

Using Social Media Platforms and Apps for Recruiting Participants and Conducting Interviews

Contributors: Damaris D E Carlisle

Pub. Date: 2022

Product: SAGE Research Methods: Doing Research Online

Methods: Case study research, Recruiting participants, Transcription

Disciplines: Education

Access Date: March 28, 2022

Academic Level: Intermediate Undergraduate

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Ltd.

City: London

Online ISBN: 9781529798906

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781529798906>

© 2022 SAGE Publications, Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Research Methods Cases.

Abstract

This case study draws on the original doctoral thesis entitled, “Learners With Special Educational Needs Reflecting on Their First Year at University.” The study of the historical background, recent developments, and issues of concern was a collective case study of special needs students studying at Singapore universities. Data collection comprised historical and current local policy documents, parliamentary records collected from Hansard (the traditional name given to transcriptions of parliamentary debates), the information collated from university websites, and semi-structured interviews with 26 participants recruited from five of the six public universities in Singapore.

This article focuses on the ways in which digital technologies were used to modify the initial research design and handle the collection of interview data gathered in this research. Some adaptations were a result of COVID-19 constraints applied in Singapore, although all semi-structured interview data were collected before lockdowns started.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate the importance of flexibility and agility when recruiting participants and conducting interviews
- Mix online and offline methods for maximum impact
- Understand the importance of listening to participants and immersion in the field of study

Project Overview and Context

Taking the opportunity to explore the topic of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) through doctoral research, I was advised against studying within my own institution for reasons of bias and power imbalances. I opted for qualitative research since I lack a strong mathematical background and, having studied to be a social worker at the undergraduate level, I have always gravitated toward personal narratives. Additionally, since disability studies are relatively recent in Singapore, a phenomenological case study seemed most appropriate as a way to explore the lived experiences of the participants and develop possible themes for further quantitative and qualitative research.

The small city-state of Singapore has a population of a little over 5.5 million people. The government has invested heavily in digital technologies, and most people have at least one device such as a smartphone, tablet, or laptop and access to the internet. Currently, the six autonomous universities receive public funding but have the flexibility to govern independently ([Ministry of Education Singapore, 2017](#)). Each university has a disability support office (DSO) and, at the time of the study, each office was run by one or two disability

support officers who may have a full-time or part-time role.

The original research proposal focused on the perspectives of educators working with learners with mild special educational needs in publicly funded universities in Singapore. Given the small size of the target sample population, when research by [Yap \(2019\)](#) overlapped, drawing on the same participants as the proposed study, a change of focus seemed sensible. After consulting my supervisor and the Research Coordinator in the School, we agreed that the overlap was too great, potentially making it difficult to enlist these same people to take part in the study.

Therefore, the study was redesigned to focus on the perspective of learners with special educational needs. The central research question was: as a result of changes in education policy in Singapore, what are the theoretical underpinnings to the perspectives of learners with special educational needs reflecting on their first year of studies at university in Singapore? This required a new proposal and amendments for ethics approval. The rationale behind selecting university students was practical; to avoid the additional layer of gaining informed consent required from parents of learners under the age of 18 ([Republic of Singapore, 1909](#)).

Singapore's unique context led to the exploration of the historical background to the education of learners with SEND at the postsecondary level, both globally and locally. Since independence in 1965, Singapore's education system has gradually transitioned from efficiency driven to streaming by academic ability: from quantity to quality ([OECD, 2011](#)). It is only in more recent years that inclusive education has started to be discussed and incorporated into mainstream schooling since the implementation of the Compulsory Education Act of 2000. Alongside increasing educational pathways, numbers of students with SEND gaining access to higher education have grown. In 2014, the Singapore Government announced each Institute of Higher Learning (IHL) would establish DSOs and create web pages outlining the support available for students with SEND ([Republic of Singapore, 2014a](#)). In addition, the SEN Fund was established to provide financial support for assistive technology and support services for the learning of students with sensory impairments and physical disabilities ([Republic of Singapore, 2014b](#)). The historical background formed the context of experiences and issues of concern for the interviewees.

Section Summary

- Having a personal interest in the study topic is essential for maintaining momentum.
- Continue to check that your proposed study is not too similar to other research projects and be prepared to make adjustments as necessary.

Research Design

Since the study used qualitative methods and was bounded by the Singaporean context, I chose criterion sampling for both documents and interviews. Exploring the historical context, I searched, selected, and analyzed parliamentary debates, educational policy documents, and advisory plans from Singapore. As IHLs

in Singapore are required to provide information about disability support on their web pages, I also reviewed gateway web pages from each of the six publicly funded universities to analyze the interpretation by each IHL of governmental policy and recommendations.

I intended to purposively select student participants with SEND from each autonomous university in Singapore with the aim of recruiting a total of 25 participants across a range of disciplines. I developed a semi-structured interview framework that allowed me to ask the same open-ended questions in a varied sequence. Dependent on the responses of each participant, I could change the sequence, drop or ask further probing questions.

The original research design was based on face-to-face interviews, meaning they would be synchronous, as opposed to asynchronous where there is a time-lapse between question and answer, as might be the case with using email or online discussion forums. Advantages of asynchronous methods have been cited as better-quality responses because respondents have longer to consider their answers ([Salmons, 2012](#)). However, as I began to consider a wider variety of interview options, such as using internet-enabled possibilities, my preference remained the synchronous route. Selecting teleconferencing options, I wanted the flexibility to probe further during the interview.

Locating participants was a challenge when access through university DSOs was declined. As I was an outsider, the original intention was to enlist the help of, what Salmons calls, “insider assistants” as a way to gain access and help develop trust in the study ([Salmons, 2012, p. 17](#)). I hoped the support officers would advertise the study to students who had declared and registered a SEND. The process, approved by the university Human Ethics and Research Committee (HERC), meant participants could self-select and respond anonymously if they were interested to take part.

Participant recruitment varied from the grounded theory methods advocated by [Corbin and Strauss \(2008\)](#). Rather than being able to seek confirming and disconfirming cases as the data analysis proceeded, recruitment although purposeful, was opportunistic. Responses relied on advertisements placed on social media platforms of specialist organizations serving specific disability groups. Snowball or chain sampling became an additional option ([Patton, 1990](#)) by asking participants for recommendations or introductions to others who qualified to participate in the study ([Morse, 2007](#)). To support the distribution of information that could be used and shared across different social media, the Participants Information Form (PIF) was embedded in a Google form enabling potential participants to read all the relevant information in one place and respond using their device if they wished.

Online calls for volunteers allowed prospective participants to express their interest and make inquiries about the project anonymously. Since information about the study was captured in the Google form, replies came directly to me, stored on my password-protected account, and not shared with others. Responses gathered this way were accepted as consent to participate. Therefore, this approach, approved by the university HERC, meant information remained private with no ethical issues of confidentiality or anonymity arising.

Section Summary

- Ensure the methodology aligns with your research objectives such as selection criteria, recruitment, and data collection methods.
- Consider ethical issues, such as confidentiality and anonymity, and gain informed consent from participants.

Research Practicalities: Finding Participants

The biggest challenge was in the recruitment of participants. This was the area I was most nervous about, knowing that freedom of speech is curtailed in Singapore, so, in my experience, people often seem reluctant to discuss their opinions ([Milman, 2015, January 5](#)). Therefore, the research design included three avenues for recruiting participants.

The first was to contact the president of each publicly funded university to seek permission to approach the DSO. I planned to enlist their help in sharing information about the research. Contact was made by letter in the post, which included the PIF, Participant Consent Form (PCF), and a stamped addressed envelope. The information was additionally sent by email. I followed up with a phone call about a week after sending the information to find out if the letter and email had been received.

When this approach was unsuccessful, I then made contact with specialist organizations such as the Singapore Association for the Deaf (SADeaf) and the Society for the Promotion of ADHD Research and Knowledge (SPARK). [Guba and Lincoln \(1981\)](#) advise developing rapport is vital to the success of a research project since insider assistants and participants need to trust the researcher and recognize the credibility of the project. My tactic was to call the organization first to explain the research project and find out to whom I should address emails. I then sent an email which included the PIF and PCF and followed up with a second phone call within a week. This approach proved to be much more positive since it allowed organizations to clarify queries about the aims of the project and decide whether they were in a position to help.

Some offered to advertise the study via their social media platforms such as Facebook and share details through their WhatsApp chat groups. For groups that offered to share details on their Facebook page, I provided a poster with contact details for interested students to make contact. Sometimes, there was a need to reformat the poster so that the design could fit or match the design of the group's webpage. One group advised me to change the terminology to be more accessible to their members. Another organization that used WhatsApp to contact members gave valuable feedback on the wording of the message they agreed to send. Approximately, one-third of participants were recruited using this method.

At the same time, I actively sought opportunities to network in relevant circles, such as joining meetings, discussion groups, and events. I joined online interest groups and used notifications to find out about events. For example, I made contact with two students at an event organized by The Purple Parade, who describe themselves as "Singapore's largest movement to support inclusion and celebrate abilities of People with

Disabilities” ([The Purple Parade, n.d.](#)). The event, “Conversations,” brought together the disabled, those working in the field of disabilities, and interested parties with the aim of creating dialogues and discussions on topics relevant to the disabled and wider community.

The final approach was to use snowball sampling. I asked participants if they knew of other students who might be interested in taking part in the study and having their voices heard. Many of the participants were members of support groups within and outside the university and were able to pass on information about the study to friends. Rather than using email, the most relevant method was using a crafted WhatsApp message that included a shortened link to the Google form which outlined the study and offered the opportunity to sign up. The remaining two-thirds of participants were recruited this way.

Section Summary

- Participant recruitment can be challenging, so identify insider assistants and consider using a variety of approaches to reach your research population.
- Investigate multiple methods of communication and reflect on the most appropriate for different types of groups.

Method in Action

Recruiting Participants

The lack of response from the universities, while disappointing, was not unexpected, given the guarded response of many institutions in Singapore. Most gave reasons that their DSO was too busy to assist, wishing to avoid extra burden for their staff.

Once I started networking and making direct contact with organizations, the process felt a lot more comfortable. Many offered useful tips on how to develop social media communication. For example, you can see in [Figure 1](#) that apart from contact details, I added a QR code to posters for participants to use their phone cameras to scan and access the Google form for further information. I also included a shortened web link for those accessing information from their phones. At the end of the Google form used for sign up, I was recommended to add the opportunity to ask further questions as well as a reminder that there was no obligation to take part in the study.

Figure 1. Sample poster used for recruitment of participants offering multiple ways to access further information. You can scan the QR Code to access the Google form.

Are you a 1st, 2nd
or 3rd year
university student
in Singapore?

Do you have an
assessed
educational need?

Have your voice
heard

Receive a \$20
Grab Voucher



INTERESTED?
CONTACT
DAMARIS CARLISLE
9186 5422
OR
SCAN THE QR CODE



CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS

I want to find out about the experiences and the issues that students with special educational needs, such as dyslexia, ADHD, autism, mental health issues, sensory impairments, or physical impairments encounter during their first year at university.

I would like to interview you as part of my doctoral research with The University of Western Australia.

<https://tinyurl.com/UWA-Research1>
FIND OUT MORE



This research project has ethics approval from The University of Western Australia

Attending events and joining forums offered advantages because it allowed me to meet key people in the field. One of my participants alerted me to a closed Facebook group that focuses specifically on disability studies in Singapore. This was useful in gaining a deeper understanding of the Singapore context and following research and disability issues in the news. Additionally, these kinds of activities helped me understand the language that is used at a local level. For instance, most organizations in Singapore encourage the use of people-first language in line with the [United Nations \(2006, December 13\)](#).

Dealing With Interviews

With consent from participants, recording interviews has become much easier. I used my iPhone which had the advantage of being convenient, unobtrusive, and mitigated the need to acquire specialist equipment. However, take the time to become familiar with the features of the device or app, such as volume control and speaker, and always make sure there is enough battery life to complete the interview.

At the start, I debated whether to fully transcribe the interviews or use the technique “abstracting,” as a way to condense large quantities of interview material, which Duncan describes “as a written summary of the contents of a recording and ‘transcription’ as a verbatim written copy of a recording” (Duncan, 1997, p. 2). However, early in the interview process, I discovered the transcription app, Otter.ai. This allowed me to keep and use the transcribed data, providing richer content for my thesis.

The cloud-based app functions across different devices such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops. Since the technology uses artificial intelligence (AI) to transcribe what is said, it is continually improving through machine learning and is able to capture a range of accents. At the time, the free version provided enough flexibility for my use.

There were numerous advantages to using Otter.ai. These included:

- time saved in transcription,
- time-stamped interview segments,
- the ability of the AI to recognize and tag different speakers,
- reasonably accurate punctuation, and
- the ability of the researcher to amend and copy the transcript to other formats.

Section Summary

- Listen to your insider assistants and participants and accept suggestions and advice.
- Find ways to network and meet relevant people so as to create opportunities to immerse yourself in the field.
- Decide how you will record and transcribe your participant interviews.

Practical Lessons Learned

The biggest takeaway for me is the importance of flexibility and agility. Having initially planned to make contact via email, I later explored the use of different forms of communication due to the young demographic of my participants. Talking to colleagues and peers to find out the methods and technologies in use was invaluable for data collection.

Flexible Interview Options

Adopting principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guided my choice in offering different options for conducting interviews. [Glass et al. \(2013\)](#) define *Universal* to mean every learner, *Design* that needs to be intentional, purposeful, and planned, and *Learning* for all individuals that challenges and supports them. The belief is that by offering flexible learning environments, individual learning differences can be accommodated. As the students with SEND had gained access to university on academic merit, the voluntary participants were willing and able to contribute without special treatment other than recognition of their specific disability which was accommodated by offering different options for interview.

Proposing meetings face-to-face, using messaging services, teleconferencing, or email had several advantages in recruiting participants. For example, I noticed that participants with physical disabilities and visual impairments tended to opt for meeting in their home or using teleconferencing, so they were not required to make the additional effort to meet in a physical setting which may not be easily accessible. Deaf and hard of hearing students, on the other hand, chose to meet face-to-face due to the challenges of using a phone or teleconferencing. The transcription app was useful here, as it could transcribe live any additional questions that I asked over and above the written semi-structured interview questions so that my interviewees could write or speak their answers. Other participants who were reluctant to be identified in a face-to-face situation, such as some with mental health conditions or on the autistic spectrum, were able to participate,

opting not to activate their cameras for interviews conducted via videoconferencing.

Recording

Familiarizing yourself with your recording equipment is important, as I discovered to my cost. I had a difficulty with one of my interviews that was conducted over WhatsApp. At the time, the transcription app I used was not integrated with other teleconferencing platforms and could not capture a phone conversation using the same device. I used my laptop to run the transcription app and capture the interview taking place on the phone. The first time I tried this, I made the mistake of not putting my phone onto speaker mode, and so the speech was not loud enough for the app to capture the recording, leaving me to take notes throughout the interview.

Transcribing

The transcription app was very helpful in saving time. This meant that transcriptions could be returned to the interviewee for member checking within a short period of time. I was usually able to send transcripts within a week, increasing the likelihood of prompt and meaningful feedback.

However, transcriptions using the app were not perfect, so they needed to be checked, providing light entertainment from time to time. The app allows you to tag speakers' names and edit the transcript. I particularly found useful the ability to click anywhere in the transcription to listen to the interview from that point. It took 2–4 hours to check the transcript of a 45-minute interview. To transcribe manually would have taken double the time. Almost all research projects are time-constrained. Saving time by not manually transcribing the qualitative interviews allowed more time for analysis, interpretation, and write-up, so finding a transcription app which works for you can reduce your stress and improve your research outcomes.

Section Summary

- Online recruitment and participation can increase the pool of potential participants and reduce the possibility of exclusion for those who cannot or are reluctant to meet physically.
- Explore and familiarize yourself with apps and software to help you manage your data.

Conclusion

Technology is constantly evolving. When you embark on your study, think about the demographic of the people you need to approach to help with recruitment and the participants you hope to enlist. Different groups and people of different ages will need distinct or multiple modes of communication. Take the example of emails that people often choose not to respond to if they do not know the sender ([Salmons, 2012](#)). You may need to pick up the phone before and after sending an email. Use as wide a variety of platforms as possible to advertise your study and take the time to speak to other researchers and find out what they do.

In the same vein, offer a range of possibilities for an interview and avoid assuming that people of certain

groups will automatically choose particular options. Some will prefer to meet face-to-face, while others will feel more comfortable conducting interviews using teleconferencing. I noticed in my study that deaf and hard of hearing students tended to request meetings face-to-face, while the blind, visually impaired, and those on the autistic spectrum opted for teleconferencing.

Many tools that are useful in research are now mainstream and are available at little or no cost. Take the time to explore and network with other researchers and colleagues to find out what they are using and recommend. For example, discovering Otter.ai was a chance conversation with one of the administrative staff at my place of work. Think about making your documents accessible to people with different needs by using accessibility features in Microsoft and/or Adobe.

During the course of this research project, student participants noted many instances of positive experiences and good practice, although not consistent across the universities. The issues of concern identified by students with SEND at university in Singapore were categorized into four main themes: institutional infrastructure, institutional policies and practice, professional development, and funding. Concerns were raised about physical accessibility as well as access to information through websites. Many hoped for streamlined, easily navigable processes, while others felt course designs could be improved by using multiple modes for learning. Although steady improvements were visible, most echoed the need for professional training of support staff and a broader scope for financial assistance.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. What online and offline tools can you use to help with the recruitment of participants?
2. What are the benefits and disadvantages of using synchronous and asynchronous methods for capturing participant data?
3. What methods and technologies can you use to transcribe interviews?
4. What ethical issues associated with using online methods should you anticipate and avoid?

Further Reading

Carlisle, D. (2020). *Learners with special educational needs reflecting on their first year at university: A study of the historical background, recent developments, and issues of concern for students in Singapore*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Western Australia]. 10.26182/kwsd-a320

Glass, D., Meyer, A., & Rose, D. H. (2013). Universal design for learning and the arts. *Harvard Educational Review*, 83(1), 98–119. 10.17763/haer.83.1.33102p26478p54pw

Salmons, J. (2016). *Doing qualitative research online*. SAGE. 10.4135/9781473921955

Whitehead, J., & McNiff, J. (2006). *Action research*. SAGE Publishing. 10.4135/9781849208536

Web Resources

Creating accessible Microsoft Office documents: <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/topic/create-accessible-office-documents-868ecfcd-4f00-4224-b881-a65537a7c155>

Google forms: <https://docs.google.com/forms/u/0/?tgif=d>

Otter.ai Transcription App: <https://otter.ai>

QR Code Generator: <https://www.qr-code-generator.com/>

Shorten URLs: <https://tinyurl.com/app>

Using the Acrobat X Pro Accessibility Checker: <https://www.adobe.com/content/dam/acom/en/accessibility/products/acrobat/pdfs/acrobat-x-accessibility-checker.pdf>

References

Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. L. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Duncan, J. (1997). To transcribe or not to transcribe? That is the question. *Education Research and Perspectives*, 24(1), 1–13.

Glass, D., Meyer, A., & Rose, D. (2013). Universal design for learning and the arts. *Harvard Educational Review*, 83(1), 98–119. [10.17763/haer.83.1.33102p26478p54pw](https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.83.1.33102p26478p54pw)

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1981). *Effective evaluation: Improving the usefulness of evaluation results through responsive and naturalistic approaches*. Jossey-Bass.

Milman, O. (2015January5). The price of life in Singapore, city of rules: “It’s a Faustian deal.”. *The Guardian*, .

Ministry of Education Singapore. (2017). *Education statistics digest 2017: moulding the future of our nation*. Singapore Government. https://www.moe.gov.sg/docs/default-source/document/publications/education-statistics-digest/esd_2017.pdf

Morse, J. M. (2007). Sampling in grounded theory. In **A. Bryant & K. Charmaz** (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 229–244). SAGE Publications.

OECD. (2011). Singapore: Rapid improvement followed by strong performance. In *Lessons from Pisa for the United States* (pp. 159–176). OECD Publishing.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publishing.

Republic of Singapore. (1909). *Civil law act*. <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CLA1909>

Republic of Singapore. (2014a). *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*. *Twelfth Parliament, 07 March 2014, 10*, (Sim Ann, Minister of State for Education). <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/fullreport?sittingdate=07-03-2014>

Republic of Singapore. (2014b). *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*. *Twelfth Parliament, 10 March 2014, 11*, (Sim Ann, Minister of State for Education and Communications and Information). <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/fullreport?sittingdate=10-03-2014>

Salmons, J. (2012). Designing and conducting research with online interviews. In **J. Salmons** (Ed.), *Cases in online interview research* (pp.pp. 1–30). SAGE Publishing.

The Purple Parade. (n.d.). *About*. <https://www.purpleparade.sg/about/>

United Nations. (2006December13). *United nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities*. https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/CTC/Ch_IV_15.pdf

Yap, A. (Ed.). (2019). *Perspectives on disability support at institutes of higher learning in Singapore*. Singapore Management University.