

## *Focus Groups and Athena SWAN Video Transcript.*

Hello, I'm Suzanne May of Continuing Education, and I'm here to talk to you about focus groups. I've been facilitating focus groups across the University with staff and students for several years now. I'm a big believer in communication, especially straight talk, which is why I love doing focus groups. And I've seen how effective they can be: in curriculum development and in adding data to valuable research projects. Not to mention, there's the satisfaction for participants - after all, everyone likes to feel that their voices are being heard and taken seriously.

Some of my focus groups have been for Athena Swan initiatives – both in gathering information for award applications, and then later to follow up on issues that were identified for an Athena SWAN action plan. For Athena Swan, you want a wide and deep evidence base of facts, opinions, perceptions, and experiences pertaining to equality issues. So, how might focus groups fit into your Athena Swan activities?

### **1. FOCUS GROUP BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS**

Like all data-gathering methods, be it qualitative or quantitative, focus groups have pros and cons:

They can provide communication from participants directly to the commissioners or principal investigators—groups who might normally have little or no interaction, for instance, between students and senior staff.

It's a good way to get more insight into a question that might elicit a yes/no answer in a survey questionnaire. Participants in a focus group bounce ideas off each other and create dialogues around shared experiences.

Focus groups are self-selecting (I've never heard of a mandatory one) but that means volunteers are motivated and come in ready to share. Focus groups are usually six to twelve people—surveys might be sent out to a much larger group, though, as we all know, the return rate is often disappointing, and I often hear from focus group participants that questionnaires are not taken seriously and are even annoying.

Athena Swan evaluations don't necessarily aim to represent an entire cohort. It can be useful to focus in on a specific group within a larger group, for instance to find out the unique experiences of international students, or the effect of maternity leave on your academic career.

A caveat: all focus groups have their own dynamics, depending on the mix of participants. I've found that people in conversation generally want to be supportive of each other and tend to agree with the speaker. So it might appear if there is more conformity than there truly is. I've also found, for some people, coming to a focus group is an opportunity to vent,

which could also distort the picture. If there is a dominant speaker, it is possible that some others might be inhibited to speak up or disagree.

I think having a good facilitator is crucial and can help manage some of the limitations of focus groups. Ideally, you'll have an experienced facilitator able to negotiate the particular group dynamics; you definitely want a neutral, impartial and non-judgemental one. The facilitator may be an outsider from beyond your department, but they should be well prepared in the topic at hand and the research questions. A really important task is to provide a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, where participants feel free to speak without fear of repercussions.

## **2. ANALYSING THE DATA**

For an Athena Swan-related focus group, handling the resulting data could work like this: The focus group, which will probably be between one and two hours long, will be audio recorded. Your facilitator can produce a report that paraphrases and summarises the key points. And/or you may also send the tape to a professional service for a verbatim transcript. There are software products, such as NVivo, which can help organise and analyse the content by coding the data, which could be helpful with issues such as intersectionality.

The enjoyment for participants from sharing ideas with peers is an expected outcome, but of course important, valuable data is produced. There's little to lose, so, go get some groups together, and start the conversation!