**The SHARE Project**

**Student focus group discussion guide**

Welcome and thank you for coming.

* The purpose of this focus group is for us to learn more about what students do when they need help from other people with their academic assignments.
* We are also interested in your understanding of circumstances in which a student might receive ‘too much’ help with an assignment - what you think is fine and acceptable and what you think is ‘too much’ or unacceptable.
* There has been some concern about students buying academic help online too, particularly buying from ‘essay mills’, and we also want to know what you think about this and why you think this is happening.

My name is [Moderator] and I am an independent researcher so please feel free to speak your mind with honesty. There are no right or wrong answers here and I will protect your anonymity. We are really keen to hear differing points of view.

I want to hear about your experiences in your words. You are welcome to share stories of things that have happened to you. Any names of other individuals mentioned will also be altered.

And I have £10 vouchers here to thank you for your contribution.

Quick ground rules if this is your first time in a focus group:

* We're tape recording, so one person speaking at a time please.
* We're on a first name basis [name cards needed]
* You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views.
* We ask that your turn off your phones. If you cannot and if you must respond to a call, please do so as quietly as possible and rejoin us as quickly as you can.
* My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion
* I’ve found these groups work best when you talk to each other rather than to me.

I have a few topics I’d like to hear your views on. We’ll start with some simple questions about:

1. types of assessments you’ve encountered on your course
2. who students might go to for help
3. what you think is acceptable and unacceptable support from other people
4. guidance given to students about collaboration and collusion by the University
5. And some stimulus material for a short game we can try

Ok so I’m going to turn the recorder on now…

**Discussion guide**

[May ask participants to introduce themselves and their course]

*Topic 1 Perceived prevalence and acceptability of social support practices 20MINS*

Let’s start the discussion by talking about the kinds of assessments you’ve encountered on your course so far. [Is it mainly essays and exams or…? Groupwork? Presentations?]

When it’s an individual assignment, how common is asking another person for help on your course? Who do students ask? Can you give me an example?

Is it normal for students to share ideas about assignments in your School? Is it normal to share drafts or final texts?

What do you think your lecturers think about students talking together about their assignments?

Can you tell me about other ways students help other students with assessed work (not groupwork)? [Conversation, recommending sources, sharing notes, sharing draft work, proof reading, etc]

What do you think about this? How do you feel about these practices? [positive, negative, neutral]

Who else do students go to for help with assignments? (prompt for online help if not mentioned)

What do you think about these practices?

Who have you gone to for help in the past? [classmates, housemates, lecturer, friend in year above/graduate, parent, sibling, writing tutor, private tutor, online]

What kinds of things prompt you to seek help on individual assignments? (prompt for depth/emotion not just circumstances)

What do you think are acceptable forms of help from another person when working on an individual assignment?

*Topic 2 Awareness of scale and character of AI lapses – 5 mins*

What do you think counts as too much help from someone else? Can you give me an example? (prompt: preparation discussion ok, but if one party takes notes? Then uses notes in the production of the assignment?)

What made this ‘too much help’ in your view? What would have been ok?

***Scenarios***

I’d like to explore this idea of what you think is acceptable and unacceptable a bit more so I have some scenarios I want to share with you. These are based on real accounts but have been anonymised.

[read out]

***Scenario 1 – 15 mins***

Andy and Cara are both students on the same MA course. Andy is an international student and Cara is a native English student. Andy asks Cara to look over his first assignment to proofread and check for consistency.

What do you think about Andy’s request? What do you think he is thinking at this point?

What do you think Cara is thinking?

Cara agrees and upon reading it, quickly realises Andy’s unusual writing style: he does not use conventional paragraphs, rather every sentence is a separate paragraph. Cara advises Andy to use paragraphs in the assignment. However, Andy is unsure and asks Cara for advice. As the deadline is the next day, instead of creating a number of example paragraphs, Cara simply restructures the entire essay by grouping the sentences in paragraphs. Andy submits this assignment and uses it as a model for future work.

Thinking about the scenario, what do you think about the students’ actions? (Sympathise?)

What do you think Andy and Cara believe about what they have done? What makes you say that?

What else might or should they have done?

What do you think staff would make of this scenario?

What do you think other students in Andy’s class would think about this scenario?

How do you think Andy’s lecturer would respond?

***Scenario 2 – 15 mins***

Kai is an MA student in arts subject. His MA dissertation, while mostly theoretical, involves some field work about the practices of different organisations. He thinks that a useful method to compare organisational characteristics and practices would be through the use of statistical analysis. However, neither Kai nor his dissertation supervisor has any background in statistical methods.

What options do you think Kai considers?

Kai’s partner Andrea is a PhD student who employs statistical analysis in her work. She agrees to help Kai, tutoring him through the design of the questionnaires, the running of the statistical tests, and the interpretation and presentation of results in the dissertation. Kai submits the dissertation and amongst other things is praised for the depth of knowledge shown by the statistical analysis.

Imagining Kai was a friend of yours, what would you say to him if he told you this?

What do you think Kai is feeling about the University here?

What do you think about Andrea’s role in this scenario?

What else might or should Kai and Andrea have done?

What do you think staff would make of this scenario?

***Scenario 3*** *– 6 mins*

*Topic 3 Knowledge and opinions of writing services*

Do you know what essay mills are? (How did you come to know about them?)

Do you have a sense of how commonly used these are on your course?

Do you know what kind of services these companies offer?

Imagine a friend tells you they are considering buying their assignment from an online writing service at a cost of £200. Why might they be considering buying an assignment do you think?

A few days later, your friend tells you they did buy it and are intending to read it through, make some edits where necessary and submit it. What might be the reasons they would give for doing that?

Who do you think uses essay mills?

What is the real reason they use an essay mill do you think?

What do you think about students using essay mills?

[Hand out bubble completions] 4-5 mins

Here’s something a little different I’d like to try with you.

Please write in the empty bubbles what you think these students would be thinking and saying in each situation.

[When complete, ask each to show the others and probe for reasoning/feelings of the *characters* NOT the participant. Use third person in follow-up questions] This part was never actually feasible, I just got them to hand them in and we moved on. You could come back and have this discussion at the end if there was time. - Johnny

*Topic 4 Reactions to institutional guidance 20 mins – 5 min per extract*

Universities often encourage students to work together, bouncing ideas off eachother to improve their learning.

What do you think the University expects you to do when getting help on an individual assignment from another person? [probe for awareness of any guidance]

I have some quotes here on collusion from student handbooks [hand out and read out].

Extract 1)

A definition of ‘collusion’

“…cooperation in order to gain an unpermitted advantage. This may occur where students have consciously collaborated on a piece of work, in part or whole, and passed it off as their own individual efforts or where one student has authorised another to use their work, in part or whole, and to submit it as their own.”

What do you think this guidance means?

What do you understand by “consciously collaborated .. and passed off as their own”?

What do you understand yourself by the term “collusion”?

Here is another extract from official guidance:

Extract 2)

Note: Legitimate input from University tutors or approved readers or scribes is not considered to be collusion.

What do you think counts as “legitimate input”?

How far is this guidance (both quotes) fair? (Reasonable? Would it work?)

Extract 3)

There are occasions when you are allowed or required to produce a joint piece of work together with other students. But these circumstances apart, the text of your work must be original to you. This is not intended to prevent you from working collaboratively, sharing ideas and possible sources of information; all of which is to be encouraged. However, the final text must be original to the individual submitting the work as their own.

Is this a practice that is understood? Is this a practice that is followed?

Extract 4)

It can be a very useful study technique to discuss and share ideas with your peers, but it is important to understand the difference between collaboration with another student and copying each other's work:

* if you wish to collaboratewith another person on your project, you should check with your supervisor whether this might be allowed and then seek permission as appropriate

How similar is this guidance to advice you have been given on your course? Is this something you do? How effective is such guidance do you think?

**Closing remarks**

Summarise consensus where there is any. Acknowledge different opinions.

Ask for any final comments.

Hand out QR code slips to the secure anonymous comment box, for any additional comments they may prefer to give outside of the focus group.

Give vouchers.

Thanks!