The Value of Group Work

This page outlines questions you should consider when embedding group work in your course.

What does group work mean in my discipline?

Different disciplines can value quite different group work skills from one another. For example, Architecture might value the ability to work in groups to develop a design solution very highly, while Commerce might consider it more important to develop a capacity to engage in teamwork to negotiate diverse social processes and situations.

Establish what your discipline holds to be important in the way of group skills, before embedding their development in your course.

How is group work valued in my Faculty?

The following table shows how various Faculties have contextualised group work skills in their discipline(s) and professional areas. These lists will evolve as Faculties map their curricula, so check with your Faculty to determine which group work skills are emphasised in the most recent contextualisations.

Faculty	Contextualised group work skills
Arts and Social Sciences	- The ability to work cooperatively with others in teams or other collaborative arrangements - The capacity to show leadership in group problem solving activities - A developed capacity to organise time and meet deadlines for the completion of tasks
COFA	- Possess an understanding of the historical and theoretical underpinning of contemporary creative practice, and the ability to discuss this understanding within a group of their peers. - Demonstrate the ability to engage in collaborative endeavours.

Australian School of Business	• Exercise empathy, respect for others and team work in pursuing outcomes of negotiating diverse social processes and situations. • For more information on the ASB's graduate attributes see the **ASB Graduate Attributes** page.
Engineering	• The ability to work within technical teams, with other professionals in the development of a product or management of a project, with all professional groups within an organisation and with other organisations and clients • Teamwork.
FBE	• Ability to function effectively as an individual and in multidisciplinary and multicultural teams, with the capacity to be a leader or manager as well as an effective team member
Medicine	• Participates effectively in peer groups • Leads and manages groups of peers • Participates effectively in health care teams
Science	• Teamwork, collaborative and management skills • Ability to recognise opportunities and contribute positively to collaborative scientific research, and to perceive the potential value of ideas towards practical applications • Demonstrate a capacity for self management, teamwork, leadership and decision making based on open-mindedness, objectivity and reasoned analysis in order to achieve common goals and further the learning of themselves and others. • Communication: effective and appropriate communication in both professional (intra- and inter-disciplinary) and social (local and international) contexts

How are group work skills valued by accreditation bodies?

The following excerpts from various professional accreditation bodies' requirements demonstrate how skills related to group work are valued in different fields.

Accreditation body	Attributes relevant to group skills

Royal Australian Institute of Architects	• Design integration: An understanding of the processes of working within a team and how to collaborate with others in the development of a design solution. • Skills: An ability to affect action or communicate ideas through the exercise of skills of collaboration, speaking, writing, drawing, modeling and evaluation.
Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia	• Collaborative team workers • Capable communicators of shared understandings
Institution of Engineers Australia	• Ability to function effectively as an individual in multidisciplinary and multicultural teams, with the capacity to be a leader or manager as well as an effective team member For further attributes, see the Engineers Australia website **Program Accreditation** page.
Australian Medical Council	• A willingness to work effectively in a team with other health care professionals • The ability to communicate clearly, considerately and sensitively with patients and their families, doctors, nurses, other health professionals and the general public For further attributes, see the Australian Medical Council Limited's **Accreditation & Recognition** home page.
Australian Psychological Society	Competency 7—Professional and Community Relations: This set of competencies addresses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes involved in establishing and maintaining effective relationships with clients, other psychologists, and with members of other professional and non-professional groups. It recognises the central role of working with people in the practice of psychology. It includes clarifying roles and responsibilities, and conveying possible contributions of psychological expertise to other professionals and the community at large. Its component parts involve the capacity to: adopt an independent or team approach as appropriate; engage the client or clients; clarify roles and responsibilities in consultation with other relevant individuals; accept and initiate supervision of projects or people as appropriate; and apply knowledge to the community. For further attributes, see the **Australian Psychology Accreditation Council's website**.

How are group skills valued by employers?

In 2000, an Australian research project was conducted by A. C. Neilson Research to determine the extent of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the skills of new graduates entering the workforce. Interpersonal skills were among the most common skill deficiencies identified by employers, along with communication skills and an understanding of business practice. The following table shows the mean importance ratings of a number of skills associated with group work across a range of industries (1=not at all important; 5=extremely important).

Faculty	Mean importance ratings		
	Teamwork	Interpersonal skills with other staff	Project management skills
Manufacturing	3.5	3.5	3.6
Construction	3.2	4.0	3.7
Wholesale	3.8	3.7	3.9
Retail	3.5	3.7	3.6
Hospitality	3.5	3.7	3.2
Finance and Insurance	4.1	4.0	3.8
Property and business services	3.9	4.0	3.7
Education	3.8	4.0	4.4
Health and community services	4.0	4.2	3.9

Adapted from A.C. Neilsen Research Services (2000). Employer Satisfaction with Graduate Skills: Research Report (Evaluations and Investigations Programme Higher Education Division, DETYA), p.18.

The above table suggests that employers in a range of industries rated teamwork, interpersonal skills and project management skills as important, with only two mean importance ratings falling below 3.5.

What do our students think of group work?

In a UNSW First Year Awards Workshop in 2003, students from the UNSW Co-op program commented on what attributes they were expected to demonstrate in their work with industry, and on what helped them to develop those attributes. These comments reinforce the importance of providing a context for the development of students' group

skills. (See the page **Preparing for group work**.)

> I also needed good group work and interpersonal skills. Group work assignments at university are almost useless because everybody simply works individually on separate tasks related to the one topic. More class time should be spent on working on problems. —*UNSW Co-op student, Workshop Panel, 2003*

This comment suggests that some students experience group work largely as an individual exercise rather than a collaborative one. If students are unclear about why a particular activity has been assigned as a group task, they are unlikely that to be motivated to interact as a group. Students who are given opportunities to develop and reflect on group processes (rather than product only) are more likely to experience the benefits of group work and use their skills in other contexts.

> Teamwork and interacting with others was also important. At university, you interact with your peers, and you can tell people to pull their weight in a group work assignment. But you never have to talk to them again once the assignment is handed in. In the workplace, however, you have to get along with people in the long term. —*UNSW Co-op student, Workshop Panel, 2003*

Students often find group work very difficult when group members are perceived as not pulling their weight. There are a number of ways to monitor and address the relative contribution of group members, and to design assessment tasks that take this issue into account—see the **Assessing by Group Work page** of this website.

> Group work is also an important skill, but peer evaluations at university aren't really effective because interpersonal relations are artificial (that is, you might not see the people in your group again after the assignment). —*UNSW Co-op student, Workshop Panel, 2003*

Authentic group tasks and projects give students an opportunity to experience scenarios they are likely to encounter in the workplace. The nature of the task and the type of group processes you focus on should help students understand what aspects of group work are valued in your discipline. If you provide students with a rationale and adequate support for the peer review process, they are more likely to see the benefit of feedback and critical review processes, and to apply their skills in other contexts.