

Conducting effective panel discussions

Manual for PC student members

This manual contains information and advice on how to conduct effective panel discussions. It is part of a workshop for PC student members but can also be used independently.¹

What:

In the context of this manual, a panel discussion is a discussion with a group of students about the education in their programme, which can range from individual courses to the general atmosphere. Ideally, between 6-12 students participate in the panel discussion, which conventionally takes between 1-2 hours. They can be held as frequently as a PC deems fit, but a common frequency is once or twice a year, for instance at the end of each semester.

Why:

A panel discussion is an important tool for evaluating the education within a programme, the results of which can be used in addition to for instance UvA Q course evaluations by among others the programme committee and the programme director. It allows PC (student) members to have an in-depth conversation with a group of students about the quality of the education they have received. In this way, a PC can gather a lot of useful information in a relatively short amount of time, with the panel discussion offering the organizers the possibility to ask (follow-up) questions about topics that deserve extra attention.

This manual takes you through the process of preparing for, holding, and reporting on a panel discussion. The appendices contain extra information, including an overview of relevant interview techniques and a list with suggested topics and questions.

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¹ This manual is based on: Steens, I. E., & Oude Alink, C. (2013). *Panel Discussions course*. Consulted via [Panel Discussions Course \(utwente.nl\)](https://utwente.nl).

1. Preparation

It is advisable to prepare the content of the panel discussion and discuss its organization well in advance with your fellow PC members.

A. Content

When preparing the topics and questions of the panel discussion with other PC members, you may keep the following in mind:

- **What approach will you take?** *Will you focus on individual courses, on the coherence between them within the semester or the whole year? Do you aim to follow up on the UvA Q evaluation results or rather focus on different topics?*
- **Will you reference specific UvA Q results or individual lecturers, or aim for a more general discussion?** *Please keep in mind that the results from UvA Q evaluations should be treated confidentially and that a discussion about individual lecturers should of course remain respectful.*
- **What are the topics / questions that you want to raise?** *Appendix 1 contains a list of suggested topics and questions that may help you prepare. Asking open-ended questions that begin with 'how' or 'what' can help to get a discussion going. For more tips on how to phrase (follow-up) questions, see Appendix 2.*

Tip: when creating the agenda for the panel discussion, identify the most important topics or questions and make sure you reserve enough time for them. Appendix 3 contains an example of an agenda for a panel discussion.

Important sources of information

There are several important sources of information that you can use while preparing for the panel discussion and drawing up the agenda, including:

- UvA Q evaluation reports;
- Course catalogue;
- Input from students and/or lecturers;
- Input from the programme director (OPD) or coordinator.

Tip: actively seeking out input from students or staff members can be a great way to identify relevant topics, while this simultaneously can increase the buy-in of students and staff, encouraging them to take the results of the panel discussion seriously.

B. Organisation

There are important organisational matters to discuss with your fellow PC members when preparing for the panel discussion, including:

- **Participants.** Who will be participating in the panel discussion, only students or also staff members such as PC lecturer members, the coordinator or the OPD? *While students generally talk more freely among themselves, there might be a bigger chance that their feedback is used to make changes if staff members hear from students directly.*
- **Size and selection.** How many students will be invited to participate, and will there be a selection process? *A frequently used group size is between 6 and 12 people. Larger groups will be more difficult to moderate, but may be more representative, whereas smaller groups are less representative².*
- **Moment, location and duration.** When and where will the panel discussion be held and how long should it be? *Choose a moment at which students have time to participate and pick a*

² Masadeh, M. A. (2012). Focus group: Reviews and practices. *The Journal of Applied Science and Technology*, 2(10).

convenient location, for instance right after a mandatory seminar in the same room, and communicate the details of the panel discussion to them in a clear way.

- **Division of roles.** Make sure that at least two student members will host the panel discussion, a moderator and a note-taker, and determine well in advance who will fulfill which role.
- **Reporting.** How are you expected to report on the panel discussion, and to whom? Appendix 4 contains a format for the report.

Tip: you may choose to vary the composition of the panel: for instance by only inviting students for the first part of the discussion, but allow staff members to be present for the second part so they can hear firsthand how students are experiencing the programme.

2. Holding the panel discussion

This section briefly outlines the different phases of the panel discussion as well as the roles of the moderator and note-taker.

A. Phases

A panel discussion ideally consists of 4 phases:

Phase 1: Opening

Important elements of the opening of the panel discussion are:

- Show your appreciation for the presence of the participants;
- Underscore the importance of the discussion and explain what will be done with the results;
- Emphasize that the anonymity of the participants will be respected in the report;
- Create a positive atmosphere and invite constructive feedback, for instance by emphasizing that you are looking for ways to improve the education;
- Ask the participants to substantiate their opinions as much as possible during the discussion with observations and ideally also offer recommendations (see Appendix 2).

Phase 2: Introducing agenda

Introduce the agenda so that all participants understand what will be discussed. This may help you during the discussion, for instance when you need to move on to another topic because time will otherwise run out. You can of course decide in how much detail you want to do so. For example: *First we will discuss the semester in general, then we will focus on individual courses and finally there is room for questions.*

Phase 3: Discussion

This phase, in which the actual evaluation of the education within the programme is taking place, should of course be the longest part of the whole panel discussion by far. Ideally, the moderator summarizes what has been said before moving to the next topic / point on the agenda. Decide beforehand which topics and questions you definitely want to cover and keep track of the time to make sure that you get to them!

Phase 4: Finishing up

When finishing up, important things to keep in mind are:

- Allow for final questions from the participants;
- Conclude the discussion by listing the most important findings and by repeating what will be done with them;
- Finally, thank the participants!

Although the above may seem obvious, people tend to only focus on the third stage. Forgetting about the other stages can easily cause confusion among participants in a panel discussion, leading to questions such as: 'Why are we discussing this, how long does the discussion last, or what is being done with the results?'

B. Role of the moderator

It is essential that a moderator stays neutral, so do not express your own opinion (even if you have a relevant one) because this could influence the opinion of the participants. In addition, you can use this to your advantage when staff members or students ask about your opinion. Refrain from asking leading or suggestive questions like: "Didn't you think ... was an excellent module?". A way to prevent yourself from doing so is actively trying not to understand things too quickly, because then you take the risk of assuming what others mean based on your own experiences or opinions.

You can use your neutrality, moreover, for instance when students in the panel discussion focus on things that have gone wrong. You can ask them openly about their role: if a participating student says, *'The syllabus was not complete'*, then you can ask, *'Did you do anything to change this? Did you ask for a supplement?'*

Appendix 2 outlines two interview techniques that you may use when moderating the panel discussion, while also offering tips on what type of (follow-up) questions you can ask and on how to deal with different types of (difficult) participants.

Tip: invite comments on what has gone well if you have the feeling that the panel discussion is taking an overly negative turn and ceases to be constructive.

C. Role of the note-taker

The main task of the note-taker is to provide a clear and concise summary of the panel discussion. During the discussion, you should take notes, which can later be turned into a report that should be understandable for people who have not attended the discussion. It is important that you as a note-taker understand the type of report that you will have to write, so make sure that you do!

Tip: you can ask the moderator to briefly summarize what has been said after each topic.

Like the moderator, the note-taker should distinguish between opinions, observations and suggestions when taking notes and writing the report (see Appendix 1). If this distinction does not become clear during the panel discussion, the note-taker may intervene by asking follow-up questions.

Tips on taking notes

When taking notes, some important things to keep in mind are:

- Have a copy of the agenda in front of you.
- Sit in a place from where you can see and understand everyone well.
- Use a telegram style and keywords rather than whole sentences.
- Work with headings and use the topics from the agenda as a structure
- Limit yourself to the main points: who says what (initials), who has to do what, things like dates, quantities, names, products, et cetera.
- Write all opinions down if multiple ones are given.
- If you don't understand what someone is saying, you can always ask them to repeat their answer or explanation. You can also ask the moderator to briefly summarise what has been discussed.

3. Reporting on the results

The report should be easy to understand for someone who has not attended the panel discussion, while giving a balanced and neutral overview of what has been said. A straightforward way to ensure that the report provides such an overview is to follow the structure of the panel discussion in writing the report.

Writing the report

When writing the report, important things to keep in mind are:

- Include general information: the number of participants, the date of the meeting, the name of the chair / note-taker, the year / semester / module under discussion;
- Remain neutral, which means excluding your own preferences from the report!
- Separate main issues from side issues. When in doubt if something should be included, remember the purpose of the evaluation;
- Don't exclude positive feedback. It is for instance relevant if participants to the panel discussion thought that something worked well and should not be changed;
- Let the reader know how many of the participants shared a particular opinion and whether there was any disagreement. You can achieve this by using phrases like:
'All panelists found ...'
'The majority thought...'
'Some panelists found...'
'One panelist thought ...'
'Some found ... while others found ...'

Distinguish between observations, opinions and recommendations

It will be helpful for readers, moreover, if the report makes a clear distinction between observations, opinions and recommendations (see Appendix 2). You can accomplish this in various ways:

- Start with the **opinion** and move to the **observation** on which the opinion is based. For example:
The students found the module chaotic because the schedule was changed suddenly.
- Start with the **observation** and then move to the resulting **opinion**. For example:
The schedule was changed during the module, which made the module chaotic.
- Make the distinction explicit in a more **schematic way**. For example:
Observation: the schedules have been changed. Opinion: the majority of the panelists found the module chaotic as a result. Recommendation: do not change the timetable in the meantime or inform the students well in advance via Canvas.

Tip: make sure that recommendations in the report are solely based on what has been said during the panel discussion and do not add your own insights or information from other sources.

Who will receive the report?

It is important to decide before the panel discussion to whom the report will be sent and communicate this clearly to the participants. This decision can best be made by all PC members together, possibly in consultation with the programme director and coordinator. Keep in mind that a report that is widely shared might have to be written somewhat differently from a report that is merely for internal use.

Tip: regardless of whether the report is sent to all participants of the panel discussion, send them an update about what has been done with the results. This will show the relevance of the panel discussion as well the importance of the activities of your PC!

Appendix 1. Suggested topics / questions

Below you will find suggestions for topics and questions that you can use when preparing for the panel discussion³:

What did you think of the content of the education?

- Objectives (clear, relevant)
- Learning material (level, amount, interesting, structure)
- Relationship between objectives, subject matter, teaching methods, assessment
- Consistency of different parts in one module
- Was the module as you expected it to be (based on the title/description etc.)

What do you think of the elements?

- Self-study assignments (clear, level, quantity, functionality)
- Lectures (level, functionality, challenging)
- Seminars (assignments: level, functionality, challenging)
- Group work (assignments: level, functionality, challenging)
- Ratio self-study – lectures – tutorials
- Variation

What do you think of the of the execution of the education?

- Group composition (size, collaboration)
- Self-reliance of you and your fellow students (motivation, participation, planning, initiative)
- Presentation and guidance of the lecturer (clarity, structure, explanation, feedback, etc.)
- Didactic instructions / Learning task orientation (relationship objectives and the evaluation)

What do you think of the assessment and the feedback you've received?

- Method(s) of assessment (clear in advance?)
- Content of the exam (level representative for the content and objectives)
- Content of the assignment (clear, functionality, relationship between teaching methods)
- Assessment procedure (clear, insight into learning process/product student)

What do you think of the quantity and suitability of the course materials (literature, audio or video clips, software, hardware, etc.)?

What do you think of the way in which the education was organized?

- Schedule (on time, clear)
- Study ability (peaks)
- Teaching spaces and resources (workability)
- Accessibility of teachers etc. for questions etc.

³ This appendix is based on: Van der Blij, M. (2012). *Manual for chairing and taking minutes of panel discussions*.

Appendix 2. Interview and report techniques

This appendix outlines two approaches you can take when moderating the panel discussion. The first one is also relevant for the note-taker, as it helps to write a structured report.

A. Opinions, observations, suggestions (interview and report technique)

Different types of information will be provided by participants in a panel discussion. They will give opinions, describe events or observations and give suggestions. It is important for the moderator to collect every type of information on each subject, so that the report can be as complete as possible. The note-taker should distinguish between these different types, so that the report can indicate whether something **was** the case or whether someone merely **believed** it to be that way.

Opinion

The meaning one gives to an observation.

For example: *The module was very chaotic.*

Observation

Objective description of what someone saw and heard (facts)

For example: *There were many roster changes.*

Suggestion

Concrete recommendation: what could be improved?

For example: *inform students on time about roster changes.*

2. Listening, Summarizing, Questioning

Listening

To keep a panel discussion going, it is important that you as a moderator are actively involved, but this doesn't mean you should be talking all the time. You can also actively listen in an active way, for instance in these ways:

- **Eye contact.** Looking at the person who is talking ensures that he or she knows that you are listening, which makes people more inclined to continue talking. When you stop eye contact, the speaker will likely stop talking more quickly.
- **Nodding and humming.** By nodding and humming occasionally, you stimulate the speaker to continue talking.
- **A calm, relaxed posture.** Through a calm attitude you indicate that you are paying attention and this stimulates speaking. Reversely, restless behavior can easily be interpreted as inattention.
- **Silences.** Reacting too quickly may disrupt another person's thought process, so allow for brief pauses. A silence can of course also be the opportunity to break into the narrative of the other person if you believe it is time to do so. By summarizing what has been said, you can show the speaker appreciation before moving on to the next topic.
- **Parroting.** By repeating one or two words from speaker's last sentence, you encourage them to continue talking. For example:
'I thought the module was a bit chaotic.'
'Chaotic?'
'Yes, because ...'
- **Intonation.** By playing with your intonation you can indicate whether you want the other person to continue talking or whether you think enough has been said. For example:
'I thought it was a good module.'
'Yes' as an assertion indicates this was sufficient information.
'Yes?' as a question indicates you would like to know more.

- **Finishing and starting up.** As moderator you can indicate how you want the conversation to develop with phrases like: *'This is sufficient on this subject, we will now move on to the next topic'* or *'With this I conclude this point, who wants to say something about'*
- **Make sure everyone is covered.** When you notice that certain students are not really participating, you can address them directly. For example: *'Karel, could you say more about this?'*, *'Petra, do you have anything to add?'* or *'Martin, what's your take on this?'*. You can also turn attention away from a dominant participant in this way. For example, *'Simon, thanks for your input, I'd like to hear someone else's opinion on this'* or *'Krista, thanks for sharing, now I'd like to hear if the others have seen it that way'*.
- **Encourage a discussion.** To avoid that panel discussion becomes a question-and-answer game, you can ask questions such as: *'What do you think of that?'* or *'Is it the case that everyone?'*

Summarising

It can improve the panel discussion if the moderator summarise the opinions that are expressed at certain points during the discussion, for example before moving on to a next topic (this is also helpful for note-taker). You can for instance briefly repeat what has been said by the panelists in your own words. Any misunderstanding can then immediately be cleared up, something which is more complicated to do after the discussion is done.

Questioning

You can of course also ask (follow-up) questions, of which there are different types:

Open questions

Questions with a range of possible answers that stimulate people to talk.

For example:

How did it go? / What happened? / What did you think of that?

Closed questions

Question that provide you with specific, targeted information to which only a short answer is possible.

For example:

Did you study more or less than what is expected for this course? / Was the lecturer sufficiently available?

Asking for more concrete information or insights

If an answer is vague, you may ask follow-up questions to clarify what someone is trying to say.

For example:

Question: What did you think of the semester?

Answer: Pretty nice.

Question: What did you like about the semester and what did you not like?

Asking for substantiation

When a panelist offers an opinion, you can ask follow-up questions to determine the facts on which that opinion is based.

For example:

Question: What did you think of the guidance on your thesis?

Answer: Worthless.

Question: What did the supervisor do or did not do?

Asking for nuance

Especially if a panelist makes an extreme or absolute statement, asking for clarification and nuance can be important.

For example:

Question: What did you think of the guidance?

Answer: The lecturer was never there.

Question: Was the lecturer really never there?

Dealing with different panelists

There will be different types of students participating in the panel discussion, all of whom you will have to deal with as moderator. Types you may encounter are:

The 'dominant student'

Students with strong opinions they like to convey are not rare, but keep in mind that this is not necessarily the opinion of all students. How do you deal with this?

- Direct your attention to other students / ask them what they think.
- Explicitly state that you also want to let others speak: 'I'll come back to you in a moment, but would like to know first what ...'.
- Register how many participants share the opinion of the dominant student (for the report).

The 'shy student'

Some students have a hard time actively contributing to a discussion. This does not mean that their opinion is less important! As a chairperson, you should try to involve them, for instance by asking them a specific question or asking them to respond to the answer of another participant.

The 'student who always agrees'

Some students agree with everything, which adds little to the discussion. As chairperson, you can ask why they agree to determine the events (observations) on which their opinion is based or ask for suggestions: how could a course (for instance) be improved?

The 'student who always disagrees'

Some students disagree with everything. They can be approached in a similar way as those who always agree: ask them why they disagree and try to have them explain the events (observations) that lead them to have this opinion. Then ask for suggestions for improvement.

The 'negative student'

It may happen that a student exclusively offers negative comments, which may create an atmosphere in which people only complain and comments cease to be constructive. In this case, you can ask for suggestions for improvement and, more generally, use positive words in your questions. For instance: 'what went well?' instead of 'what did you think of...'? You should of course refrain for asking questions that are (too) leading.

It helps, moreover, to explicitly state at the beginning of the panel discussion that the session is not about making negative comments, but about obtaining balanced insights that can be used to improve the curriculum.

Appendix 3. Format agenda (example)

Agenda Panel Discussion (example)

Meeting date Click or tap here to enter text.	Location Faculty of Humanities	Time Click or tap here to enter text.
Contact Subject	Email ...	
Semester ...		

This example agenda will need to be modified to fit individual panel discussions, but it can hopefully provide a useful starting point. For more information on how to organize and lead a panel discussion, please see the Guide 'How to Hold a Panel Discussion', especially created for PC student members.

Curious about more tips for holding this discussion? View the manual (mail tlc-fgw@uva.nl for a copy).

Agenda items

1. Open the meeting and welcome the participants

Click or tap here to enter text.

2. Introduce the agenda

Click or tap here to enter text.

3. Discussion of general matters, like the atmosphere of the programme, its overall coherence, etc.

Click or tap here to enter text.

4. Discussion of individual courses

Click or tap here to enter text.

Possible topics for discussion are: the workload, the suitability of the literature / source material, feedback, the relation with the lecturer and fellow students, the structure and organization of the course, and the learning outcomes and if they have been reached.

Possible sources of input for the discussion are: the UvA Q evaluation reports, the MA Coordinator and the informal session with students held immediately before the panel discussion.

5. Other matters or questions?

Click or tap here to enter text.

6. Close the meeting

Click or tap here to enter text.

Appendix 4. Format report

Format Report Panel Discussion

In this format, a schema has been developed for an evaluation of a semester in which the courses are discussed individually.

Tips for completing the report:

- A panel discussion is an example. Therefore, neutrally describe in the report how many participants shared an opinion (all panel members, the majority, some panel members, etc.)
- Make a clear distinction between opinions, observations and suggestions (OOS). Make sure that these three elements are described with each part.
- Include the topics you discussed per course and only write down the most important points.

Curious about more tips for writing this report? View the manual (mail tlc-fgw@uva.nl for a copy).

Panel discussion of the <i>Name PC</i>		Date panel discussion <i>dd-mm-yyyy</i>
Goal panel discussion: <i>evaluating specific courses/semester, name and year of study.</i>		
Attendees: <i>names PC student members, number of students present, Master coordinator, tutor, etc.</i>		
Input MA Coordinator	Conclusions	
General experiences semester	What to keep?	
	Areas for improvement	
Course/theme 1 <i>Describe course/theme here.</i>	What to keep?	
	Areas for improvement	
Course/theme 2 <i>Describe course/theme here.</i>	What to keep?	
	Areas for improvement	

Course/theme 3 Describe course/theme here.	What to keep?
	Areas for improvement
Course/theme 4 Describe course/theme here.	What to keep?
	Areas for improvement
Course/theme 5 Describe course/theme here.	What to keep?
	Areas for improvement
Other comments	
Transferring of results	<i>Describe to whom the results of the panel discussion will be handed over: OPD, Master coordinator, etc.</i>