# Online Focus Group Checklist

## Before the focus group

- Test the software and programs being used and ensure moderators are comfortable using them and can solve minor technological issues (Kite and Phongsavan 2017; Tuttas 2015).
- Choose systems and programs that require minimal set up for your participants.
- Research the systems and programs you will use in the focus groups – if these have issues with firewalls or antivirus software, consider their merits carefully. If proceeding, ensure participants are aware that they may have issues if joining from institutional computers.
- Estimate the technological proficiencies of your participant population and adjust your protocol accordingly (Tuttas 2015).
- Provide participants with details of how the systems and programs work and how to join them in advance of the focus group – this can be incorporated into the participant information sheet.
- Have a plan for how to cope with potential technological issues for the moderator and participants (Tuttas, 2015).
- Offer participants a chance to have a practice call with the moderator in advance of the focus group to check whether they can use the software.
- Establish rapport with participants in advance through emails (Tuttas, 2015).
- Decide in advance what the ground rules for your focus group will be (e.g. will participants be asked to remain unmuted when not speaking? Should cameras be kept on if possible?).
- Plan your recruitment strategy and a protocol adjustment to cope with potentially low numbers on the day (Fox 2017; Tuttas 2015).
- Think about how you will prepare and present your materials in a way that best re-creates the important aspects of the in-person plan (e.g. randomisation of order, ability for participants to double check phrasing throughout the focus group).
- Prepare moderator materials (e.g. note-taking plan or copies of the protocol) such that these are easily accessible during the call.
- Test the moderators' audio and video call quality with a group call of equivalent size to the focus group.

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- Choose a sign up method which allows you to collect the information necessary to assign participants to specific groups (e.g. if you need to ensure specific representation within each group).
- Offer participants a range of potential dates during the sign up process to allow for rescheduling if required.
- Choose an online consent form method that allows the moderator to check that all participants have completed these prior to beginning data collection.
- Think through your protocol and identify a list of potential problems that require contingency plans. These may include:
    - Preparing a back-up call link in case the original service is unavailable on the day
    - Preparing (but not sending) an email in advance to all participants with the back-up call link and instructions on how to join using this server
    - Preparing a back-up method of presenting key materials on the day
    - Using multiple methods for recording
    - Having back-up moderators ready to help participants with technical issues on the day
    - Having back-up moderators ready to take over should the original moderator have technical issues during the event
    - Facilitating back-up moderator transitions by sharing links for the call, back-up call, materials, back-up materials, and providing participants with the back-up moderator's contact details
- Recruit additional attendees to allow for late drop outs (Liamputtong 2015).
- Pilot your online focus group and compare results with those obtained from in-person pilots (if applicable) to gauge the impact of moving online – adapt protocol further if needed.

## During the focus group

- Start early to ensure you have time to set everything up (Tuttas, 2015), to check participants connections, and consent forms, as well as to build rapport with participants.
- Remind participants when recording is about to begin (Tuttas, 2015).
- Explain the ground rules for the call. This could include:
    - Reminding participants that online discussions are less fluid than in-person meetings
    - Asking participants to be patient and considerate of one another

  - Detailing requests for microphones to remain on (or off) when participants are not speaking and explaining why this is important
  - Detailing requests for video to remain on (or off) when participants are not speaking, and explaining why this is important
  - Highlighting that technical glitches often resolve quickly on their own, and explaining the basic procedure (e.g. back-up moderator) should any technical issues not resolve in a timely fashion
  - Explaining how and when the chat function (and any other functions, such as hand raising) is to be used within the call
- Allow for slightly longer delays than normal in speaking – be prepared to be silence and wait for a reply which may be delayed due to lag.
- Encourage turn taking and ensure everyone has a chance to speak (Tuttas, 2015)
- Explain to participants how each activity will work and show them how to use any technology or programs they will need to use before starting the activity.
- Leave time for questions throughout and at the end of the workshop, as there may be fewer natural pauses or asides where participants could raise these.

## After the focus group

- Upload any recordings and files to a secure location and follow any further data protection steps required in the ethical protocol immediately after the focus group.
- Thank participants for their time by email and remind them about any time-limited consent withdrawal or future work.

## References

Fox, Fiona. 2017. "Meeting in Virtual Spaces: Conducting Online Focus Groups." Pp. 256–74 in *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide to Textual, Media and Virtual Techniques*, edited by D. Gray, V. Clarke, and V. Braun. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kite, James and Philayrath Phongsavan. 2017. "Insights for Conducting Real-Time Focus Groups Online Using a Web Conferencing Service." *F1000Research* 6(122).

Liamputtong, Pranee. 2015. "Focus Group Methodology and Principles." in *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Tuttas, Carol A. 2015. "Lessons Learned Using Web Conference Technology for Online Focus Group Interviews." *Qualitative Health Research* 25(1):122–33.