

Working with Students in Teams or Groups



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An important aspect of study at university is the opportunity to work as part of a group or team. Group working is encouraged because it can be a highly effective way to learn and is extremely relevant to the workplace. Working with others enables students to pool ideas, see problems from different perspectives and benefit from analysing, discussing and exploring their own ideas and questions and to gain feedback from their peers.

Group working helps students to develop generic skills such as organisation, delegation, effective communication, co-operation and leadership; all valuable qualities that will be sought after and highly valued in their careers. Teamwork and leadership¹ are some of the key qualities that employers look for in their new graduates. However, it is not sufficient to put students in groups and ask them to work together: students need to be taught the skills they will need to function successfully in this kind of situation.

Two objectives are achieved in good teams: the task is completed *and* the satisfaction of team members is high. In order to achieve both of these ends, students must be taught to:²

- Get to know other members of the group and their strengths
- Set ground rules
- Use a facilitator
- Keep lines of communication open
- Know how to avoid (or solve) common problems

Help should be given to students to set basic ground rules to ensure that everyone is in agreement about how the team should operate. They also need help to establish rules about how the work will be done, the role and responsibilities of a facilitator, how they will communicate with one another and how any meetings will be run.

Resources

A good guide to the issues of professional communication that undergraduate students need in order to successfully work as part of a team can be found at <http://web.mit.edu/tll/teaching-materials/teamwork/index.html> Issues such as basic team working skills and group assessment are presented as well as hints for team members on how to handle difficult behaviour.

¹ <http://www.corusgroup.com/en/careers/>

² <http://web.mit.edu/tll/teaching-materials/teamwork/index.html>

The Foundation Coalition (FC), an engineering partnership funded by the National Science Foundation, has an excellent resource on how to work with teams of engineering students. The Foundation's faculty members have coupled their experience and expertise with research on teams to create a number of resources to help members of staff increase the effectiveness of student teams in their courses. The resource is available at http://www.foundationcoalition.org/home/keycomponents/student_teams.html

How can we help?

UKCME can help by:

- Putting you in contact with one or more staff at UK universities who currently deliver modules with a strong 'team working' flavour;
- Offer guidance and/or teaching development grants to develop modules which incorporate a team working theme;
- Running an awareness-raising workshop in your Department, Faculty, School or College.

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Higher Education Academy Resources

- The HEA's website has an extensive 'Group Work' resource which covers the following areas: using groups, group roles, stages of development, group size, group formation, preparing students for group work, managing group processes, assessing group work, evaluating and reviewing, and pedagogical and ethical issues. This is available at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/assessment/Group>
- There is a 'Teamwork' tutor support pack available online through the HEA's website at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/SNAS/snas_334 This pack is written for design tutors who include some team work in their course and want to students to have a positive experience in this way of working. Whilst tailored for architecture students, the pack provides plans for three design workshops. Script is provided for each workshop outlining what the tutor does, what the students do and what the outputs are at each stage. The intention is that a tutor will be able to use the pack's material, as it stands and with limited preparation, to experiment with a new way of working with students, later adapting and extending it to suit his or her own specific context.
- A report entitled 'Training students to work in teams: Why and how?' is published at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/resources/casestudies/cs_120 This report provides practical advice to academic staff members on how team skills training programmes can be developed. It includes an evaluation of its impact on student performance, learning outcomes, student attitudes and peer relationships.