CODE OF PRACTICE ON ASSESSMENT

APPENDIX G

Policy on Assessment of Group-Work for Taught Provision

GUIDELINES FOR STAFF

2021-22

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 [https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/centre-for-innovation-in-education/](https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/centre-for-innovation-in-education/) and additional information for students is also available at [https://student.liverpool.ac.uk/advice-and-guidance/knowhow/group-work-and-presentations/](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 themselves for asking students to engage in it. Examples of reasons cited by staff include:
   a. students can compare ideas and are helped to recognise 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 can gain information about individual students' understanding or lack of it;
   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 practise listening, communication, teamwork and leadership skills;
   h. there is increasing pressure from employers for students to be able to demonstrate successful group-work experience.

4. Students should be informed of this rationale both within the programme documentation and at the start of their group-work experience.

What is group-work?

5. Group-work is when two or more individuals work together to a common agenda. It enables cooperative learning through which new knowledge is created and the development of generic skills such as those of communication, negotiation, critical thinking and planning is fostered.

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 is 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 which 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), and group-work which takes place in part or wholly online.

**Integrating group-work within degree programmes**

9. Where it is feasible and appropriate/relevant to offer group-work opportunities either within modules, or external to modules (see below), students should ideally experience working in groups during each year of their programme of study.

10. 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).

11. In the first year of a degree programme, there may be group-based ice-breakers/exercises during Welcome Week as well as group-work opportunities in modules. Any learning outcomes related to group-work in a first year module will typically not have a significant focus on the ‘process’ of group-work.

12. Students in the second and third years of their programmes could benefit from being introduced to a greater 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 in a group and identifying with it. Typically students undertaking more substantial group-based activities in Years 2 and 3 would be expected to meet learning outcomes and assessment tasks associated with both the ‘task’ and the group-work ‘process’.

13. As students undertake more substantial group-based activities leading to assessment they will typically be asked to engage in some form of peer moderation where they ‘rate’ the performance of their fellow group members, with their rating impacting on the mark that each individual student receives (see paragraphs 30-37 below).
14. 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 for further details.

15. 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.

Preparing the environment for successful group-work

16. How the learning environment is set up, whether physical or virtual, can play a significant part in facilitating a successful group. Issues to be considered when setting up a physical learning environment include:

a. Temperature and noise – is the room comfortable to sit in? Can everyone be heard?

b. 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;

c. Think about where the tutor sits and its likely 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’;

d. Think about location of flipchart, screen etc. Try not to break up the formation of the group by the way the equipment is positioned. (A flip chart and stand can be included as part of the circle rather than blocking a student’s view);

e. Laboratories - conducting group-work in a laboratory 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);

f. Meeting places for the groups may need to be accessible for students with mobility difficulties;

g. 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.

17. When setting up a virtual 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;
b. Students may elect to use non-institutional tools in preference to institutionally supported tools. Ensure that students are aware of how any self-selected tools can adequately support group-work tasks and processes, 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 the group-work process.

d. Ensure the virtual learning environment/online tools are accessible to students with a visual impairment; this should be checked directly with the individual student.

Supporting the group process

Setting up groups

18. 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.

Initial briefing

19. 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.

20. Not all students will have worked in a group environment before and so depending on the purpose and duration of the group-work activity, may need briefing/advice on how to set the group up (e.g. would it be helpful for roles to be assigned either by the module convener or the group members), how a group works (in terms of the processes that groups go through as a task progresses), and the different kinds of contribution which members can make.

21. There are two elements that impact on the progression of any group – 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

22. It is important that students have a process for monitor 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 checklists and questionnaires (examples available from the Centre for Innovation in Education) that can be completed by individual group members, and with results being shared amongst the group.

23. 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.

Setting ‘ground rules’

24. A technique that can be useful for student groups is to ask the groups, once formed, to discuss and formulate a set of ‘ground rules’ by which they all agree to abide for the period of the group-work. Typically, such ‘ground rules’ might mention taking responsibility/meeting deadlines as agreed as well as more process oriented statements such as respecting everyone’s views and listening to each other. An example set of ‘ground rules’ can be requested from the Centre for Innovation in Education.

Supporting dysfunctional groups

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 convener at the earliest opportunity. There can be many reasons for groups becoming dysfunctional. It may be due to individual students displaying certain characteristics and/or it may be a lack of focus on the task (and resulting assessment pressures) and/or lack of focus on the group process i.e. how the individuals in that group are feeling towards each other as well as towards the task.

26. Sometimes the following behaviours can be encountered in a student group: a silent student, a student who has not prepared, a student who is frequently late, a student who is frequently absent, a hostile student, a dominant (very talkative) student (whether useful, off-the-point or incorrect). There could be a number of reasons behind such behaviour, which may stem from the student being unhappy working with the group for reasons mentioned earlier, or the reasons may be completely unrelated to the academic work and arise from an ‘external’ situation. Whatever the cause for the behaviour, the following strategies might be useful:

   a. Try to avoid making a student look foolish in front of their peers;
   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 etc., then ask them to discuss it with one other person, then link 2 pairs up to discuss their collective ideas with another pair);
   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. Other possible reasons for dysfunctional groups might be:

   a. students not being able to hear, see, or pick up on verbal or visual cues making it harder for them to participate;
   b. students who have difficulties due to fatigue (e.g. mental health difficulties or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) 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. a student who has Asperger’s Syndrome, a speech impairment or mental health difficulties);

d. students who may have limited study time available and/or difficulty with meeting deadlines set by their group.

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. 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. In the case of students who have declared a disability, staff are recommended to follow the process/guidelines below as appropriate:

   a. The tutor could meet with the student in advance to discuss how to support them with the group-work, i.e. a discussion about whether the student is happy for their group to be told about their disability;

   b. If required, the tutor could meet with the student and their group to facilitate informing the group about the student’s disability and what they can do to support the student e.g. if the student has a hearing impairment, the member of staff should provide basic guidance to the group, such as facing the student when speaking and taking turns to speak;

   c. The tutor assigning groups rather than asking the students to pick groups themselves could help students who may find this difficult;

   d. The tutor could 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);

   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 students who have Asperger’s Syndrome, 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).

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

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

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

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 technology to support group-work). Other means include individual vivas and (when available) digital records of individual students’ contributions e.g. to a group wiki.

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. For many students, particularly international students, this may be a completely novel process and both the rationale and the procedure need to be communicated with care.
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.

Using technology to support group-work

38. 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.

39. The use of collaborative software such as discussion boards and wikis may also have a very beneficial effect on students whose language skills are weak – in particular, for those students who are not native English speakers – by allowing them more time to digest the contributions of their peers and to develop their own contributions. For the same reasons students with some types of disability could benefit from the use of technology to support group-work.

Increasing the flexibility of group-work for group members

40. Technology can enable students to communicate synchronously or asynchronously to support the group process, and to make changes or additions to online versions of the group-work product(s). Tutors should consider whether to require students to work within University-supported software (primarily VITAL tools such as discussion boards, blogs and wikis). These tools allow tutors to track contributions from individual members and will also safeguard the final assessment product.

41. In terms of allowing more control for students in their independent study time when group-working, VITAL’s group tool can be very useful. Wikis, blogs, discussion board and the group tools enable students to have ‘write’ access to VITAL. There is also an opportunity in VITAL to create self-enrol groups, so module instructors can allow students to self-form groups and work within VITAL in their respective group areas. Nevertheless, it may occasionally be appropriate to allow students to choose their own social networking software and means of generating the group product.

Streamlining the assessment process

42. There is well-established practice in some parts of the University in using WebPA as a tool to gather peer review and use it to moderate the single group mark. Doing this manually is a laborious process for tutors and WebPA has demonstrated its flexibility to meet a variety of tutors’ requirements. Again, 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.

43. Offering students a Turnitin facility to check draft assignments is also a useful existing practice although less widespread for group-work assignments. A group cannot currently submit a finalised piece of work into Turnitin except through the submission via one individual member of the group. Students do need some guidance in interpreting text-matching reports generated by Turnitin and making a judgement about academic integrity.

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, 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 literacy and media skills.

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.