COST Action 15221
Protocol for focus groups with key informants

The purpose of this protocol is to document and guide the process associated with the focus group element of data gathering with key informants as part of COST Action 15221.

## Context of the focus groups

COST Action 15221 addresses the challenge of creating synergy among the increasingly more specialised and centralised supports for four key higher education activities – research, writing, teaching and learning – which frequently fail to capitalise on their shared territories and common ground.

This Action will address the identified challenge by:

● classifying, as 'frontier taxonomies', the common ground in terms of shared purposes, processes, knowledge, values and skills among centralized institutional supports for research, writing, teaching and learning in order to capitalise on their synergies
● offering the most advantageous models and practices for supporting these four areas that are mindful of the availability of new technologies and assessments and that prompt a reworking of current institutional supports which will be valuable and far-reaching.

In order to achieve these aims, one of the objectives associated with the Action is to classify the elements that have typically led key informants to success, effectiveness and productivity across the four areas of research, writing, teaching and learning.

Data gathering with key informants i.e. colleagues who are deemed expert across the four areas, was discussed by the Action's working groups and Management Committee when it met in Malta in Feb/March 2018. After much consideration it was agreed that two data gathering tools would be used in succession with key informants, namely focus group and questionnaire, where the results of the former would influence the design of the latter. At that meeting, the broad parameters and scope of the focus group data gathering were also agreed. This included the following elements:

● that the focus groups would take place online
● that they would be largely discipline specific
● that they would be conducted in English
● that they would be audio recorded
● that there would be a gender balance across the groups
● that the participation would be made up of one representative from each of our partner countries
● that there would be approximately 6 focus groups each made up of 5-6 people
● that the facilitators of the focus groups would be drawn from our Action's working groups and MC and that we would seek volunteers in this regard
● that the focus groups would take place in May – June 2018
● that this protocol be drafted and provided to the facilitators and participants
● that a pilot focus group be organized for facilitators.


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## Purpose of the focus group

The purpose of the focus group is twofold:
1. to begin to identify with key informants the elements that have typically led them to success, effectiveness and productivity across the four areas of research, writing, teaching and learning.
2. to inform the design of the questionnaire for use with key informants.

## Research ethics

As agreed by the Action's MC, ethical approval was sought for the data gathering process with key informants and the subsequent use of that data. The focus group, this protocol, the information sheet and the consent form all received ethical approval from the following institutions, in which all of the facilitators are based:

- Maynooth University
- University of Limerick
- European University Viadrina

All focus group participants must have carefully read the information sheet, and read and signed the consent form prior to participating in the focus group. An electronic signature is acceptable.

## Focus group procedures and phases

Effective focus group organization involves many procedures and phases; those which are relevant to our process are outlined here.

## Pre-focus group procedures

### *Focus group participant selection*

The makeup of the focus groups is vital for the success of the research. There will be one focus group participant per COST Action member country. The focus group participant will be selected by the MC members; where there are two MC members in one country the MC members must agree between them on the focus group participant. In this regard, it is certainly possible that one or other of the MC members will not know the person selected, and thus a level of trust in colleagues' judgement will have to prevail. Focus group members must be

- judged to meet, as closely as possible, the agreed criteria for 'stellar' colleagues (this may include Action MC members)
- motivated and willing to contribute to the data gathering process
- willing to sign the consent form associated with the data gathering
- sufficiently competent in English to actively contribute to the focus group
- sufficiently ICT literate to be able to manage to contribute to the focus group in an online environment.

## Organizing the focus groups

Colleagues will be provided with a short summary of the project including the focus group element, which they can share with prospective participants. Each MC member country agrees on their focus group participant in May 2018; this process will also involve securing an 'agreement in principle' from the participant to take part in the focus group. Once both of these elements have been completed, the name, discipline and email address of the participant should be sent to the COST Action chair who, in consultation with the focus group facilitators, will assign the participants to groups.

Once participants have been assigned to groups, the relevant group facilitator will be in touch with participants in order to provide more information about the project. This will include greater detail on the focus group and a copy of the ground rules for the focus group. The facilitator will also agree the date and time for the focus group with participants; this can be done using a Doodle poll. The focus group must occur in either May or June 2018.

*Consent*

Following the agreement on the time and date of the focus group, the facilitator will seek formal consent from participants as per the requirements of the ethical approval. Signed consent forms must be returned to the facilitator and the COST Action chair prior to the focus group; an electronic signature is acceptable.

*ICT checking*

The facilitator will notify the participants of the technology that will be used for the focus group. At least a fortnight prior to the focus group the facilitator will check that participants understand how to engage with the technology by running a 5 min test at an agreed time. This test run can be a one-to-one check with participants, or a partial or all group check.

*Initial introductions*

The facilitator will introduce participants to each other by email at least a week before the scheduled focus group. Participants will be encouraged to share information between the group about their discipline, where they work, how they are connected with the project, etc. The tone of this introduction should be very informal, and chat like (indeed, a chat space could be used as an alternative to email). This is not an opportunity to share one's CV, rather it is a chance to get a sense of where participants are coming from more broadly.

*Reminders*

The facilitator sends a reminder to participants 3 days (or so) before the focus group giving them the link to the technology and reminding them of the date and time (and time zone).

## Focus group procedures

The focus group will last 90 mins. Each focus group should allow for 15 mins before the focus group proper starts, so that people can login and to ensure that the technology is working for everyone. Similarly, each focus group should allow for 15 mins at the end where any logistics or indeed follow up activity can be clarified.

Only the 90 mins of the focus group proper need be recorded; this should be recorded within the technology being used and backed up with a digital audio recorder.

## Focus group phases

*Phase 1 – welcome, checking-in and introductions*
This phase occurs in the 15 mins prior to the focus group proper and involves the following steps:
1. Facilitator checks that everyone can hear and be heard.
2. Facilitator welcomes everyone, thanks them for volunteering to participate, acknowledges their expertise and recognises how much we can all learn from each other in the focus group.

3. Tour de table. Everyone introduces themselves by giving their name, their discipline/department, their institution, maybe experience of online focus groups (?) followed by the answer to a short icebreaker question e.g. where are you this morning? what can you see out your window? what can you hear? what's the weather like?
4. Facilitator outlines his/her role in the focus group i.e. to conduct the focus group as per the ethical requirements, in fulfilment of the stated purpose, to the agreed ground rules and in a collegial manner
5. Facilitator mentions the aim of the COST Action (1 min), the stage at which the project is at the moment (2 mins), and the purpose of the focus group (2 mins)
These are as follows:
*Aim of the COST Action project* – to addresses the challenge of creating synergy among the increasingly more specialised and centralised supports for four key higher education activities – research, writing, teaching and learning – which frequently fail to capitalise on their shared territories and common ground.
*Stage of Action* – the Action began in October 2016 and will finish in October 2020, so we are approximately half way through. So far we have learned about the models of support for research, writing, learning and teaching that exist in the MC's institutions. We have also explored what we consider desirable models of support.
*Purpose of the focus group* – the purpose of this focus group is to add to the data we have to date by specifically identifying with key informants the elements that have typically led them to success, effectiveness and productivity across the four areas of research, writing, teaching and learning. The outcomes of the focus group will also inform the design of a questionnaire which will be used with other key informants.
6. Facilitator reminds participants of the timings for the focus group and that the focus group will be recorded.
7. Facilitator reminds participants of the ground rules which have been distributed in advance of the focus group

*Phase 2 – Development – focus group work*

The focus group will last for 90 mins. It will consider 5 questions:
1. What has been the single most important factor that has contributed to your success as a researcher, writer, teacher and learner?
2. What have you found most difficult in your career to date and how have you managed that challenge?
3. What habits or what about your disposition (professional demeanour) contributes most to your success?
4. What do you want to do next and what (besides more time and resources!) would help you to achieve that goal?
5. What advice would you give to an early career colleague hoping to succeed as a researcher, writer, teacher and learner?

The facilitator should remember the following points:
- To listen actively to participants.
- To watch the time; there is approximately 15 mins for each question.
- To ensure that every participant gets a fair chance to contribute.
- To draw out/encourage shy participants.
- To try, as best as possible, to follow the sequence of the questions, and to make connections from one question to the next.
- To maintain an open, informal, collegial tone.
- To respond to contributions in a neutral, impartial, professional manner.
- To clarify contributions with participants where there is ambiguity.
- To probe and encourage elaboration on interesting points (within the existing time constraints).

● To be sensitive to cultural and diversity issues in the group
● Not to stray from the questions – this is strongly discouraged
● Not to invite questions from participants throughout the focus group.

*Phase 3 – Wrapping up*

The wrapping up phase takes place after the 90 mins focus group and should last no more than 15 mins.

Immediately post the focus group the facilitator turns off the recorder and informs the group that the recording is finished. The facilitator then thanks the group for their participation. He/She reminds the participants of the following information which they would have received pre-focus group:
● that the content of the focus group will be transcribed by participants of the September 2018 COST Action training school
● that those transcripts will be checked by a member of the COST Action Core Group
● that following that process, the transcripts will be sent to each member of the focus group for verification of accuracy and for any 'off the record' remarks to be removed
● that the transcripts will be adjusted based on feedback from participants and the finalised version sent to participants for their information
● that when participants get the finalised transcripts they will be reminded about the next phases in the project and how they can keep in touch or be kept informed of the research.

The facilitator asks if there are any questions from participants and does his/her best to answer these. Where an immediate answer is not possible the facilitator notes the question and brings it to the attention of the Action's Core Group.

The facilitator thanks participants again and finishes the focus group session.

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