

## Unravelling Group Work Assessment: Postgraduate Students’ Perceptions and Experiences

*Jacqueline Susan Rijeng, Imelia Laura Daneil, Tang Howe Eng, Siti Faridah Kamaruddin,  
Mohamad Musa Bohari*

*(Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kampus Mukah)*

**Abstract:** The importance of team-working in Malaysian institutions of higher education has brought significant impacts and received various reactions from students of different levels particularly in implementing the assessment practices in higher education today. A study was conducted to explore postgraduate students’ perceptions of group work assessment, potential issues germane to group work assessment as well as strategies to overcome the problem. The study employed a mixed method research design and involved a group of final year full-time postgraduate students ( $n = 20$ ) from the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam. Findings revealed that students had a positive attitude to group work assessment as an integral aspect in the classroom, and that it is a fair method in awarding marks. Nonetheless, some were still uncertain if it ensures lower grades for students who work the least. Several issues were highlighted in terms of the assessment process, lecturer and students’ standpoints which lead to the suggestion in implementing peer-assessment in the syllabus. The findings have implications on curriculum development across different programmes in order to implement effective assessment method in higher education.

**Key words:** Group work assessment, peer-assessment, higher education

### 1. Introduction

Classroom instruction and assessment play important roles to enhance student learning especially in producing well-rounded individuals in facing with the demands of the 21st century. This is in line with the features outlined in the Education Development Plan of Malaysia (PPPM) 2015-2025 that highlights “thinking skills” as one of the six features required by students to meet the challenges of the global demands. Therefore, team-working or collaborative group work is seen as one way to prepare students in an academic setting to function as effective thinkers or thinking individuals. This is particularly true in the working environment which requires individuals to relay ideas effectively among team members.

Hence, group work comes into perspective as an integral part of a student-centered curriculum. According to Noonan (2013), a properly-developed assessment that addresses the entire requirement needed in assessing group work is the key aspect that ensures the successful engagement of group work. Using group work as part of classroom assessments is engaging for many reasons as it offers a variety of learning strategies such as collaborative learning, problem-based learning and active learning (Gagon & Roberge, 2011). With this in mind, students are expected to maximize knowledge sharing and to develop interpersonal trust among members to

obtain the desired outcome working in a group (Analoui, Sambrook & Doloriert, 2014) as it provides opportunities that cannot be experienced through individual learning.

### **1.1 Statement of Problem**

At present, group work assessment takes place in many aspects of the teaching and learning process. Educators strongly emphasized the importance of students' active participation in a group so as to stimulate thinking and to promote interaction particularly, student engagement in learning. Although group work projects are capable of promoting teamwork skill and self-regulated learning, there are ethical considerations concerning its assessment. The fairness of group work as a tool for assessment is questionable mainly among students. This includes equality in awarding marks for group work, equality in assessing individual contribution to group work and the like (Quinn & Hughes, 2007). Furthermore, studies also claimed that students perceive the assessment of group work to be unfair if there is equal reward given for unequal contribution among group members (Noonan, 2013). This creates conflicts as marks allocation by educators tends to be seen as an issue as it is taught to be unfair or bias at times.

Other issues include the reliability of group work as an assessment, unfair distribution of workload, and group members who are not active in contributing to the completion of a task (Chapman, 2006 as cited in Beccaria, Kek, Huijser, Rose & Kimmins, 2014). So, to achieve fairness in assessment, the consistency of group work assessment should therefore be addressed. Thus, the following research objectives are taken into account: a) To investigate the postgraduate students' perceptions on the fairness of group work assessment; b) To explore the potential issues rose by post graduate students with regards to assessment of group work; c) to identify the strategies to overcome the issues on group work assessment.

## **2. Literature Review**

The assessment of group work is seen as an important aspect that could enhance the effectiveness of student learning among their peers. In a study conducted by Smith and Rogers (2014) among nursing students, there is a positive indication in students' attitudes where students believed that teamwork skills is important and that the group work approach is a preferred method of learning. On the contrary, Analoui, Sambrook and Doloriert (2014) revealed that students have limited knowledge in understanding sharing skills that is much needed in the successful execution of group work. While some schools of thought perceived group work as conflicting in nature, it is inevitable that it offers numerous benefits to students. Working in groups is found to deliver academic and social benefits to students (Beccaria et al., 2014). Group discussion allows students to communicate, solve problems, improve social and leadership skills as well as experience awareness of group dynamics (Cartney & Rouse, 2006 as cited in Beccaria et al., 2014). Given this circumstance, trust among members is required when conducting group work. In a study by Matveev and Milter (2010) conducted among 114 American university students, trust is viewed as one of the most important aspect in group work effectiveness.

From the students' point of view, some common issues include dealing with cultural diversity in a group as well as inequality in group contribution among members (Sedgwich, 2010). Similarly, educators perceived group work to be challenging in terms of marks allocation and in ensuring productive collaboration among students (Sedgwich, 2010). Hence, educators need to ensure the fair and reliable assessment of group work to be practiced in the classroom as there will always be significant challenges in assessing group work (Caple & Bogle, 2013) in the attempt to ensure that the assessment is accepted and recognized as fair among students.

Hence, several strategies can be implemented to address the aforementioned problems. One way is by practicing peer assessment which has proven to enhance student learning as well as to ensure the fairness or usefulness of the grades allocated (Shiu, Chan, Lam, Lee & Kwong, 2011). Peer-evaluation allows the moderation of scores across all groups as well as evaluation of students' perception. Another important method is by acknowledging students' contribution as one regardless of the individual effort they put in unless, feedback is given if there is a problem (Noonan, 2013). By taking these suggestions into consideration, assessment of group work can be carried out more effectively.

### 3. Methodology

This research employed a mixed method design which includes questionnaires and interviews. A survey was conducted to investigate postgraduate students' perception on fairness of group work assessment while the interviews were done to gain students' insights on issues and ways to deal with the problems of group work assessment. The target population for the study were postgraduate students from the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam undergoing TESL or Leadership and Management courses. Twenty respondents ( $n = 20$ ) took part in the survey after they were identified through simple random sampling while two respondents ( $n = 5$ ) took part in a semi-structured interview through convenience sampling. A five-point Likert scale student questionnaire was used as the main instrument in this study which was adapted from the works of Elliot and Higgins (2005). Each questionnaire comprised of 13 items with two sections. For qualitative instrument, four interview questions were developed to elicit issues on group work assessment and suggestions to it. Instruments were self-administered and completed with a 100% response rate. Survey data was analyzed while data from the semi-structured interview was transcribed and categorized using the thematic analyses.

### 4. Findings

Majority of respondents are female (90 %) while 10% ( $n = 2$ ) are male, where half (50%) are from the TESL Programme while the other half are from the Leadership and Management Programme. On CGPA, 80% of the respondents are within the range of 3.00-3.75. On students' perception of group work, results (Table 1) revealed that 60% of the respondents ( $n = 12$ ) indicated that they enjoy working together in groups and 55% ( $n = 11$ ) considered group work as fun and stimulating. However, majority of respondents (40%) are still uncertain if they can produce better outcome by working in groups. Also, 60% ( $n = 12$ ) of the respondents agreed that the delegation of tasks is done equally and that majority of the respondents (50%) strongly agreed that assessment is clearly defined at the beginning of the semester.

**Table 1 Students' Perception of Group Work**

| Items:   | SA<br>(%) | A<br>(%) | N<br>(%) | D<br>(%) | SD<br>(%) |
|--|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| 1. I enjoy working in a group compared to individual work.       | 25        | 60       | 15       | 0        | 0         |
| 2. Working together in a group is fun and stimulating.           | 25        | 55       | 20       | 0        | 0         |
| 3. Group work enables students to produce better outcome.        | 35        | 25       | 40       | 0        | 0         |
| 4. Assessment of group work is clearly clarified early semester. | 30        | 60       | 10       | 0        | 0         |
| 5. The group work is shared equally among group members.         | 20        | 50       | 25       | 0        | 5         |

On students' perceptions of fairness in group work (Table 2), majority of respondents (40%) believed that group work assessment is a fair method of awarding marks. Similarly, 40% ( $n = 8$ ) considered group work assessment as a fair method of assessing individual contribution. However, 10% ( $n = 2$ ) of the respondents disagreed and 40% ( $n = 8$ ) indicated that they were unsure if their individual contribution is fairly assessed although majority of the respondents (55%) still believed that their contribution to the task is valued. In terms of awarding grades, 70% ( $n = 14$ ) of the respondents are either uncertain (45%) or disagreed (25%) with individuals who participated the least in group, if they were awarded a lower grade or not. This leads to the 50% ( $n = 10$ ) of the respondents who feels uncertain with the effectiveness of group work assessment.

**Table 2 Students' Perception of Fairness of Group Work Assessment**

| Items:   | SA<br>(%) | A<br>(%) | N<br>(%) | D<br>(%) | SD<br>(%) |
|--|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| 1. The group work assessment is a fair method of awarding marks for group work.                          | 25        | 40       | 25       | 10       | 0         |
| 2. The group work assessment is a fair method of assessing individual's contribution to group work.      | 10        | 40       | 40       | 0        | 0         |
| 3. The group work assessment means that my contribution to the group work is valued.                     | 10        | 55       | 30       | 5        | 0         |
| 4. Group work assessment ensures that individuals who participated the least were awarded a lower grade. | 20        | 10       | 45       | 25       | 0         |
| 5. Group work assessment is the most effective among all assessment.                                     | 25        | 10       | 50       | 15       | 5         |

#### 4.1 Issues Raised and Strategies to Overcome Group Work Assessment Issues

During the interview, respondents were asked if they are satisfied with the assessment of group work. In general, all respondents expressed their contentment with how group work is assessed. However, there are still issues that may influence the way groups are assessed. Student responses on issues are categorized into three groups: (a) assessment process, (b) lecturers and (c) students. Firstly, respondents thought that the assessment criteria are unreliable to assess individual contribution. Respondents were discontented that the assessment only evaluates the product or outcome of a task and does not take into consideration the process of doing it. Second, respondents indicated that there is a tendency for lecturers to be unfair and biased during the assessment. Third, respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the delegation of tasks where some students may receive an easier task to work on. This appeared to be unfair because all members will eventually receive the same mark. On the strategies to overcome the issue, respondents also mentioned the importance of peer-assessment to be the basis of group work assessment as it was thought to be an innovative means of assessing group work contribution. Nevertheless, one respondent partially disagree with peer-assessment because it is thought that students themselves tend to be biased while assessing their peers. It was also opined that lecturers should consider awarding marks on an ongoing basis, conducting constant monitoring and also requesting for progress report.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, students perceived the assessment of group work as a fair method to be conducted in the classroom. It allows student to exhibit positivity in contributing to the outcome of the task (Beccaria et al., 2014; Smith & Rogers, 2014). Interestingly, despite the positive attitude, students are still uncertain on the effectiveness of group work assessment. One of the key problems was the awarding of group marks regardless of students' individual contribution (Noonan, 2013). This shows that there are other assessments which are believed to be more effective

compared to group assessment. The importance of peer assessment, carried out in various innovative means, is seen as a way to achieve fairness (Shiu, Chan, Lam, Lee & Kwong, 2011) as it can promote encouraging outcome in students learning. The effectiveness of peer assessment in improving students learning also extends to promoting fairness, usefulness of grades and independent learning.

The implementation of group work as part of classroom assessment is an appropriate tool for assessment in higher education although its practice is bound to some academic repercussions. Educators play a significant role in deciding the fairness of group work by taking into considerations innovative measures to conduct group work assessment. Monitoring students' involvement and acknowledging their effort can reduce lecturers' tendency to be unfair or bias. Hence, it is hoped that through the findings of this study, educators as well as students can create awareness to guarantee fairness in group work assessment. More efforts should be taken into account especially to improve group work as an assessment tool to be carried out in the classroom. Future research may look into students from different levels of education or other programmes that offer group assessment as part of their teaching and learning process. This can help to further assist and optimize effective learning to take place in the classroom.

## References

- Analoui B. D., Sambrook S. and Doloriert C. H. (2014). "Engaging students in group work to maximize tacit knowledge sharing and use", *The International Journal of Management Education*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 35–43.
- Beccaria L., Kek M., Huijser H., Rose J. and Kimmins L. (2014). "The interrelationships between student approaches on learning and group work", *Nurse Education Today*, Vol. 34, No. 7, pp. 1094–1103.
- Caple H. and Bogle M. (2013). "Making group assessment transparent: What wikis can contribute to collaborative projects", *Assessment and Evaluation in higher Education*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 198–210.
- Elliot N. and Higgins A. (2005). "Self and peer assessment — Does it make a difference to student group work?", *New Education in Practice*, Vol. 5, pp. 40–48.
- Gagon L. L. and Roberge G. D. (2011). "Dissecting the journey: nursing student experiences with collaboration during the group work process", *Nurse Education Today*, available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2011.10.019>.
- Matveev A. V. and Milter R. G. (2010). "An implementation of active learning: assessing the effectiveness of the team infomercial assignment", *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 201–213.
- Ministry of Education (2015). *Education Development Plan of Malaysia (PPPM) 2015-2025*, Putrajaya: Bahagian Pendidikan Guru.
- Noonan M. (2013). "The ethical considerations associated with group work assessments", *Nurse Education Today*, Vol. 33, No. 11, pp. 1422–1427.
- Quinn F. M. and Hughes S. J. (2007). *Quinn's Principles and Practice of Nurse Education* (5th ed.), Nelson Thornes, Cheltenham.
- Sedgwich P. (2010). "Reflections of a 'progressive' teacher in higher education: The opportunities involved in giving students control", CETL AFL Occasional Papers No.5, Centre of Excellence in Assessment for Learning, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne.
- Shiu A. T. Y., Chan W. H. C., Lam P., Lee J. and Kwong A. N. L. (2011). "Baccalaureate nursing students' perceptions of peer assessment of individual contributions to a group project: A case study", *Nurse Education Today*, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 214–218.
- Smith M. and Rogers J. (2014). "Understanding nursing students' perspectives on the grading of group work assessments", *Nurse Education in Practice*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 112–116.