impact.
    - How does your feedback help you do better across modules?

3. "Tell me about how the way you are assessed affect your studying – for example determining to some extent what you pay attention to, or leave out, what you spend time on, how much effort you put in, how engaged you are, that kind of thing...."
  - Prompt them to give specific instances of general ideas they mention – for example if someone says “on some courses you really don’t have to do a lot” then find out which course, if there are other courses that are different, how they get to find out that not much is required etc
  - If one person mentions something – ask the others if it is the same for them, or the same for most other students
  - Ask "Why do you respond like that"
  - Explore if this has changed over time as they have become more experienced as students – over the years
  - How consistent is the advice/guidance you are given by lecturers?
  - What assessment related factors motivate you to take your optional modules – exams/no exams; lenient markers/fewer assessed pieces etc?
  
4. "Tell me about how you have come to know what you are supposed to be doing and how you know what is likely to get good marks or to pass or fail?"
  - Prompt them to give specific instances of general ideas they mention – for example if someone says “I don’t really understand what they want half the time” then probe how they DO get to find out, if some classes are clear and others not, or whether the whole thing is a blur, what they would ideally like in terms of clarification, whether what they want differs between courses or years etc.
  - How consistent are the messages about assessment – do you always know what is expected or is it a bit of a guessing game? Prompt them about how they use criteria, whether they have assessed their own work, or peer assessed, or been shown models of good practice – do they know what quality looks like?
  
5. Summary and judgements: "Overall, does the way assessment works here help you to learn well, or does it interfere or cause you difficulties."

Prompts can also take the form "I know of courses where xxxxx - is it like that here for you?"

## Appendix B: Example consent form

### FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM

Programme and year of study: [...]

Date of focus group: [...]

- I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, without having to give a reason and without any consequences. If I exercise my right to withdraw and I don't want my data to be used, any data which have been collected from me will be destroyed.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study any personal data (i.e. data which identify me personally) at any time.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e. data which do not identify me personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study.
- I understand that any information recorded in the investigation will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.
- I consent to being a participant in the project
- I consent to being audio recorded as part of the project

Print name: .....

Signed: .....

Date: .....