# WORKING IN GROUPS

Why do we do group work at uni? Group work has much to offer, such as:

- providing **opportunities to work with people** who have different perspectives, values, experience, training, cultures, priorities, etc.
- **enabling larger, more challenging tasks to be tackled** because you are part of a team.
- allowing consideration of a **greater number of ideas** for any given project.
- preparing students for professional life. **Employers value group skills and the ability to work with others¸** and this is often listed in selection criteria for positions.

Although it is often more complicated working with others than working by oneself, when a group works well together, the results can be very impressive and satisfying. However, when groups do not work well, the experience can be distressing.

## TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL GROUP WORK

- Devote time to getting to know your group members first. People who know each other are more likely to be comfortable enough to express their ideas and opinions freely, to compromise and to find common meeting times, etc.

- Decide on some group rules. Often students think this is not necessary, but when groups don't work well it can help to have some rules in writing that hold group members accountable.

**SOME EXAMPLES OF USEFUL RULES ARE:**
- All members are to attend group meetings as scheduled or to contact other members in advance to make alternative arrangements for participation.
- All members should be active participants and contribute to the conversation.
- All individuals have the right to speak and suggest ideas.
- Decisions will be made based on majority decision with a minimum number of people required to make the decision (or other criteria, as your group sees fit).
- Minutes of the meetings should be distributed to all members within 3 days of the meeting to ensure everyone knows what has been decided on and what they must do.
- Any student who is having trouble with their task must inform other group members well in advance of deadlines to discuss solutions.

- Keep records of who attends each meeting and who doesn't. Also, agree on the time and place, or online platform, for the next meeting, which tasks needs doing and who will do them (*see example on next page*).

- Each meeting, rotate roles such as minute taking (the person who records what is discussed at the meeting) and chairing (the person who leads the meeting) so that everyone gets practice at these skills.

- Estimate time and effort required for each task and adjust later if necessary. Commit yourselves to group decisions and tasks - record them and follow through with them.

**SUGGESTED MINIMUM INFORMATION TO BE RECORDED AT EACH MEETING:**

- Date and time
- Attendees – who was at the meeting
- Apologies – who couldn't be there?
- Business from the last meeting
  - What is today's agenda
  - What were the decisions made previously?
- Assigned tasks for each group member to make progress on before the next meeting
- Next meeting
  - Decide on a date, time, and venue
  - Who will chair and who will take minutes?

## AVOIDING & MANAGING GROUP PROBLEMS

**Problems** can occur if one or more group members do not:

- do what they said they would do
- turn up for meetings
- stay on task at meetings
- care much about their grades, whilst others want high distinctions
- value the input of other members
- participate in discussions (or they dominate the group)
- agree or reach a compromise
- work cooperatively
- remain in the course (i.e. withdraw before the project is complete) - you will need to work out a contingency plan.

**MANY OF THE POSSIBLE PROBLEMS OF GROUP WORK CAN BE AVOIDED OR MINIMISED BY:**

- spending some time to get to know and be comfortable with each other
- setting up group rules at the first meeting
- ensuring that all members get their ideas heard and considered
- breaking the project up into roughly equal tasks
- encouraging group members to volunteer for tasks that they would like to do, rather than be allocated tasks they do not want
- ensuring that all tasks are allocated to somebody
- rotating leadership and recording responsibilities
- giving each member copies of meeting logs which record promises, decisions, tasks etc. so that everyone is informed. These logs can also act as proof of participation.

If you are unable to resolve an issue within your group, it may be useful to make your tutor aware, so that they can give advice, and so that the situation can be taken into account when the group project is being assessed. Your tutor may need to see records of group meetings to decide how to assess your group members fairly.