

Guidelines for Effective Group Projects at the University of Melbourne

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The role of collaborative learning is receiving widespread attention in higher education and, in many cases, increasing priority within university curricula. While much of this attention is focussed on fostering in-class discussion and enabling informal collaborative study, the important contribution of more formalised group projects for assessment purposes* is also recognised – as are the associated challenges.

Students frequently express concerns about group projects, and their concerns typically involve issues of assessment, fair 'reward for effort', and group management. Staff share many of these concerns. Yet well-designed and supported group projects can be highly effective for student learning and can help develop skills of leadership and teamwork.

Group projects are a feature of many courses at the University of Melbourne. Students work collaboratively in the research, creation and development of a wide range of 'products' – for example: written and oral presentations, architectural installations, computer software, drama, music. Group projects are as varied in purpose as they are in product. Some of the more common reasons for including a group project in subject curricula are to:

- develop teamwork skills, including both generic skills and those more specific to particular disciplines or professions;
- develop leadership skills, including the associated interpersonal skills and understandings;
- enable production of work that is either not possible or is too onerous for individual effort alone;
- encourage learning from one another, promoting cultural awareness and knowledge across disciplines;
- engage with the community in knowledge-transfer activities;
- manage assessment in large classes, with limited resources.

For effective group projects, staff involvement is critical in providing:

1. careful planning, with consideration given to specific purposes and learning outcomes;
2. management of group formation, in line with purpose and appropriate to the student cohort;
3. assessment which is aligned to the stated purpose, takes advantage of opportunities for peer feedback, and addresses students' concerns over equity;
4. clear goals for students through detailed explanations, assistance in the development of teamwork skills, facilities for communication, and resolution of difficulties should they arise.

The *Principles for Group Projects at the University of Melbourne* (page 2) provides a framework to inform the design and conduct of group projects across the University, while supporting the diversity of specific purpose and application in various courses and disciplines. Group projects play an important role in the development of the University's graduate attributes, and provide opportunities for knowledge transfer through activities such as service learning with industry and volunteer work with community-based groups. These Principles are aligned with the University's *Nine Principles Guiding Teaching and Learning*¹, and endorsed principles of assessment².

* For the purposes of this document, group projects are defined as tasks that involve small groups of students working collaboratively over a period of days or weeks to produce a tangible outcome, or 'product', that is typically assessed.

¹ http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/9_Principles.pdf

² <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/GRA.pdf>

For links to further information and resources to support group projects:
www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/resources/cshe_res/XXXX (under development)

Principles for Group Projects at the University of Melbourne

Project design

1. Group projects are designed to support the development of students' teamwork skills
2. More sophisticated teamwork skills are required for group projects in postgraduate subjects
3. The relevance of group projects to the overall learning within subjects is made explicit
4. The projects set are suitable for collaborative group work
5. The projects reflect collaborative work in the discipline or professional field
6. Consideration is given to the timing and nature of group projects across a course of study

Group formation

7. Staff are responsible for determining group membership in order to accommodate diversity and ensure fairness
8. Cultural and disciplinary diversity within groups is fostered
9. Group formation solely on the basis of friendship is avoided wherever possible
10. Group size is optimised for effective collaboration, recognising the challenges associated with coordination of large groups
11. Contingencies are planned should groups become unviable during the course of projects

Assessment

12. Peer feedback and reflection on the effectiveness of group processes is encouraged
13. Formal assessment may focus on the completed 'product' only, or may include assessment of the group process itself, as is appropriate to the subject objectives
14. If grades are to be revised to recognise individuals' differential contributions to the group process, staff give consideration to both peer and self reports
15. Group projects may involve a combination of individual and group assessment tasks
16. The degree of complexity and workload involved in group projects is reflected in their assessment weighting

Information and support for students

17. Students are provided with information about expectations at the outset
18. The type of collaboration expected is explained to students
19. Assessment criteria are provided and standards explained
20. Teamwork skills are explicitly taught as preparation for the group project
21. Resources are provided to assist groups to manage group processes and teamwork
22. Processes for involving staff in resolution of group difficulties are described
23. Communication and collaboration are facilitated through the use of tools on the subject website
24. Face-to-face meetings are encouraged through access to appropriate facilities on campus

Development of these principles involved consultation with the Teaching and Learning Development Committee, and with the Policy and Procedures Working Group between May and July 2008.