



Using Interviews and Focus Groups in Higher Education Research: Methodological Rigour in Design and Reporting

Kerry Dobbins^a, Martin Andrew^b, Karen Lander^c, and Julie Willems^d

^a University of Warwick, UK; ^b Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand; ^c University of Manchester, UK, ^d Monash University, Australia

Abstract

This Editorial examines the use and reporting of interviews and focus groups as methods in higher education research. It responds to recurring reviewer concerns that many studies lack clarity and transparency in the reporting of qualitative methods. Drawing on our editorial experience and relevant literature, we identify common issues, including weak alignment between research questions and methods, limited transparency in design and analysis, and underdeveloped interpretation of findings. This paper positions methodological rigour as a relational concept and explores four key dimensions: alignment of methods to research purpose, design and conduct, analysis, and the presentation of findings. Practitioner principles are shared at the end of the Editorial to guide the design and reporting of interview and focus group studies, emphasising coherence across the research process, interpretation, and evidentiary grounding. These principles aim to help writers produce more methodologically rigorous reports of interview and focus group studies.

Editors

Section: Editorial
Editor in Chief Rachel Fitzgerald

Publication

Submission: 13 May 2026
Revised: 03 July 2026
Accepted: 31 July 2026
Published: 05 Sep 2026

Copyright © by the authors, in its year of first publication. This publication is an open access publication under the Creative Commons Attribution [CC BY-ND 4.0](#) license.

Practitioner Notes

1. Interviews and focus groups provide rich, in-depth understandings of phenomena under investigation.
2. Valuable studies using these methods might not be published due to insufficient grounding or reporting.
3. Methodological rigour is the relational thread that connects authors, readers, and the broader scholarly contribution of their work.
4. The alignment of research questions, method, design, and analysis procedures all feed into the presentation and discussion of findings to make a coherent manuscript.
5. Methodological rigour is most effectively demonstrated when it is embedded from the beginning of a study's development.

Keywords

qualitative methods, pedagogic research, manuscript preparation, study coherence

Citation:

Dobbins, K., Andrew, M., Lander, K., & Willems, J. (2026). Using interviews and focus groups in higher education research: methodological rigour in design and reporting. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 23(3). <https://doi.org/10.53761/hapq3171>

Introduction

Interviews and focus groups remain prominent methods employed in social science and higher education studies. Their prominence is unsurprising given their capacity to generate rich and nuanced data focused on individuals' experiences, understandings, behaviours, perspectives, views, emotions, and perceptions (Xu et al., 2025). Rather than pursuing generalisation across large groups, interviews and focus groups are utilised by researchers seeking subjective perspectives of a phenomenon, allowing insight into the unique experiences as lived, experienced and perceived by individuals or across groups (McGrath et al., 2018). From this perspective, interviews and focus groups align with what Jensen and co-authors (2013, p. 127) call "the qualitative mission of contextualisation and attention to unique subjectivities". These methods are not the only ones that support this mission; however, they remain familiar and typical within pedagogic and practitioner scholarship and their use warrants a deeper dive. This Editorial therefore positions itself within the journal's wider emphasis on supporting authors to develop their practice, alongside work on selecting and composing research questions (Purvis et al., 2024) and constructing succinct and careful abstracts (Dobbins et al., 2024).

As indicated in Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice (JUTLP)'s guidelines, a predominant aim for manuscripts submitted to the journal is to "contribute to improving how academics think about and practice teaching". This aim indicates why interviews and focus groups are common methods in the manuscripts we receive. Improving or changing thinking requires understanding of existing perspectives; surfacing the barriers, challenges and enablers that impact how researchers approach and practice teaching; identifying the cultural, contextual and systemic factors that shape how they make sense of specific educational worlds. Interviews and focus groups are not the only approaches that can uncover thinking, emotions and perspectives. Indeed, as Lamont and Swidler (2014, p. 154) state, a data collection technique itself does not have agency, rather it "all depends on what one does with it, what it is used for". When used appropriately in line with the aims and research questions of a study, interviews and focus groups are effective tools that can be used to help explore the gaps and landscape between abstract ideas and lived realities.

Changing how academics think about and practice teaching is no small feat. It requires readers to have trust and confidence in the results of the study being presented. Researchers, therefore, need clear rationales for their selection of methods and must convince readers that their evidence set is sufficient and their sampling appropriate. Particularly, this necessitates a transparent methodological thread woven through a manuscript from the study's rationale and design to the presentation of findings (Cohen et al., 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Tracy, 2025). Without this transparency, when details of evidence collection and analysis methods remain opaque, the soundness of findings becomes problematic, and the paper's scholarly contribution is weakened.

The impetus for this Editorial came from a shared experience of observing limited methodological information reported in manuscripts, particularly for studies using interviews and/or focus groups. Decisions to progress manuscripts are based on consideration of whether they can make a valid, reliable and meaningful contribution to existing scholarly bodies of knowledge. Editors' confidence in manuscripts to make this contribution is negatively impacted when there is overly brief or omitted content in the Method section.

To support potential authors and fellow members of the scholarly community, we consider four dimensions of methodological rigour, as they relate to the use of interviews and focus groups as research methods. We end by offering practical and actionable principles for the design and reporting of studies when using such methods. This is not about setting a checklist for crafting effective manuscripts, it is a way to position methodological rigour as a critical and relational concept – something that exists between the author, reader and the scholarly field. In this way, it draws attention to the golden thread connecting research design, execution and scholarly contribution.

In framing this Editorial, we also recognise that the use of interviews and focus groups as qualitative methods is both shaped by underlying epistemological and paradigmatic positions and subject to rigorous reflexivity and criticality (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; Cohen et al., 2007; Tracy, 2025). While these foundational assumptions are central to qualitative inquiry, the focus here is not on engaging in detailed philosophical debate. Instead, we attend to how epistemological positioning is translated into coherent and transparent methodological decisions in studies using interviews and focus groups across design, data collection, analysis, and reporting, in ways that enable readers to understand, assess, and engage with the contribution being made.

The Significance of Interviews and Focus Groups

There are likely varied reasons for the continued popularity of interviews and focus group methods within pedagogic scholarship. In their scoping review of studies published between 2014 –2023 within the *International Journal of Academic Development*, Benini et al. (2026) found that qualitative research methods were by far the most common, with interviews and focus groups accounting for half of the qualitative methods used. The authors suggest that interview/focus groups have become a signature methodology for the academic development field as they extend a practice grounded in individual, collective and contextualised meaning-making through dialogue and exchange of ideas. In a similar way, an attention to subjective perceptions, “imagined realities and cultural ideals, as well as emotional states” (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p. 157) positions researchers using interviews and focus groups as interested in the relational interplay of people’s experiences; that is how individuals and groups perceive themselves, their behaviours, actions, emotions and experiences in relation to the contexts, cultures, environments or communities within which the studies are situated. Cousin (2009, p. 72) indicates that interviews “attempt to grapple with complex experiences”. Educational activities are recognised as inherently complex (Freebody, 2003) and inter-relational (Murphy & Brown, 2012), with “educationally engaged human relationships...entangled within the spaces, places, contexts and environments with which they occur” (Gravett et al., 2024, p. 388). As such, interviews and focus groups could be seen as signature methods across the pedagogic field through their extension of the subjective and human experience of education.

To this point, interviews and focus groups have been discussed together, almost as though they capture and interpret similar types of experience. This is not the case of course. Whilst some may position focus groups as a type or extended form of the interview method (Cohen et al., 2007), there are important nuances and dynamics that distinguish one from the other. Interviews centre on individual voices and personal experiences, seeking in-depth and emic (insider) perspectives (Hennink et al., 2020). Whilst gaining participant perspectives is still a feature of focus groups, this method promotes participation between and among participants and the goal is group

discussion. As a social event, participants construct opinions or shape their perspectives through their interaction with other members' ideas and comments (Ning et al., 2024). It is beyond the scope of this Editorial to dive too deeply into the distinct nuances of each method. Rather, we consider them together as methods commonly used within pedagogic and practitioner scholarship and as sharing a philosophy of obtaining subjective knowledge, experiences, interpretations, and lived realities in participants' own words.

Finally, in addition to their potential as signature methods in the pedagogic field, organisational or contextual factors may also play a role in the prevalence of these two methods. Considering their own discipline, Kahlke et al. (2025, p. 528) view interviews as among the most common qualitative methods used in health professions education, "likely because they are seemingly easy to conduct". Whilst we do not maintain these methods are 'easy' (indeed, this Editorial springs from the challenges we observe for authors to make an effective scholarly contribution using these methods), we acknowledge the practical constraints and issues colleagues may face that might underlie this view. Academics in the modern university are time poor and hence make practical choices. Further, limited institutional training and support to conduct pedagogic scholarship activities is well-documented (Evans et al., 2020; Tierney, 2019). Constrained resources, as Benini et al. (2026) suggest, may incline researchers to qualitative approaches due to the pragmatic challenges of collecting and analysing large data sets. In these difficult contexts for pedagogic scholars, collecting richer data from smaller samples that they can more readily access may seem the 'easier' option. As part of this scholarly community, we recognise these challenges first-hand but note that the widespread use and accessibility of these methods should not be taken as an indication of methodological sufficiency; rather, their prevalence makes careful design, execution, and reporting even more critical. This Editorial therefore offers a practical contribution to supporting community-based pedagogic scholarship under such conditions.

The Importance of Methodological Rigour

Methodological rigour is the foundation for enabling our work as scholars to make a genuine contribution. At its heart are the principles of coherence and transparency across all aspects of the research process, from design and conduct to reporting of findings (Johnson et al., 2020; Köhler, 2016; Marino et al., 2025; Tracy, 2025). Recently, these expectations are reflected in wider discussions of open research practices (Nosek et al., 2015). In qualitative research, this includes making methodological and analytic decisions visible (Haven et al., 2020), while carefully navigating issues such as reflexivity, context, and the ethical limits of data sharing. These developments further reinforce transparency as a central component of methodological rigour, aligning with understandings of how research decisions are articulated and justified.

Köhler et al. (2017, p. 173) summarise rigour as the "consistent, conscientious, and reasoned carrying out of a chosen method that fits the proposed research question and the context of study". It is the transparent and "honest communication" (Johnson et al., 2020, p. 145) of research actions and decisions taken across the study that assures readers of the criticality, trustworthiness and credibility of the findings reported and the implications drawn for knowledge, policy and/or practice. Tracy (2025) conceptualises quality in qualitative studies through eight principles that support rigour: worthy topics, richness of rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significance of contribution, ethics and meaningful contribution. The emphasis on alignment between research goals, methods and findings is particularly relevant to the arguments advanced in this Editorial.

Kim et al. (2022, p. 210) argue that confidence in qualitative research is built through “coherence between the research questions, adopted methods, findings, and theoretical analysis”. This principle sits at the heart of the editorial process. As manuscripts move from Editors-in-Chief, to Senior and Associate Editors and reviewers, each stakeholder is effectively asked the same question: “Are we convinced?” (Kim et al., 2022, p. 209). When the answer is no, the issue is rarely the topic itself but a lack of coherence across the study, making rejection more likely.

Such a rejection does not necessarily imply a lack of rigour, quality or systematic methodology; rather, it may reflect shortcomings in how the study has been reported. Returning to JUTLP’s aim of contributing “to improving how academics think about and practice teaching”, this places a significant responsibility on us as editors to ensure that evidence presented in our published manuscripts is credible and based on sound research methods and decision-making (Köhler, 2016). We therefore see methodological rigour as a relational concept. Studies are never conducted in a vacuum; they are undertaken to advance knowledge and understandings. When published in JUTLP, they are intended to contribute to others’ understandings, to inform and shape policy and/or practice, and advance the higher education landscapes we collectively inhabit. In seeking to publish our research, we enter into a relationship with the audiences and communities we hope to influence. As such, our work must convince and reassure through a coherent, consistent and transparent thread that runs from research design through to its execution and reporting.

Four Dimensions of Methodological Rigour

This Editorial focuses on interviews and focus groups because of the valuable contribution studies using these methods make to academic and practice development. The JUTLP journal template provides the structural guidance on what should be addressed within a manuscript, and here we elaborate on the rationale underpinning those expectations. The following sections focus on four key dimensions of methodological rigour as they relate to the use of these methods: aligning method(s) to the research purpose; designing and conducting interviews and focus groups; analysis procedures; and reporting of findings.

Alignment of Method to Research Purpose

Coherence across study design and research processes is a fundamental marker of methodological rigour. This coherence begins with clarity about the purpose of the research, which in a JUTLP paper is established in the Introduction and further developed through engagement with the literature. The Method section then becomes the space in which authors not only explain and justify their chosen data collection methods but also situate the study within an appropriate epistemological or paradigmatic framework. It is often at this point, that coherence begins to weaken, particularly when the links between research purpose, epistemological positioning, and method are not made explicit.

A frequently noted issue in qualitative research manuscripts concerns the transparency and coherence between the research questions posed and the research method(s) employed. Such issues can arise where there is a lack of alignment between research questions, underlying epistemological or paradigmatic assumptions, and the methods selected (Köhler, 2016; Köhler et al., 2017). At a broad level, this may be evident where positivist forms of sense-making are paired with interpretivist methods (Kim et al., 2022). As editors, however, what we more commonly

observe is not an overt paradigmatic mismatch, but rather an insufficient explanation of why interviews and/or focus groups are the most appropriate data collection methods in relation to the study's stated purpose.

Qualitative research "is focused on making sense of lived, observed phenomenon in a specific context with specifically selected individuals" (Johnson et al., 2020, p. 141); but it does not follow that interviews or focus groups are the most suitable methods to use. Gaining insight into people's unique experiences and social and experiential worlds could occur through a range of narrative and phenomenographic techniques, such as open-ended surveys, reflective diaries and journals, narrative frames and more ethnographic fieldwork methods such as participant observations. Rather than providing an exhaustive account, we aim to highlight that a range of methods exists beyond interviews and focus groups. Authors need to offer strong rationales for their choice of methods as the most appropriate ones for their study. In recognition that a range of methods exists for capturing rich, perspective-based data, manuscripts should explain why interviews or focus groups were chosen and how these methods align with what the research questions aim to uncover (Köhler, 2016).

Although interviews and focus groups are discussed together in this Editorial, they are distinct methods that generate insights from participants in different ways. As editors, we encourage manuscripts to recognise the distinctiveness of these two methods. When focus groups are chosen, the Methods section should clarify how the social and group dynamics of the approach align with the nature of the research questions. Likewise, when interviews are used, manuscripts should explain how individual perspectives are central to addressing the study's aims.

Beyond this distinction, the term 'interview' encompasses a range of approaches that can be understood, in broad terms, as existing along a spectrum from structured to unstructured processes (Cohen et al., 2007; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; Kahlke et al., 2025). Semi-structured interviews are commonly employed; however, the Methods section should acknowledge the distinctiveness of the interview format used and explain why it was most appropriate for the study. Articulating both the nature of interviews as a data collection method and the rationale for the specific format adopted helps to establish a coherent thread between the research aims and the methods used.

A final consideration regarding the alignment of method and purpose is that interviews or focus groups are sometimes employed as secondary methods within a broader methodological design. If interviews or focus groups are used within a mixed-methods design, their purpose and contribution should be clearly articulated, whether this is to explain, contextualise, elaborate upon, or complement quantitative findings. In the research design stage, the evidence collection methods need to be the most epistemologically appropriate methods for generating data that can address the research enquiry. Editors and reviewers rightly attend to whether the methods used to gather evidence align with researchers' professed worldviews and epistemologies, and are likely to create the most effective evidence set to address the research enquiry or questions. It is a common weakness in education and development research for interview data to be used primarily as a corroborative device, with limited attention given to its analytic contribution. In such cases, the qualitative component can appear disconnected from the central research enquiry rather than fully integrated into the methodological design. This may reflect a mismatch between the questions being asked and the methods selected to address them. Authors should ensure

that methodological choices are driven first by the nature of the research problem and the evidence required to answer it, rather than by disciplinary convention or methodological habit.

Design and Conduct of Interviews and Focus Groups

As editors of JUTLP, we are not alone in observing that interviews and focus groups are among the frequently used data sources in qualitative manuscript submissions (Benini et al., 2026; Köhler, 2016). However, like others, we also find that important details are missing or not properly explained about how these methods were designed and conducted (Köhler, 2016; Kim et al., 2022). This omission within manuscripts hinders the transparency of the research process and has significant implications for establishing the trustworthiness of the research results (Johnson et al., 2020). Köhler (2016) conceives of transparency as the provision of sufficient relevant information about the research actions to enable readers to gain a thorough understanding of authors' reasoning and choices. A multitude of decisions underpin the actions that a researcher takes and only when these decisions are communicated can readers evaluate whether the chosen methodology was appropriate and well-executed.

In relation to interviews and focus groups, an initial decision to communicate regarding the research design is the chosen setting of the study, which includes where the study was conducted and with whom. In practical terms, this means explaining the context of the study location and why it was an optimal setting to address the research questions. Practitioner researchers may often be researching within their local contexts and with samples to which they have ready access. Far from a drawback, such studies can produce rich insights and contribute important knowledge to the field. What is essential, however, is a coherent thread between the study context and sample and the research questions being explored. In other words, reviewers and readers need to be confident that the research context and participants are appropriate for generating the type of data required to address the research aims. Similarly, transparency around who was invited to participate in focus groups, and why, are key to highlighting the design elements (Barbour, 2008; Caillaud et al., 2022). Further, participant selection needs to be guided by the research topic and a consideration of potential perceptions and experiences of the event or phenomenon.

Transparent communication within manuscripts of the study context and sample includes justification for the institutional setting(s) in which the research was conducted and description of the core characteristics of interview or focus group participants (Xu et al., 2025). Manuscripts should also provide detail on how participants were recruited once identified as appropriate for the study, as well as on the researcher's relationship (if any) to the study setting (Köhler, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher's positionality in relation to the study context is an important consideration and, in our experience, one that is often overlooked in manuscripts.

Once the study and sample context is explained and justified, the Method section should provide clarification about how the interviews or focus groups were conducted. This unfolding of the method's execution includes details such as where and how the interviews or focus groups took place, their duration, who facilitated them, and how the discussions were recorded and/or documented (Köhler, 2016; Xu et al., 2025). Manuscripts should also provide insight into the interview or discussion guides used, enabling readers to gauge the alignment between the questions posed and the research objectives.

Providing such detail is not only important for transparent communication of the research process and enhancing confidence in the coherence of the study, but also foregrounds the relational and interpretive dimensions that are central to these methods. Interviews, depending on their degree of openness, and focus groups generate data through conversational exchanges (Kahlke et al., 2025), meaning that both facilitator and participants negotiate and interpret meaning through each other. In this way, insights generated through dialogic methods, such as semi-structured and unstructured interviews and focus groups, may be seen as co-constructed in that they emerge through the coming together of the researcher and the study participants (Hennink et al., 2020; McGrath et al., 2018). As such, within relational and interpretive approaches like these, it is critical to acknowledge the influence of the researcher on the data collection process, including how their background, characteristics, and, more critically, their positionality might shape the research encounter. In the Method section, this involves explicitly considering the researcher's relationship to the study context and participant sample, reflecting on any power dynamics that may have influenced the data generated, and attending to the interactional dynamics of interviews and focus groups that shape the knowledge produced (Hennink et al., 2020; Kahlke et al., 2025).

Cohen et al. (2007, p. 150) argue that interviewer neutrality is a "chimera", yet manuscripts often implicitly align with this illusion through the omission of reflexive detail. Frequently missing or incomplete are an explication of the researcher's positioning in relation to the enquiry, its context, the participants, the participants' contributions that become data, and the chosen data managing and presentation methods. To ensure criticality as a measure of trustworthiness, the positioning of the interviewer-researcher-writer should be unpacked with self-reflexivity and issues of power differential addressed (Tracy, 2025). Following Hennink et al. (2020, p. 20), we encourage authors to recognise that the credibility and trustworthiness of findings are grounded in conscious positioning and methodological openness, allowing readers to judge whether researchers have adequately considered how the data were "made".

Analysis Process

An issue we frequently encounter as editors in rejected manuscripts is limited detail about the analytical processes applied to interview and/or focus group data. We commonly see thematic analysis identified as the analytic approach, with little more than a statement that the data were coded to identify themes. Authors need to provide more detail than simply stating that thematic analysis was used, as the omission of analytical detail has significant implications for perceptions of a study's methodological rigour (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Köhler, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). Brief descriptions of the analysis process, rather than a sufficiently detailed account, limit the abilities of readers, including editors and reviewers, to evaluate the trustworthiness of the findings presented and the research approach overall. Most significantly, they fail to acknowledge the analytical choices made by the researcher. Indeed, thematic analysis often appears as the de facto analysis procedure for interviews and focus groups. Yet, there are multiple ways of undertaking thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), alongside many other approaches to qualitative data analysis, including content analysis, narrative analysis, and (critical) discourse analysis (Cousin, 2009; Hennink et al., 2020). While these approaches may share principles of coding, categorising and theme development, they represent different ways of making sense of qualitative data.

Hence, researchers weave a critical thread of methodological rigour through their studies through the clear use of rationales for their choices. Cohen et al. (2007, p. 461) argue that how researchers analyse evidence or data pivots on the issue of “fitness for purpose”. Establishing fitness for purpose means connecting the overall analysis approach to the reasons for the study, the research questions it explores and the decision to use interviews and/or focus groups as the research method. For example, if the purpose of the study is to examine the stories that people use to understand their lives and experiences, then narrative analysis may be the most appropriate method. On the other hand, discourse analysis might be best suited for a study that wants to explore the language and expressions people use to frame and construct their understanding. Without this connective thread between research purpose, design and analysis, the reader cannot be assured of the appropriateness and validity of the analysis method chosen.

As well as providing the rationale for the analysis method chosen, manuscripts also need to discuss the process that was followed. Taking thematic analysis as our example here, there are many stages in the analytic process and important choices are made at each point. Braun and Clarke (2022) and Nowell et al. (2017) identify six phases of thematic analysis: familiarising yourself with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. It is beyond the scope of this Editorial to discuss these phases in detail, and both sources offer valuable practical guidance for using this approach. For our purposes, it is sufficient to highlight the multiple stages involved in thematic analysis and the analytical decisions they require, many of which are often left unreported in manuscripts.

This lack of transparency in reporting the process of analysis, whether it is thematic analysis or another method, means that readers do not have a full picture of whether interview and/or focus group data has been worked with in sound, methodical and systematic ways. It also obscures the actions and choices that have been made by the researcher. A short-hand analysis description can imply a view that themes are neutral and there to be found within the interview or focus group data. As Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise, themes never just emerge, they are the result of the critical and active role that the researcher plays in identifying codes and patterns. Accepting that this data or analysis of it can never be neutral does not mean that we can never trust such research accounts (Cousin, 2009). Instead, it puts an onus on researchers to be transparent in how they have taken account of their positionality and influence within the analysis process.

Relatedly, manuscripts rarely specify the epistemological perspective of the approach adopted or align it with the paradigmatic framework of the study. This detail is especially important for thematic analysis as it is not a single conceptual framework with one set of underlying assumptions and analysis (Terry et al., 2017). Reflexive approaches to thematic analysis, for example, conceptualise themes as interpretative constructions, whereas approaches that rely on structured codebooks or coding reliability measures consider themes as more objectively identifiable within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022, 2023). A lack of clarity around this position within a manuscript can lead to conceptual ambiguity, undermining the internal coherence of the study and the interpretation of the analysis conducted.

Beyond epistemological or paradigmatic clarity, Köhler (2016) suggests two ways that researchers can enhance others’ confidence in their interpretation of the data. The first is keeping critical reflections throughout the data collection process and using these during analysis to demonstrate how researchers’ perspectives and backgrounds may have influenced their interpretations. For interviews and focus groups, such critical reflections may include researchers’

consideration of how their positionality, assumptions, and interaction with participants shaped the data generated and observations about interview or focus-group dynamics. Secondly, researchers should show the steps they have taken to consider alternative interpretations, e.g. researcher triangulation, team discussions, member checking.

Nowell et al. (2017, p. 2) highlight that when conducting data analysis, the researcher as medium of analysis, makes “judgments about coding, theming, decontextualising, and recontextualising the data”. Themes do not passively emerge but are works of judgement. Manuscripts should centre this understanding in their explanation of the analytic approach followed, making clear what method has been applied to the interview and/or focus group data and how researchers’ interpretive judgements shaped the process.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

So far, this Editorial has focused on methodological rigour in relation to design, conduct and analysis processes and how they should be appropriately reported. Even when all these elements have been carefully implemented and described, a manuscript may still be weakened by the way its findings are presented and discussed. We affirm the need to “think of data presentation not as a cosmetic exercise but as core to methodological rigour” (Marino et al., 2025, p. 2). It is through the presentation of findings that a manuscript brings together its research design, execution, and contribution to the field.

Compelling Results and Discussion sections ultimately serve to address the research question(s). In so doing, they provide relevant evidence from the dataset as well as interpretation and analysis of the findings. Deceptively simple as this sounds, they are areas that manuscripts can falter, and particularly those reporting interview and/or focus group research. Our editorial experience aligns with two overarching issues frequently noted elsewhere: first, findings are often presented in the Results section with insufficient analytical narration in relation to the research questions; second, the Discussion section sometimes advances conclusions or implications that are not adequately supported by the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Köhler, 2016; Xu et al., 2025).

The Results section narrates the story of the data. It involves presenting elements of the story, or data in a way that allows the overall narrative—and the connections and commonalities between the voiced evidence—to be clearly understood. In interview and focus group studies, this story is often presented through the themes generated by the chosen analytic approach. Braun and Clarke (2023) caution against treating themes as simple topic summaries rather than as interpretative stories that convey meaning. When a theme heading seems overly broad, descriptive or catch-all (e.g. ‘Experiences of...’ or ‘Barriers to...’), it can signal to editors that the analysis has not progressed beyond summary. The storied and curated narratives must relate back to the purpose of the study and the questions that framed its design and implementation. They should also convey the deep understanding the researcher has gained of the stories being told within the data and what they reveal about the phenomenon being explored. Without this alignment, the coherency of the study is weakened.

One way in which insufficient interpretation can emerge in manuscripts is through an inadequate balance of ‘showing’ and ‘telling’. Manuscripts reporting interview and focus group studies are particularly prone to the problem of over-showing and under-telling. This manifests when authors provide numerous quotes, or overly long and uncurated quotes, to establish a point, but devote

limited attention to interpreting their meaning. As Köhler (2016) argues, the interpretation of quotes should extend beyond simply paraphrasing participants' words to demonstrating what can be learned from their accounts in relation to the phenomenon being explored.

An overreliance on quotes to show the data can lead to a second issue: The Discussion section deriving conclusions or implications that are not adequately supported by the data. Xu et al. (2025) assert that limited interpretation of the data in the discussion space leads to analytical underdevelopment. In that vein, editors often observe manuscripts that report interview and focus group studies overextending the conclusions. This problem is less likely to be present when the data have been well-presented and analysed. A key aim of journals is to advance knowledge, but we emphasise Marino et al.'s assertion that "methodological rigor also applies to the inferences drawn from a study" (2025, p. 2). Authors need to ensure that any claims made are clearly grounded in the scope and context of the study undertaken and are commensurate with the evidence and findings presented. Without this coherency, any conclusions presented remain on shaky foundations, limiting the study's scholarly contribution. The manuscript is also unlikely to convince editors or reviewers, which may result in rejection.

A further point concerns ensuring good practice in the presentation of quotes. Pseudonyms are often the most appropriate way to anonymise participants while maintaining their human status. Participant pseudonyms should be provided alongside quoted extracts, typically at the end of the quotation. Alternatively, where appropriate, researchers may present participant quotes using anonymised labels or identifier codes to identify the source of the quoted material (e.g. P1 for Participant 1). Whatever approach is adopted, it should be applied consistently throughout the manuscript. Relevant demographic and contextual information associated with participant pseudonyms or identification codes should be described in the Method section. The use of a clear and consistent system of participant pseudonyms or identifiers is important for presenting a coherent and convincing account of the findings. Consistent use of participant pseudonyms or identifier codes also allows readers to judge the balance of perspectives represented. Without such a system, readers cannot determine whether interpretations are grounded in the views of a limited number of participants or reflect perspectives from across the sample.

Of course, not all interviewees or focus group participants need to raise the same issue for it to constitute an important finding. Crucial insights may emerge from a small proportion of the sample, and these should be explored through the analysis and presentation of the findings. The inclusion of participants' pseudonyms or identifier codes provides further coherency between the evidence presented through example quotes and the narrative being told about that data. Their absence may raise concerns among editors and reviewers and introduce doubt about the alignment of the findings to the conclusions and implications drawn.

Principles for Design and Reporting

In this final section, the Editorial draws together principles for ensuring methodological rigour within studies using interviews or focus groups as data collection methods (Table 1). These principles are framed as reflective questions, drawing on the issues discussed and on aspects editors frequently observe within manuscripts. Importantly, our intention here is more than the presentation of a checklist for authors to follow when writing up their research. Rather, we seek to foreground methodological rigour as a relational thread: connecting authors, readers, and the broader scholarly contribution of their work. In this way, while these principles reflect key aspects

that should be addressed within a manuscript, they are also intended to inform and guide study design.

Table 1*Reflective Questions for Methodological Rigour in Interview and Focus Group Research*

Dimension of Methodological Rigour	Principles to Consider
	Has an appropriate epistemological or paradigmatic framework been clearly articulated and used to inform the study from the outset?
Alignment of Method to Research Purpose	Is there a coherent alignment between the research questions posed and the use of interviews and/or focus groups as the chosen data collection methods? Are the specific interview or focus group formats adopted identified and appropriately justified in relation to the study? Is the study setting—where the research was conducted and with whom—clearly justified?
Design and Conduct of Interviews and Focus Groups	Is the researcher's relationship to the study context and participant sample explicitly acknowledged and reflected upon? Has interpersonal reflexivity been demonstrated by considering the interactional dynamics of interviews or focus groups and their influence on the data generated?
Analysis Process	Is the analytic approach clearly explained and coherently aligned with the study's epistemological or paradigmatic positioning, research aims, and data collection methods? Are all steps of the analytic process sufficiently described? Do the presentation and discussion of findings relate back to the study's purpose and guiding research questions?
Presentation and Discussion of Findings	Is there an effective balance between presenting data extracts (e.g., quotations) and interpreting their meaning and significance? Are quotations labelled with pseudonyms or codes that convey relevant information about their source? Are the conclusions drawn from the study commensurate with the findings presented?

Conclusion

Interviews and focus groups remain common and appropriate methods used in qualitative studies reported in manuscripts submitted to JUTLP and in social sciences more broadly. The findings generated from these studies have the potential to inform and shape teaching practice in rich and meaningful ways. This Editorial seeks to support authors and pedagogic scholars in clearly articulating methodological rigour, enabling reviewers and readers to recognise and assess the contribution of their work. The principles shared here are intended to inform both the design and

reporting of studies, recognising that methodological rigour is most effectively demonstrated when it is thoughtfully embedded from the outset.

Acknowledgements

The authors disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university. The authors have used Generative AI tools solely for copyediting and sense-checking purposes, in line with guidance from Crawford et al. (2023). The authors confirm that they have met the ethical standards expected per Purvis and Crawford (2024).

The authors list the following CRediT contributions: Dobbins: Conceptualisation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing; Project administration; Andrew: Writing – review & editing; Lander: Writing – review & editing; Willems: Writing – review & editing.

References

- Barbour, R. (2008). *Doing focus groups*. SAGE.
- Benini, E., Huijser, H., & Serbati, A. (2026). Signature methodologies? A scoping review of trends in research methods for academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144x.2026.2622349>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2023). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and be(com)ing a *knowing* researcher. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 24(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Caillaud, S., Kalampalikis, N., & Doumergue, M. (2022). Designing focus groups. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research design* (pp. 684–699). SAGE.
- Charmaz, K., & Belgrave, L. L. (2012). Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. In J. F. Gubrium, J. A. Holstein, A. B. Marvasti, & K. D. McKinney (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of interview research: The complexity of the craft* (2nd ed., pp. 347–366). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452218403.n25>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). Routledge.
- Cousin, G. (2009). *Researching learning in higher education: An introduction to contemporary methods and approaches*. Routledge.
- Crawford, J., Cowling, M., Ashton-Hay, S., Kelder, J. A., Middleton, R., & Wilson, G. S. (2023). Artificial intelligence and authorship editor policy: ChatGPT, Bard Bing AI, and beyond. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 20(5). <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.20.5.01>
- Dobbins, K., Pollard, E., Andrew, M., & Middleton, R. (2024). Editorial: Making unstructured abstracts more concrete. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 21(09). <https://doi.org/10.53761/t28dqa89>
- Evans, C., Kandiko Howson, C., Forsythe, A., & Edwards, C. (2020). What constitutes high quality higher education pedagogical research? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 46(4), 525–546. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2020.1790500>
- Freebody, P. (2003). *Qualitative research in education: Interaction and practice*. SAGE.
- Gravett, K., Taylor, C. A., & Fairchild, N. (2024). Pedagogies of mattering: re-conceptualising relational pedagogies in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 29(2), 388–403. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1989580>
- Haven, T. L., Errington, T. M., Gleditsch, K. S., van Grootel, L., Jacobs, A. M., Kern, F. G., Piñeiro, R., Rosenblatt, F., & Mekkink, L. B. (2020). Preregistering qualitative research: A Delphi study. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920976417>
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I., & Bailey, A. (2020). *Qualitative research methods* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Jensen, R. E., Christy, K., Gettings, P. E., & Lareau, L. (2013). Interview and focus group research: A content analysis of scholarship published in ranked journals. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 7(2), 126–133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2013.789838>

- Johnson, J. L., Adkins, D., & Chauvin, S. (2020). A review of the quality indicators of rigor in qualitative research. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 84(1), 7120. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe7120>
- Kahlke, R., O'Brien, B. C., & Varpio, L. (2025). Qualitative research interviews for health professions education: AMEE Guide No. 185. *Medical Teacher*, 48(4), 528–541. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159x.2025.2536697>
- Kim, Y., Kester, K., & Han, S. (2022). Editorial: Interesting, but are we convinced? The importance of methodological rigor at Asia Pacific Education Review. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 23(2), 209–210. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-022-09768-3>
- Köhler, T. (2016). From the editors: On writing up qualitative research in management learning and education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 15(3), 400–418. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2016.0275>
- Köhler, T., Landis, R. S., & Cortina, J. M. (2017). From the editors: Establishing methodological rigor in quantitative management learning and education research: The role of design, statistical methods, and reporting standards. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 16(2), 173–192. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2017.0079>
- Lamont, M., & Swidler, A. (2014). Methodological pluralism and the possibilities and limits of interviewing. *Qualitative Sociology*, 37(2), 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-014-9274-z>
- Marino, M., Stuart, E. A., & Galea, S. (2025). Methodological rigor in health policy and health services research. *JAMA Health Forum*, 6(12), e255887. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamahealthforum.2025.5887>
- McGrath, C., Palmgren, P. J., & Liljedahl, M. (2018). Twelve tips for conducting qualitative research interviews. *Medical Teacher*, 41(9), 1002–1006. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159x.2018.1497149>
- Murphy, M., & Brown, T. (2012). Learning as relational: Intersubjectivity and pedagogy in higher education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 31(5), 643–654. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2012.700648>
- Ning, X., Liu, Y., Miao, J. L., & Li, W. L. (2024). Enhancing the potentials of the focus group discussion: Engaging frequently neglected but essential situational factors for analyzing data. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241306332>
- Nosek, B. A., Alter, G., Banks, G. C., Borsboom, D., Bowman, S. D., Breckler, S. J., Buck, S., Chambers, C. D., Chin, G., Christensen, G., Contestabile, M., Dafoe, A., Eich, E., Freese, J., Glennerster, R., Goroff, D., Green, D. P., Hesse, B., Humphreys, M., et al. (2015). Promoting an open research culture. *Science*, 348(6242), 1422–1425. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aab2374>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Purvis, A. J., & Crawford, J. (2024). Ethical standards in social science publications. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 21(09). <https://doi.org/10.53761/hqnqr710>
- Purvis, A., Nicholas, V., & Tai, J. (2024). What's your problem? Writing effective research questions for quality publications. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 21(10). <https://doi.org/10.53761/j64xa573>

- Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 17–37). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555>
- Tierney, A. (2019). The scholarship of teaching and learning and pedagogic research within the disciplines: Should it be included in the research excellence framework? *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(1), 176–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1574732>
- Tracy, S. J. (2025). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis and communicating impact*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Xu, Z., Wang, Y., & Qian, Y. (2025). The design and application of in-depth interviews in primary care research. *Chinese General Practice Journal*, 2(2), 100062. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cgpj.2025.100062>
- Xu, Z., Wang, Y., & Qian, Y. (2025). The design and application of in-depth interviews in primary care research. *Chinese General Practice Journal*, 2(2), 100062. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cgpj.2025.100062>