Dealing with Group Work Issues

On this page you'll find some tips for dealing with some common issues experienced by students in groups.

**Issue 1**

**Students feel that group members are not pulling their weight and are concerned that individual contributions will not be recognised and assessed fairly**

- Avoid this issue by asking students to set clear expectations at the beginning of the task or project. Make sure they include guidelines regarding individual contributions to the group. For example:
  - Everyone will come to meetings prepared.
  - We will encourage everyone to contribute to discussion and the generation of ideas.
  - We will review levels of contribution four weeks into the project.

- Ask students to complete the exercise *Reviewing the contribution of group members.*

- Address the issue of contributions with the whole class, when first you introduce the idea of group work. For example, ask the class to come up with a range of strategies that might be useful for dealing with situations where students are not pulling their weight in groups. Perhaps they could put a list of ideas on a whiteboard, and you could add a few suggestions of your own. This type of brainstorming gets the issue out in the open and can also be used to help students deal with dominant group members or other common group issues.

- A major concern students have about group work is that group assessment may not fairly assess individual contributions. For ideas on how assessment can be structured to address student concerns see the page *Assessing Group Work.*

**Issue 2**

**Students don’t see the relevance of group work and feel that the objectives aren’t clear**

- Spend some time in class setting up a context for group work. Students may not have a clear understanding of how the skills of group work are relevant to, and valued in, their chosen discipline area. You might like the whole group to brainstorm why group work is important in the field of study, or ask students to discuss ideas
in small groups and report back to the whole class for further discussion. Consult this checklist for setting a context for group work.

- Clarify the specific learning outcomes for group work—what will students be able to do after they have completed the group task or project? This gives them clear direction and can motivate their learning. Similarly, tell them what criteria will be used to judge the process and products of group work. This can help them stay focused on their skills development, monitor their progress and identify areas for improvement.

- Make sure students are adequately prepared for group work (see the page Preparing students for group work). Student reactions to group work are often negative at first. Their previous experiences of group work may not have been positive, or they may prefer working on their own, or they may be intimidated by the task. With adequate preparation and support, students often change their view as their group task or project progresses, and develop an appreciation of the process and products of group work.

### Issue 3

**Groups don’t get on and aren’t listening to each other**

- Remind students that in their professional careers they may find themselves having to work in groups where they don’t get on well with group members, or find it difficult to work with some people in group situations. Suggest to them that now is a good time to start learning how to deal with differences of opinion, ways of working, ideas and philosophies and so on.

- Take students through exercises and handouts to help them put aside their differences, improve their ways of working together, and encourage them to raise, address and resolve particularly emotional issues in a systematic and constructive manner. In particular, you might like to consider supporting students in reflective listening and providing constructive feedback.

### Issue 4

**Students are concerned about their group members’ English language abilities**

- If a group report is part of the group project, perhaps the more confident writers in the group can pair up with the less confident ones to help them plan a draft and revise their section of the report.

- Students may not understand why they should devote extra time to students with lower levels of English proficiency. Explain to them that people often learn best when explaining things to others, clarifying and refining their ideas as they speak. And remind students that if they don't support group members with lower English proficiency skills in articulating their ideas, they might significantly compromise the quality of ideas and arguments in the report.

- Suggest to students that they give students with lower English proficiency skills the opportunity to practise their part of a group presentation and receive constructive feedback. You might consider providing students with some guidelines on constructive feedback.

- Make sure students are aware of the UNSW Learning Centre and the support they provide for developing students’ academic writing and presentation skills. While the Learning Centre does not teach English, many of
their workshops and online resources can help students improve their writing and presentation skills.

Issue 5

One or more members of the group leave and a group has to reform

If a group has to reform, or there is late integration of group members, groups may need support to readjust. For example you might suggest that groups repeat an initial ice breaker or team building exercise, and review their job lists, action plans, meeting roles and timelines. Groups might also benefit from reviewing their progress a few weeks after their reformation to identify and address any issues they may be facing.

Issue 6

Students are finding it difficult to schedule meetings outside class

- Allow some time in class for groups to conduct meetings and plan their work. This will also allow you to monitor group processes, suggest ways of working to groups who are experiencing difficulties and encourage students to reflect on their progress and identify any problems and successes.
- If scheduling class time for meetings is difficult, you might be able to avoid difficulties by forming groups based on factors like geographical location, comparable work schedules and so on.