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Conducting Virtual Qualitative Interviews with International Key Informants: Insights from a Research Project

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Abstract

There is an increasing need for cross-cultural qualitative studies in an era of globalization. A focus group of five researchers, who were involved in a large international research project, identified effective strategies and challenges associated with five key domains of qualitative research with key informants: identification, recruitment, preparation, conducting the interview, and follow-up. Content analysis revealed nuanced tactics related to effective strategies and challenges associated with each domain. Examples of effective strategies include interview preparation to understand the specific expertise of the interviewee and allowing the informant to offer additional information beyond the questions asked. Challenges included technical difficulties with virtual platforms and scheduling interviews in multiple time zones. These findings provide practical guidelines for researchers conducting virtual interviews with international key informants.

Keywords

key informant interviews, adult learning, programs and policies

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There is an increasing need for cross-cultural qualitative studies in an era of globalization. A focus group of five researchers, who were involved in a large international research project, identified effective strategies and challenges associated with five key domains of qualitative research with key informants: identification, recruitment, preparation, conducting the interview, and follow-up. Content analysis revealed nuanced tactics related to effective strategies and challenges associated with each domain. Examples of effective strategies include interview preparation to understand the specific expertise of the interviewee and allowing the informant to offer additional information beyond the questions asked. Challenges included technical difficulties with virtual platforms and scheduling interviews in multiple time zones. These findings provide practical guidelines for researchers conducting virtual interviews with international key informants.

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Introduction

There is little cross-cultural and international research regarding lifelong learning and workforce education, especially programs that focus on culturally diverse populations. This gap in understanding represents an important barrier to developing culturally sensitive lifelong education policies and programs. To address this lack of understanding, the research team conducted a large-scale mixed methods research project. In addition to a systematic literature and document review, the qualitative portion of the project included a goal to interview five to seven key informants in the ten countries included in the study. Key informants were selected based on their expertise in adult education and the distinct information and perspectives they could provide (Maxwell, 1997). We identified individuals from each country who were knowledgeable about the most relevant issues raised in the literature and other documents, including financing of adult education (e.g., individual, employer, government, or some

combination), encouraging participation in adult education by adults at all skill levels, the roles of the public and private sector in the provision of adult education, and the structure and availability of programs.

The goal of this paper is to provide guidance on how to successfully complete key informant interviews with experts in their field, in an international qualitative research study. Conducting key informant interviews in multiple countries is difficult on many fronts, and researchers often face multiple challenges in all phases of the interview process. For example, low response rates to outgoing emails and complex interview scheduling in different time zones are common problems. The purpose of the current study is to provide practical guidelines by identifying and summarizing effective strategies and challenges of the qualitative interview process based on our study that included 60 international informants combined with a review of relevant literature. The research question we addressed was: what are effective strategies when conducting interviews with international key informants? While the focus of the overall research project centers around adult learning policies and practices, the stages of the key informant interview process we discuss, and report here is applicable to other qualitative research topics.

Interview Preparation

Interviewing key informants is a complex process and involves substantial planning (Hoffmann, 2007; Roulston et al., 2003). Identifying informants who are experts in their field in multiple countries is most appropriately accomplished through purposive sampling, which Teddlie and Yu (2007) define as "selecting units" (e.g., individuals, groups of individuals, institutions) based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study's questions" (p. 77). This sampling technique is appropriate when relevant information is not readily available from other sources (Maxwell, 1997), such as archival documents. More specifically, to ensure key informants are included from each country, stratified purposeful sampling, is a technique to identify subgroups of interest (Robinson, 2014). Purposive sampling followed by snowball sampling, or chain referrals (i.e., asking interviewees to suggest additional informants) is an additional recruiting mechanism (Robinson, 2014; Sadler et al., 2010; Tongco, 2007) that is appropriate for recruiting expert informants.

Interviews with expert key informants requires substantial preparation by the researchers (Harvey, 2011). Understanding the informants' background and expertise is essential to both gaining access to the expert and obtaining useful information (Mikecz, 2012). This preparation could include reviewing published reports and journal articles, as well as the organization(s) with which the interviewee is affiliated (Welch et al., 2002). Customizing the interview questions based on meticulous preparation for each informant is necessary so the discussion can focus on the expert's specific knowledge about the topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Rubin and Rubin (2012) describe this technique as "responsive interviewing," with a goal to "build a solid, deep understanding of whatever you are studying based on the perspectives and experience of your interviewees" (p. 38). Further, with responsive interviewing, an exchange of information may occur, and the interviewee is treated as a partner. This feeling of partnership can create a more personal relationship with an inherent duty of reciprocity (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Moreover, allowing the interviewee to control the discussion may lead to collecting important information that would not have been otherwise available (Anyan, 2013). Following-up after the interview with the informant to express appreciation for the information provided can yield positive benefits, such as additional reading materials and connections with other potential informants (Mikecz, 2012).

Interviewing platforms have evolved in recent years and virtual options (e.g., Skype, Zoom, Teams) are increasingly common, especially when participants are geographically

dispersed (Busher & James, 2012; Gray et al., 2020; Janghorban et al., 2014) and are a reasonable alternative to face-to-face interviews (Hanna, 2012). Unlike telephone interviews, virtual interviews allow for more personal connections (Gray et al., 2020), including observations of facial expressions and eye contact (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). Moreover, as compared to telephone interviews, participants may provide more detailed responses (Harvey, 2011). Virtual platforms can, however, create technical obstacles to interviewees unfamiliar with these technologies (Janghorban et al., 2014). Having an alternative virtual platform or shifting to a telephone interview is important as is providing the interviewee with technical information for troubleshooting prior to the interview (Gray et al., 2020). Despite potential technical obstacles with virtual interviewing, it is an effective strategy for interviews with international key informants.

In summary, interviewing expert informants requires substantial planning and preparation. Ensuring that research participants have the expertise and knowledge to address the specific research question requires extensive investigation, as does preparation for the interview itself. Availability of virtual platforms for conducting interviews with international experts enhance the quality of the interview, but the researcher needs to be prepared for technical issues. Overall, there is little practical guidance on conducting interviews with international key informants.

Methods

Sample

We used purposive sampling to recruit five researchers who were involved with the mix-methods international research of adult educational and training (AET). Only researchers involved with qualitative interviews of international key informants, hereafter KIs, were invited to participate in a virtual focus group. The participants were five researchers who worked on the recruitment and data collection phase of the project. The participants were all female between the ages of 25 and 67 and had 4 to 15 years of research experience. All participants had completed graduate-level research training, one had a doctoral degree, and two were pursuing doctoral degrees at the time of the research project. We distinguish researchers who were a part of the focus group by referring to them as "participants," "interviewers," or "focus group participants" from individuals interviewed for the qualitative portion of the mixed methods research by calling them "key informants," "KIs," "informants," "experts," or "interviewees."

Data Collection

Based on experiences interviewing 60 KIs, which took place between November 2018 and June 2020, we focused on five key areas of interest for preparing and conducting qualitative interviews, including: (1) identification, (2) recruitment, (3) preparation, (4) conducting interview, and (5) follow-up. Of the 60 KI interviews, 18 of them took place after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. in March 2020. A member of the research team not involved in the qualitative interview process facilitated a one-hour focus group in which participants were asked to explore strategies and barriers associated with the five key areas. The focus group was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim via an online service (www.Rev.com). The transcript was manually reviewed for accuracy. The study was approved by Miami University's Institutional Review Board (Protocol #02552e).

Analytic Approach

Focus group data were imported into NVivo QSR International, 2020, an analytic program that assists evaluation of unstructured text data. Three researchers independently applied 10 broad coding categories (see Table 1) to the transcript line by line in NVivo. This process was followed by paired review to reconcile discrepant coding. Unresolvable differences were brought to team meetings for a consensus resolution.

Table 1
Codes and Sub-Codes

Code	Sub-Codes	Definitions
Identification	Effective Strategy	Successful identification of KIs with relevant experience on lifelong learning and labor market policies.
	Challenge	Identification of challenges and barriers pertaining to the successful identification of KIs.
Recruitment	Effective Strategy	Successful recruitment efforts in which KI agrees to participate in the research.
	Challenge	Barriers experienced during the process of extending a formal invitation to participate.
Preparation	Effective Strategy	Successful efforts in preparing for the interview with the KIs.
	Challenge	Barriers associated with the development of an interview protocol and arranging the interview setting.
Conducting Interview	Effective Strategy	Strategies related to the successful interviewing of the KIs by the research team.
	Challenge	Unsuccessful strategies during the interview process.
Follow-up	Effective Strategy	Successful post-interview process of data organization, extraction, and resuming contact with the KIs.
	Challenge	Barriers associated with the post-interview process of data organization, extraction, and resuming contact with the KIs.
KIs = Key Informants		

The coded data were explored using content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Using NVivo, line-by-line data classified into each of the ten broad codes (Table 1) were individually retrieved, iteratively open-coded for underlying themes, and then distilled into sub-categories. To ensure methodological rigor and establish data trustworthiness, codes and emerged themes were reviewed for accuracy by the focus group participants, and further adjustments were made according to the feedback (Krefting & Krefting, 1991). The consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ; Tong et al., 2007) was utilized to report essential research processes.

Findings

Focus group participants reported several effective strategies and challenges associated with each of the five key steps: (1) identification of KIs, (2) recruitment, (3) interview preparation, (4) conducting interview, and (5) follow-up. Below we present effective strategies and challenges for each of these five areas. Quotes were selected as exemplars, portraying the nuanced statements relating to effective strategies and challenges.

Identification of Key Informants

Effective Strategies

Regarding the first step, identification, effective strategies included literature reviews, an advisory board, participation in professional organizations, chain referrals, and openness to different expertise areas.

The review of relevant literature and public records was reported as a successful strategy for identifying international KIs. Participants discussed identifying experts by targeting adult education and workforce education literature, as well as websites and other public records. These records then allowed researchers to locate the contact information of potential informants.

Maintaining an advisory board of five international content experts was identified as a critical resource for identifying KIs. This advisory board, which included representatives from Australia, Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, was recruited at the start of the research project. For instance, one focus group participant noted:

> One of our strategies…was to create an advisory group of international informants that we know are knowledgeable about adult education and workforce training. We recruited people from other countries, mostly through [professional] contacts. Once we put this group together, we asked them [advisory board] for recommendations for key informants in each of their countries, and [some] gave us quite a few names in other countries.

Semi-annual advisory board meetings were held, and members were an instrumental tool in identifying KIs. If there continued to be gaps in identified key informants, the issue would be revisited at subsequent advisory board meetings.

Focus group participants emphasized that attending professional conferences created important opportunities to identify and approach potential KIs: *"We also thought of people that we knew from some of the organizations I'm involved in, like the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education and the Council for International Adult Education."* Attending conference sessions relevant to the research topic provided opportunities for initial contacts with potential KIs.

While the primary method used to identify and recruit informants was purposive sampling (Teddlie & Yu, 2007; Tongco, 2007), focus group participants indicated that they also used snowball sampling, or "chain referral" techniques to identify additional KIs. At the end of each interview, interviewers asked KIs to identify additional potential experts in fields related to the research project. In addition, this technique was used when KIs were identified through professional conferences and when KIs declined interview requests or did not currently work in the research area of interest.

Focus group participants indicated the importance of being open to experts outside of the initially targeted areas (e.g., academia). Participants discussed how chain referrals resulted in the identification of experts in social services, non-profit organizations, and government:

> I think I was surprised by some of the people that were identified, like [organization] and then [organization]. In terms of recruiting, sometimes you'll get unexpected people identified that you wouldn't even think of and then that might cause you to also look in a different direction to recruit.

Being amenable to including additional areas of expertise allowed for a broader scope for data collection and to explore emerging topics.

Challenges

A few challenges were acknowledged in the KI identification process. Focus group participants identified unfamiliarity with online platforms as a unique challenge during the identification phase:

> I would just say kind of challenging maybe finding my way around websites like ResearchGate, which is new to me, or even just what are the right key terms that are going to find the person, or the topic that we're interested in.

The importance of research team members' familiarity with multiple online resources, such as Google Scholar, university library search platforms, and reports available through professional associations, for data searches became apparent.

An additional challenge during the identification process pertains to the potential lack of relevant expertise of the identified KIs. The identification of KIs was challenging and the process was not always fruitful. "Sometimes people would give us names and then we would have to do due diligence to find out if they really were a good key informant. Sometimes we found they were not." This process took additional time but resulted in KIs who were most appropriate for the project.

Recruitment

Effective Strategies

In terms of effective recruitment strategies, participants indicated five effective strategies including email tactics, highlighting KI expertise, referencing professional networks, using online networking sites, maintaining a master list, and revisiting invitations.

Recruitment was conducted primarily through emails. Focus group participants described the importance of emails tailored to KIs' work/research. Participants emphasized that each email invitation was customized to reflect each KIs' most recent research as well as relevant country-level policies:

> The language in that initial email helps the potential key informant feel like they would be a good fit [to participate]. [The key informant should know] that their particular area of expertise is going to be valuable to our project.

Email read receipts were also used during the recruitment process which provided some certainty that the email was received. Also, the read receipt would serve as an indicator of the KIs' potential interest to be interviewed and the email address was current:

> I think one strategy is the use of read receipt on email, so that we know whether someone has opened that email. At least that way if we are not hearing from them, we know it is not because they are not seeing our messages, but simply because maybe they are not interested [in being interviewed].

While read receipts were a useful strategy to ensure emails were received, researchers also used the "schedule send" option so the email would arrive mid-morning local time for potential informants.

Interview invitations were also extended to potential KIs with no recent involvement in the relevant research. *"Sometimes we would get responses, 'Well, I'm no longer working in that area,' then we would say, 'Well, we want to talk to you about your [past] experience.'"* Past pertinent experience provided researchers with useful information and, in some cases, with referrals to other experts.

Focus group participants also discussed the importance of explicitly referencing professional networks to recruit KIs. Specifically, when experts were referred, participants mentioned the professional who referred them. Personal connections added credibility to the project and research team. The use of professional networking sites such as LinkedIn were recognized as a tool for facilitating recruitment efforts. "I would send the person an invitation to connect on LinkedIn, so that they would see my background and interests before they got the email." Connecting on LinkedIn provided the informant with relevant information about researcher qualifications and experience and, if the invitation was accepted, provided interviewers with an email address.

Maintaining a master list of KIs was also identified as an effective strategy in recruiting and managing contacts with KIs and for scheduling interviews. The master spreadsheet was developed through routine literature searches and other identification efforts (e.g., advisory board), and used as a centralized database to manage contact information and tracking interview contact frequency.

KIs who had previously declined due to time constraints were sometimes willing to participate when invited a second time. This was particularly the case during recruitment in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, when a majority of KIs were working from home and thus had more flexibility in their schedule:

> I pulled a list of all of our key informants that had declined previously, specifically for the reason of not having enough time… Although we know that our lives might be more convoluted now, in some cases folks had a little bit more flexibility in the work and their priorities because some things are not possible to move forward with working remotely. [Principal Investigator] drafted a message to send to several of those folks who had previously declined.

This strategy resulted in interviews with several previously contacted informants and is a useful strategy, especially for projects that last many months.

Challenges

Challenges in the recruitment domain included outdated contact information and competing obligations. Participants expressed that sometimes finding up-to-date contact information for KIs was a challenge in recruitment. Often, they found themselves exploring multiple websites and professional networks to locate current contact information. Contact information was also found in journal articles, but it was sometimes outdated:

> Sometimes you might identify someone, but their contact information isn't readily available, so then you start looking, doing some searches. LinkedIn, we found some contact information there. Or in the case of [KI], the contact information we found on LinkedIn didn't get any reply, so then we went directly to that school's website… The contact information wasn't there, but other

> people's contact was, so we were able to identify what their typical email address looks like... we just tried a few different combinations until we landed on the right email address.

Multiple search methods were sometimes necessary to find correct contact information.

Competing obligations were also identified as a challenge to recruit KIs. Social circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as interviewees adjusting to remote work options or overseeing remote learning for their children, and differences in regional holidays presented challenges for recruitment. Participants described examples of difficulties in scheduling interviews:

> There was one woman in Australia that we were all set to interview, and she was ill, so it's kind of scary right now when people cancel because they're sick, depending on what country they are in. We reached out to her again to schedule an interview and have not heard anything back.

> I don't know if it was just the timing, the holidays and everything, but we had some trouble getting people [to accept an invitation] …we struggled with recruitment. I do not know if was because of that or if it was just because of the timing, where people just could not fit it into their schedule.

Perseverance in reaching out to KIs was necessary, but it was also important to be respectful of an individual's circumstances.

Preparation

Effective Strategies

Regarding effective preparation strategies, focus group participants indicated three areas of importance including familiarizing research team with KIs' work when preparing for the interview, scheduling congruences, and the flexibility in interviewing platforms (e.g., Skype, Zoom).

Focus group participants reported that familiarizing themselves with the KIs' research and expertise was a critical step in preparing for interviews and in creating the interview guide. Specifically, they described using websites and public records to become familiar with KIs' areas of expertise. In addition, the familiarization process involved developing a synopsis of the KIs' work to refer to during the interview. This synopsis was shared among researchers prior to each interview. A participant offered: "Every time we were getting prepared to do the interview, [researcher] would send everybody the agenda, the interview guide, and there will always be some information about the person and their work." Preparation for the interview provided for greater engagement with the informant and gaining important information that might not have been possible otherwise.

Focus group participants expressed the importance of tailoring the semi-structured interview to the KIs' expertise and background. Public records such as personal websites and publications were used to inform the interview guide development process:

> But before we went into the interview, we all read those articles and prepared at least two or three questions individually as well that could be used based on the literature [we] found…We all looked at each article that was used to inform the interview guide as well.

While this preparation took a great deal of time, it was important to the success of the interview. KIs were more responsive when it became clear the researchers prepared for the interview.

Careful consideration of time zones and differences in seasonal national holidays were reported as critical for the successful preparation and scheduling of interviews. Researchers noted that having a resource such as websites that can easily compare time zones was essential as time-zones almost always varied between interviewers and interviewee. In addition, daylight savings times do not begin and end on the same dates throughout the world which further complicated scheduling.

Focus group participants expressed that having access to several web-based interviewing platforms was an effective strategy when arranging interviews with KIs. Participants indicated that it was necessary to have multiple platforms available to cater to the KIs' preferred option

> We had a recent person that we interviewed, [who] wanted to do Zoom and we just adapted to that. I got a Zoom account. We paid for a Zoom account, because the telephone was not an option, and he did not want to do Skype. A lot of people have trouble with Skype.

Challenge

Structural differences in national policies were identified as a challenge. Preparing for interviews required an intensive review of differences in each country's educational and labor policies, as these differences require a unique set of interview questions:

> For certain countries, education is free. That is not necessarily that situation in all countries so we had to go in and craft the interview guide to be specific to their experience because if we did not, it [the interview] would not go anywhere.

Understanding policy differences was relevant to this research and was an important part of our project.

Conducting the Interview

Effective Strategies

Seven effective strategies were identified among participants when discussing conducting the interview with KIs. Effective strategies included introducing mutual research, flexibility in interview context and format, allowing KI to lead, sharing personal experiences, adopting video conferencing, length of the interview, and information (e.g., documents, weblinks) exchange.

Focus group participants noted that, when conducting interviews, they offered to summarize the project goals after introducing the research team. According to the participants, at the beginning of each interview, KIs were asked if they would like a review of the project's goals. Experts typically accepted the offer:

> [The principal investigator] begins the interview and introduces everybody, asking the key informant if they had a chance to review the abstract sent in the invitations, or if the key informant would like for [the principal investigator] to give a brief review of the project. Most of our key informants do ask for that. They find that helpful.

Providing a description of the project allowed the KI to relate the research to their own work and resulted in a more productive discussion. After obtaining informed consent from the KI, the interview would start with a discussion of the KIs current role and projects.

Flexibility in the interview content and format was reported as an effective strategy. Focus group participants reported several effective strategies regarding flexibility, including interview content and format varying across experts. Participants reported that using a semi-structured interview guide allowed them flexibility in obtaining richer data:

> We did not always stick to the interview guide. We sort of let the person we were talking with, if he or she brought up a topic that really was not in the guide, we would really go with that and delve deeper into that.

While researchers were well prepared for the interview, informants' recent work was sometimes not available in web searches and could be important information. Additional questions might emerge after learning about their current projects.

Participants also discussed a shift in power at the end of the interview by providing experts an opportunity to discuss topics that may have been overlooked during the interview. The final interview questions were, "Is there anything we did not ask that we should have?" and "Do you have any questions for us?" According to participants, this shift in power often led to a more robust discussion. KIs also used this as an opportunity to discuss commonalities in their research and that of the research team.

While most interviews were conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, focus group participants reported changes during the pandemic related to work arrangements (i.e., working remotely). By being flexible in the topics of discussion, participants reported the benefits of a shared experience regarding social distancing and working from home:

> Now what has been interesting when we are talking with folks, is being able to ask them about their adjustment to working remotely or to how their country is dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. That has brought, I think, a sense of just everybody is in this together or that kind of thing has been helpful.

COVID-19 is a global issue and informants were quite interested in impacts and work adjustments in other countries, including in the U.S.

The use of video conferencing was reported as a key strategy to successfully conducting interviews. As compared to a telephone interview, video conferencing was preferred by researchers as well as KIs, as this avenue provided an environment more like a face-to-face, semi-structured interview. The use of video conferencing platforms required some flexibility because as was discussed earlier, some KIs were restricted in their use of certain platforms.

Focus group participants reported concerns about the length of interviews and the importance of being mindful of KIs' time. "Interviews typically lasted between 45 minutes to an hour, maybe an hour and 10 minutes sometimes, but we were intentional about not taking up too much of their time." KIs typically had teaching or administrative responsibilities, and it was necessary to be respectful of their time. If an interview ended with unanswered questions, KIs typically offered to respond via email.

Participants discussed flexibility in sharing resources as another effective strategy. Participants expressed that the majority of KIs were willing to share resources they referenced throughout the interview, including recent publications, policy briefs, and other public resources. "In the more recent interviews, we have been getting more things like that, people willing to share things with us, 'Well, have you seen thus and so report? There is a link for this website that might be useful.'" This resource exchange added valuable resources to the project.

Challenges

Four challenges in the interview process were described among participants. Challenges described included the setting of the interview, technical difficulties, language differences, and unrelated expertise of the KIs. The physical setting in which the interview takes place may sometimes present challenges. Video conference calls in larger rooms with poor sound quality may interfere with the quality of the interview. "It might be good to suggest to the people the type of room that we find to be the most conducive to conducting the interview." Providing the KI with suggestions about the ideal physical setting, prior to the interview, might solve this issue. The increased use of virtual platforms has resulted in more availability of information on best practices.

Focus group participants expressed concerns about potential technical difficulties during interviews. *"We had some terrible sound transmission issues. Maybe it was the room they were in. One time a woman was using a headset, and that became a problem in the transcription."* Both researchers and KIs were rather new to virtual platforms and troubleshooting technical issues. Testing multiple virtual platforms prior to the interview to identify potential issues might allow for better troubleshooting. Troubleshooting was sometimes necessary during the interview if there were issues with the audio or video.

Accents and language differences were reported as a challenge during some of the interviews. In some cases, researchers had to rephrase questions multiple times to facilitate the KIs' understanding. "I would say there were times when we had to rephrase the question in a different way or use different words because they weren't familiar with specific terminologies." Researchers chose not to use translators, and, in some cases, the interview might have been more productive if one had been used. KIs in Norway and Sweden generally were quite fluent in English, but that was not always the case for KIs from Italy.

Participants stated that, in some cases, the discussion became limited as the KIs' experience was unrelated to the research topics of interest. "There were instances where either their work wasn't necessarily aligned [with the research]." In those cases, researchers attempted to find commonalities but if that was not possible, the interview ended early.

Follow-Up

Effective Strategies

Regarding the fifth domain, follow-up, effective strategies included revisiting KI identification, resource exchange, peer debriefing, and data organization. Following interviews, researchers immediately revisited the identification phase and updated the master list to reflect recommendations made by the KI:

> If they [experts] have referred us or given us names of other individuals, that is when we start the process of going back to the identification process so that we can see is this name that they gave us really going to be a good fit for our work.

These referrals became an important source for additional KIs.

Focus group participants expressed that following-up with KIs after the interview was a critical strategy. Following the interview, KIs were thanked for their participation, and there was a mutual exchange of resources. An email from the research team following the interview that included resources sometimes resulted in the KI sending the research team reports or a list of websites.

Peer debriefing was also recognized as an effective post-interview strategy. Peer debriefing was primarily described as a discussion that occurred either immediately following interviews with KIs or during the weekly research team meeting:

> We generally debriefed twice. We would do it immediately after an interview and it would just be general thoughts on how the interview went. We would recognize what worked and did not work. Then we would discuss the interview again in our weekly meeting.

Multiple debriefings were especially important when KIs provided us with additional resources and when additional follow-up became necessary.

Focus group participants emphasized the importance of having a process to manage and organize resources, including emails, interview transcripts, and other documents. A spreadsheet organized by country and KI ensured adequate record-keeping and that the resources were readily accessible to the research team. It was also important to track all contacts with KIs. In addition, documents were stored in shared folders organized by country.

Challenges

Challenges regarding follow-up included language in the transcription. Focus group participants reported occasional difficulties deciphering transcribed interviews. Language differences prompted the participant to conduct several reads of the transcripts as terms and phases varied among KIs whose primary language was not English:

> I had to read and reread it several times to make sense out of it, because it was not the English used in the United States…but definitely when you're going through the transcripts it creates extra difficultly in understanding what actually they are saying and how it reflects the question they were trying to answer.

Returning to resources used for interview preparation was helpful in bringing context to challenging transcripts. In addition, listening to portions of the recorded interview clarified the context of a KI comment.

Discussion and Conclusion

There is little research regarding differences in lifelong learning policies across multiple countries. This gap represents an important barrier to developing effective lifelong learning practices and, in turn, workforce education policies and programs to improve adults' employment prospects in a rapidly changing labor market. The purpose was to summarize effective strategies and challenges when preparing and conducting virtual interviews with international KIs. Lessons learned from our large-scale international research project are relevant to topics beyond lifelong learning.

Regarding effective identification of potential KIs, literature reviews, professional conferences, purposeful sampling, and chain referrals were found be effective. The findings are in line with previous literature on qualitative best practices suggesting that researchers use purposive sampling techniques (e.g., article review, professional networks) followed by snowball techniques (chain referrals in this case) to recruit hard-to-reach populations (Sadler et al., 2010; Tongco, 2007).

Researchers' preparedness (e.g., knowledge about the interviewees' work, areas of expertise, country specific information) played a key role in the interviews. Pre-interview

phases were indispensable opportunities to learn about the KIs' research and background. Pre-interview preparation efforts including reviews of public records, scholarly database searches for published articles, email tactics (e.g., customizing an email to each KI), and the individual crafting of interview questions resulted in successful interviews and, in turn, rich data collection. The findings of the preparedness are consistent with the existing studies (Mikecz, 2012; Welch et al., 2002). Furthermore, flexibility with the online interview platforms and questions were important. Exchanging resources increases the interview narrative as well as promotes interactions (i.e., power shift) between the interviewer and interviewee (Kazmer & Xie, 2008). In line with previous literature (Anyan, 2013; Hoffmann, 2007), giving experts an opportunity to ask questions and freely talk were useful strategies to capture richer data in the international contexts and virtual settings as well. The power shift was effective to have active interactions with KIs and have them play more of a collaborative role rather than just as a KI.

In terms of barriers, consistent with previous research, external factors including language barriers (Drew, 2014; Welch et al., 2002), and technical issues with online platforms (Busher & James, 2012; Janghorban et al., 2014) were found to be challenging. Drew (2014) and Tsang (1998) argue that interviewing in a language foreign to the KI can have a negative impact on the interview whereas Welch et al. (2002) and Williamson et al. (2011) suggest that experts may be reluctant to answer some questions and the interpretation might not be accurate. A discussion with the KI prior to the interview regarding their comfort with responding to questions in a foreign language should be considered. Anticipating potential technical issues in advance by creating troubleshooting guides for multiple virtual platforms can minimize issues.

This study is not without limitations. First, due to the specific focuses (e.g., lifelong learning, workforce education) of this study, we advise caution in generalizing these results. There is no unidimensional approach to identifying, recruiting, and conducting interviews with international key informants in virtual settings. That is, these five domains are not always linear, and researchers may find themselves progressing through them in different order or revisiting. Second, the focus group was conducted with KIs from 11 countries. The insights that emerged from the focus group data are most likely not exhaustive from sociocultural perspectives. Future research should expand the scope of international context beyond 11 countries, cross-examine this study's findings from KIs' perceptions to refine the guidelines for cross-national qualitative interviews, and evaluate strategies to overcome barriers to participating in international virtual interviews.

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