



MAKING THE MOST OF GROUP WORK

A guide for staff

Contents

- 01**
 - Introduction, how to use this guide
 - Getting started with group work

- 02**
 - Student-facing resources
 - How else may they need support?
 - Be aware of complications

- 03**
 - Getting the most out of group work
 - Take time

- 04**
 - Assessing group work & addressing the issue of fairness
 - Check list – what to consider when selecting group work for assessment
 - Collaboration vs. collusion

- 05**
 - Group size and composition
 - Monitoring and supporting groups

- 06**
 -

- 07**
 - Final words
 - Useful links





1

- Introduction, how to use this guide
- Getting started with group work

Introduction, and how to use this guide

Across the Higher Education sector, students are expected to work collaboratively with other students, in groups, teams and on joint projects, and this can often constitute a proportion of their assessed work. Group work is used at university because it can be an effective and powerful way to learn. Students may work in groups allocated by their lecturer, or in self-selected groups. The **process** of working in a group can be assessed, as well as the outcome or **product** of the group work. In fact, most courses will involve some form of team working, and this can be an effective way for learners to develop a range of skills that are valued highly by employers.

There are a great many benefits to using group work, both for students and their lecturers, which are explored in this document – but it is important to note that simply assigning group work in no way guarantees that these benefits will magically occur. Badly thought-out group work projects often backfire and may have a detrimental effect on student motivation and engagement, so it is essential that group projects – and particularly those which include an element of group assessment – are well-designed and are supervised and assessed fairly. This guide aims to provide practical help and guidance for staff around the design and implementation of effective group work and

group assessed tasks. It points you in the direction of key University policy, student-facing guidance developed by the Study Advice team (LibGuides), staff support from the Centre for Quality Support and Development (CQSD) and highlights different areas which should be considered at all stages of implementation.

The products (and to a lesser extent the process) of group work are increasingly popular as a form of assessment. This guide reminds you of the importance of taking a carefully planned outcomes-based or 'backwards design' approach to assessment as well as adopting a holistic programme-level view, by considering what is happening in other modules within the degree programme. For assessments to be valid, authentic, current, sufficient and reliable, issues of fairness and inclusivity must be considered from the outset, and the use of group assessment practices must be proportionate within a programme.

This guide is designed to act as a supplement to the University of Reading's assessment policies.

When considering group work as a form of assessment, reference should always be made to the University's Assessment Handbook:

Section 5: Assessment Regimes.

Welcome to Making the Most of Group Work:

A guide for staff. We hope you find it useful and illuminating.

The Working Group on Group Work, University of Reading (2022)



Getting started with group work

Getting your students prepared

Preparing your students for group work is crucial and an important first step is for you to articulate why you are using this approach in the first place. We should not assume that our students will necessarily understand the benefits of group work, or that they are familiar with this way of working and can do so effectively without support. Students may not always be positive about working in groups, especially if they have been allocated to a team in which there are no familiar faces, or if, from their perspective, the group composition is not what they would prefer. Students may also be reluctant to take part in group-based tasks due to a lack of group work experience or because of a previous negative experience. Some learners, particularly Part 1 UG, may have had little previous experience of working in a group.

The previous educational setting and the cultural background of the learner may have an impact here. For some, the notion of working in a group with equal status, taking the initiative, and speaking up in front of others may not be the norm. Difficulties with group work can arise from differences in background or because students lack experience in this way of working. Of course, you may equally have classes in which there are students who already have a good deal of experience of group work (as part of their studies or extra-curricular activities), and again those experiences may colour their view of what is involved. To prepare students for this way of working, it is therefore important to take time to articulate your expectations, share the benefits of group work, and to support your students, particularly if this is their first experience of group work at university.



Seven benefits of group work

Group working is an effective and powerful way to learn, contributing to student learning and retention and success. Here are some benefits to share with your students:

- 1** Two heads are better than one. You can pool ideas, share the workload and examine problems from a **range of different perspectives**, tackling more complex problems than you could working alone.
- 2** Group projects develop valuable **workplace skills** such as organisation, leadership, cooperation, delegation - and effective communication.
- 3** You'll meet people. Working in groups provides opportunities for you to get to know other learners on your course and to develop and **strengthen your social network**.
- 4** You'll learn to **work in different ways**, finding different approaches to solving problems and overcoming challenges. Interactions with others help you to construct new knowledge and to refine and assess what you know, through feedback, discussion and knowledge acquisition.
- 5** Group work is a powerful learning experience which develops your higher-order problem-solving and reasoning and critical thinking skills.
- 6** Working in diverse teams develops your **inter-cultural competence and communication** skills - meaning that you can work effectively across cultures - an essential skill for living and working in the globalised world.
- 7** It's **fun!** Group work allows you to work with others, using hands-on, practical, collaborative approaches.



02

- Student-facing resources
- How else may they need support?
- Be aware of complications

Student-facing resources

What learner support is available?

When you set a group project, ensure that you direct your students to the [Effective Group Work LibGuide](#) produced by the University of Reading's Study Advice team. There are webpages to consult, a Getting Started pack to download and proformas that your students can use to support them through the various stages of their group project.

If your students agree on basic organisation strategies including how the group will work and communicate together, and allocate roles and agree shared objectives, the process is likely to run more smoothly for them. The LibGuide emphasises the importance of developing speaking and listening skills and provides tips for managing conflict, plus guidance regarding how to be a good group member. By preparing your learners for the experience of group working, including how cultural differences might affect different members of the group, the students can commence their project better equipped for the task ahead.

This interactive video, also produced by the library, is an invaluable introduction to successful group working: <https://web.microsoftstream.com/video/bb93c271-b8fe-4c09-a6cb-81474b0067c8>

Seven ways to prepare your students for group work:

- 1** Use icebreakers and warmers, so they get to know each other before any group work starts.
- 2** Talk with your class about how groups function.
- 3** Bring in students from the previous year to share their team-working top tips.
- 4** Invite guest speakers, employers and alumni to talk about the skills they value.
- 5** Provide opportunities for students to discuss, negotiate, improve their listening skills and practise giving feedback to each other.
- 6** Provide support by having timetabled sessions*/ seminars in which they are allocated specific time or tasks to work as a group.
- 7** Share (and explain) the assessment criteria!**

* Students often understandably complain that it is difficult and time-consuming to organise meetings. It's not always easy for students to meet outside class to work on a team task. There may be clashes with other study/work/family commitments; not all students live on or near campus; some may be studying part-time. Therefore, having some timetabled slots where they can work together on their group projects, with the teacher present, is extremely helpful. Online meetings can also be used to accommodate time and place constraints.

** At the same time as doing this, embed the link to the Group Work Study Advice guide in your BB pages and direct your student towards it, so that students are signposted towards support from the outset.

Make an informed decision about when you will share the information above with your class. It may be helpful for this decision to be made at programme level: for instance, would it be helpful for students on a programme to hear this message annually, in a specific lecture geared towards effective group-working, or would it be more beneficial for students to hear these messages at the specific time when group work assessed tasks are set? Or a combination of these approaches? It is good practice to provide a dedicated face-to-face briefing to students when you set a group assignment, which should also include a Q&A opportunity. Ongoing opportunities to review the assessment brief, for example during tutorials, are also advisable. It's worth thinking about using some low-stakes, straightforward group working tasks early in the academic year with a new cohort, as a means of allowing students to get to know each other and to begin to form social connections.

How else may they might need support?

You may find that groups will need help in a number of areas, including:

- 1 Group bonding
- 2 Setting ground rules
- 3 Clarifying the task
- 4 Managing and recording meetings
- 5 Encouraging effective intra-group communication
- 6 Dividing up tasks
- 7 Managing non-contribution
- 8 Monitoring their progress
- 9 Giving feedback to peers

'Stretching' students beyond their comfort zones is important for learning to take place (McClelland 2012)

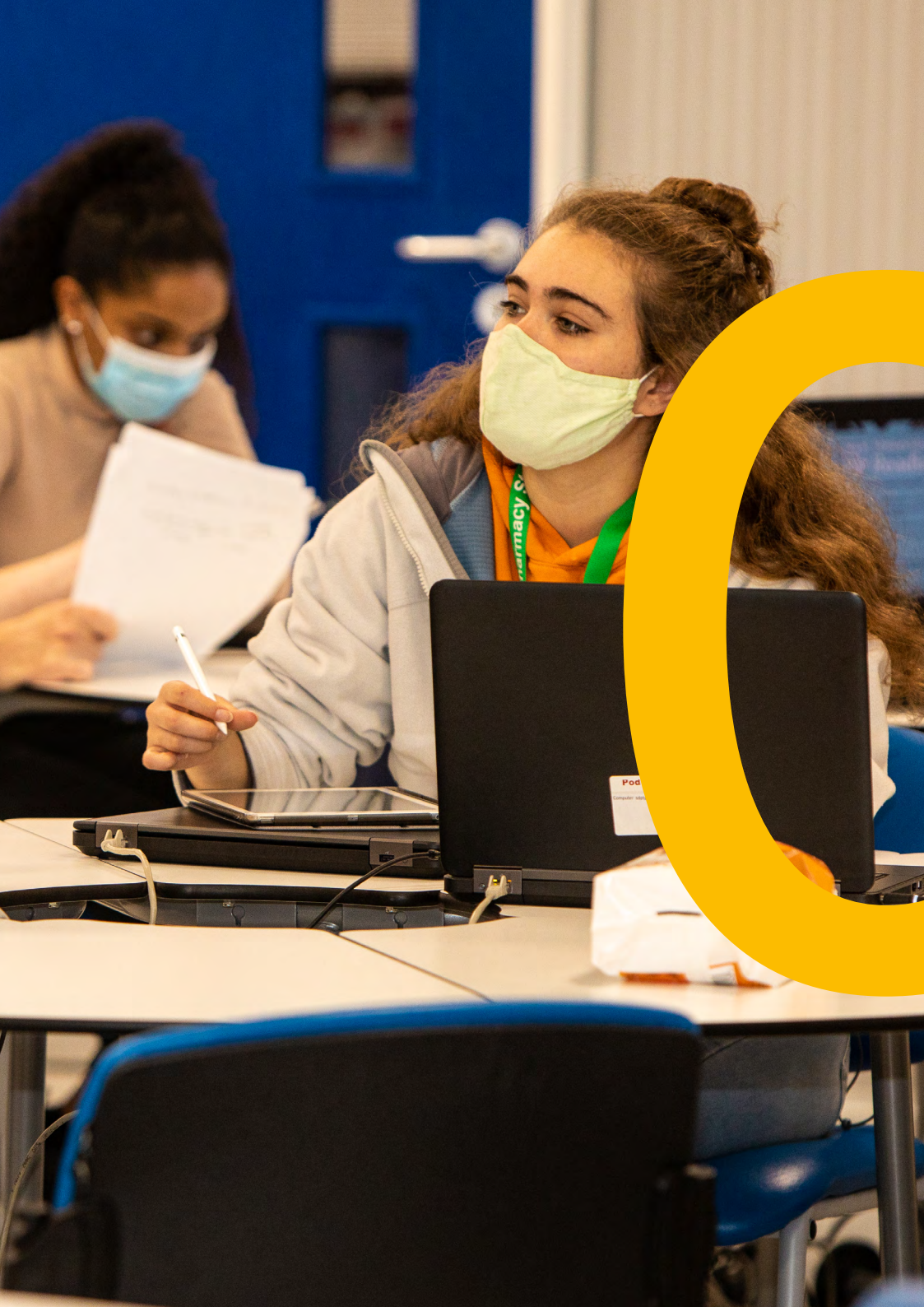
Be aware of complications

When designing tasks for your learners, it is important to acknowledge that group work can impact adversely on your learners – for example, on their social and working relationships if the group fails. Groups are inevitably made up of students with different abilities, who may contribute more or less to a group task. If peer assessment is involved, there is a potential for this to impact upon the group dynamics and for personal differences to emerge. If one member withdraws from the group, this can also lead to complex situations involving exceptional/ extenuating circumstances.

Peer assessment (more on this later, see below) can be popular with students, who see it as a helpful way to mitigate against the impact of 'passenger behaviour' within the group. Passenger behaviour, sometimes called 'free-riding' or 'social loafing' is when group members are viewed as not to be making an equal contribution within the group. This can have a negative impact on the group work experience and all group members. Peer assessment therefore is often favoured by learners and its use even in a small measure can impact positively on group behaviour, as students do not wish to be judged unfavourably by their peers.

It is worth noting here that 'free-riders' may not be participating fully **involuntarily**, rather than deliberately, through for example perceived laziness. Free-riding can occur due to many reasons, including language issues, students not understanding the task fully and also when students are excluded from group decisions. This can happen when other learners dominate the group process, because of their perception that others in the group are unreliable, less capable or are unwilling to work in the way that they wish. As a result, as the project progresses, trust within the group diminishes. It is essential that peer assessment is not overused, and that staff are aware of the potential impact of bullying behaviours within a group against a group member.

Peer assessment therefore must be used carefully, in tandem with University policy (see [Assessment Handbook](#), section 5.4) and rules around its use must be clear to students from the outset.



3

- Getting the most out of group work
- Take time

Getting the most out of group work

The best group work tasks are those where:

- Everyone in the group is able to contribute meaningfully.
- These contributions can be easily identified (and possibly logged or recorded).
- The assessment process is clear and transparent.
- The task is well-designed to encourage collaboration.

If you have (culturally) diverse groups, setting tasks which benefit from **multiple perspectives** or a diverse knowledge base can be helpful. An outcomes-based approach is one in which learning outcomes, the teaching and learning content and activities, and the assessment procedures are all aligned and thus students are always clear what the expectations are for that module and how they will meet them. A holistic programme overview should ensure that students are not exposed to an excessive number of group assessments, and that careful consideration is given if group assessments are to be used in the final year of their degree programme. Note also that University policy requires Board of Studies approval of any final module mark arrived at through group work, and especially where this exceeds 50%. See the [Assessment handbook, Section 5.4.3](#).

Seven tips for running good group work

- 1** Share the rationale with your learners – why is a groupwork task appropriate at this point in the course? How will it benefit them? What could they tell a future employer about the gains they made in this project?
- 2** Consider some low-stakes assessment of the process in group work early on in the programme, so that students are rewarded for being effective group members. Purely assessing the outcomes or end product will not encourage 'good' group working or allow students to develop effective group work skills.
- 3** Think about allocating different roles to your teams – e.g. spokesperson or presenter, notetaker, timekeeper, chair, strategy analyst, checker, et cetera. When you repeat group work later in the year, encourage students to take on a new role. Hold discussions in class about cultural differences, and make it clear that all group members have a voice.
- 4** Support your students with technology- help them to set up a OneDrive folder for their work or provide a working area such as a wiki or folder in the Virtual Learning Environment (Blackboard or Canvas). Encourage them to use this shared space and consider whether you should have access to it, to monitor their progress. If in addition the group decides to communicate using social media, remind them that all group members must have access to the chosen platform (e.g. WhatsApp / WeChat) See below: Group work and Digital Tools.
- 5** Vary the way you set up the groups. Early in the term, self-sorting friendship groups may work well and enable students to consolidate their social networks and to feel comfortable in their chosen subject. Later, mixing up the groups will expose them to more diverse groups and different ways of working.
- 6** Provide low-stakes or risk-free opportunities for students to practice and rehearse – giving them the chance to make mistakes and try things out without it impacting upon their grades. Formative feedback on 'trial runs' can build confidence and resilience.
- 7** Prepare your students: remind them that group dysfunction is a common stage. Tell your class that going through this stage and sorting it out is part of the task.

Take time

It's especially important that groups are given enough time to develop their 'group norms'. Learning to work with others and to allow learners to discover their current group's way of functioning is a key learning step which cannot be rushed. It takes time for a group dynamic to form and for students to feel comfortable within it, and this requires some negotiation and give and take within the group, in those preliminary stages. Set group assessed tasks with a sufficient timeline which allows for groups to bond, work together, overcome difficulties, meet the learning outcomes, and reflect on the process at the end.

"Learning to work cooperatively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, attitudes or motivation towards work, varying knowledge bases or skill sets is essential, especially as the workplace becomes more collaborative. The ability to solve problems or resolve conflict requires communication skills, as well as leadership and mediation, which are all attributes that employers are seeking."





4

- Assessing group work & addressing the issue of fairness
- Check list – what to consider when selecting group work for assessment
- Collaboration vs. collusion

Assessing group work and addressing the issue of fairness

Self-assessment, peer assessment and assessment weighting

As UG and PGT students may be required to take group-based assessments across a number of modules on their programme, it is important that their experience is consistent, in particular in relation to the application of assessment policy. The concept of “fairness” is emphasised in the University’s policy on the assessment of group work. There are a variety of ways to mitigate the impact of receiving a group mark – for example by introducing or changing the assessment weighting of various components, or marking the group members on the process of team-working as well as the final product they create. If students feel that their individual learning and performance is assessed within the group, this can provide a greater sense of fairness.

This can be achieved by adding an **individual element** to a group task, such as an individual reflective account, a personal portfolio or record of contributions to the task, or individual mini-tests or quizzes. How this element is accounted for in the final grade – for example, a 50:50 or an

80:20 split between group mark and individual component – will depend upon the T&L context and what the assessed piece is, but in all instances this should be aligned to the module learning outcomes and the type of work you are planning to assess. It is essential to take into account the ethos of the School/department and local the teaching and learning context, as discipline-specific factors will impact upon the appropriateness of the assessment methods which are selected.

Peer assessment provides students with the opportunity to provide feedback to each other on their work. It develops assessment literacy, enabling students to get to grips with assessment criteria, take responsibility for their own learning and can motivate them to engage with the group work process more deeply. The use of peer assessment in group work often aims to encourage students to value the process of group work, not just the end product. It can deter uneven workloads, as those who contribute more are rewarded for their efforts, and this can encourage more reluctant members of the group to participate more fully.

Assessing the process of group work can be helpful in the

early stages of setting group work. In fact, assessing **how** students work, and not just what they produce, can impact positively on group work tasks set later in the programme, when you may shift the focus towards more assessment of the groups’ outputs. Assessing the process might relate to effort put in (through contribution logs or records), self-evaluations such as reflective accounts or self-reporting on aspects you wish to encourage (such as communication strategies, roles taken, contributions to the team) and peer assessment where each group member evaluates the contributions of the group members. This type of assessment could be qualitative (e.g. a short reflective account) or quantitative.

Note that marking the process of the group work usually relies upon some element of self-reporting on the part of the students, as most group work tasks take place outside of the classroom.

Assessment:

- 1 The assessment criteria
- 2 The grading scheme (What does good look like?)
- 3 The components which constitute the group mark
- 4 What percentage is made up of individual assessment
- 5 What percentage is made up of peer assessment
- 6 Whether the process and /or product (outputs) are assessed
- 7 How this relates to the learning outcomes of the module

Check list – what to consider when selecting group work as an assessment method

When deciding to use group-based assessment, module convenors should consider the following:

1. The relevance of group work to the learning outcomes of the module. How does the assessment of students via group work enable them to demonstrate some or all of the learning outcomes?
2. The value of group work as a developmental learning experience for the students. What will they gain from this form of work?
3. Is there an appropriate variety of assessment methods for the module, and an appropriate balance of formative and summative assessment?
4. What is being assessed – the process of group work, the product, or both?
5. What is the overall amount of group work being applied across the Part/programme? Is it proportionate?
6. Has consultation with students and External examiners been sought in the design of assessments?
7. What is the size and composition of student groups?
8. Have the needs of students with specific learning needs and/or disabilities been considered within into the assessment design?
9. Is the group work task relevant to the development of employability skills? How is this articulated to the learners?
10. What proportion of the proportion of the final module mark is arrived at through group work? The University guidance is that group work should not make up more than 50% of the final module mark. This may be exceeded where development of an ability to work in a group is central to the aims of the module and/or programme but this does require approval.



Collaboration vs. collusion

When students working in groups are required to submit individual pieces of work, they may find the difference between collaboration and collusion confusing. It is important, therefore, that you make the distinction clear. This means supporting learners to collaborate effectively while explaining that submitting a piece of work done jointly as if it has been done individually (whether unintentionally or otherwise) is considered collusion and as such is subject to academic misconduct procedures.

[See the Assessment Handbook, section 5.4](#)
[.4 viii](#)

If all group work is done outside the classroom or if the whole group are to receive the same mark irrespective of individual contributions, then this may well increase the likelihood of collusion.

It is therefore a good idea to consider your options to minimise potential collusion opportunities. You may find it helpful to incorporate elements of peer assessment (see above), perhaps making it a requirement that group activities are recorded in some way (e.g. through a blog, project log or online discussion board) ¹. The LibGuides Getting Started pack provides an example proforma for recording the minutes of meetings.

Seven things which cause students to complain about group work

- 1** Feeling their grades have been brought down by others.
- 2** Feeling that the workload is unfair.
- 3** Feeling that 'passenger' behaviour / poor attendance is rewarded, when those students get the same grade as those who worked very hard.
- 4** Suffering from stress caused by poor organisation and unclear procedures.
- 5** Feeling that their hard work is not being properly rewarded.
- 6** Feeling that if they were allowed to do the task by themselves, they would do a better job.
- 7** Feeling confused on how the work will be assessed.

Clearly, in order to minimise the likelihood of these events occurring, it is essential at the **planning** stage to have well-designed activities and assessment procedures, as well as having clear procedures to deal with complications as and when they arise. Ensure that you are familiar with the [University's Assessment policies](#) and that you are transparent and clear with your students about what is involved. Use ground rules and set clear instructions to alleviate anxiety. Group work can be particularly stressful for students who are introverts or dominating personalities – again, this is where a timely discussion around member roles (and remembering to rotate these) may be helpful.

1. Carroll, J. (2007). *A Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education* (second edition). Oxford: OCSLD



05

- Group size and composition
- Monitoring and supporting groups

Group size and composition

In terms of group size the 'ideal' number will be determined by the class size and by the nature of the assessment task you have set them. In general, a group size of four to six is thought to be ideal as it allows a fair distribution of work and a manageable size to organise. Larger groups make it increasingly difficult for all voices to be heard and increases the likelihood of passenger behaviours.

Group composition can impact upon the quality of the work that is being assessed, and it is therefore unhelpful for students to work with the same group repeatedly. Being able to work in a wide range of group situations is an important aspect of teamwork and so creating opportunities for students to work with different people can provide new opportunities for them to develop other knowledge and skills.

Monitoring and supporting groups

Some form of monitoring is useful to provide students with formative feedback on their progress. This also gives you the opportunity to see how a group is performing. Monitoring enables you to consider levels of engagement and to keep an eye on students who may find group work particularly challenging. For instance, introverted students, or those with an educational background where group work is rarely encountered, may find the social aspects of group work particularly challenging.

Monitoring the group will keep you informed of any potential problems that may arise because of the group dynamics. Group monitoring need not be an exhaustive process. For example, you may ask to see regular records/ minutes of the group meetings which detail attendees, input from individuals, discussion points and agreed actions. In blended learning environments, you could ask the group to provide a transcript of their last online discussion, or you could review online discussions yourself via the virtual learning environment. Holding online meetings within class time with the teams working in breakout rooms provides a quick solution for monitoring several groups at once. Monitoring and being on hand to support learners is especially vital in the early stages, to identify and address any issues quickly and to provide help as needed.





06

- Group work and digital tools
- Diversity and Inclusivity

Group work and digital tools

- Provide opportunities during timetabled sessions for students to meet in their small groups.
- Encourage students to communicate and collaborate effectively and securely online, using their University Microsoft365 accounts or within Teams to facilitate group work. Students can chat, meet remotely, and share or author documents together. (See [Using Microsoft Teams for Teaching and Learning](#)).
- Set up digital spaces to record formal group work, where individual contributions or development needs to be assessed, use a Discussion Board, Blog or Journal in the VLE. (See Blackboard Learning Activities support guides).

Although as seen above, students may choose to use other social media tools to organise and interact informally as a group, some students might not want or be able to use these platforms. University provided options are often required or preferred. The Study Advice team also offers support for students around [Working together online](#) and the use of online meeting tools.

Diversity and Inclusivity

Group work can be particularly difficult for some learners. Students within a minority group may feel uncomfortable in a group and in groups that are not functioning well, this can intensify feelings of isolation and exacerbate the feeling of not being heard. Team projects can make students feel exposed as differences (such as language background, race, disability, age, background) come to the fore. This can be a source of real anxiety and stress. It is important to acknowledge this when group work is set. Speakers of English as a second language can feel disadvantaged – it is important to clear about what you are assessing. Commuter students or those with family commitments may not be able to easily attend meetings outside of scheduled sessions. Students with strict religious beliefs may not feel comfortable meeting in the student union bar for a catch up.

Students with a learning difficulty such as dyslexia may feel anxious that their needs may not be considered or that they may look foolish in front of their peers. Rather than abandoning group work, instead invite your students to reflect on how they can create an inclusive environment and the best conditions so that **everyone is welcome** to enable the group can play to their strengths. The use of ground rules, agreements, allocation of roles and record-keeping can all improve the learning environment. It is essential to champion the message that diversity within a group is a strength and remind groups that whatever practical working arrangements they chose they must work for **all** participants. The design of your group working tasks is key. Those tasks which require a

range of perspectives, for example by drawing upon global case studies and diverse skills and knowledge, are more likely to work well. For assessed group work, think about what alternative assessments might be required (e.g. an extra written task instead of an oral presentation); whether including individual assessed elements would work better and how much time groups need to enable them to function well. Keep monitoring and checking in with your learners and provide dedicated time for them to ask questions as the projects progress. Finally: do include a de-brief stage following all group tasks. Allow students time and space to **reflect upon the experience**, draw out key lessons learned, and plan specific action points for themselves to take forward into their next encounter with group work.

Seven task types that could work well with diverse groups

- 1 Design and administer a survey
- 2 Analyse a complex topic
- 3 Undertake a problem-based challenge
- 4 Complete a comparative study from a global perspective
- 5 Design an experiment, analyse the results and report back
- 6 Examine a case study from different viewpoints
- 7 Plan or organise an event



O

7

- Final words
- Useful links

Final words

There are many benefits to learners from working in groups. Group work offers students the opportunity to engage in complex and challenging tasks, collaborate with their peers, and to develop valuable skills such as communication, intercultural competences, listening and feedback skills, as well as cooperation, leadership, delegation, and personal time management. It takes effort to get it right, and time is needed for all group members to work together as a group. We hope that this guide will support you with your reflections on this aspect of your teaching, and in your efforts to make the most of group work with the students you teach.



Useful links

We hope that you have found this guide for effective group work and group assessment helpful. Effective group teaching requires not just excellent subject knowledge, but highly skilled teaching: group work presents challenges for both the lecturer and the learners. We hope that this guide has given you some helpful support and useful strategies to supplement your teaching practice. When group assessment is added to the mix, careful planning and management are called into play.

Here are some links to additional resources that may be useful:

- University of Reading Assessment Handbook: Section 5: Assessment Regimes: http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/quality-support/5_Assessment_Regimes.pdf
- CQSD webpages <https://www.reading.ac.uk/reading-cqsd/cqsd-home.aspx>
- CQSD assessment pages <https://sites.reading.ac.uk/curriculum-framework/assessment/>
- University of Reading Library Guide – Effective Group Work (note that these are student-facing pages and a fantastic way to introduce group work to your student cohort) <https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/groups>
- A stream video on working in groups: [Successful Group Work - a Study Advice video for students](#)

Contact CQSD

- Email: cqsd-tandl@reading.ac.uk
- T&L Programme: <https://www.reading.ac.uk/reading-cqsd/Developing-and-enhancing/events-and-training/cqsd-events.aspx>
- Learn Higher resources: <https://aldinhe.ac.uk/resource-category/group-work-resources/>

Designers

Designed by the Real Jobs student team: Ajoke Sofiyah Cardoso, Taria Khan, Dean Thorn and Kori Kucharska.