STAGE 1

External Reporting

Tool: Focus Group Interviews

What is it? A focus group interview is a facilitated discussion with a small group of participants, typically 3–8 people. It is guided by a set of structured questions to explore specific topics, such as the project's achievements, challenges, and impact.

When to use it? Focus group interviews are ideal for gathering qualitative insights and diverse perspectives on Erasmus+ project outcomes. Use them during the reporting phase to provide a nuanced and comprehensive view of the project's impact.

Why use it? This method encourages in-depth discussions that reveal diverse experiences and outcomes. It allows for rich, detailed data that complements quantitative metrics, making your final report more compelling and aligned with funder expectations.

Step-by-Step Guide

Step 1 **Define objectives:** Identify the key outcomes or aspects of the project you want to explore. Align these with your formal project plan and Erasmus+ reporting requirements to focus the discussion.

Step 2 **Plan and schedule the session:** Select a diverse group of participants who represent different perspectives. Schedule a 1–2 hour session in a comfortable setting. Make sure to schedule the session in advance, preferably while the project is still ongoing to ensure participation.

- Think carefully about the timing of the interview. For example, you might want to do it at the last stages of the project to ensure participation, right after the project when memories are fresh, or some time after a project once participants have been able to reflect on their learnings. Note, however, that the longer you wait, the harder it might be to get people to participate.

Step 3 **Develop guiding questions:** Prepare open-ended questions that encourage detailed responses. Example: “What do you think was the most significant impact of this project?”

- You can use the template in the next pages, or develop questions that work for you. Remember to also ask into potential negative experiences and aspects that participants think could be developed.

Step 4 **Facilitate the discussion:** Start with an introduction, explaining the purpose of the session. Use guiding questions to steer the conversation, ensuring all voices are heard.

Step 5 **Record and document:** Take detailed notes or record the session with consent. Focus on capturing direct quotes and key points for later analysis.

- Note that it is good to document the notes into a separate document so that all data is gathered in one place.

Step 6 **Analyze and Report:** Review the notes or transcripts to identify themes and key outcomes. Use this qualitative data to enrich your Erasmus+ report, providing concrete examples and participant testimonials. To analyze your data, you can use, for example, the Most Significant Change (MSC) tool presented earlier.

Focus Group Interview

Time: 30–90 min

Roles:

1–2 interviewers (1 note-taker), 4–10 interviewees

What you need:

- A space or online platform for the interview
  - **Zoom**
  - **Teams**
  - **Google Meet**
- Pre-planned interview structure
- Recorder (optional, but handy)
- Note-taking equipment

When to use? When you want to have a deep discussion of the participants' experiences and thoughts.

When not? When you want to have data from tens or dozens of people or you need statistical information.

Tips for Facilitating

Show that you are interested to listen: Nod and maintain eye-contact.

Stay neutral: Keep your responses encouraging, don't assert your own opinions.

Encourage balanced participation: Make sure everyone gets a chance to speak, you can use phrases like "Let's hear from someone who hasn't shared yet" or "Lena, what do you think?".

Ask open questions and use follow-up prompts: Avoid "yes/no"-questions, prefer "what/how/why?". If participants provide brief answers, try follow-up questions like "Can you tell me more about that?", "Why do you think that is?" or "How did that make you feel?".

Watch the time: Gently guide the discussion to stay on track and ensure all topics are covered.

Focus Group Interview

Process Phases

Decide objectives for the interview
- What do you want to learn?

Reserve space for the interview(s)

Choose representatives of the focus group and invite interviewees
- Number interviewees per group can vary between 4–10.
- The more sensitive the subject and the deeper the discussion, the smaller the group.
- 3–4 groups may already be enough to have “saturation”, meaning that new interviews won’t bring new insights to the interview data.

Create a specific interview structure
- List the questions you wish to ask and arrange them in an order that seems most natural to you for creating a conversational flow. See example interview structure on the next page.
- You can revise the interview structure for later interviews if needed. Try the keep the bulk of the interview still similar to maintain commensurability between different interviews.

Hold the interview(s)
- Make notes and/or record the interview.
- Revise the interview structure between interviews if needed.

Analyze the interview data
- What are the recurring experiences and themes in the data? How do they respond to your expectations? What is surprising in the data? Are there some important or worrying singular instances? Great quotes?

Draw conclusions – What did you learn?
- E.g. What has the project changed in the focus group’s lives?

Focus Group Interview Structure [Example]

Objective

To gather qualitative insights from Erasmus students about their experiences during the one-week exchange program, focusing on both learnings and personal development.

Opening (5–10 minutes)

Welcome and introduction: Briefly introduce yourself and explain the purpose of the focus group: “Today, we want to hear about your experiences during the exchange to help improve future Erasmus programs.”

Set expectations: Explain the session will last about 60–90 minutes and will include open discussion. Emphasize confidentiality to create a safe space for sharing.

Consent and recording: Ask for consent to record the session if applicable and clarify that their feedback will be kept anonymous.

Icebreaker (5 minutes)

To ease participants into the discussion, start with a light, introductory question:
“Could each of you share one word or phrase that describes your experience during the exchange?”

Main Discussion Topics (45–60 minutes)

Topic 1: Orientation and initial impressions
“How was your first day in the host country? Was there anything unexpected or challenging?”
“Did you feel supported by the Erasmus staff and host institution? What was most helpful?”

Topic 2: Academic and cultural experience
“What were some highlights of the academic experience? Did you learn anything new or surprising?”
“How did interacting with students or faculty from the host country impact you?”
“Did you encounter any cultural differences? How did you handle them?”

Topic 3: Personal growth and impact
“How has this experience influenced you personally or academically?”
“Would you say the exchange affected your confidence in any way, perhaps in communicating across cultures or adapting to new environments?”
“What skills or insights have you gained that you think will be useful in the future?”

Topic 4: Challenges and areas for improvement
“Did you face any challenges during the exchange? How did you handle them?”
“What aspects of the exchange program could be improved for future participants?”
“If you could change one thing about your experience, what would it be?”

Closing (5–10 minutes)

Final thoughts: “Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experience that we haven’t covered?”
Gratitude and next steps: Thank participants for their time and valuable feedback. Share how their input will help shape future Erasmus programs.