

## **Group Assessment Guidelines**

### **Preamble**

These Guidelines are pursuant to the revised Draft Unit Assessment policy (Appendix 5) and procedures (section B5, 10.03.09 v16) [*update reference when the procedures have been approved by the University Education Committee and reported to Academic Board*].

### **Principles**

The following guidelines are designed to

- provide a useful resource for the development of skills for teaching and assessing group work
- highlight good practice in group assessment.

### ***Purpose of Group Assessment***

Before setting group work, the chief examiner in conjunction with the unit coordinator needs to plan the objectives for the task in relation to the overall assessment program for the unit.

Group work is most valuable where it is designed to achieve learning objectives regarding the development of collaborative skills. The assessment focus should be on the *process* of working in groups:

- collaboration and cooperation
- analysing the task and assigning responsibility for its components
- leadership, teamwork, delegation and coordination
- preparation and presentation of a report
- awareness of issues that arose and techniques for managing difficulties.

Group work should not be viewed as a way of reducing the marking load. In fact, group work requires active involvement by the teaching team, particularly in terms of monitoring problems and intervening should a group become dysfunctional.

### ***Study Groups***

Cooperative learning can also be encouraged through the use of study groups. Such groups would typically:

- have up to six members
- work collaboratively on assignment tasks in the formative stage and to a point defined by the teaching team (e.g. dot point outlines of the form and content of the assignment). Final assignments would be drafted and finalised by each member individually
- keep a journal to record attendance, actions, contributions and notes about the process

Study groups are a way of combining the objectives of teamwork and individual assessment.

Safeguards against plagiarism can be readily built in by ensuring that the group concludes before the final write-up commences, and by requiring a journal to be submitted.

### ***Content learning***

Assessment tasks set for groups should not focus on detailed content learning – individual learning outcomes in relation to content are likely to vary considerably across the group and are difficult to assess accurately through group assessment.

### ***Weight of group assessment within a unit***

Group assessment tasks need to suit the unit's learning objectives and teaching mode.

The development of collaborative skills can be seen as a cumulative process. Group work in first and second year units therefore needs to facilitate the acquisition and practice of skills for working in groups.

*First year units* - staff are encouraged to think about setting minor team-based tasks in tutorials, to empower students for undertaking formal group assessment in subsequent levels of study.

*Second year units* – the use of team tasks in tutorials should be continued. Minor pieces of formal group work can be introduced but they should not account for a significant proportion of the unit assessment. Planning needs to take prerequisites into account – it should not be assumed that all students will have the same degree of preparation for group work assessment at this level.

*Third year and graduate units* - more sophisticated group work assessment can be included in higher level units. Depending on the subject, a reasonably high proportion of assessment might be academically appropriate.

However, as a general rule, group work should not exceed 35% of the total assessment prescribed for a unit.

### ***Managing group work***

Complaints and general student dissatisfaction with group work are common. Usually, dissatisfaction is a symptom of inadequate planning or oversight. It is important that group tasks are carefully planned and managed, and that students are given clear information about all aspects of the task.

The chief examiner needs to ensure that:

- the objectives are clearly stated (including how they link into the unit and course graduate attributes/assurance of learning)
- students know how the groups will be formed
- the teaching team is trained appropriately to manage and assess the task, and to foster the development of the required skills
- information is captured about each member's contribution (examples of ways in which this can be done are available from the Education Office) so that individual performance can be evaluated
- problems are triggered at an early stage so that intervention can occur in time to keep the task on track.

### ***Forming groups***

There are three main ways that groups can be formed:

*Random selection:* Students grouped according to a lecturer/tutor randomly determined criterion e.g. numbering, background, characteristics, names.

*Self selection:* Students select their own group.

*Lecturer selection:* Lecturers/tutors select the groups based on their knowledge of the students and their abilities. The groups may also be determined by asking students to fill in questionnaires about preferred working style, linguistic proficiency, study habits etc. Student may be assigned 'job' titles.

The advantages and disadvantages of each method are outlined in the table below:

Method of selection	Advantages	Disadvantages
Randomly selected by lecturer/tutor	<p>Unbiased selection method</p> <p>Groups are responsible for the shaping of the process (as opposed to an 'engineered' situation where tasks may be allocated by the lecturer/tutor)</p> <p>Limited effort required on the part of the lecturer/tutor to assign groups</p>	<p>Challenges of the group work process can be magnified when members are also dealing with cultural and linguistic issues.</p> <p>Chance plays a large part in the success or failure of the group.</p> <p>Elements of skills, ability and diversity can be unbalanced across the cohort and within individual groups. The chance of achieving an even spread of abilities is highly unlikely and therefore could result in a bad group experience.</p> <p>EAL<sup>1</sup> students may be relegated to a lower status within a group based on others' perceptions of their competence due to language or ethnicity.</p> <p>In heterogeneous groups EAL students may be prevented from contributing in substantive ways. This may then result in these students becoming unwilling freeloaders.</p> <p>Can unfairly disadvantage students due to the possibility of uneven spread of skills both within and across groups.</p> <p>Could take longer for the group to cohere.</p>
Self selected	<p>Initial higher cohesion possibly resulting in greater productivity</p> <p>Greater ownership of group problems/conflict</p> <p>Team related norms may have been established from prior classes where students have worked together</p> <p>Students often prefer to self select over any other group formation method</p>	<p>Tendency toward cultural and linguistic homogeneity.</p> <p>May possess an inadequate skill set across the group.</p> <p>Problem of 'leftover' students that then have to be placed in self selected groups. Embarrassment of rejection.</p> <p>Students may not know each other well enough to make an appropriate selection. EAL students may be reluctant to approach L1<sup>2</sup> students to join a group.</p> <p>L1 students uncertain how to deal with EAL students, for example should they modify their language and if so, to what extent? Can result in reluctance to engage with EAL students. EAL students may be relegated to a lower status within the group.</p>

<sup>1</sup> English as an Additional Language

<sup>2</sup> First language speakers (in this context, English)

<p>Lecturer/tutor selected ('engineered')</p>	<p>Task or job allocation or roles can make it less likely for specific group members to 'hide'. This highly structured approach may also help to alleviate the problem of having different skill levels within the group.</p> <p>If roles are clearly defined, it can give the student some feeling of autonomy in relation to their specific role. Students are less likely to be excluded from the process.</p>	<p>Challenges of the group work process can be magnified when members are also dealing with cultural and linguistic issues.</p> <p>Selection criteria can vary considerably from teacher to teacher. Lack of consistency.</p> <p>L1s may resent being mixed with EALs.</p> <p>In heterogeneous groups, EAL students may be prevented from making substantive contributions to the group. This may then result in these students becoming unwilling freeloaders.</p> <p>Students may be reluctant to take ownership of the group if the group structure is imposed upon them. This may also cause them to be less engaged in the learning process.</p> <p>Designing and collating questionnaires in order to assign groups is time consuming and there is little evidence as to whether this results in a better group structure.</p> <p>Period of time for culturally and linguistically diverse groups to cohere may take longer than for a homogenous group.</p> <p>This can cause problems when groups are placed under tight time constraints.</p>
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### *Dysfunctional groups*

If a problem arises that seems insurmountable, the lecturer should have a back-up plan, such as splitting the group or specifying additional individual assessment. However, if the purpose of the group work is to develop collaborative skills, a student who is unable to perform well in the group is not displaying these skills – assigning a fail for the task is a valid option.

### **Methods for assessing group work**

When designing the task, the assessment methodology needs to be defined. Some of the assessment methods that can be used, either alone or in combination, include:

- *Peer assessment* – the task is assessed on the basis of evaluations submitted by each student. This method is particularly useful when the learning outcomes are related to the experience of working in a team.
- *Summative assessment* – on the basis of a seminar presentation and/or written report. This may be more appropriate for higher level units.
- *Formative assessment* – assessment by the teaching team based on observation of the groups at different stages of the task.

### **Training and Resources**

Training for staff to plan, manage and assess group work is essential. Chief examiners should ensure that staff have the appropriate training and support to ensure that group work is used to enhance student learning.

Useful resources to help staff are available from the **Education Office**.