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FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION AS A METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND RELATED FIELDS¹

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This article sets out to report our first-hand experience with using focus groups as a method of data collection in higher education research. We were interested in shedding light on how university lecturers coped with remote teaching during the Covid pandemic and how the unusual circumstances affected their teaching. The analysis of the resulting data is still ongoing. In this study, we summarise

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our experiences of using the focus group methodology in our research. By discussing and evaluating our research experiences, we aim to demonstrate the usability and the potential risks of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in a higher education context by identifying further areas of application, such as for supporting the development of the education system. We argue that the main characteristic of FGD is its interactive nature, and we back this claim by providing a detailed presentation of the focus group methodology, as well as by describing and analysing the experiences of group discussions conducted with the involvement of university lecturers. Due to their interactive nature, focus group discussions are particularly suitable for research on educational methodology, specifically within the training system for public officials operated by the Ludovika University of Public Service (LUPS) in Budapest, Hungary since 2013. The focus group research method can be used either as a tool for quality assurance or as a tool for assessing training needs. Our study is highly relevant for those who are planning to conduct focus group research in a higher education context or in related fields such as adult education programmes, by providing practical recommendations.

KEYWORDS:

focus group, higher education research, adult education

INTRODUCTION

When conducting a research project, an obvious first step is to analyse and evaluate the chosen data collection method. In this way it is possible to confirm if the method chosen is appropriate for the research objectives, if it is suitable for the study of the groups concerned and if it can reveal new data. To explore the long-term impact of the pandemic on the work of lecturers, to understand how lecturers think about higher education pedagogy and about its methodology, we were confident that the focus group method is appropriate.

We chose the focus group method primarily because it is a qualitative research method that is relevant for exploring a specific focus of a broader topic. From a communication point of view this method can also be used successfully to explore and understand different perspectives on and attitudes towards a particular topic. The method is also suitable for group discussions, as it allows participants to get to know and shape each other's opinions and to articulate similar and different viewpoints.

We argue that the focus group, as a research method, is particularly suitable for conducting educational methodology research with the participants of the training system for public officials operated by the LUPS since 2013. This is primarily due to the method's interactive nature, which we present in detail, while describing and analysing our experiences of conducting FGDs with lecturers.

The first part of the paper will discuss the focus group method, drawing upon international and national literature. In the second part of the paper, we will summarise the experiences of our focus group research, and in the light of these experiences, we will argue for the potential of the focus group research method in a field bordering the higher education context: adult training.

LITERATURE REVIEW – FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

As defined by Krueger and Casey, “A focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment”.²

The focus group is a method of data collection used in qualitative research settings³ and has become widely used and accepted in social sciences. This is because FGD enables an in-depth understanding of a wide variety of social issues, from nature conservation and biodiversity⁴ to the assessment of patient-based outcomes in medicine.⁵ As a working method, it can be applied when working with young people and even to topics requiring a high degree of sensitivity, such as AIDS or other sexual risks. It can therefore be seen that it promises to be a suitable method for interviewing a university collective with a tight hierarchy that is receiving special government attention.⁶ The participants talk in small groups in a more structured way than in everyday conversations, under specific conditions set by a moderator. The optimal number of participants in a focus group is 5 to 7 which is small enough for participants to feel safe when sharing their views, while being large enough to allow differences between participants’ perspectives. Individual opinions that are extreme or are not communicated in the desired level of detail can be explored further by conducting subsequent in-depth interviews.

The group discussion is repeated several times with similar types of participants to identify trends and patterns of opinions.⁷ The structure is provided by planned, guided interview questions through which the moderator encourages the participants to talk to each other and to share their attitudes on a particular topic.

Some Hungarian authors have argued that group interviews are more time-consuming to organise and require particularly careful preparation and special circumstances. The technical requirements of the process include a special venue, audio and video recording, a moderator actively engaging in the conversation and the presence of an observer.⁸ However, other authors argue that FGD is simple, cost-effective, requires few participants and can be carried out in a short time.⁹ Moreover, as a result of coordinated, well-prepared and well-organised research, small group discussions bring individual opinions and views to the surface more evidently, while participants can interact dynamically to reveal their attitudes and influence each other. The same cannot be said for individual interviews. Small group discussions also improve community spirit, as participants have the chance to hear how other participants deal with the same problem, and that is a real intangible incentive for participation.

² KRUEGER–CASEY 2014: 26.

³ PARKER–TRITTER 2006.

⁴ NYUMBA et al. 2018.

⁵ ZACHARIA et al. 2021.

⁶ DE OLIVEIRA 2011.

⁷ KRUEGER–CASEY 2014.

⁸ SÍKLAKI 2006.

⁹ ZACHARIA et al. 2021.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FGD METHOD

Krueger (2002) divides the conduct of focus group research into four basic steps, which are: decision and arguments in favour of using the focus group method, decision on the group of participants, listening to the target audience and communicating the results.¹⁰ In the following, we break this down into detail and identify further steps (processes), similarly to Brown (2021), whose approach better reflects the practical aspects of the research.¹¹

The first three steps are (1) defining the research objective and comparing the arguments for and against FGD, (2) formulating the most important research questions, and (3) developing various protocols (engagement of the participants, scheduling of meetings, selection and preparation of moderators and observers, FGD guidelines, additional data collection methods, data protection, technical trial). Then, in the following three steps (4) participants are recruited (sending out invitation letters, making appointments), (5) focus discussions are conducted (moderation, monitoring, recording and data storage), and (6) notes and transcripts are made (sharing the materials created and experiences gathered, as well as additional personal impressions). The last phase is (7) the analysis of data (manually or by using software, possibly automatic, now even supported by artificial intelligence), (8) communication and dissemination of the results (preparing and sharing research reports, holding presentations for different groups of stakeholders), and (9) matching the results of the analysis to the results of the broader research programme and to further research plans (aspects of institutional development), and archiving (including possibly deletion of content in compliance with data protection regulations).

Academic approaches to focus groups usually emphasise that the conversations are conducted in a community environment, such as in community rooms or meeting rooms, or alternatively in the natural environment of the interviewees, or in various outdoor spaces. In addition to the consciously structured set of questions, the basic fact-finding tools of the focus discussion include the various so-called data-generating activities during which the participants perform certain actions together. This can involve listing, ranking, organising, drawing answers, mapping, etc.¹² During the focus group discussion, various creativity-stimulating and projective techniques (e.g. metaphors, associations, role-playing or collage) can be used, depending on the research goal, and the participants' and the moderator's preparation.¹³

At the same time, mini focus groups can be organised, if it is not possible to reach enough participants or if there are other obstacles to the group discussion.¹⁴ In this case, the mod-

¹⁰ KRUEGER 2002.

¹¹ BROWN 2021.

¹² HENNINK 2014.

¹³ SPRY–PICH 2021.

¹⁴ NYUMBA et al. 2018.

erator must consider that the group dynamics will change¹⁵ and that there is a high risk that the opinion of one or two dominant participants will determine the discussion.¹⁶

THE FGD MODERATOR

In order for the focus discussions to achieve their goal, i.e. to reveal the desired information, the moderators must have the necessary skills and know suitable techniques with which they can keep the discussion on the right path.¹⁷ Shaha and his co-authors (2011) mainly identify interpersonal and team leadership skills in this context.¹⁸ The moderator's responsibility is to encourage full, active participation, to help participants overcome possible self-censorship, and to guide the conversation towards mutual understanding. Instead of win-lose games, they should steer the group in the direction of inclusive practices, while strengthening the awareness of shared responsibility in the participants, so that they leave power constraints (resulting from social and/or organisational hierarchy) behind.¹⁹

Good moderators are characterised by an interplay of particular individual characteristics and situational factors and can be excellent conversation leaders. Personal traits include age, gender, qualifications, sensitivity about the topic and the ability to change roles. Other factors that contribute to the suitability of a moderator are a well-chosen physical environment and the time factor, while many other things may affect their performance, relationship with the group, and finally the group results. Moderators have the unenviable task of balancing the requirements of sensitivity and empathy on the one hand, and objectivity and detachment on the other.²⁰

From itemised lists of skills and qualities, we can also conclude the following:

An FGD moderator:

- has good communication skills (to build rapport), is able to create a supportive atmosphere and facilitate dialogue
- is attentive and has empathy towards listeners who reflect, summarise or paraphrase the statements of the participants in a meaningful way and stimulate the dialogue with their feedback
- is an accurate observer who follows the group dynamics, while reading the behavioural signs and gestures of the participants
- is an excellent communicator who, despite being prepared in the subject, is able to look “naively” at the content of the focus conversation

¹⁵ SMITHSON 2008.

¹⁶ BLOOR et al. 2001.

¹⁷ MORGAN et al. 1998.

¹⁸ SHAHA et al. 2011.

¹⁹ KANER et al. 2007.

²⁰ STEWART-SHAMDASANI 2014.

- is a flexible manager who adapts the course of the conversation to the needs and characteristics of the group, and who can make quick interventions to modify the conditions in order to achieve the research goal
- is able to remain impartial and express this both verbally and non-verbally during conversation
- has a sense of humour with which they overcome tensions and help the group through difficult situations.²¹ In addition, it does not hurt if they are assertive, credible, have adequate self-esteem, are enthusiastic and optimistic, extroverted, humble and reliable.²²

The technical and organisational conditions of our research will be explained after discussing the particularities of higher education.

UTILISING FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH IN A HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

Similar to other qualitative tools, focus group research is popularly used in higher education,²³ but it is only occasionally used to find out the views of lecturers. We found that an overwhelming number of research papers apply it as a means to amplify students' voices and to increase student engagement, rather than in connection with faculty members. In contrast to student questionnaires, focus groups do not homogenise their findings, but instead help to express the viewpoints of the interviewees in a dialogic way and preserve their diversity, and this is the key to the true authenticity.²⁴

The focus group method is widely used in competence development to improve the negotiation skills, reasoning ability and oral performance of students, especially in teaching English as a foreign language or when teaching multicultural groups of students. Qualitative researchers using the focus group method emphasise that this structured and facilitated form of group discussion helps to make participants aware of the importance of listening to each other.

The study by Hiltz and his co-authors (2007), that originally used the focus group method to explore motivations related to active learning networks, can be considered the direct methodological antecedent of the present research. One of their main conclusions was that “the method is recommended to other institutions that wish to obtain a better understanding of their online faculty and of steps that can be taken to improve their motivation for teaching online”.²⁵

²¹ NYUMBA et al. 2018.

²² STEWART–SHAMDASANI 2014.

²³ E.g. LEA et al. 2010; MOULE et al. 2010; SMITH 2017; TRAHAR–HYLAND 2011.

²⁴ BOURNE–WINSTONE 2020.

²⁵ HILTZ et al. 2007.

Participants have the feeling that they are experts on the current topic and therefore they are more likely to share their thoughts and opinions, especially if the topic is directly related to their everyday lives²⁶ (compared to a face-to-face interview). By no means is the goal for the interviewees to come to an agreement, or achieve a consensus, but rather to reveal the widest possible horizon of viewpoints and experiences.²⁷

The FGD method can be best used when for some reason the usual, transaction-based forms of communication²⁸ do not yield results, when the research objective cannot be obtained or when unambiguous answers are not given to the questions asked. The reasons for this vary, but it is especially worth emphasising a couple of them: the topic or phenomenon researched seems too complex and has a structure that the research subjects do not fully grasp and which they therefore only have vague feelings about and attitudes towards, or they do not care to articulate an opinion, and at the same time they do not have the sufficient vocabulary to name the elements of the researched phenomenon. For these reasons, research on teaching methodology cannot be effectively conducted by using transaction-based communication. This is especially true if the research subjects – not only those participating in training, but also the lecturers – do not have (sufficient) experience in pedagogy, andragogy and teaching methodology.

Focus group discussions may, however, be perceived as an act of interactive communication²⁹ where – together with the exchange of information – the research subjects, with the assistance of the moderator create and articulate their own or even a common point of view by building on each other's comments. Data derived from a focus group discussion is interactively constructed, which sharply distinguishes this method from other qualitative data collection methods.³⁰ In addition to this, it also serves to expose and register latent opinions, attitudes, feelings, individual or group experiences, and to create a 'common tongue' describing the research topic based on the vocabulary used by the research subjects. This also eliminates problems related to different interpretations of terminology.

Because of the reasons given above, the FGD method is especially compatible with the research projects in the field of education methodology conducted at the Ludovika University of Public Service which investigate the participants in its public officials training system.

PARTICULARITIES OF THE PUBLIC OFFICIALS TRAINING SYSTEM

Government regulation 273/2012 (IX. 28.) on public officials' training (hereinafter: Regulation) entrusts the Ludovika University of Public Service with the operation of this training system. The system aims to deepen participants' general knowledge of

²⁶ HADI-JUNAIDI 2020.

²⁷ HENNINK 2014.

²⁸ SHANNON-WEAVER 1949; BARNLUND 1970.

²⁹ NEWCOMB 1953.

³⁰ BARBOUR-KITZINGER 1999.

public administration and their specialised knowledge of institutions and competences while developing their personal and leadership skills. The Regulation states that it is the responsibility of the LUPS to provide training on public administration and on leadership skills, while other types of training can be organised by any unit of public administration, conducted inhouse. Every public official – in different proportions – has to undergo 2-6 training sessions based on their individual qualifications and the particularities of the given training course. The Regulation also states that these training sessions can only be conducted by personnel who are included in the registry of university lecturers through tenders launched by the university. The university has to provide these lecturers with planned and regular professional training on teaching methodology and andragogy, participation in which is also a condition for lecturers to be allowed to teach general public administration courses and to hold leadership seminars or workshops. There is, however, no such requirement stated in the Regulation for those teaching internal courses.

Lecturers participating in public officials training constitute 3 categories:

- university lecturers who are included in the university's registry in any role (lecturer, trainer, facilitator, tutor, training official, language teacher etc.) who have taken part in a teaching methodology training course – whether they are lecturers at the Ludovika University of Public Service or at other universities
- individuals who are not university lecturers but who are included in the registry and have taken part in the teaching methodology training course
- experts in certain fields of public administration who hold internal training courses/sessions and for whom the university does not provide teaching methodology training and who probably have never received such training

It could be an interesting and useful avenue of research for assessing the efficiency of the public officials' training system to examine what kind of teaching methodology supports these lecturers' needs best and how can they best be provided. For the reasons mentioned above, focus group discussion is the most suitable research method for such analysis. When organising this type of research, it is important for researchers to pay attention to the differences in the level of teaching methodology knowledge and the teaching skills of lecturers from all three categories as they all require different focal points.

To comply with the Regulation, the university is not only obliged to organise general public administration and leadership training programmes for public officials, but it also has to develop them. As a result, in addition to teaching methodology, training programme development methodology also received special attention in our study. These two terms are obviously not independent from one another, but the legislative requirements of the system for quality assurance make it necessary to deal with training programme development methodology in its own right. The experts developing a curriculum also follow some kind of methodology (for example, a language learning textbook may be communication based, grammar based or even culture based). Often the curriculum and the related tools facilitating learning and teaching inherently define the teaching methods (and of course the opposite can be true: some teaching methods require certain types of teaching tools).

In other cases, in contrast, alternative teaching methods may be employed, depending on the lecturer's personality and the target group (public officials are a heterogenic target group not only due to their different fields of expertise and positions, but also because of their professional qualifications). From a quality assurance point of view³¹ it is important that the developed curriculum and the related teaching/learning tools serve as a 'recipe book' with the help of which even lecturers who have less experience, less knowledge of teaching methods and less teaching skills can deliver training sessions that achieve the course goals and develop the required levels of competences and skills. This is important because, given the volume and the structure of the training system for public officials, the people responsible for the development of a training programme or session cannot all cooperate in its realisation. Besides, treating training development methodology as a different subject matter is plausible given the many e-learning based courses that require special methods, yet which do not require the cooperation of lecturers at the stage of their realisation.

The university involves experts who have experience in planned training in the process of training development. Nevertheless, only some of these experts have training experience and sufficient knowledge of teaching methodology and skills, as their task is to provide appropriate professional content. However, the people responsible for developing training programmes do not have to possess the same methodological skills as lecturers (for example different skills are needed for an expert tasked with writing appropriate exam questions and a competent examiner). The FGD method hence is not only a good choice for research involving lecturers but also for studies involving curriculum developers as it helps to understand what kind of methodological support this target group needs and how it can be best provided.

The results of the research projects described above can, on the one hand, be incorporated into the professional materials on the methodology of obligatory training provided by the university that are related to certain lecturer roles; and on the other hand, they allow the trainers for who are not obligated by legislation to receive training in methodology to be provided with the most suitable methodological support. The training system that is operated by the university and is embedded into its educational activity can thus be integrated into the paradigm shift that is part of the Institutional Development Plan.

In the foregoing discussion, the FGD method has been presented as a kind of a quality assurance tool. However, when the method focuses on the participants of the public officials training system it also has the potential to be used for the assessment of training needs.

Training programmes for public officials are organised in both online and offline formats in addition to a hybrid blended format.

The teaching tools and methods associated with e-learning can be sorted into the following main categories:

- video presentation
- complex e-curriculum – the core of the curriculum is storytelling, which presents the values and patterns of thought related to the subject, facilitating the later recall

³¹ EMISZ 2017.

of the knowledge thus acquired. Stories can take the form of comics, live action films or animations that are complemented by e-learning texts, narrated videos and video presentations

- educational movie – a media presentation that consists of scenes that have an appropriate didactic structure and that is consistent in terms of its content and its imagery. This is a visual tool of teaching which is primarily based on images but which also applies manipulative mechanisms that have an effect on both the mind and the emotions
- simulation – short scenes in the online space recorded on video that aim at developing skills and that have the same actors and are embedded into a wider story. It models real decision-making situations in the online space, and it allows students to deepen the knowledge that they have acquired in theory and turn it into practical skills

Written background materials and glossaries are often developed for e-learning courses to complement the learning materials and to facilitate learning.³²

Offline training can vary from frontal lectures to courses applying training methodology to workshops and seminars (see: case studies). Consequently, teaching tools developed for these also vary, and they may thus exhibit methodological heterogeneity. The lecturers involved are chosen from the above-mentioned pool based on the competences required for each academic role.

While a research methodology based on transactive communication can work well in the examination of the training subjects required by public officials (see: survey); when it comes to the different methodological approaches taken by participants and their expectations such research is less suitable.

The most important questions both from the standpoints of the efficiency of the training system and of the methodological requirements of lecturers are as follows:

- How can participants be motivated and activated; how can they be involved in the learning process?
- What methods are available to make learning more experience- and practice-based?
- How can interactive techniques be incorporated into traditional, frontal instruction?
- Which elements of the training methodology can be incorporated into the more traditional practice of education?
- What methods can be effectively used in remote teaching through online platforms (MST, Zoom, etc.)?
- How can testing knowledge become part of the learning process instead of being a separate exam?

³² See: <https://probono.uni-nke.hu/onfejlesztes/>

Even though answers to these questions can be found in the teaching methodology literature, these approaches are not always suitable for every target group.

Public officials function within a severely regulated institutional system based on a tight hierarchy (in this it is similar to the university collective that also operates with a high level of hierarchy and that receives a great deal of government attention) and, as we have already mentioned, it is in several aspects a very heterogeneous target group and therefore not every method can be effectively used with public officials. They could, however, indicate those methods that motivate them and those that they reject through focus group discussions. The focus group format allows them to articulate their views, opinions, needs and expectations for further research.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The primary aim of the research in which the focus group method was used was to explore the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on lecturers' work. The research was motivated by our experience of the pandemic situation, as well as by the institutional drive to reform the teaching methodology, which had already started at the university shortly before the pandemic broke out. There is an increasing ambition internationally to improve the quality of education³³ in various ways. The changes forced by the need for emergency remote teaching during the Covid-19 lockdowns have raised awareness of digital education even more. These circumstances have required flexible institutional and faculty responses, and they have led to the appearance and the widespread use of new teaching methodologies.³⁴

The educational reform process began at the LUPS in 2019. Following the preparatory work, the university's Institutional Development Plan (2020 to 2025) aimed to deliver a paradigm shift in pedagogy entitled the Creative Learning Programme (CLP). CLP is a process that has the objective of bringing teaching methods up to date and building lecturers' teaching skills to better support the effective development of students' abilities. As it transpired, the implementation of the CLP started under the difficult circumstances of Covid.

Qualitative research therefore did not begin without any precedent or introduction. Online workshops were organised to collect best practices from lecturers. In January 2021 a total of 80 teachers in 10 groups participated in online discussions on good practices. The discussions were led by moderators using the same questions and scenario. The moderators produced a summary of the discussions, and the summaries were used to produce a 39-page report for the CLP. Then training materials were developed and delivered to share and to improve innovative and creative teaching methods. From March 2022 to June 2022, a pedagogical revision of 10 mandatory courses were carried out on the BA in International Administration, after which all the elective courses of the faculty were

³³ KÁLMÁN 2019.

³⁴ SUTTON – BITENCOURT JORGE 2020.

updated. Since September 2022, a series of discussions on methodological issues connected to teaching at the university have been held under the title Methodological Tea Party, led by a moderator. With this background in mind, we started our focus group research in the autumn of 2022.

OUR EXPERIENCES WITH FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Similarly to Brown (2021), we can describe the main steps of the research by starting with the definition of the research objective and comparing the arguments for and against FGD, formulating the most important research questions and developing various protocols (selection and preparation of moderators and observers, FGD guideline, additional data collection methods, data protection and technical trial).³⁵ The focus of our research is on lecturers' perceptions of the digital switchover. However, we were also interested in shedding light on how they experienced and coped with emergency remote teaching, how special circumstances affected their teaching and what long-term effects they recognise in their work afterwards.

The criteria for conducting focus group research include choosing a suitable location, a convenient time slot and an appropriate moderator. We planned the possible dates of the focus groups, taking into account the working schedule of lecturers. We tried to provide an atmosphere that was relatively informal but professional where participants would feel comfortable and feel safe talking. The university has its own one-way mirror room, but this had not been previously known either to us or to the participants. The one-way mirror room is located in one of the buildings of the Faculty of Law Enforcement, along with several other practical classrooms. After visiting and assessing the room, we were convinced that it was suitable for FGD, so we requested permission to use it. The technician of the Forensic Department of the Faculty of Law Enforcement helped us adapt the room to our purposes and to take full advantage of its technical facilities. A moderator and an observer were assigned to each time slot.

Once the venue, possible dates and moderators had been identified, we started to formulate the questions. The research team brainstormed and developed the questions in a logical sequence that it felt would support the purpose of our research. We used different types of open-ended questions: opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending questions, with 10-12 questions being asked in 90 minutes of discussion. We decided to start the FGD with broader questions, then continue with more specific, more focused questions on the topic. We paid particular attention to documenting participants' consent, ensuring that various documents on data protection and additional data collection were signed.

³⁵ BROWN [s. a].

In the following phase, the participants of the focus groups were recruited. During the recruitment process the heads of 16 faculty departments were asked by email to propose participants from among their colleagues for focus group discussions with varying qualifications, different professional profiles and/or different perspectives. We also requested a range of participants differing in terms of how much time they had spent at the university or how much experience they had as lecturers. Proposals were received from eight departments. For the remaining eight departments, potential participants were selected by reviewing their CVs on the university's website. For several reasons, it was important to include participants from different departments in the focus groups. We hoped that the mixing of departments would provide as much information as possible, and that this diversity would also be attractive for participants to allow them to meet people from other departments.

After a successful recruitment process, five FGDs were conducted in November 2022. The participants were informed in the invitation letters about the venue of choice, where video and audio recordings would also be made. The researchers playing the role of the moderator were those who had experience as trainers. Moderators were responsible for keeping the discussions on track and for stimulating discussion if necessary. At the same time, Moderators tried to stay on the periphery of the discussion as much as possible. Moderators worked in pairs with an observer from the research group.

Participants were met on arrival outside the building where the focus groups were held. Some snacks and water were prepared in the room. At the beginning of the talks, we introduced ourselves briefly, explaining the purpose and benefits of the focus group. The observer sat behind the one-way mirror so she could take notes without disturbing the discussion. The moderator kept track of time and guided the discussions along the lines of predetermined questions, while observers took notes from the other side of the one-way mirror. The discussions lasted 60-90 minutes. The technician shared the video materials with us that we transcribed word for word. Observers added their own personal impressions and observations to the transcripts. Using the verbatim transcription of the FGD, we obtained a corpus of text available in Word format, running to more than 100 pages.

The last phase of the research involved the analysis of data, the communication and dissemination of the results, preparing and sharing the research reports, holding presentations with different groups of stakeholders and matching the results to the results of the broader research programme and to our further research plans (institutional development aspects), as well as archiving the results (including the deletion of sensitive content to comply with data protection regulations). The qualitative data corpus was analysed with the help of a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, specifically MAXQDA.

POSSIBLE PROBLEMS AND THEIR ELIMINATION DURING THE APPLICATION OF FGD

Zacharia and his co-authors (2021) identified differences inherent in the regional, economic, cultural, educational, linguistic and social situation and roots as risk factors.³⁶ In our case, participants from the same cultural milieu and the same university (organisational) culture had a discussion based on similar values, which were, however, enriched by the participants' experience in other educational institutions and educational levels and forms. At the same time, a kind of fault line could be observed between those colleagues who mainly or regularly work with international (multicultural) student groups and the lecturers who mainly teach Hungarian (homogenous) groups. By definition, there was no language barrier. We faced a dilemma when deciding what data to gather about the participants and where to obtain it, and the level of detail of the data sheet that participants would complete before the group discussion. We decided to process the public data published on the organisation's website as a primary source, i.e. the biographies of the lecturers, which have to be uploaded for the sake of organisational transparency. However, since we encountered a great deal of variety regarding the level of detail of such documents, it was necessary to have the participants fill out a short form on paper before the discussion. This mainly included columns relevant to their professional socialisation as lecturers: a) teaching experience expressed in years, b) educational levels taught,³⁷ c) teaching in a foreign language, d) other relevant professional experience³⁸ (self-declaration), e) other.

Maintaining quality and consistency during successive focus group discussions can be a challenge,³⁹ especially if, as in our case, there are several different moderators and observers. The research group of the Creative Learning Programme is a group of researchers who have been working together for several months, which jointly planned and commented on the guidelines of the interview with its members in several rounds, so that a unified framework of thought was arrived at.⁴⁰ Adhering to the fixed thematic units and a specific order made it possible for the focus groups to share their thoughts via the same questions and, as far as possible, under the same conditions (space, time and number of employees).

Before each focus group, the moderator and observer had the opportunity to view the recordings of the previously completed sessions. At the same time, since each conversation

³⁶ ZACHARIA et al. 2021.

³⁷ In Hungary, these levels are: primary or secondary school education, vocational school or high school, higher education vocational education, higher education bachelor's and master's education, doctoral education, post-graduate education (specialised further education), and possibly courses or other forms of education outside the school system.

³⁸ Here, we primarily took into consideration participants' professional experience as lawyers, judges, in diplomatic and business roles, their training or coaching activities, training or mediation experience, and artistic or creative activities.

³⁹ MUIJEEN et al. 2019.

⁴⁰ Four of the members of the research group were participants in the same doctoral programme on communication, so their common professional history went back much further.

was not conducted by the same moderator, it was not a concern that over time, due to the feeling of familiarity, moderators and observers would become almost saturated with the information that had been shared and already mentioned by previous groups – fresh eyes and ears were ensured for active, understanding and facilitative listening.⁴¹

Recruiting presented a whole set of challenges. We started recruiting two weeks before the first group session was planned to be held. We sent out invitation emails to 51 members of staff, more than 100 exchanges of correspondence took place, and finally, as a result of a repetitive process (contact, confirm, remind) 23 lecturers were recruited to participate in the discussions in 5 focus groups.

Trust was a key issue in the recruitment process. Closer colleagues of the recruiters were easier to engage. Some individuals were hesitant and said no because of the one-way mirror room and the recording process.

Fern (1982) determined that the members in a focus group produce fewer ideas (contributions) on a topic than they would in an individual interview.⁴² This makes it questionable whether we can obtain better quality or deeper answers from the participants than with other methods. However, in our case, the focus groups are a complementary method in the broader context of the research in which personal in-depth interview were also conducted. This helped to eliminate the potential shortcomings of the methodology regarding the quality of the data.

CONCLUSIONS

Is it possible to conclusively name any pros and cons of using the focus group method? One possible drawback was that the monitoring/observation and recording of the discussions discouraged some people from participating, even those for whom a C-type national security check/screening is an entry requirement for their jobs, and this is well known and communicated. When organising an FGD, it is important to take into account the power structure of the organisation, the competing interests of the departments and the level of resistance to and scepticism about changes. It is necessary to assume the role of a neutral facilitator regardless of whether the moderator is working with participants she has known for a long time or with colleagues she has never met before to ensure that they share their experiences. Researchers need to make cold calls like salespeople do in the marketplace. The moderator needs to be able to ask questions as openly and impartially as if she did not know the pedagogical practices of her colleagues by hearsay, and must create an atmosphere in which they honestly discuss what they do well or poorly, leaving behind institutional expectations, admitting what they fail to do, what they do not believe in and why they do or do not make an effort.

⁴¹ KANER et al. 2007.

⁴² FERN 1982.

The method proved to be suitable for channelling knowledge and initiatives from below into the development process to help to deliver an absolutely top-down and centralised institutional-level methodological paradigm shift. Precise preparation, strict adherence to scientific and ethical principles and data protection rules and successful facilitation all contributed to the success of this research methodology.

FGD can be effectively used both as a quality assurance and a needs assessment tool in the context of adult training, which differs in many aspects from regular higher education, and the results of needs assessment can be incorporated into quality assurance processes.

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