

International students working in group  
and project-based activities at university

University of Southampton Students'  
Union



Research project into  
the international student  
experience in the UK  
2018-19

UK Council  
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## International students working in group and project-based activities at university University of Southampton Students' Union

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## 1. Group work in higher education

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Group work plays a significant role in the modern university experience. Whilst, historically, the academic journey at university was an individual quest for knowledge, universities have gradually placed greater value on the concept of students working in groups.

Group work can be extremely positive for students and indeed employers are increasingly searching for graduates who can exhibit the skills they expect them to have acquired through working in groups at university. However, it also presents complex challenges to students' academic experience and is a system with multifaceted flaws that requires careful consideration by institutions.

## 2. Motivation for research

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The primary motivation of this research is to make a positive change for international students who participate in group work during their time at university. As the University of Southampton has over 6,500 international students from more than 135 countries<sup>1</sup>, it provided a very suitable environment to undertake this research. However, whilst the University of Southampton is an ideal microcosm for exploring the issue, it was foreseeable that the research findings would be applicable to a much wider audience, benefitting students across the UK.

The ultimate aim of undertaking this research is to improve the experience for international students working in groups. Previous research suggests group work can present particular challenges for international students and these can have a profound impact on their educational experience, employability prospects and their health and wellbeing, making it a serious and important issue for UK universities.

For example, Australian researchers Summers and Volet (2008) found that "international students' attitudes and skill over their three years of study were unchanged whereas home students became less willing and less able to work with others who they saw as 'different' and many thought communicating with those whose English language skills were developing was a waste of time and effort.

This is an extremely serious and concerning finding, which would impact on the academic experience of an international student. Indeed, where students should theoretically be building increasingly positive relationships at university, the research suggests that students are gradually becoming more intolerant of their colleagues.

In 2011, the Higher Education Academy also undertook research on group work among students studying engineering degrees and they identified the "need for enhanced support" and the "recognition of cultural capital"<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, in order to improve the student experience of group work, firstly, we needed to understand what challenges *all* students face when they undertake group work as part of their course at university. It was important to acquire this knowledge to contextualise the wider issues that group work presents to the general student population, rather than merely attributing these far-reaching issues to a particular cohort of international students.

Our first aim was to acquire information from the wider student population in order to provide a comparative dataset from which we could see which of the issues were more, or indeed less, challenging for international students. Following this, our second aim was to understand specifically which of these general issues were particularly prevalent or problematic for international students. Thirdly, our aim was to focus specifically on the issues that international students identified as being challenging or concerning for them and develop solutions that could improve their experience in group work situations.

This research aims to provide an important update to research that was undertaken a number of years ago. Since this research was undertaken, the international student demographic has evolved considerably and this important issue deserves and requires an update. We planned to build on previous evidence and contribute a new perspective to a wider discussion on the experiences of international students working in group and project-based activities.

## 3. Summary of research outcomes

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This research has resulted in a greater knowledge of the issues that affect all students in group work projects. Further, it provides a detailed understanding of the specific challenges that international students encounter and offers suggestions that aim to inform better practices at universities across the UK.

## 4. Background information and scope

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This research was undertaken during the course of the 2018-19 academic year and the scope of the project was limited to students studying at the University of Southampton. However, the knowledge acquired and the subsequent proposals will be relevant to other institutions across the UK.

Due to the complex issues the research was exploring, a mixed methodology approach was adopted. Initially, the research assumed a quantitative approach by publishing a survey that was available to the whole student membership (see Appendix 1, available with the online version of this report). It was promoted through the Students' Union's social media channels, email correspondence and by asking students in person to complete it. The survey received a total of 222 responses and the breakdown of the domicile and level of study of students who completed it can be found in Appendix 3, available with the online version of this report.

We followed up the survey with a qualitative approach by interviewing students face to face to explore specific areas in detail. By analysing the results of the survey, there were clear themes emerging that it was important to discuss in more detail with students. The focus groups were undertaken by the authors of the research and followed a structure to cover the key points (see Appendix 2, available with the online version of this report). However, this was not wholly prescriptive and the resources allowed the flexibility to pursue particular lines of enquiry if there was a clear opportunity within the conversation. There were 13 sessions and 17 students attended in total, meaning the majority were one to one sessions and, on average, they lasted 17 minutes each with students very keen to inform the researchers of their experiences.

## 5. Key research findings

Key findings include:

- Group work for all students is plagued with fundamental flaws. These defects undermine the whole experience and, furthermore, they minimise the opportunities available to students.
- International students experience these systematic faults but also encounter further

specific challenges when undertaking group work and these can have a profound impact on their educational experience.

- Whilst there are significant flaws in the group work process, the research offers recommendations that should improve the experience for students.
- The large amount of data highlighted four key themes:
  - Insufficient guidance or training
  - Cultural/language barriers
  - Group allocation
  - Mental health

### 5.1 Insufficient guidance or training

Summers and Volet (2008) found that “if you force students to interact without appropriate support, training and motivation, you risk fostering less rather than more mutual understanding and respect”.

Therefore, it was interesting to note that the first area that students immediately identified as a barrier to effective group projects was insufficient guidance or training on how to work in groups. Whilst students may have undertaken some form of group work during their previous educational experiences, the difference in undertaking a group project at university is significant and, currently, formal or consistent guidance or training does not effectively support the transition.

Consequently, in our quantitative research, the top four issues that students had experienced in group work situations were:

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| ▪ Group members not pulling their weight      | 68% |
| ▪ Difficulties scheduling group meetings      | 67% |
| ▪ Group members not turning up for meetings   | 59% |
| ▪ Group work taking longer than personal work | 43% |

When these were analysed further as part of the qualitative research, these issues were largely underpinned by a lack of group organisation, which stems from students not having sufficient knowledge of how to manage a group project situation. The focus group data highlighted that students start with different levels of experience and knowledge regarding how to approach a group project and that there is little in place to provide further advice or bring all participants to a similar level.

This often causes structural challenges within groups from the very outset and these consequently lead to wider issues in managing group projects.



### 5.1.1 Logistics

Students encountered logistical challenges during group projects that included the time, location and regularity of meetings.

Accommodating the timetables of a diverse group of students with academic and social commitments can be problematic. However, if the entire group is not able to meet regularly, it hinders the ability of the group to function and causes profound challenges to successfully completing the project.

In particular, when students miss group meetings, this is often where communication breaks down between the individuals. This can range from meeting notes not being taken or circulated to miscommunications or fundamental misunderstandings. This can lead to inherent flaws in the group project that then become extremely challenging to overcome.

Indeed, in some cases, the group splinters and individuals form their own sub-groups but without careful design or project management of the task allocation. Students form smaller groups because of others' non-attendance or they are divided by personality clashes that are often caused by the sheer frustration of attempting to overcome logistical issues as part of the project.

Throughout the research, the common perception from students was that students who did not attend group meetings were uncommitted, lazy or entirely undeserving of the final grade awarded to the group. In many cases, the frustration that students expressed is logical but it is important to acknowledge that, in some cases, students do have legitimate competing interests.

For example, a student parent stated that they were simply not able to attend the meetings arranged by the group as the times were outside of their childcare arrangements. Yet despite the often genuine and legitimate reasons as to why a student cannot attend a group session, the consequences for a student of being isolated from a group because they are unable to overcome logistical issues are significant. The separation has an impact on a student's academic experience, with the decisions about the approach and pace of the project being made in their absence. Moreover, student welfare and wellbeing is negatively impacted with students experiencing frustration, isolation and, sometimes, unfair characterisation from their peers.

### 5.1.2 Communication

Students identified that communication was a very significant issue within group projects. Indeed, during our interviews with students, issues within the group work were directly attributable to poor



communication between the individual members. As one international student explained, "I've had cases where a language barrier has resulted in misunderstandings and things not getting done, but through no fault of anyone, just the fact that there was a barrier there."

This highlights the need for strong and confident communication regarding the allocation and understanding of assigned tasks. Some international students, particularly those from East Asia, may have previously studied in a culture where asking for clarification or explaining that they do not understand what is expected of them is less acceptable. Hence, if this ethos continues to be applied in group work situations in UK institutions, it is entirely predictable that miscommunications are more likely to occur.

However, it is important that communication issues are not solely attributed to the command of language because many of the issues centred on the informal nature of the communication channels within group projects. Students explained that, generally, they communicated with their group via social media, which caused issues regarding:

- The choice of social media to use and issues of inclusion if a student does not use that platform.
- The inherently informal nature of the communication channel, which does not provide the most conducive setting for academic discussion.
- The instantaneous nature of the platforms mean students are contactable at any time of the day, increasing the risk of unhealthy working habits.
- The challenge of keeping an accurate record of the academic discussion.

Whilst communication via social media plays an extremely important role for students, this can be a particular issue for students from different parts of the world who may not use the platforms that are most popular in Western culture. This immediately places a significant barrier to inclusion for international students and results in them having to use an unfamiliar tool in order to be able to communicate with their group.

### 5.1.3 Rationale

The research found that there was no clear, consistent or overarching rationale conveyed to students as to why they were participating in group projects. Thus, from the very outset of the project there are fundamental issues within group work situations, namely that students do not recognise the potential opportunities and benefits of group work and instead often focus on the negative aspects or make unhelpful assumptions. Group work has great potential to provide opportunities to build skills both academically and for future employment. Yet the potential opportunities for personal development are not conveyed to students in an effective manner. This ensures that students afford group work a lesser importance than it deserves and often the student perception of group projects is more negative than it should be.

On more than one occasion, students stated that they believed the primary reason for having to undertake group work was that it meant less assessment work for their tutors. With the potential benefits of participating in group work waiting to be realised, it is very unfortunate if these benefits may have been lost in the messaging. Students are making extremely negative assumptions when there is no clear communication to students for the rationale of doing group work.

### 5.1.4 Risks

The research found that few of the aforementioned challenges were minimised or eliminated from group work, largely because students had not identified these in the first instance. A thorough analysis of potential challenges is commonplace when starting a group project in the workplace, however, this does not appear to be standard practice at university. Whilst some students may argue this is a laborious or pointless process, if it enables the group to function more effectively then it justifies the initial investment of time.

For example, an assessment could help to identify:

- Potential issues with the scheduling of meetings, for example, if a student parent had childcare arrangements that mean certain days or times are not possible for them to meet.
- The most appropriate platform by which the group communicate, including the choice of whether to use social media and, if so, which platform everyone in the group uses.
- Competing deadlines for other work that students have, allowing the group to plan the project effectively and ensure it is completed.
- Personal strengths and weaknesses within the group, to afford each student the opportunity to perform to the best of their ability within the group.

Ultimately, it is for the students to decide whether to assess the potential challenges. However, if institutions were to recommend that students consider some of the potential challenges they might face, it could be a powerful motivating factor to facilitate the group planning proactive solutions, as well as developing useful skills for the workplace.

This research found that insufficient guidance or training on how to work effectively in groups is a major issue for all students but can be particularly problematic for international students who may have the additional challenges of language or cultural barriers.

Students come to university with diverse experiences and approaches to group work and that is one of the most positive advantages. To try to suppress this to ensure a uniform student approach would be to lose a unique opportunity for students from different parts of the world to experience diverse situations and progress their personal development as a result. However, this does not need to preclude good practice guidance from institutions that offers overarching advice on how to manage a group project effectively. Indeed, if one of the core rationales behind requiring students to work in groups is to prepare students for a future workplace, then advice on how to do this effectively should be part of the offer to students.

## 5.2 Cultural/language barriers

One of the most significant advantages that students identified about working in groups was the opportunity to work with students who come from different backgrounds and cultures. However, simultaneously, both international students and students from the UK acknowledged this as one of the primary challenges.

Firstly, students identified the language barrier as an important issue in group work. This appears to have two major consequences, affecting both confidence in speaking and the effectiveness of the communication itself, with one international student reporting:

**“I do have friends who are international students and they, well, they’re not that expressive when it comes to group work, they feel like their opinions don’t matter in the group so they feel left out and maybe they do have some language barrier so that is part of it.”**

This was supported in a separate interview with an international student, who stated:

**“In my first year my English was not very good. Maybe even now is not very good, but it was worse then. And... I felt like some of**

**my group mates, they were a bit lazy in understanding me. My accent was even more thick, and they just couldn't be bothered to understand me."**

Language can be a significant barrier to effective group work, even though it is entirely surmountable with due consideration and effort from the group. However, it is important to note that a language barrier is not merely between students from the UK and students from overseas. For example, one student from the EU told us, "I'd like to emphasize the difficulties I experienced due to the language barrier, especially with Asian group members".

Further, a student from Asia stated that one of the reasons they wished to study in the UK was to improve their English. However, they found themselves unable to practice in their group project as the rest of the students were speaking in their native language. They told us, "I tried, I tried to talk with them in English, but it just made me feel really weird, well... they counted me English, but they just keep talking in Chinese. It's an awkward situation actually."

Therefore, when discussing a language barrier, it is vital to recognise that this is a multifaceted issue and not merely a communication challenge between students from the UK and students from overseas.

### 5.3 Group allocation

One of the questions that posed the most difficulty to students was whether they would prefer their groups selected by staff or by the students themselves. Generally, students could see the positives and negatives of both options and answers even changed depending on the context of the project. Table 1 shows data on how students would prefer groups to be chosen (the breakdown of domicile and level of study is listed alongside the chart in Appendix 3, available in the online version of this report).

**Table 1 How would you prefer groups to be chosen?**

Cohort of students	By lecturer/tutor	By students
EU	31.43%	68.57%
Overseas	37.78%	62.22%
UK	46.15%	53.85%
<b>Average</b>	<b>42.79%</b>	<b>57.21%</b>

Overall, the research found that 57% of respondents preferred groups being selected by students and 43% would rather groups be chosen by university staff. However, there was a more noticeable difference with 62% of overseas students and 69% of students from the EU preferring groups selected by students rather than university staff.



Clearly, this represents a more significant shift towards students being able to choose the people they are working with in group project situations. When this was analysed further as part of the qualitative research it was found that much of this centred around two key aspects: confidence within group projects and the commitment of other group members. For example, a student from the EU explained, "I believe that teams should be chosen by students as it makes it easier and less stressful to work with friends you know. Meaning that you know they will put the same commitment to it and will want to work hard to achieve a good mark".

### 5.4 Mental health

From the outset of the project, one area identified by students as being a major aspect of group work was the significant impact that these projects can have on a student's mental health. Whilst universities are responding to the essential conversation around mental health by developing and promoting support services around key academic issues such as exams, the impact and stress of working in groups does not appear to be on the radar of institutions.

From the quantitative dataset, the research found:

- 42% of the students surveyed had experienced stress because of group work.
- 8% of respondents specifically identified that they had experienced mental health issues because of group work.
- 20% of respondents stated that they experienced a lack of confidence to express ideas.
- 6% of UK students stated that they felt "isolated, unwanted or not included" in group work but this figure rose to 11% of overseas students and 23% of students from countries in the EU.

Further, previous research on the topic of mental health suggests that people often find it challenging to recognise or acknowledge the impact something can have on their mental wellbeing. Hence, it may be the case that in reality the statistics are even higher and the impact even more significant. Several students indicated this during focus groups, for example, one international student stated, "I don't do well having to do it for other people, it had

me so nervous I was shaking the whole day and scared to death. Obviously, I felt uncomfortable to say as nobody else had that problem...so I didn't say anything."

Another international student told us, "it definitely made me anxious and it was also the first week at university... so really, really stressed, really nervous, and I didn't really want to go to those group works. I was afraid of these situations." Hence, this suggests a significant issue regarding mental health within group projects and it is important that this be added into the wider discourse on the subject.

As the challenges in speaking out about mental health at universities remain, it is important that this research highlights group work as a significant issue. Further exploration is needed.

## 6. Conclusions and ideas for further research

Conclusions from the quantitative and qualitative research:

- a) All students face challenges when undertaking group work at university but for international students these can be particularly profound.
- b) A lack of effective, overarching guidance or training for students on how to manage group projects and work together immediately creates fundamental challenges for the group and inhibits students' ability to take advantage of the opportunities that group work offers.
- c) Ineffective communication between students underpins many of the problems that groups experience. This includes using informal means to communicate, not considering potential problems and not giving due consideration to language or cultural barriers for international students.
- d) Throughout the research, there was an undercurrent of group work assessments affecting students' mental health. This does not receive the same recognition or attention as mental health around other types of assessments but is no less significant. As such, it is a strong recommendation that further research explores the issue of mental health within group project situations.
- e) More widely, it must be accepted that working with people who have a different command of the language presents an *opportunity* rather than an *obstacle*. In an increasingly interlinked world, the opportunity to demonstrate and develop skills to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds is invaluable and hugely valued by prospective employers. Thus, the perception and discourse around group work must change in order for the potential benefits of this opportunity to be realised.

## 7. Recommendations

- This research suggests that more robust, external structures for group work would provide stronger and more secure foundations for students. Institutions may wish to consider what would be most appropriate for their students but these external structures could take the form of written guidance, online training or key tips as to how to manage a group project and capitalise on the opportunity of working with other students. This would aim to increase students' knowledge of the actual processes of group work and boost their confidence within those situations.
- If a more robust support framework was in place, the overarching guidance would ensure all students had greater access to information around the value of the project. This would aim to raise their aspirations and commitment, and place greater significance on the work.

The majority of students assumed that the reason for undertaking group work was to improve their skills when working in a team. However, it is a missed opportunity if institutions do not explicitly centre the rationale for group work on this theme and encourage students to capitalise on the opportunity to develop their academic and employability skills. It would also help frame the project in a more effective way if students were clear as to what they would be gaining from their participation in the group.

In terms of the student's assertion that choosing their own groups makes group work "easier and less stressful", this merely shifts the issue rather than resolving it. Hence, it is important that institutions deliver clear, specific and informative guidance about group projects because this should make it easier and indeed more enticing to work with different people.

- To aid international students it is important that institutions support all students in developing communication skills and empower students to feel confident and seek further clarification on a task if required. If guidance or training were to be provided then the skills students developed would ensure a more secure environment in which the group could study, as well as providing valuable experience for a future workplace.
- This research recommends that institutions consider students' mental health relating to group work. The research found evidence that students find group work challenging, stressful and often work which has a negative impact on their mental wellbeing. Whilst institutions are developing their recognition and response to mental health around exam periods, the impact of group work has not been given due consideration. Therefore, it is essential that institutions respond to this challenge and provide students with the support that they need.

## 8. Notes

1 University of Southampton, 2019. *Studying in the UK*. Available at: <<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/uni-life/international.page>>.

2 The Higher Education Academy, 2011. *Working with international students: Group and project-based activities on engineering degree programmes*. London: Higher Education Academy.

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## 12. Appendices

Appendices are available with the online version of this report: [www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports).

The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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