Assessed Group-work: A Framework and Guidelines

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-	24/02/2023	Academic Council (Meeting No. 185; AC:DOC:185:09:02)	• Guidelines updated.

Purpose of the document

This document has been developed to provide a framework for programme teams and lecturers to consider the role and place of group-work in their programmes and teaching and to plan and manage it in a way that enhances learning and promotes a positive learning and teaching experience. Group-work in this context refers to two or more students working together as part of a formal assessment. This might be face-to-face, online or in a blended context. However, some of the principles can also be applied to other forms of student group work, including that which is more informal.

Background

Group projects and other forms of group-work are widely used in DkIT and elsewhere. It is widely recognised that group-work has academic, practical and social benefits (and promotes employability (Grimzeck, Kinnamon & Marks, 2020). However, there are many challenges including student perceptions of (un)fairness (MacFarlane, 2016), exclusion (Noonan, 2013), assessing appropriately (Forsell, Frykedal & Chiriac, 2021) and the demands placed on students' time (Lee *et al*., 2015). Group-work supports the development of key skills and graduate attributes, however it is important to recognise that group-work *does not* automatically benefit students; to do this it needs to be well planned, structured and supported. This requires planning, input and support from the lecturer. Evidence is clear that if group-work is to be successful, it needs to be facilitated and students need preparation and guidance. Group-work that is not well planned and supported can impede learning, create a difficult social environment and cause students to experience stress and distress. Group-work, perhaps more than any other form of assessment, highlights the ethical issues inherent in assessment (Noonan, 2013).

Group-work may also be particularly challenging for some students, including those with autism and/or learning differences. When planning group-work it is important to ensure that some students are not disadvantaged or excluded. Sturgess (2019) has developed principles of good practice for supporting students with autism to work with their peers (see [The development of good practice principles for supporting students with autism to work with their peers – AHEAD) and these have informed this guidance.](#) There is no simple formula for doing group-work well; there is no single 'best' approach to forming groups, managing the process and assessing. All approaches have advantages and disadvantages and need to be considered within the context of the programme, the stage, the nature of the assessment, student characteristics   However, there are a number of principles, including Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which, if followed, can result in a positive experience of group-work for all*.*

Using this guidance

This document has been designed to provide a framework for thinking about group-work in a structured way and making decisions at each stage in the process: Programme Development; Module Planning; Assessing

and Monitoring and Supporting. The flowchart shown in Figure 1 illustrates the process and identifies key questions to answer at each stage. The guidelines then deal with each stage in more depth.
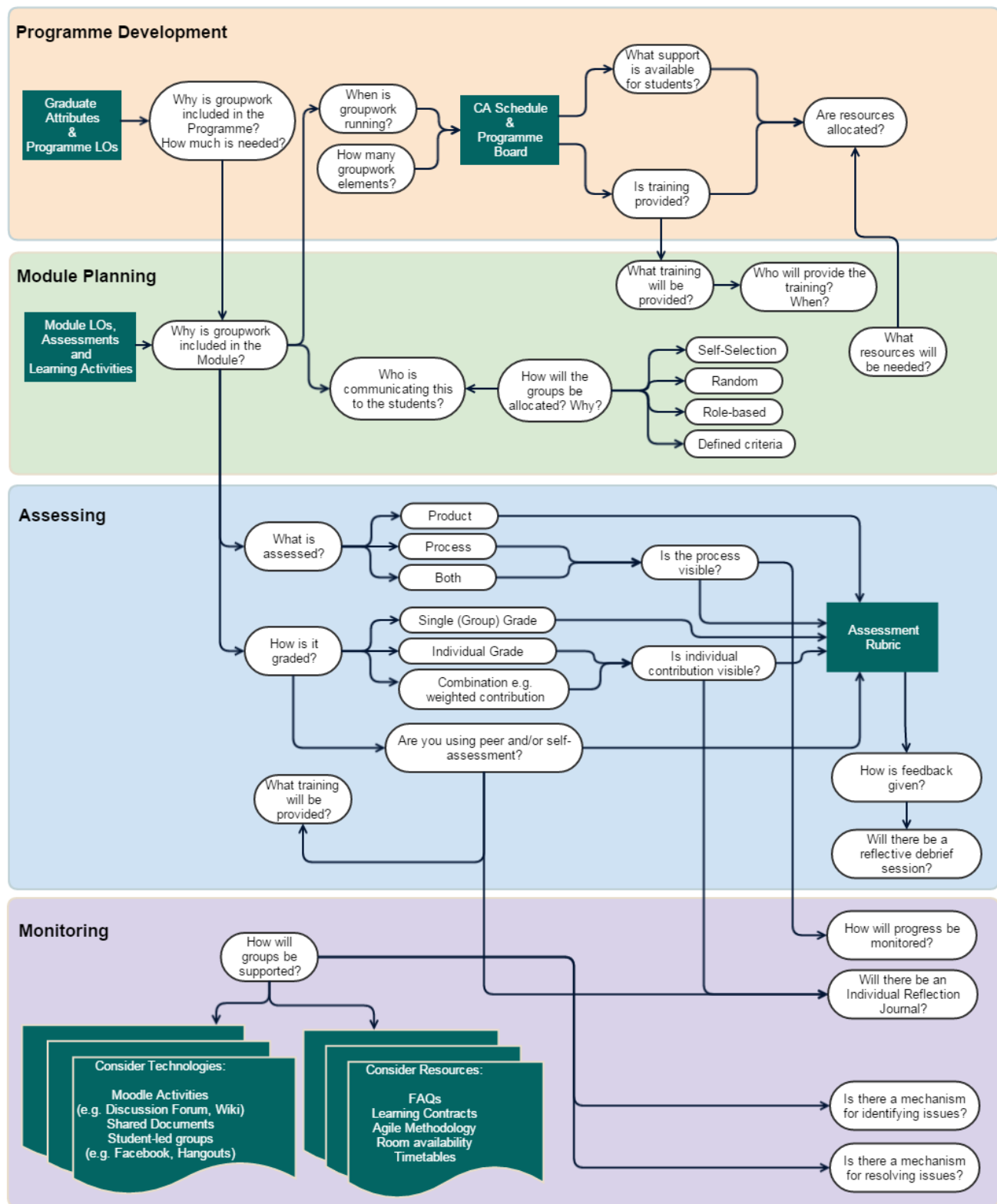

Figure 1: Planning, Implementing and Assessing Group-Work

1. *Planning group work at the programme level*

Group-work is experienced by students within the context of the programme. Group-work should be explicitly considered as part of the assessment strategy during programme development. This means that the development of team working skills should be scaffolded across the programme to ensure that students have the skills to engage.

Group-work contributes to the development of many important graduate attributes and skills. DkIT's PCs Graduate Attribute Framework identifies four key capstone graduate attributes: Practical; Communication Skills, Collaborative Skills and Confidence (see [Embedding Employability Toolkit | SUPERFOODS to Boost Your Curriculum's Employability @DkIT (wordpress.com)). Group work can contribute to the development of all but is particularly relevant to collaborative skills.](#) Questions for the programme team to consider are: why is group-work used on this programme? How does it contribute to the programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes? How are team working skills developed? How can we ensure that group-work is inclusive? Addressing these should inform the nature of the group-work, where it sits in the curriculum, how it is introduced and how the skills are developed over time. The Embedding Employability Toolkit includes useful advice and resources.

While these questions are particularly pertinent at the programme development stage or during Programmatic Review, it is important that group-work is reviewed by Programme Boards on an ongoing basis. This helps to ensure that (i) the group-work is appropriate in terms of the programme learning outcomes and graduate attributes, (ii) there is a coherent approach to group-work across the programme and expectations are consistent, appropriate and reasonable, (iii) students receive the training and support they need, when they need it, (iv) A universal design approach to group work is applied to ensure all students are supported to work successfully with their peers.

In particular, it is important that Programme Boards consider the amount of group-work facing students in a given semester and ensure that this is reasonable[1]. Even if the assignments involved have a small weighting, the work involved in managing the group process is likely to be considerable and may be complicated by timetabling.

Additional support is also available via the Student Learning and Development Centre (SLDC). SLDC tutors offer workshops on group work for students and these can be tailored to the needs of specific class groups (contact tutor@dkit.ie). Guidance and resources for students are also available on the SLDC Moodle pages on the DkIT Moodle Student Support Hub.

Actions
- Table group-work as an agenda item at a Programme Board,
- Talk to students about the role of group-work on the programme, for example, as part of induction,
- Ensure that the development of group-work skills is considered across the programme,
- Connect to graduate attributes and employability skills

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[1] This may depend on the programme/discipline

- Identify group-work/group projects explicitly on the CA schedule,
- Consider assessed group-work as part of the Programmatic Review process.
- Use UDL principles to inform assessment design,
- Use the resources and supports available.

2. Module planning

Within the context of an individual module, it is also important to consider why group-work is being used. Rogers & Smith (2014) suggest using group-work only if it is the '… *best possible way to demonstrate achievement of specific course objectives*' (p.126). It is important to remember that including group-work in the assessment strategy for a module should be considered in the context of wider programme assessment strategy

2.1 Preparation for group work

It is important to discuss the rationale for a group-work assessment with the students and to ensure that there are opportunities to discuss and agree expectations and to identify where the students may need support. A structured approach with clear expectations, tasks and deadlines will benefit all students and particularly students with autism.

2.2 Selecting groups

Methods can be broadly categorised as student-led or lecturer-led. Both have advantages and disadvantages (see Table 1) and the most appropriate method depends on the task and the context. Students often self-select on the basis of friendship or previous experience of working in a group but may also seek to work with high-performing students and/or avoid students perceived as unreliable. For students with autism, working with friends or people they already know can be very helpful (Sturgess, 2019). Lecturers may allocate students to groups randomly or on the basis of particular characteristics, for example, ensuring a mix of international and domestic students or on the basis of performance or specific skills. As Noonan (2013) suggests, the most important factor in determining group membership is promoting cohesiveness as this allows students '...*to focus on the task to be completed rather than spending time on conflict management'* (p. 1423). Whatever method is used, the rationale should be explained to the students.

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Self-selection by students	- May increase motivation and engagement, - Increased sense of control, - Friendship groups often cohesive, - May reduce anxiety and conflict, - May facilitate meeting and	- May exclude some students, particularly those outside established friendship groups or those perceived as less reliable by other students, - Roles and power structures within friendship groups may be limiting,

	organisation of the work.	● Reduces opportunities to hear other views and work with a wide range of peers.
	● May reduce free-riding	
Groups formed by lecturers	● May represent a more authentic work situation,	● Reduces the student's control,
		● May increase anxiety,
	● All students are selected and part of a group,	● Some students may be marginalised within a group,
	● Exposure to a wider range of perspectives,	● May be more difficult to meet and organise the work.
	● May facilitate students adopting new roles and approaches.	

Table 1: Forming groups

2.2   Free-riding

Free-riding happens when some group members do not contribute or do not contribute sufficiently to the work. This is widely recognised as a challenge and is a key source of student dissatisfaction. Free-riding may be involuntary, for example, the dynamics within a group may subtly prevent a student from participating fully and the impact of this can be damaging (see Noonan, 2013). Preparing the students to engage in group-work will help. There are also a number of strategies that can be used to encourage full participation by all (Perry, 2008): There is a good deal of research on strategies to reduce free riding in group-work. These include:

Strategies to promote cohesiveness

- Clear, shared goals,
- Smaller teams,
- Avoiding random assignment,
- Facilitating collaboration, in person and/or virtually,
- Fostering inter-dependence,
- Strategies to reward participation.

Rewarding individual contributions and linking to group goals,

- Reviewing individual contributions,
- Peer assessment or anonymous peer assessment,
- Lecturer assessment of individual contributions,
- Diaries/logs/reflective journals,
- Contracts for specific tasks, / Ground rules constructed by group,
- Attendance records,

- Penalties for inadequate contribution.

Lecturer Support

- Support dealing with conflict and/or non-engagement.
- Sliding scale of support, with lecturer providing greater input/support at the earlier stages of the project.

Again, the best approach will depend on the context, but it is important to note that students appreciate any effort by lecturers to tackle free-riding (Perry, 2008).

3. Assessing

Assessing group-work is challenging for staff. The assessment should be both valid and fair. It is important to differentiate between the process and product in the assessment. Clarify what is being assessed - product, process or both? This should be reflected in the assessment criteria for the task and linked to the specific module learning outcomes. The assessment criteria should be discussed with students early in the process and it should be clear how grades will be assigned. A rubric may be helpful in specifying criteria, standards and weightings.

If process is being assessed, identify the elements (e.g. effort, contribution, personal development etc.) and consider how they will be evidenced. Digital technologies are likely to be important both to facilitate collaboration and record activity. Technologies like MS Teams, Moodle discussion boards and wikis allow students to meet, share and organise information and manage their time. They also generate a record of activity that can help the lecturer to monitor and assess the process. Other strategies include reflective diaries/logs, self-assessment, peer assessment and lecturer observation (see 4. Monitoring). A methodology for managing the process, for example Scrum[2], may also be used to provide transparency on individual roles, planning and task completion. However, if using a process methodology like Scrum, significant training and monitoring will be needed to ensure the students correctly understand, interpret and apply the process disciplines.

3.1 Grading

Typically, the approaches are (i) a single grade for all group members, (ii) an individual grade for each group member (iii) some combination, often a group mark with an individualised component reflecting effort, contribution and/or other dimensions of process.

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[2] See https://www.scrumalliance.org/

Again, all approaches have advantages and disadvantages, however, while a single grade may be appropriate in some circumstances, it is generally perceived as very unfair and can cause distress to award stage students in particular. A single grade may also undermine personal responsibility and promote free-riding. .[3]

Individual grades are more likely to be perceived as fair. Allowing students to submit individual assignments may be appropriate in some cases, particularly where the focus is on the product and/or individual competencies. For example, a group of students might conduct a small piece of research and each then submits an individual research report. In other cases, this would not be appropriate and some combination of group and individual grade must be used.

One approach is for the group to submit a single product, such as an artefact or report, but each group member also submits an individual piece that reflects on the process and their learning. This could also take the form of a presentation or interview is assessed by the lecturer. The overall grade for each student is determined by the shared grade for the product and the individual grade. Another approach is to combine an overall product grade with an individualised grade for contribution using one of the methods in Table 2.

Quality of work Contribution/effort* and /or the process	Assessed by lecturer - typically same mark for all		
	Assessed by lecturer	Assessed by peers	Self-assessment
	Likely to be perceived as fair, Requires a system for monitoring the process and/or contribution (digital technologies likely to be useful).	May promote ownership and engagement, Enhances understanding of task and process, May reduce free-riding, Group-members often best placed to evaluate contribution.	May promote ownership and engagement, Enhances understanding of task and process, Has the potential to develop understanding of own learning.
	But, Little active engagement by students in the assessment process, Difficult to manage if no monitoring system in place.	*But,* May be perceived as unfair, If poorly managed can create a 'hostile' environment (Noonan, 2013), Preparation and training required may place additional demands on staff and student time, May produce	*But,* May be perceived as unfair or unreliable, Preparation and training required - students often feel ill-prepared, May produce inconsistencies and/or grade inflation.

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[3] While this may reflect relative advantage or disadvantage, it may also reflect the different skills involved in group projects.

		inconsistencies and/or grade inflation.
Useful when	The emphasis is on the product and/or some key element of process, Little time to prepare students for peer/self - assessment, Groups are not cohesive.	The process is an important part of the assessment, There is time to prepare and support the students, Clear criteria are developed and applied - consider using a rubric, Rationale is clear to the students, Groups are fairly cohesive, Grading is anonymous.

Table 2: Individualising grades by contribution.

*Contribution reflects effort but is more than this (e.g. quality of ideas) so it is important to be clear about what is being assessed.

Peer and self-assessment are very useful learning activities but students need guidance, support and clear criteria. It is worth noting these forms of assessment can be formative rather than summative. Students can learn a great deal by giving feedback to each other and receiving it in return. They do not have to grade each other to benefit.

3.2   Weightings

These should be determined by the learning outcomes and assessment criteria. For example, if process is a key part of the assessment this should be clear from the weighting.   Rubrics can help to make this transparent.   If peer or self-assessment contributes to the grade think carefully about the appropriate weighting for this. Lee *et al*. (2015) suggest a weighting of approximately 10% as reasonable but this will depend also on the task and the disciplinary norms.

4.   Monitoring

Lecturers have a duty to guide and support the students; it is unreasonable to expect them to manage the complexities of group-work without support.   This also facilitates lecturer assessment of individual contributions.

Consider:

- What experience do these students have with group-work?
- What preparation do they need?
- What support do they need? How will this be provided?
- Timetables and room availability may make it difficult for students to meet so devoting some class time to projects can be very helpful.
- Be mindful of the potential sensory issues for some students, for example, around levels of noise and light. Quiet rooms are available for students to book in the library and these can be very useful for

group-work. An assistive technology sensory space is also available in the library to facilitate group-work for students supported by the Disability Service. This space can also be used by such students to practice presentations, supported by the Assistive Technology Officer, if required.

- Technologies can also be helpful - shared digital workspaces, such as Teams, can be very useful in terms of managing and recording the work and promoting transparency.

Stage	Strategy
Before	Discuss expectations,
	Explain the assessment process,
	Support group formation:
	1. Encourage allocation of roles within the group,
	2. Agree a communication process,
	3. Consider learning agreements,
	4. Agree a mechanism for identifying and resolving problems.
During	Encourage groups to set clear goals and allocate tasks,
	Review progress at regular intervals,
	Lecturer should support groups in resolving issues and intervene where appropriate,
	If a group appears to be having difficulty deal with this as early as possible,
	Encourage students to reflect on their learning.
After	Discuss the experience and encourage students to reflect on what they have learned, and how this may apply to their employability skills development.
	Provide timely constructive feedback on product and process.

Table 3: Monitoring and supporting group work

Summary

- Group work plays an important role in developing transferrable skills and has the potential to enhance learning, however it must be planned, monitored and supported if these benefits are to be realised.
- The role of group-work should be considered in the context of the programme, discussed with students and linked to the development of graduate attributes.
- The relative emphasis on product and process should be considered.
- Assessment criteria should be clear, fair and discussed with students.
- Students need support and guidance throughout the process.

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