

What they Don't tell you: Third Party Focus Groups.

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Abstract

The difficulty of an institutional survey of a student population is that previously observed negativity concerning the relationship of establishment and subject – power differential, mistrust, guilt –taint the results of surveys that are undertaken by an identified university official or an individual that is known to be in the employ of the university, such as residential assistants, tutors and students under departmental employ.

Since 2005 OSHC Worldcare has undertaken a series of student/customer surveys concerning the OSHC product, experiences of Australia and additional questioning about their studies. These surveys were conducted in such a manner as to be anonymous and thus gather as much unbiased information as possible. A more recent use of the focus groups has been to use the focus group to ask questions supplied by the university so as to gather unbiased, or at least, least biased information.

The students are free to ask questions in the focus group forum, and so the information gathered from the students is not just reaction but also proactive.

This presentation will explore, within the bounds of customer/client confidentiality, the results from our focus group participant's answers and comments and the indicators they provide for international student recruitment and retention based on community communication both in Australia and their country of origin.

Keywords.

Assimilation, Focus Group, Asian, Independent, Outcomes

Introduction.

The OSHC Worldcare focus groups are held in a closed room with a random selection of international students selected – by the institution – at which the focus group is being held. The focus group's system of construction was designed in such a way as to prevent, as much as possible, prejudicial data being supplied by students forming an opinion or developing an agenda before entering the focus group itself.

Reasoning behind the in person FG.

The focus groups are held in person so as to record all the ways a student can communicate their reaction to a question, be that reaction motionless apathy, sneering resentment or gushing enthusiasm. The importance of the in person focus group is reflected in the findings of Jenny Kitzinger in her paper regarding focus group participant interaction saying that intra-group dynamics highlight the respondents attitudes, priorities, language, and framework of understanding [Kitzinger 116] in the context of themes and questions.

“Physical” focus group rather than a mail out or online survey serve to preserve the anonymity of the questioning, ensuring that participants cannot scroll down to either anticipate questions nor react instinctively upon the perception of branding. A further purpose behind the face to face focus group is the identification of a group's normal attitude to a topic and, as Kitzinger puts it, the focus group provides insight into the operation of group/social processes in the articulation of knowledge. [Kitzinger 116]

Central Limit Theorem and OSHCFG

The logistics of space and organisation of a physical focus group along with the variable of institution space allocation, invitation distribution and staff participation concerning the event and the unpredictability of international students actually turning up to the event mean that an application of central limit theorem is difficult to enforce. The theorem, whose basic principle is to preserve a stable standard deviation that the study group must number thirty or greater, does not mean that any number less than 30 is irrelevant but it does mean that taking lead indicators and understanding the group to be representative of the student body is risky. None of the focus groups conducted for OSHC Worldcare have ever equalled or exceeded thirty, the average of the focus groups has been 12 to 15 participants but have gone as high as 25 and as low as 3. For the purposes of this paper no group with less than 10 will be included as an indicator group but in the instance of a reoccurring theme across focus groups where there is a significant variation in numbers, attention will be called to a comment coming from a low numbered group.

Questions.

The core questions are primarily interested in the students understanding of the function, service and use of their OSHC insurance cover. The core questions have remained constant over the past three years in an attempt to build a profile of student perception regarding their insurance; the questions concerning lifestyle, preferences, spending habits, moods and pastimes have changed

The obvious variations in the questions are the way that they are used by the focus group convenor; the use may be altered by "leading" statements by the convenor or by alterations in the way that the question is phrased. As I asked all the questions in the focused groups referenced in this presentation I am reasonable convinced of their consistency.

Finally confidentiality concerning the questions asked on the behalf of the university and the exact details of the answers will be respected in this presentation. The trends of group opinion and particular answers will be referenced but the institution will not be given.

Rationalisation of third party: Dynamics and purpose of OSHC focus groups

Before engaging with the question of what was learned from the focus groups or how the focus group questions were established, the question 'why' must be asked: why did we run focus groups and having answered why focus groups, why conduct them as a disinterested third party?

Worldcare began running focus groups for the same purpose as most other consumer companies: to determine what our ultimate consumer – the student – knew about their mandatory insurance cover and what could be done, within the bounds of the governing deed to improve the product. In the initial focus groups, held prior to a methodology was imposed, it was announced that the focus group was being conducted by Worldcare which resulted in a number of students bringing medical receipts, claims that had been denied and, most problematically, accounts from the ubiquitous "friend who said". To try and get around this institutions were asked to organise the focus groups with the incentive of having a series of their own questions asked, however, the students were ultimately informed of who was performing the questioning and consequently the previous problems with the focus groups were repeated.

In 2006 OSHC Worldcare performed a review of the focus group purpose, construction and format. The following questions were posed as to why we run the focus groups; of whom are we asking the questions?; must the questions be asked by Worldcare or the institution?; is the information of use; and ultimately are the focus groups valued by our clients?

Rather than proving to be a linear set of questions the forgoing proved to be a continuum with one directly affecting the assembling and outcome of the other questions. The most pertinent factor that dictated the course of the focus group program was who should conduct the questioning: did the identity of the inquisitor make a difference to the answers supplied?

Issues of the Asian respondent:

When redesigning the focus groups, we worked from a basic premise: we would be talking with international students and the majority of international students, based on the statistics, enrolled in Australian institutions are from Northern and South-East Asia. Configuring the questions around the foregoing premise we encountered the accepted wisdom, or cliché, that students coming from Asiatic, Confucian oriented cultures were more likely to remain calm, differential and respectful when confronted with authority and its representatives, as Littlewood wrote concerning her survey “statements about Asian students obedient and unquestioning behaviour are made so frequently that we can scarcely deny that they are based in some form of reality” [Littlewood 32] additionally a study of Asian-Americans by Kim, Atkinson and Umemoto has shown that the Confucian value of interpersonal harmony can play a significant role...They [Asian Americans] also may attempt to blend in with the group rather than distinguish themselves through either good or bad behaviour [Kim Atkinson Umemoto 573]. It needs to be noted however that despite all of the foregoing evidence, the results of Littlewood’s survey of Asian students reflect that the stereotype of Asian students as obedient listeners – weather or not it is a reflection of their actual behaviour in class – does not reflect the roles they *would like* to adopt in class. [Littlewood 33; italics his]

Taking this information into account we determined that it would be best for Worldcare to maintain control of running the operation albeit to now do so with as much anonymity as possible. Logistically, however it was expedient for all parties to have the institution distribute invitations for the event as it provided an additional level of separation for Worldcare and the International departments would not have to contend with their students being bombarded with what might be construed as spam mail. An unintended consequence of this decision was that the focus groups became limited to those institutions that OSHC Worldcare had an existing relationship that is to say our clients.

Results:

To avoid making it blatantly obvious that the anonymous interlocution was entirely OSHC related material and to also provide a service to our clients that had organised the focus group, we volunteered to introduce questions from the institution as well as put in ‘peripheral’ questions that related to lifestyle, health and wellness and attitudes to their education. To preserve the anonymity of the questions, when asked by the participants where we were from, who we worked for and where the questions came from; we maintained that we were a consulting group that collected questions from interested parties and filtered it back to them after the questions were complete. Curiously enough the most commonly asked question after the cover story was given was “Are you from Immigration?”

I think it should be mentioned that students in Victoria and New South Wales no matter what the question or the context could always work in “travel concessions” as being a fundamental concern as they not only did not receive them but were actively denied legal recourse.

2006 and letting go

In 2006 the dominant theme that was returned from the students was the complexity and cost of gaining access to the Australian education system and on arrival the various complexities of maintaining the finances, working and visa requirements while attempting to complete their field of study. Of the focus groups held the overwhelming number of respondents, seventy to eighty percent of respondents desired an expedited system to make the process of studying easier. When enquiry was made as to what elements could be simplified, the six groups that were constituted by more than ten participants, responded that “visa issues”; asked what they meant by visa issues the groups broke into discussion about what was more difficult or worrying concerning their student visa. 10% [7 students] of these students commented that maintaining their grades to keep their visa was a concern, 40% were concerned about their working hours and potentially violating their 20 hours while the remaining 50% were concerned with making sure

that their mandatory elements, such as their OSHC, they felt were “beyond their control” should be easier.

2007 and linking in.

In 2007 the reviews of the focus group had been completed and specific sections had been developed to allow for institutions questions and social research. Institutional questions were varied and widely different depending on the operational and demographic requirements of the university. The social research concentrated on open ended questions intended to develop an idea of the participation rates of international students in areas of their lives beyond study and work. The reason for this was that we had determined that a number of illnesses and injuries could have their root in culture shock, isolation or depression. In every focus group where the questions about wanting to engage in community activities, eagerness to meet and intermingle with domestic students and be more involved with community groups there was an overwhelming amount of support. Engagement with community activity groups met with 80% approval, interacting with domestic students had a 90% approval rating and being involved with community groups had a 95% approval rating. Those who answered in the negative normally stated that they did not have enough time between work and study, that they already knew “enough” domestic students, or that they already were involved in community or church groups.

2008 and living in Australia.

The 2008 focus groups were refined to give greater emphasis to the student's capacity to express themselves and so with the exception of institutional questions, Worldcare refrained from inserting any thematic questions, but rather allocated time in the focus group for the students to express themselves. Structurally this was achieved by using the “ice breaking” questions “What do you like, or dislike, about studying in Australia?” etc, and then comparing the issues raised in those sections with the topics raised at the conclusion of the focus group in the free comment section.

The most significant theme raised by the students was the cost of living in the face of Australia's strengthening dollar in contrast with weaker home currencies, scarcity of accommodation and the price of comestibles. Accommodation was a particular topic of concern among approximately 70% of the respondents due to affordable accommodation being usually some distance from their education provider, with a 40% of the students who commented on accommodation problems stating that the Universities housing assistance, when available, was of little use due to prices and extremely limited availability.

The most disturbing comments, however, came from students commenting on the sheer number of international students in Australia. All of the groups measured here had at least 10% of students comment either in the active or passive tone as to the number of international students. Two students, one from a metropolitan institution and one from an less urbanised institution commented that “there are too many international students on campus”, the passive version of this comment voiced more frequently and always clarified through questioning is “There are so many international students here, I find it difficult to meet the locals”.

Conclusions:

As much as the field of international education is a significant export and as much as the international student community is variously burdened, exploited, supported and assisted by government, education providers and ancillary support industries the students will behave in the same manner as young people everywhere. International students as a rule simply do not have the capacity or the resources to express themselves.

From the perspective of what international students do and do not tell you, the authority, and us, the outsider, remains to be seen however no research has been unveiled from sources of authority that *en masse* reflect the general themes that are present in the Worldcare focus groups. The trends reveal that the international student is not blind, mute and unengaged but rather is hungry for information from accessible, trusted but unreliable fonts; and it is that that we

in the associated industries must be aware of even as the education industry proper has been always, in some form or another, aware of it.

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