



UNIVERSITY OF  
LIVERPOOL

# **CODE OF PRACTICE ON ASSESSMENT**

## **APPENDIX G**

### **Policy on Assessment of Group Work for Taught Provision**

#### **GUIDELINES FOR STAFF**

**2023-24**

Applicable to all cohorts

In the Code of Practice on Assessment and all Appendices the term “student” includes apprentices on degree apprenticeship programmes

## **Annexe 1**

### **Guidelines on Assessment of Group Work for Taught Provision**

#### **Introduction**

1. These guidelines are not intended to be prescriptive, rather to provide guidance to what is currently regarded as good practice across the sector in the implementation of group work. Disciplines and programmes will vary in their requirements and many will have established good practice through long experience: this guidance is therefore intended to supplement, not to supplant, those practices.
2. Supporting materials and additional information are available for staff from the Centre for Innovation in Education resource database with the search term 'group' <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/centre-for-innovation-in-education/resources/all-resources/> and additional information for students is also available at <https://student.liverpool.ac.uk/advice-and-guidance/knowhow/group-work-and-presentations/>.

#### **Rationale for working in groups**

3. Staff should understand the range of reasons why it is beneficial for students to work in groups and have a clear rationale for asking students to engage in it, which they communicate to students. Some disabled students can experience significant challenges within a group environment so these benefits of participating need to be clearly highlighted and communicated in advance. Examples of benefits of engaging students in group work include:
  - a. Students can compare ideas and are helped to recognise and value different perspectives;
  - b. Students can test their own understanding through explaining to each other: often misunderstandings and confusions are clarified through peer discussion;
  - c. Students' experience is pooled and valued;
  - d. A tutor<sup>1</sup> can gain information about individual students' understanding and behaviour in a group setting;
  - e. Groups often stimulate creativity in problem-solving;
  - f. Groups can be given more complex, 'real-world' tasks to tackle than individuals;
  - g. Students have opportunities to develop listening, communication, teamwork, collaboration and leadership skills;
  - h. Employers increasingly demand successful group work experience, including the ability to resolve the challenges that group working can present, as these collaborative skills are essential in almost all further study and employment contexts;

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<sup>1</sup> Note re terminology: the term 'module tutor' is used in this policy, but it is recognised that this role may be known as 'module coordinator' or 'module tutor' at local level within the University of Liverpool.

- i. Group work also aligns with the Liverpool Curriculum Framework, specifically with the hallmarks of Active Learning and Authentic Assessment, and with the graduate attributes of Confidence (gaining experience in being part of a team and being able to articulate one's strengths and weaknesses in working in teams), Digital Fluency (team work can take place with the support of various digital tools for collaboration) and Global Citizenship (multicultural group work can develop intercultural awareness and ready graduates for working in global teams);
  - j. Students can learn a lot about themselves, particularly how well they work with others (and how that can be further enhanced), what roles they might default to in group situations (and how they can become more flexible), and their own approaches, ideologies and personal habits when working in a group context (and how to interact better with those with different approaches).
4. Students should be informed of this rationale both within the programme documentation and at the start of their group work experience (as per group work policy, see Appendix G).

### What is group work?

5. Group work is when two or more individuals work together to a common agenda. It enables co-operative learning through which new knowledge is created and fosters the development of generic skills such as communication, negotiation, critical thinking and planning.
6. The particular form of group work adopted should follow from the rationale for its use, which will also dictate the appropriate size for a group. For example, when the rationale focuses on interactivity and exchange of perspectives, this can take place with as few as two students, but becomes more difficult in groups larger than seven or eight. Experience indicates that for students to have the opportunity for an effective group work experience, the ideal group size is in the region of four to six, although this can depend on the task and other factors such as logistical issues:
  - a. In most cases, **four** is recommended as a minimum number of group members for a substantive group work project that is expected to last a number of weeks in duration;
  - b. With students who have considerable experience of working in groups and expect to have to do so in their future careers, it may well be possible to create larger groups of around **twelve** students which can still function effectively;
  - c. However, in programmes with very large cohorts where a 'tutorial' group may be as large as thirty or more, it is not possible to reap the benefits of group work as defined above without further sub-division of the group. In these cases, tutors would be well advised to devise learning activities that entail smaller groups working concurrently, which they can circulate between but which do not require their constant presence.
7. Tutor-present group work includes both those learning activities where the tutor leads or monitors a single group activity (e.g. student-led seminars) and the type of situation described above which is a hybrid between this and independent group work (referred to below as Student Study Teams). Staff should note that students may be confused by traditional academic terms such as seminar and tutorial, which take on different meanings in different disciplinary and programme contexts, and should always explain to students what is expected of them in a particular learning setting.
8. Tutor-absent group work, which may also be referred to as Student Study Teams, can include on-campus timetabled group work, situations where students are expected to arrange their own meetings (which could be in any location, but to remain inclusive, preferably in locations that do not require students to spend money e.g. on food/drinks), and group work which takes place in part or wholly online.

### **Integrating group work within degree programmes**

9. Ideally students' experience of group work should be progressive throughout their degree programme, enabling the development of their group working skills. The feasibility of this should be taken into consideration when designing programmes (recognising that maximising flexibility and choice for students may work against this). Students who arrive to the programmes later may need additional support to develop group working skills.
10. At the start of a degree programme, there may be group-based ice-breakers/exercises as well as group work opportunities in modules.
11. Students benefit from being introduced to a focus on group process i.e. understanding the nature of group work, the contributions that individuals can make to a group/team through understanding each individual's strengths, and also therefore how to recognise when perhaps the group is not functioning as well as it should. It is important for students to realise that effective group work also depends on group members feeling comfortable and included in a group. Typically, students undertaking more substantial group-based activities would be expected to meet learning outcomes and assessment tasks associated with both the 'task' and the group work 'process'.
12. As students undertake more substantial group-based activities leading to assessment, they will typically be asked to engage in some form of peer evaluation or moderation where they 'rate' the contribution of their fellow group members to the process or their performance, with their rating potentially impacting on the mark that each individual student receives (see paragraphs 30-38 below).
13. When tutors are considering how best to brief students about group process, and particularly when group-based activities are more substantial and teams may be larger, it might also be helpful to introduce models of teamwork. Teamwork models look at the different skills and characteristics that help to form effective teams and techniques for helping students to recognise the skills and attributes that they can bring to a team. You should contact the Centre for Innovation in Education ([cie@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:cie@liverpool.ac.uk)) for further details.
14. It is recognised that disciplines and programmes will vary in the extent to which learning to work successfully in a group plays a key role as a programme learning outcome. This variation will influence programme designers making decisions about the compulsory nature of certain modules, whether learning outcomes focussed on group process are appropriate and what the resit opportunities should be. Under certain circumstances it may be appropriate to require a student to retake a failed module based on group work, in order to repeat the group work experience. In other cases, setting an individual task which addresses the same learning outcomes will be the most appropriate type of resit opportunity, or where it is required as a reasonable adjustment, an alternative individual task could be identified for students unable to complete a group work assignment, e.g. some disabled students.

### **Preparing the environment for successful group work**

15. How the learning environment is set up, regardless of whether it is physical or virtual, can play a significant part in facilitating a successful group. Issues to be considered when setting up a physical learning environment where students attend in-person (and is possible within the space) include:
  - a. Temperature and noise – is the room comfortable to sit in? Can everyone be heard? Can chairs and tables be arranged easily so that all group members can see one another? This may be particularly important where a group member has a declared, or undeclared disability e.g. a hearing impairment, physical disability or mental health issue that could impact on their ability to fully participate in the group;
  - b. Think about where the tutor sits and its potential effect – if a tutor sits with the students as part of the group, or near the group, this will usually result in the students 'looking to

the tutor' for guidance/leadership on the task being undertaken. If the tutor is part of the group, as in a small seminar, then they should sit in the circle as part of the group. If the tutor wants the groups to 'organise themselves', they will probably need to stay a distance from the groups whilst the groups get started, and then perhaps approach the group occasionally to 'listen in';

- c. Think about location of flipchart, screen, other visual aids or AV equipment. Try not to break up the formation of the group by the way the equipment is positioned (e.g. A flip chart and stand can be included as part of the circle rather than blocking a student's view or display monitors should be visible by all group members);
- d. Laboratories or spaces with fixed seating: conducting group work in such a setting can be more problematic depending on the layout of benches/equipment etc. Where possible, try to organise the students into a 'circular group' around a bench (as in the guidelines above);
- e. Meeting places for the groups may need to be accessible for students with mobility difficulties.
- f. Some students may be supported by a Study Assistant (SA) e.g. a facilitator, note-taker, or personal assistant. The SA is present to support the student and not to participate in the group work.

16. When setting up an online learning environment, the following guidelines may be helpful:

- a. Ensure students have opportunities to test their skills in the use of online tools to support group work before they start, including signposting to useful resources;
- b. Ensure that students have access to the required devices and platforms; not all students have equal access to technology. There are a range of University supported platforms that facilitate online collaboration and group work. In some cases, students may elect to use non-institutional tools in preference to University supported tools. In either scenario, ensure that students are aware of how the chosen tools are inclusive of all members of the group and that each member of the group is willing and confident in the alternative choices;
- c. Students should be supported to develop, test and refine protocols, expectations and agreements for using online tools to support their group work.
- d. Consider the accessibility of the virtual learning environment/online tools. For example, live captioning may be useful for students with hearing impairments, students with visual impairments may need additional cues to know who wishes to speak next, many students find it difficult to use both the online chat and to follow the spoken content of a meeting.
- e. Ensure that the timing of group work sessions is inclusive of the different contexts of students e.g. those in different time zones, students with caring responsibilities or with limited access to quiet study spaces.

## **Supporting the group process**

### **Setting up groups**

17. Setting up can be done by allowing students to select their own groups, or by the tutor allocating students to groups. Research suggests that, on balance, students prefer groups to be allocated by a tutor because if they set up their own groups with friends, and the group becomes dysfunctional for any reason, there can be greater difficulties trying to resolve this situation. Tutor allocated groups can also be more sensitive to issues of diversity, equality and inclusion. It is useful for staff members to explain the rationale for their allocation of groups.

### Initial briefing and setting ground rules – group contract

18. It is important that students understand why they are being asked to work in a group for a specified task or tasks. Hence it is good practice to explain the benefits of this method of learning and why it is being used in this context. It can also be helpful to make explicit the recognition that not everyone enjoys working with others. These and other issues are covered in a student-focused manner in the student intranet at <https://student.liverpool.ac.uk/advice-and-guidance/knowhow/group-work-and-presentations/> . It would be helpful to suggest that students access these materials before starting their group work.
19. In order to support inclusive group work, it is recommended that students are given 15-30 minutes of class time to negotiate a group work contract with their group as they start out. A template group work contract is available from CIE at <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/centre-for-innovation-in-education/tools-and-templates/group-work-contract.docx>. This supports inclusivity, and covers issues such as: preferred times and platforms, ways to communicate, group roles, decision making practices, individual responsibilities, agreed behaviour, and respecting everyone's views etc. This can be really useful especially as not all students will have worked in a group environment before. The group contract should also cover what will happen when a student is not keeping to contract, who will determine this, and the suitable actions as a result of a breach.
20. With respect to paying attention to the task and attention to the process, students can very often fall into the (understandable) trap of focusing solely on the task, but care needs to be given to both task and process otherwise a group may not function as effectively as it could. One way to encourage students to look at both elements is to explicitly plan in review time asking students to consider issues/questions that relate to task and process.

### Monitoring the group's progress and conflict resolution

21. It is important that students have a process for monitoring their progress, but also that they know how to recognise the signs of a group that is not functioning well and what to do about this. Strategies might include:
  - a. Explicit opportunities to discuss how all group members are feeling about the 'project' in terms of achievement of task and the group work process, at meetings of the group;
  - b. Use of supporting materials such as the group work contract template (<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/centre-for-innovation-in-education/tools-and-templates/group-work-contract.docx>).
22. A very effective way of monitoring progress, which records valuable information both for the group and the tutor, is to require the group to keep a log/record of its meetings and decisions, preferably online so as to be easily accessible. This task is sometimes labelled as keeping a group log, other times as keeping minutes. Groups should be given guidance about what to include in the log/record in order for it to be useful. The log/record may form part of the assessment requirement for the group task.
23. Students should be encouraged to resolve conflicts within their group in line with their group contract.
24. Clear guidance should be provided for students on the escalation options where a student/s is experiencing difficulties with their group that cannot be resolved within the group, and what they can expect to happen as a result, especially for assessed group work that will contribute to module marks.

### Creating inclusive group work practices

25. Students should be made aware that if they feel the group is not functioning well for whatever reason, one or more members of that group should inform the module tutor at the earliest opportunity. There can be many reasons for groups becoming dysfunctional.
26. Sometimes the following behaviours can be encountered in a student group: a student who does not talk, a student who has not prepared, a student who is frequently late, a student who is frequently absent, a hostile student, a student who talks a lot or certain members may feel marginalised (e.g. for reasons relating to gender, race, disability or other characteristics). There could be a number of reasons behind such behaviour and it is important that we encourage students to take an inclusive view of personal difference and aim to remain positive about working with others. It may be helpful for the group to revisit the group work contract and see if any points can be amended, to improve the way the group is functioning. The following strategies may also be useful:
- a. Nurture a constructive and supportive environment for learning in groups by drawing on Alexander's (2018)<sup>2</sup> five principles for dialogic interaction:
    - i. Collective: the classroom is a site of joint learning and enquiry;
    - ii. Reciprocal: participants listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints;
    - iii. Supportive: participants feel able to express ideas freely, without risk of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers, and they help each other to reach common understandings;
    - iv. Cumulative: participants build on their own and each other's contributions and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and understanding;
    - v. Purposeful: classroom talk, though open and dialogic, is structured with specific learning goals in view.
  - b. Start new or quiet groups with paired discussion (Think-Pair-Share – a technique where you ask students to think individually through an issue/problem ('Think'), then ask them to discuss it with one other person ('Pair'), then link two pairs up to discuss their collective ideas with another pair ('Share');
  - c. Handle dominant students with respect. Try an intervention technique by explicitly acknowledging the contribution that the individual has made and then make a point of asking others in the group for their opinions etc. as appropriate;
  - d. See students individually outside class to explore issues;
  - e. Encourage the group to set its own 'ground rules';
  - f. Model punctuality;
  - g. Consider allowing time in class for preparation/supplying all necessary materials.
27. Additional aspects to consider:
- a. Students not being able to hear, see, or pick up on verbal or visual cues making it harder for them to participate;

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander R (2018) *Developing dialogic teaching: Genesis, process, trial. Research Papers in Education* 33(5): 561-598.

**CODE OF PRACTICE ON ASSESSMENT – APPENDIX G ANNEXE 1**  
**Policy on Assessment of Group work for Taught Provision – Staff Guidelines**  
**2023-24 and All Cohorts**

- b. Students who have difficulties due to fatigue (e.g. mental health difficulties or Myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME/CFS), or for any other reasons (e.g. caring responsibilities) may not be able to meet with the group as often as their peers;
  - c. Some students may find it difficult to actively participate in group sessions (e.g. students with: speech and language difficulties, anxiety, mental health difficulties, autistic students etc.);
  - d. Students who may have limited study time available and/or difficulty with meeting deadlines set by their group;
  - e. Students who may have financial limitations to meet at non-timetabled venues where they would need to purchase food or drinks to be able to attend group meetings;
  - f. Students who commute to campus and as a result may have limited availability to meet with peers face to face.
28. Students who have declared any disability to the University will have had this recorded in a Student Support Information Sheet (SSIS), which will be flagged on the module class list in Banner, or check with the Kaplan Disability Team for Liverpool Online students. Some students, even with inclusive design, may still require individual adjustments. Tutors would need to discuss students' individual requirements with them directly prior to setting up the groups. Tutors will have access to this information but are not allowed to share any such information with fellow students in a module without the express permission of the student in question. As students may not declare a disability, or want other students to be aware of their disability, it is good practice for all tutors to consider the above guidelines as appropriate when planning the learning, teaching and assessment.
29. Whether students have declared a disability or not (not every student may declare their disability), staff are recommended to follow inclusive practices below as appropriate:
- a. Seek guidance from your DDC about inclusive group work. You may take this as an opportunity to discuss inclusive practices with your entire class, so that everyone learns how best to support each other. It is important you do not name (or 'out') a student, and this does not feel targeted (e.g. you have a deaf student in your class and only discuss things relating to hearing loss).
  - b. If a student wants staff support when talking to a group, make clear it is available, but don't assume without consulting the student that this is the most appropriate way forwards and automatically offer it. Allow the student to retain agency and dignity in this process.
  - c. Assign groups rather than ask students to pick groups themselves, as this can help students who may find this difficult or who have not developed friendships with others in their cohort;
  - d. Provide guidance to the group on expectations of how to behave e.g. turn taking, note-taking, time limits and how to organise the group;
  - e. Regular review meetings could be arranged between the tutor and the group to enable any issues to be raised and addressed;
  - f. Materials to be used by the group may need to be made available in an alternative format – the tutor should be advised to consult the student's Student Support Information Sheet (SSIS), or the Kaplan Disability Team for online students;
  - g. Tutors should be aware that different ways of communication may need to be used by the group e.g. if a student has a speech impairment;



- h. For students who have difficulties interacting/communicating with others (for example some autistic students, social communication disorders, or severe social anxiety), consideration of alternative means of learning, teaching and/or assessment may be required (See Appendix K of the Code of Practice on Assessment).
- i. For online students it is suggested that the tutor consults the Kaplan Disability Team for advice on how best to support any students with a declared disability.

### Assessing group work

- 30. Tutors should consider carefully whether they are assessing group *product*, group *process* or *both*. This will depend on the learning outcomes of the module in which the group work takes place.
- 31. Learning outcomes related to the **process** of group work may well sit alongside other module learning outcomes clearly related to the subject. There are three common areas that process-related learning outcomes are likely to refer to:
  - a. Students’ appreciation that successful teams use different strengths and different kinds of contributions from their members;
  - b. Students’ recognition of the skills of good interpersonal communication in teams (leading on to the ability to resolve conflicts);
  - c. Students’ recognition that group tasks need to be explicitly managed and their ability to identify the necessary skills to achieve effective management as well as developing awareness of their own behaviour during group work.

Outcomes related to these general areas, at an initial level of experience and at a more advanced level might read thus:

Outcome	Lower level	Higher level
1	‘recognise that different team members make different kinds of valid contributions to the team effort’	‘identify the different contributions made by different team members, relating these to a recognised model (e.g. Belbin) of successful teamwork activity’
2	‘identify occasions when team members communicate effectively and not so effectively and some of the reasons for this’	‘identify and use appropriate communications skills to progress the task or resolve conflict’
3	‘identify the critical targets, deadlines and allocations of tasks to ensure the group task (project) is completed on time’	‘demonstrate project management skills (e.g. regular review, progress checks, adjustments to initial project plans) appropriate to the complexity of the group task’

- 32. Students should have a clear understanding of the relative balance of the assessment and how the different assessment criteria (relating to product or process) will be applied.
- 33. A key principle of effective group work assessment is that it must be seen to be fair by the participating students. Resentment over assessment perceived to be ‘unfair’ (which usually relates to perceptions of inadequate contribution from some group members) is regularly cited by students as the main factor which undermines their engagement with learning from group work.

34. There is a range of ways in which fairness can be achieved. The most straightforward is to require individual assignments from students arising out of their group work but this often has the disadvantage of actually discouraging students from working effectively together. Therefore, it is recommended that staff consider setting a collective group assignment wherever possible.
35. Where a single group mark is given (which will normally be for the group **product**) there should always be a means of moderating this mark for individual students to reflect their contribution. The most straightforward way of achieving this is to use peer moderation i.e. students are required to assess their own and each group member's contribution to the group product, yielding a score which is then used to moderate the single group mark for each student. This process can be supported by technology (see the section below on *Using digital tools to support group work*). Other means include individual vivas and (when available) digital records of individual students' contributions e.g. to a group wiki or journal/blog.
36. It must be made clear to students both in the documentation they receive and in verbal briefings at the start of a group work activity how they are going to be assessed. This is particularly important when the process will involve peer moderation of contribution to the group. If using peer moderation, this should be done within a setting in which the impact of our views on others due to unconscious bias, inclusivity and linguistic discrimination have been discussed (e.g. students with regional accent, or whose first language is not English often get judged (unfairly) because of how their language is perceived). Receiving unfiltered peer feedback can be very destructive, particularly if it comes from a point of misunderstanding. Ensure you provide visible and easily accessible support for your students. It is a good idea to get students undertake this activity as a formative task, especially if this leads to a summative moderation task.
37. Ultimately the assessment of group work, like all other assessment, is a matter for academic judgement. If a tutor decides that they have evidence of factors affecting the performance of either the group or individuals within it, then this may influence the grades awarded. Such judgement will need to cover cases of academic integrity, or any other form of penalty that may need to be applied: where there is sufficient evidence that penalties will only be applied to some of the group members, the performance of the rest of the group will need to be assessed removing particular parts of the submitted work. It also covers occasions when there is reason to disregard peer moderation results if these are believed to inaccurately represent the group member/s' contribution.
38. If the assessment includes peer moderation, consider providing ways for students to challenge peer moderation where they feel the moderation process has been unfair or unreflective of their efforts, especially if they feel it has arisen from a particular perspective of bias that negatively impacted on the perceived efforts of particular members of a group.

### **Using digital tools to support group work**

39. Technology can support group work in a variety of ways:
  - a. Increasing the flexibility of the group work process for the students;
  - b. Making the assessment process more streamlined for the tutor;
  - c. As part of a formative assessment process.
40. The use of collaborative software (e.g. MS Teams/Office365 tools, discussion boards, wikis, visual collaboration tools etc.), if introduced well, may also have a beneficial effect for some students e.g. autistic students, dyslexic students, anxious students, students whose first language is not English – by allowing them more time to digest the contributions of their peers and to develop their own contributions. At the same time, you should also consider that it may increase the amount of time it takes these students to participate. It may help students to

contribute if you state clearly that posts will be valued for their criticality and contribution rather than for grammatical accuracy.

#### Increasing the flexibility of group work for group members

41. Using digital tools can support students in their groupwork by enabling synchronous and asynchronous communication and collaboration, for example to provide a platform for students to work together and make changes or additions to online versions of their group work product(s). Tutors should ideally require students to work within University supported systems (for example group spaces in Canvas or Microsoft Teams). These tools can allow tutors to track and monitor contributions from individual members and will also safeguard the final assessment product. In some cases, it may be more appropriate to use external platforms or to allow students to choose their own social networking software and means of generating the group product. In all cases, it is important to consider inclusivity, ensuring all group members have access to the chosen the platform(s).
42. In terms of allowing more control for students in their independent study time when group working, tools such as those provided by Canvas and Microsoft Teams can be very useful. In Canvas, student editable Pages, Office 365 Collaborations and discussion boards are the primary means by which students can co-construct pieces of work inside the Canvas course, and similar functionality exists in Microsoft Teams. There is also an opportunity in Canvas to create self-enrol groups, so tutors can allow students to self-form groups and work within Canvas in their respective group areas.

#### Streamlining the assessment process

43. There is well-established practice in some parts of the University in using BuddyCheck as a tool to gather peer evaluation and use it to moderate the single group mark, enabling a fairer allocation of marks within a group based on individual student contribution. Doing this manually is a laborious process for tutors and BuddyCheck has demonstrated its flexibility to meet a variety of tutors' requirements. Students appear to have little problem in using the tool. Technologies can also be used for peer assessment on group work presentations such as using a video of a group work presentation as a product that can be peer reviewed by students.

#### Formative assessment process

44. As well as supporting the development of the product, technology can also support the recording of the group work process which may be part of the assessment process (formative or summative). For example, digital tools (e.g. wikis/blogs etc.) can make the group work development process accessible to staff to give timely formative feedback and also to make decisions about the relative contributions of individuals. Wikis and blogs also enable the use of multimedia products such as videos or screencast resources with the added benefit of developing students' digital fluency.
45. Technologies that can be used to support group work are subject to change and development. Please contact the Centre for Innovation in Education for update advice and support.