

Guidelines for Designing, Delivering & Assessing Group Work

Revised 15.3.2021

Introduction

[1] These guidelines are built around a set of general principles governing the design, delivery and assessment of group work. The guidelines apply to all modules, including those delivered via online / blended learning, involving group work as defined in Section 4 below. These guidelines, as of [date to be inserted], replace the previous advisory policy on groupwork that was in effect 05 April 2017 to [date to be inserted].

[2] In addition to these guidelines, CIRTL has made available a checklist intended to support good practice in the delivery of group work and organises seminars / workshops on group work and related matters (<https://www.ucc.ie/en/cirtl/>)

[3] Alignment between forms of assessment and intended learning outcomes is good educational practice which supports high quality student learning. As a method of assessment, group work shares the same requirements as all other forms of assessment for educational alignment. This includes the need for a clear statement of: (i) the learning to be assessed, (ii) the assessment task, (iii) assessment criteria, and (iv) expectations for levels of student performance. Group work can facilitate the development and / or assessment of learners' valuable transferrable skills, including communication, problem-solving and team-working abilities. Nevertheless, some staff and students may regard assessment of group work activities with a degree of apprehension, which often arises as group work is typically a less frequently used form of assessment and therefore less well understood than other assessment methods. These guidelines present a set of general principles which are sufficiently robust to reflect good practice in the design and practice of assessment and flexible enough to be permissive of the range of disciplinary settings and approaches in operation across the university.

[4] These guidelines should be read in conjunction with UCC's Assessment Framework and aim to promote good practice through a set of general principles so that students undertaking group work activity are supported in achieving maximum learning from this assessment format.

General definition of “group work”

[5] For the purpose of this policy, “group work” involves students working collaboratively on a particular project, assignment or task and where the assessment is based on the output of the group work and / or the group work process (i.e., assessment of participation in the group). There are different kinds of assessment that may be used in demonstrating achievement of particular learning outcomes/learning outcome sets. Module co-ordinators should consider carefully whether group work assessment is continuous, formative and / or summative.

Background and context

[6] A wide range of group work activity takes place across the University and provides valuable learning opportunities for students. As well as strengthening students’ capacity with respect to rigorous scholarship, group work facilitates the development of a range of transferable skills which are much sought after by employers (e.g., leadership skills, problem- solving skills, working as part of a team, time management, communication skills, presentation and report writing skills, self-reflection etc.). The use of group work, and the emphasis on developing an active, student-centred learning environment through problem-based and project-based learning, has increased in recent years. This trend is likely to continue into the future with the strong contemporary focus on “work ready” graduates who have acquired a wide range of skills in the course of their programme of study.

[7] Given the diversity of approaches to group work across the University, and the specific disciplinary and / or professional accreditation requirements that apply in certain cases, a core set of general principles, supplemented by exemplars of best practice, provides a valuable resource for the development of robust groupwork activity across the University.

[8] The overarching objective of these guidelines is to commend best practice and positive learning outcomes which aim to ensure, *inter alia*, that an individual student’s contribution to group work is accurately assessed and rewarded. This objective is best achieved by consideration, from the outset, to the design and delivery of group work activities, including establishing clear and appropriate processes to address any issues, tensions or disputes that might arise in the course of a group work activity and communicating this information effectively to students in advance of the project commencing.

General guidance on group work

Please refer to the [CIRTL website](#) for more in-depth information, guidance, and resources on designing, delivering and assessing groupwork.

1. Clear module objectives and learning outcomes communicated effectively to students

The UCC [Book of Modules](#) describes all modules listed in the College Calendar. Policy Governing the creation/amendment of existing modules (including the Academic Council approved module guidelines and checklist) can be found [here](#). As is the case for every module, the module description in the Book of Modules must state the objectives and learning outcomes of any module involving group work. If an objective of the group work project is to develop transversal skills, these should be reflected in the learning outcomes for the module.

The published Book of Modules is the contract between the University and the student, thus the information it contains must accurately reflect the module content delivered. Additional information which expands on the approved published module description should also be made available directly to students, in writing, in an initial briefing session or introductory seminar (and / or via Canvas/VLE). In some cases (e.g. at a local/School or discipline level), a student handbook may be provided which contains information with regard to group work activities. Any such additional information **must** be aligned with the approved module description as published in the Book of Modules.

Carefully considered, well-designed module objectives and robust learning outcomes, which are communicated effectively to students, should reduce the scope for potential problems in implementation and assessment of group work.

The module objectives and learning outcomes will guide the choice of learning method(s) and the most appropriate method(s) of assessment.

2. Clear statement of assessment method(s) should be communicated effectively to students

The module description in the Book of Modules must state how the module will be assessed and the specific weighting assigned to each element of the overall assessment. In particular, students must be informed and fully understand whether assessment is based on their individual performance or the group's performance or a combination of both.

In order to ensure fairness, and to reflect accurately each individual student's contribution to a group work project, it is highly recommended that any assessment of group work activity should involve a specific mechanism whereby *individual* student

achievement is recognised and rewarded. Assessment of group work is therefore most robust where two elements are considered: one comprising a group mark and the other comprising an individual mark reflective of the individual input into the generation of the groupwork artefact(s).

The rationale for each element of the overall assessment and how this links into the learning outcomes and / or accreditation requirements / professional requirements (where appropriate) should be clear to all students. For example, what skills are being assessed in performing a particular task (e.g., presentation skills, report writing skills etc.) and to which learning outcome is this skill/assessment aligned?

Students must be provided with clear expectations at the outset of the module, as well as clear information, in writing, detailing how their performance and contribution to any group work activity will be assessed. This information must describe each element of the overall assessment for the module, the weighting assigned to it and the evaluation criteria and must be consistent with the approved module description as published in the Book of Modules. Any change to the published Book of Modules must be approved at College level before being communicated to students.

When determining the assessment method(s) and the weight to be assigned to each element of the overall assessment, careful consideration must be given to the distribution of marks for each element of the assessment so as to reflect the nature and complexity of the particular task(s) assigned to the individual and /or group.

Where marks are allocated to students for their own specific contribution to a piece of work undertaken in a group, clear guidance must be provided to students at the outset of the module on how to distinguish their particular individual contribution to the piece of work in question (e.g., each student may be required to submit a declaration (or equivalent) confirming their particular contribution to a group work project).

Students must be provided with the information necessary to enable them to understand clearly how each element of assessment will be graded (e.g., grade descriptors or evaluation criteria).

Overall responsibility and oversight for grading must rest with the module co-ordinator to ensure consistency.

Arrangements for supplemental examinations involving group work must be set out in the module description in the Book of Modules and must comply with Academic Council approved policy in relation to repeating Continuous Assessment for Supplemental Examinations (see DMIS Guidelines). This policy states that, wherever practicable, a second opportunity should be provided to students who have failed Continuous Assessment, or particular elements of Continuous Assessment. These

arrangements must be considered carefully and communicated clearly to students in good time. Arrangements for supplemental examinations allow that the format of the second opportunity examination in Continuous Assessment need not necessarily be the same as that used for in-year assessment but, whatever format is used, the same competencies should be assessed and should ensure that the module learning outcomes are evaluated, and that the format is appropriate for return of marks.

3. Clarity around how groups are formed

Groups in the context of this policy are considered to consist of two or more students working jointly on a particular project, assignment or task. Group size should reflect the nature and complexity of the learning outcomes and the specific task(s) assigned to the group. Students must take responsibility for contributing to the group dynamic and making it work.

Students must be informed at the outset as to how groups will be formed. It is recognised that, in some cases, self-selection may be appropriate while, in others, students may not have a choice in their allocation to a group; the merits and appropriateness of the two approaches should be considered carefully for each group work assignment. If self-selection is used, group formation should be co-ordinated through the module co-ordinator rather than being left to the students' own devices.

4. Timely and informative feedback for students

In order to enable students to judge their progress and improve their performance over the course of the module, timely and informative feedback should be provided for each element of the assessment, where possible.

5. Opportunities for students to comment on experience in the group

An appropriate process must be put in place to enable students to communicate their experiences of how the group is progressing to the lecturer and / or module co-ordinator (as appropriate) on an ongoing basis. Such a process provides an "early warning system" which can alert the lecturer / module co-ordinator to any potential issues or problems within a group at an early stage.

6. Processes to address any issues / conflicts arising during a group work project

Module co-ordinators should encourage members of a group to attempt to resolve any conflicts that arise among themselves in the first instance, where appropriate.

An appropriate dispute resolution process should be put in place at the outset and students should be informed as to how they can engage this process should the need arise. At the very minimum, students must be informed of their entitlement to contact the lecturer and / or module co-ordinator (as appropriate) for assistance. The importance of addressing any issues arising at the earliest possible opportunity must be communicated clearly to students. The nature of the process put in place will vary depending on the nature of the group work activity in question and the weighting assigned to it (for example, where group work accounts for a significant portion of the marks available in a specific module and / or programme, a more formal and elaborate dispute resolution process may be necessary). The University has a [Student Complaints Policy](#), to which local dispute resolution processes, particularly escalation pathways, must be aligned.

7. Feedback mechanism on student experience of the module

As is the case with any module, with a view towards ongoing improvement of the module and learning from experience, students should be given an appropriate opportunity to provide feedback on their experience of the module and, in particular, on the group work element, to the module co-ordinator. This mechanism is in addition to the ongoing analysis of student experience throughout the groupwork activity (Section 5, above).

8. Support and collaboration among staff involved in group work activities

Staff members who are proposing new modules that involve group work, or who are considering introducing a group work component to existing modules, should be encouraged to engage with more experienced colleagues at the outset so that they are made aware of any potential pit-falls and how best to avoid problems with implementation. Please refer to the CIRTLL website, or contact CIRTLL directly, for a list of groupwork 'champions'.

9. Relevant policies, Codes of Conduct etc.

Due attention and consideration must be given to UCC policies, codes of conduct etc. that may be relevant in a particular situation, including, for example, the [Handbook](#)

Governing Curriculum Approval, the Policies and Guidelines Governing Academic Programmes, [DMIS Guidelines](#), the [Guide to Examinations and Assessment for Staff and Students](#), the [Plagiarism Policy](#), [Student Complaints Policy & Procedure](#), and the [UCC Student Rules](#) etc.