

Quick Guide: Consulting with students and survivors to develop and review your university's response to sexual misconduct

This guide had been developed by [AVA \(Against Violence and Abuse\)](#) to help you **safely and effectively consult with students** as you develop and review your plans to combat sexual harassment and misconduct at university. It is designed to be used by student support teams, student unions and other staff tasked with organising focus groups and workshops to understand students' views.

This guide is designed to support you to **run a consultation that aims to improve university policy and practice**. It is applicable when engaging with students who identify as survivors of abuse and violence and with students in general. This guide is **not designed to support academic research¹** or for **situations where you need to find out the details of someone's personal experience**, for example as part of an investigation process.

For further support, see the templates at the end of this document:

- **Resource A:** Consent form template
- **Resource B:** Participant information sheet template

About Combat Misconduct

This guide has been developed by [AVA \(Against Violence & Abuse\)](#), a national charity committed to creating a world without gender-based violence and abuse. AVA is a feminist charity particularly recognised for specialist expertise in multiple disadvantage and children and young people's work. Our core work includes training, policy, research and consultancy.

This guide was produced within the Combat Misconduct project. Combat Misconduct is a partnership between AVA, [NUS](#) and [UUK](#) aiming to improve university responses to sexual misconduct. The project is funded by [Rosa](#), the UK fund for women and girls. For more information about the project, visit www.avaproject.org.uk/combatisconduct.

¹ For further guidance on conducting academic research on violence and abuse, see the Research Integrity Framework from Women's Aid:

<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Research-Integrity-Framework-RIF-on-Domestic-Violence-and-Abuse-DVA-November-2020.pdf>

Five key principles for consulting with students and survivors

<p>Authentic</p>	<p>Authentic engagement acknowledges that people with lived experiences of sexual misconduct are often best placed to advise on what works for them. This is AVA's overarching principle for safe and meaningful consultation with students and survivors.</p> <p>It includes actively and meaningfully including students in the consultation process and sharing power - doing consultation 'with' and not 'to' students. Actively ask students what things would make their participation more comfortable and create room for questions in advance.</p>
<p>Safe</p>	<p>Be sure to get informed consent from everyone taking part, for example by using resources A and B at the end of this quick guide.</p> <p>Be risk aware, not risk averse. Understand and clearly communicate your institution's safeguarding policies. Ensure that you and the students know what will happen if someone discloses abuse during the consultation. See AVA's quick guide to handling disclosures.</p> <p>Promote self-care for students and facilitators - see AVA's quick guide to self-care.</p>
<p>Empathetic</p>	<p>Focus on the strengths and ideas of students and not just negative experiences. Remember that everyone's opinions and stories are different, and all are valid. Use empathetic, encouraging and supportive language throughout the consultation.</p> <p>Compensate students and survivors for their time with payment or equivalent that validates their engagement and contribution in an empowering way.</p>
<p>Transparent</p>	<p>Communicate clearly and consistently about how information will be used.</p> <p>Ensure that boundaries are clear; be transparent about what you can and cannot do, and what the scope and outcomes of the consultation will be in the long run.</p>
<p>Realistic</p>	<p>Start planning student and survivor engagement early on in the process; not as an afterthought. Leave time to be flexible on dates and times as much as possible, and ask proactively about students' access needs so arrangements can be made ahead of time.</p> <p>Be flexible. The consultation will naturally flow, but you can always gently steer the process back on topic without shutting discussions down. Recognise that conflict is part of the process. People will disagree and this is ok.</p>

Why focus groups?

A focus group is a method of research in which a discussion is facilitated with a small group of participants. Focus groups are useful for conducting consultations as they generally lead to in-depth, qualitative data.²

Advantages

Time-efficient in comparison to one-to-one interviews, and more in-depth than surveys.

Group discussion can generate ideas & capture attitudes you would be unlikely to uncover using other methods.

Disadvantages

Group context can inhibit or influence participant contributions.

Rich, qualitative data can be more complex and time consuming to analyse and draw conclusions.

AVA recommends using focus groups as a method to help understand the diversity of students' views and experience in more depth. Focus groups provide the opportunity for students to feel involved with the university's work to respond to sexual misconduct, as well as share their experience and advice.

Stage 1: Organising your consultation

Recruitment:

- Consider the **essential requirements** for participation in the group and make this clear in recruitment e.g. do the students need to have used the university report and support system?
- **Enlist the help of the students' union or student groups** to help you reach your target audience.
- Make it clear that you will **compensate students** for their time with payment or equivalent that validates their engagement and contribution in an empowering way.
- **Consider who should be involved** and be actively inclusive where possible. However, be sure to **create safe spaces for involvement**. This could mean having separate spaces for students with similar lived experiences e.g. based on race and gender identity.

² For more information on focus groups and their merits see:

<https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/organisation/impact/measuring-your-impact/focus-groups>

- **Monitor equalities data** to keep track of the demographic of students involved in consultation, and support you in securing a representative and diverse sample. Ensure you monitor ethnicity via accurate and clear categories, and are trans inclusive.³
- Be aware of **power dynamics** – for example a student might not feel comfortable disclosing some information if a senior member of staff is present or facilitating.
- **Keep numbers small** (10 maximum) to allow for everyone to input. AVA recommends that for groups dealing with challenging topics, smaller groups of 4–6 participants are most suitable.

Location: Consultation should take place in a location that is **safe, accessible and minimises triggers**.

Consulting online: ensure all students have a confidential, safe and quiet space to participate online – see [AVA's Digital Safeguarding resource for guidance](#). Ensure participants know how to use the video calling software you have chosen, and consider offering expenses for internet or phone costs and support in finding a suitable space if this isn't readily available. Check accessibility requirements well in advance⁴ and be realistic about what you can provide.

Consulting in-person: ensure the location is safe, private, and quiet. Check for accessibility requirements and be realistic about what you can provide. Consider travel costs to the location and potential child care costs for participants.

Safety:

- Be sure to get **informed consent** from everyone taking part. This can be done by sharing a participant information sheet and consent form prior to the group. See resources A and B for examples. Do not encourage the sharing of personal details or stories without prior discussion or agreement.
- **Clearly explain safeguarding measures.** Make sure you are up to date on your institution's policies and processes and communicate these with students in advance so that they know what will happen if they disclose something during a group. **Disclosures in a group should always be taken seriously.** This could be the first time someone has told anyone what happened to them. See AVA's quick guide to handling disclosures for more information.

³ For more information on equalities monitoring see Stonewall's (2016) guidance: https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/do_ask_do_tell_guide_2016.pdf

⁴ For information on making your online spaces accessible, see: <https://www.essentialaccessibility.com/blog/how-to-make-virtual-meetings-accessible>

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- **Promote wellbeing and self-care.** When working with challenging topics like sexual misconduct, even if students are not talking about direct experience, these topics can be upsetting. It is important that students and facilitators have strategies in place to maintain their wellbeing.
- Check with students before they take part that they have a **named contact**. This could be a support worker, family or friend - who they can reach out to after the focus group.
- **Offer support to students throughout the group and afterwards.** For example, offer comfort breaks, use encouraging, empathetic language, and if possible offer the option of a phone check-in several days after the group as it can take time to realise something has caused upset.
- Provide students *and* facilitators with a **self-care resource**; see AVA's quick guide to self-care.

Stage 2: Planning your consultation

Choose your facilitators:

- For safety reasons you will need **at least two facilitators**, for example if a student needs to step out. Both facilitators should have a **general understanding of the topic** being explored.
- Consider also arranging a separate note-taker in a larger group.
- **Consider the demographics of facilitators and note-takers** present. This can influence group dynamics and affect student engagement. For example, a male facilitator might not be appropriate for a focus group exploring women's experiences of sexual violence.

Plan your topic guide:

- A **topic guide**⁵ is a **list of questions prepared before the focus group** that cover the main themes to discuss in the form of semi-structured questions.
- **Questions should be open-ended.** To ensure the depth of information and experience shared, avoid 'yes' or 'no' format of questions.
- It can be useful to ask a couple of **'warm-up questions'** to get the group thinking more generally about the topic you to discuss.

Stage 3: Facilitating your consultation

Starting out:

⁵ For more information on topic guides, see:

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/Equalities/How%20to%20run%20focus%20groups%20guide.pdf>

- **Devise a group agreement.** You can either do this before the group and present it for feedback, or devise guidelines collaboratively during the group to make expectations clear and encourage a safe, respectful environment.
- **Check and check again.** It's important that you clearly communicate the purpose of the focus group, how it will run, along with safety and safeguarding measures. Make it clear that you are interested in the students' thoughts and opinions, and that no one has to answer anything they don't want to.
- **Check-ins or ice breakers** are a useful way to kick off a focus group and allow everyone to relax and inject some needed light heartedness and fun. It is useful for facilitators to know who in the group may be feeling low so they can provide empathy and encouragement.

Be comfortable with uncertainty. The unexpected is normal, something might come up that you can't prepare for, and that's ok.

Remember that some conflict is unavoidable. People naturally disagree. Gently remind the group of the group rules of respect, and that this is a safe space where people are bound to have different opinions.

Running the group:

- Throughout the group, **gently encourage conversation through prompts:** e.g. 'could you tell me a bit more about that?', 'why do you think that is?', 'does anyone else have anything to add?'
- **Ensure everyone has had a chance to input** into the discussion without putting anyone on the spot.
- It can be useful to **summarise** to ensure you have a good understanding of the students' input. Try using the student's own words as much as you can.
- **Be flexible.** It is normal for conversations to naturally flow, you can always gently steer the conversation back on topic without shutting discussions down.
- **Be receptive.** You can always offer more comfort breaks if you think this is needed, or avoid some questions you think could be triggering or upsetting based on the discussion.
- **Be empathetic.** It can be challenging to respond sometimes when people express feelings of sadness or disclose harmful experiences. See AVA's guidance on handling disclosures.

Finishing up:

- **Thank the students** for their time and let them know that you appreciate their contributions.
- **Go over the next steps** of the consultation, and any opportunities for more engagement.
- Provide the opportunity for **feedback**.

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- Provide a **check-out**. When dealing with challenging topics it can be useful to ask students to describe something they are looking forward to after the group to lift the mood.
- Reiterate any necessary **safeguarding and safety** measures: Encourage students to do something nice for themselves, and share a self-care resource – see AVA’s guide to self-care.
- **Write up your notes as soon as possible** to avoid losing anything to memory.

Resource A: Consent Form Template

[Briefly describe project]. Before you agree to take part, it is important that you read the Participant Information Sheet, which has been sent to you along with this consent form, to understand why the focus group is taking place and what it will ask of you. Please take time to read the information sheet and discuss it with others if you wish.

[Add contact information].

I confirm that I have read/someone has explained to me the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

I understand that the focus group *[delete as appropriate: will be recorded/notes about what is said will be made]*.

I give permission for the information I provide in the focus group to be shared with **[insert details about sharing and publication plans]**

I agree to take part in this focus group.

Signature.... Date....

Resource B: Participant Information Sheet Template

Purpose: Briefly describe the project and purpose of the focus group.

Before you agree to participate in this focus group, it is important that you understand why the focus group is taking place and what it would ask of you. Please take time to read this information sheet.

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Please ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. *[Provide contact details]*

- **Participants:** e.g. We are inviting university students who are survivors of sexual misconduct and who experienced university in the period after March 2020 to take part in interviews. Because you identify with some of those experiences, you have been invited to contribute to this group discussion.
- **Who is conducting the group?** Explain who is leading the project, facilitating the groups and taking notes
- **Practical details:** Explain where the focus group will take place and how long it will take.
- **Topics covered:** Summarise what participants will be asked to talk about. You can skip any questions you do not want to answer, and you can withdraw at any time without giving an explanation.
- **Requirements to take part:** e.g. We ask that you join the interview in a quiet and confidential space. You can participate with your camera on or off.
- **Accessibility:** Provide contact details if participants have any access requirements.
- **Payment and expenses:** Provide information about compensation and expenses for internet, phone credit, childcare etc.
- **Confidentiality and safeguarding:** Provide information about whether information shared will be confidential and/or anonymous. Set out your safeguarding policies and any exceptions to confidentiality.
- **Data recording, storage, sharing and publication:** Provide information about recording and note-taking, how information will be stored in line with GDPR, and how the information will be shared and published if applicable.
- **Self-care** e.g. We hope that nothing about this interview is going to upset you, or make you feel sad or worried. If, for any reason, what we discuss makes you feel angry, sad or worried, we will provide *[self-care options e.g. a list of resources or support services]*.

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