**Policy on Designing, Delivering & Assessing Group Work**

**Approved by Academic Board, 5 April 2017**

**Introduction**

[1]     This policy is built around a set of general principles governing the design, delivery and assessment of group work.  It applies to all modules, including those delivered via online / blended learning, involving group work as defined in section 4 below.  In addition to these general principles, a checklist is included in Appendix 1.  The checklist is intended to support good practice in the delivery of group work.  It is designed to facilitate both ongoing review of existing elements of group work and development of new group work-based activities.   A Resource List on group work is included in Appendix 2.  The intention is that roll out of the policy would be supported by a series of seminars / workshops on group work and related matters organised at both central University and local level.

[2]     Alignment between forms of assessment and intended learning outcomes is considered to be 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 the learning to be assessed, the assessment task, assessment criteria, and 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 such as examination.  This document aims to promote good practice in group work activities through 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.

[3]     It is important to acknowledge at the outset that there is currently no overarching policy or code of practice on assessment at UCC.  This state of affairs makes it challenging to develop principles governing one particular method of assessment in isolation.  In the absence of an overarching policy on assessment, this document aims to promote good practice through a set of general principles so that students undertaking group work activity are not disadvantaged.

**General definition of "group work"**

[4]    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 a particular case.  Module co-ordinators should consider carefully whether group work assessment is continuous, formative and / or summative.

**Background and context**

[5]    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.

[6]    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, setting down a core set of general principles, to be supplemented by best practice in each particular discipline, is the best approach.

[7]    The overarching objective of this policy 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 careful attention at the outset to the design and delivery of group work activities including putting appropriate processes in place 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.

**General principles on group work**

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

The Policy Governing Modules (including the Academic Council approved module guidelines and checklist) can be found in the DMIS guidelines (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.

The published Book of Modules is the contract between the University and the student and should accurately reflect the module which is delivered. Additional information which expands on the approved published module description should also be made available directly to students, preferably in writing, in an initial briefing session or introductory seminar (and / or via Blackboard).  In some cases, a student handbook may be provided which contains information with regard to group work activities.  Any 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) 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 as to 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 should therefore involve two elements: one comprising a group mark and the other comprising an individual mark (see further point 6 in the checklist in the Appendix where further detail is provided on this point).

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.)?

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.

Particular care needs to be taken where group work accounts for a significant portion of the marks available in a specific module and / or programme.

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, it must 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.

A suitable dispute resolution process must be put in place at the outset and students must 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 is currently in the process of developing a Student Complaints Policy. Once this policy is in place, local dispute resolution processes should be aligned with its requirements.

**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.

**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.

**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 for Staff and Students, the

Plagiarism Policy, the Duty of Respect and Right to Dignity Policy, and the UCC Student Rules etc.

## 10. Review

This policy will be subject to review by the Academic Council Teaching and Learning Committee after its first year in operation.

**Appendix 1**

**Designing, Delivering and Assessing Group Work**

**Checklist**

This checklist is intended to support good practice in the delivery of group work.  It is designed to facilitate both ongoing review of existing elements of group work and development of new group work-based activities.  In such cases, it is recommended that the following questions be considered carefully:

1.  Is group work an appropriate form of assessment for the particular module (whether as part of the assessment for the module or as the sole form of assessment for the module)?  What is the rationale behind using group work as a form of assessment in the module?

2.  What learning outcomes are being assessed?

    These may be specific to group work:

    - Understanding of participative roles and responsibilities
    - Leadership and organisational skills
    - Working in a multidisciplinary or multi-cultural environment
    - Conflict management

    and generic in project work:

    - The ability to conduct research
    - Report writing skills
    - Presentation skills
    - Project management (time and asset management)
    - Problem solving

3.  What is the appropriate group size?

    - Group of 2 (where a co-operative model with equal division of work is optimal)
    - Group of 3-4 (requiring division of workload/self-identification of strengths and weaknesses and optimisation of roles and responsibilities)
    - Group of > 5 (for larger projects with more tasks or greater complexity - or where sub-groups may be involved - and requiring detailed protocols for assignment of roles and responsibilities)

4.  How are groups assigned (examples might include self-assembly by students, random allocation, alphabetical groupings, groupings assigned by the lecturer etc.)?

5. Are there opportunities for multidisciplinary groups and/or culturally diverse groups (i.e. are there factors which are imposed onto the formation of groups to ensure a particular mix of disciplines or groups)?

6. How will the input of members of the group be assessed? Is there potential for students to complete the module without contributing significant effort?

   - What is the breakdown of marks between each element of the overall assessment for the module, including any group work activity?
   - What proportion of the overall marks available for the group work activity are assigned to: (1) an individual student's performance in the group work activity and (2) the group's performance?
   - How are individual student's specific contributions to group work activity to be recognised and rewarded (e.g. by requiring each student to submit a declaration confirming their particular contribution to the group work project)?
   - Is peer assessment of individual student performance in the group setting to be used?
   - How is it ensured that sufficient weight is attached to individual contributions to the group effort?
   - How is it ensured that no student is unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged in the group setting?
   - How will students receive feedback on their performance as individuals and as groups?
   - At what particular points in the module will students receive feedback on their performance?
   - What opportunities will be afforded to students to apply the feedback received to improve their performance?
   - How is student feedback on the conduct and assessment of the group work elements of the module gathered and used (i.e. what arrangements are in place to ensure that the feedback loop is closed)?

7. Are group/team roles and responsibilities assigned or brokered internally in each group/team?

   - Who is the group/team leader? How is the group/team leader selected? What delegated authority do they have?
   - How is equitable distribution of workload ensured?

8. What process(es) are in place to address any issues or conflicts that may arise in the course of the group work activity?  How are any student complaints/concerns to be handled?

9. How is the success or otherwise of the group work activity as a learning tool assessed?

    • Are you measuring the achievement of learning outcomes?
    • To what programme learning outcomes do the specific module learning outcomes relate?

   What evidence of student attainment of learning outcomes is preserved for professional accreditation (if appropriate)?

10. Are students prepared for further study / accreditation, e.g., will students completing programmes with modules heavily weighted towards continuous assessment be prepared adequately if required to sit written examinations by professional bodies?

**Appendix 2**

**Designing, Delivering and Assessing Group Work**

**Resource List**

This annotated resource list provides some sign-posts to practices, policies and practice research about the use of group work within the higher education curriculum.

**Institutional Resources / Guides**

1. Carnegie Mellon University, Eberly Center supports innovative educational practice and some of its learning resources deal with group work: "*What are best practices for designing group projects?*" outlines three important aspects of designing group work: creating interdependence, developing team skills and individual contribution.

   The resource can be accessed here:
   http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/design.html

   "*Assessing groupwork*" sets out some key principles for assessment in this context and some assessment tools for groups and self-assessment, as well as grading methods.

   The resource can be accessed here:

   http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/howto/assesslearning/groupWork.html

2. Higher Education Academy provides a range of resources and publications based on commissioned research and case studies by academic staff.

   Some resources available include:

   https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/feature_janey_gordon.pdf

   This case study summarises the results of a project which examined group work activities undertaken within a selection of HE programmes, in particular the ways that lecturers can aid the enhancement of the work within that group.

   https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/peer-moderation-group-work-hands-workshop

   This presentation provides an overview of WebPA, an open source online peer assessment tool that enables every team member to recognise individual contributions to group work that was created by JISC.

3. Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development offers consultancy, courses and other support for staff and educational development nationally and internationally, within higher education and the public sector, and internally at Oxford Brookes University. Resources on group work include principles to guide group work activities as well as practical examples.
   http://owww.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsld/resources/groupwork/index.html

4. O Neill, Geraldine, M. (2013) *Assessing Group Work (including online)*
   http://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/UCDTLE0065.pdf

   This resource addresses a range of approaches to assessing group work including questions of the focus of assessment, the methods of assessment and emphasis whether on the process of group work or the product of groups or both.