

# Reinventing the Focus Group: Introducing Design Thinking CoLabs

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## Abstract

*Despite the ongoing student-centric context of higher education, there have been few innovative research methods introduced that foster collaborative dialogue between students and staff. Traditional methods of gaining access to student voices such as interviews, surveys, and focus groups often drain students of data without reciprocating value to them for their participation. In 2019-2020, La Trobe University launched CoLab workshops which use design-thinking methods to support student and staff collaboration, dialogue, and co-created ideation. Benefits of the workshops indicate greater belongingness and engagement for both student and staff cohorts, as well as greater service innovation that stems from the diversity of participants' ideas, experiences, and suggestions. It is recommended here that researchers in higher education continue to reflect on how to ensure data collection methods are equitable and reciprocal for participants and consider co-design methods in the future.*

## Background to CoLabs

Focus groups are a dominant form of data collection for many social scientists. Rationale for their common usage includes lower costs, time efficiency, and the perceived ability to yield large amounts of qualitative data (see Parker & Tritter, 2007). However, focus groups are also prone to several limitations including a dominating or controlling participant, data that may be superficial, and a lack of reciprocity in the value return for participants (Tuckett & Stewart, 2004). Further, while focus groups may be an appropriate method for studies that are investigating shared beliefs among cohorts, or trends across participants' experiences, they may not be suitable for cross-cohort collaboration or ideation. Thus, in the context of higher education, where there are concerted efforts to foster 'student-centric' teaching, learning, and student services, it is possible that traditional methods to collect diverse student voices, such as focus groups, interviews, and surveys, are not optimal.

In 2018 'student partnership' was named as one of the core enablers to student success at La Trobe University. Implicit within this strategy was the premise that in order to provide an outstanding student experience, university staff needed to partner with students to deeply understand their current experiences as well as their ideas and suggestions for future improvement and innovation. However, at the time of the strategy's release, there were few 'whole of institution' practices to foster or support student voices and student-staff collaboration. Instead, the university relied on a series of intermittent and unconnected research methods such as focus groups, interviews and surveys. Further, the methods used were often driven by an individual team or department and were not always shared with other university units that may benefit from the data. For these reasons, a new approach was devised in 2019 to host 'whole of institution' CoLabs where students and staff from across the university would be invited to attend 2-hour design thinking workshops. The data from these workshops would be shared not only with participants but collated biannually to report back to university staff about data that had emerged on how to improve the student experience.

## Brief Overview of CoLab Approach

The design of CoLabs strives to closely adhere to the principles of student partnership such as reciprocity, transparency, and authentic dialogue (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). The two-hour long workshops are pitched through an online submission by either students or staff to foster innovative solutions to an ongoing issue or challenge. Once the topic has been approved, staff that work in the area (e.g., library, a specific school or department) are invited to participate. Depending on the topic, student recruitment can range from an open call to any student who is interested in attending (for example, creating a student dashboard) to targeted recruitment of students who have previously engaged/disengaged from the service (for example, students who chose not to attend an event they were invited to). CoLabs seek to either have a 1:1 or 2:1 ratio of students to staff to ensure that dialogue is balanced.

At the beginning of each CoLab, participants are given an overview of design-thinking methods. They are further provided any necessary background information to the issue (e.g., satisfaction scores from a recent survey). All participants are encouraged to remember that everyone has the "...opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways." (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp.6-7). CoLabs are run by an impartial facilitator with no direct connection to the specific issue or challenge. By maintaining objectivity throughout the CoLab, it is hoped that traditional power imbalances between students and staff can be mediated so that students can feel free to share, criticise, or challenge existing ideas and beliefs. Co-design activities that are used in CoLabs range from storyboarding, mind maps, and role playing (see Dollinger et al., 2020; Dollinger & Vanderlelie, 2020). To date, La Trobe University has conducted over 30 CoLabs on topics such as designing a student dashboard, co-creating learning resources for subjects, and increasing engagement in specific programs. The results of CoLabs have included helping academic staff redesign assessments to support employability, re-writing communications to students to improve engagement and highlight benefits of participation, and redesigning student spaces in the library to be accessible for students with physical disabilities. Moving forward we would like to reflect on:

- 1) What are the dominant institutional practices for collecting data on students' perspectives, experiences, and ideas?
- 2) How, if at all, is this data collated and communicated back out to student communities?

## References

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