

The management and assessment of groupwork

Item Type	Chapter in book
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Citation	CELT Learning and Teaching Projects 2000/2001
Publisher	University of Wolverhampton
Download date	2026-05-13 04:57:24
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/2436/6089

The management and assessment of groupwork

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Background and rationale

Within the School of Health Sciences it had become evident that in many modules students were expected to work together and produce work that would be formally assessed. Each module leader devised their own way to manage and assess that group work activity which meant that there was little, if any consistency. In general the group work presentation would be awarded a grade which was the same for all the students in that group. Sometimes that would not be fair, as it was possible for a student to contribute very little to the group work and yet they would be awarded the same grade as their peers. On several occasions students grumbled about this lack of equity. Being able to work effectively with other people is a key skill and group work offers the opportunity to assess many of the key skills and these also include:

- communication
- gathering information
- organising both material and time
- working independently and also interdependently
- problem solving

In order to assess these skills, there is a need to manage and assess the group working processes as well as the final piece of work that the group presents.

The purpose of this project therefore was to devise a model of managing and assessing group work and pilot it for levels 1, 2 and 3 over the academic year.

Implementation of the innovation

In September 2000 three modules at the three academic levels were identified and the module leaders concerned were asked to form a small project management team. Decisions were made about the following:

- How many students there should be in a group (ideally)
- Should the module leader select the groups or could these be student self selected?
- What would be the ongoing management of the groups?
- What should be the assessment criteria both for the process of the group working and for the outcome of the group work?—work carried out by the University of Aberdeen (1991) provided information that helped to devise the model for Group Working Guidelines (see appendix A) and also a model for the Assessment of Group Work (see appendix B)

The three pilot modules were HL3052 (Semester One) Perspectives in Health, HL2022 (Semester One) Maintenance of Health at Work and HL1113 (Semester Two) Healthy Lifestyles. The respective module leaders were Sarah Luft, Sean Mahar and Ruth Westerby, who comprised the project management team.

Introducing the students to the group work activity

Semester One: HL3052: number of students = 36

A major part of this module had been planned to run around small group work anyway. Resources had been prepared which involved the participants, who were expected to undertake specific tasks. These would help them tackle the second assignment for this module which was an essay. Prior to the arrival of the students the room was prepared so that the tables and chairs were grouped and each table had a

number attached to it. When the students came in they were asked to form the required number of groups: n=9. The students were then introduced to the module and explanations about the group work project were explained to them. They had all experienced group work in previous years and the initial reaction to being part of the pilot project was positive.

Copies of both The Guidelines of the Management of Group Work and The Model for Assessing Group Work were distributed to the students. These were then discussed with the module leader.

Semester One: HL2022: number of students = 15

Two members of the project team introduced the students to this pilot project. The room had not been prepared specifically for group work activity as the module leader began each session with a lecture. The module leader explained how the group work project would relate to the group work activity they were to undertake and the response from this group was also generally positive. They all appeared happy to take part although many of these students had not participated in group work previously. One student was deaf and needed reassurance that the resources would be available for her to carry out the group work activity (i.e. interpreter).

Semester Two: HL1113: number of students = 63

Due to the numbers registered on this module 2 members of staff were involved in its management. The majority of students had not participated in assessed group work prior to undertaking this module. In some ways this was helpful because for them this was new anyway and there were no questions initially around the Guidelines and the Model for Assessing Group Work which were distributed. In order to emphasise the value of the Group Work activity, it was decided to devote the first hour to the group work and to follow this with the lecture programme. It may be because this module is time-tabled for the evening that previous experience has demonstrated that once the lecture component of the module was completed for the evening (and all handouts collected!) that many students chose to leave and not stay on for the group work. In total there were 13 groups comprising 4–5 students and on the whole attendance was good throughout the module. For the first 3–4 weeks there were 4 members of academic staff present to facilitate the group-working process. After the third week the groups were able to manage themselves and input from the lecturers was minimal.

Managing the vivas

Students were required to undertake a short viva (approximately 7 minutes) prior to the presentation of their group work project. This was carried out on an individual basis and the assessment criteria for these form Appendix C. Each student was asked to reflect on the process of working in their groups. They brought with them their individual diary logs which could be used as a basis for discussion. At this time, each individual was awarded a mark (percentage).

The presentation and group report

Each group of students presented their work and followed this up by submitting a ‘Group Report’. This report comprised:

- a) an outline of the academic components which were researched by the group
- b) an overall reflection on their own observations concerning the group dynamics, how they managed their group work and the presentation
- c) suggestions for how they might enhance group work for the future

The presentation and group report were awarded a percentage. This percentage was added to the one awarded for the individual vivas and a grade formulated for each individual student.

Outcomes from the lecturers’ perspective

- 1) If assessed group work is incorporated into the module outcomes then it is important to have a clear structure for its management that is fair to all students.
- 2) For group work to be managed ‘effectively’ i.e. for students to understand the importance of learning to work together there needs to be a significant amount of time allocated to this activity.

- 3) Physical resource is important. Students need an environment which is conducive to group work (not a lecture theatre!).
- 4) There is insufficient time to manage group work activity properly within one semester. For instance, if students are expected to present work between weeks 9–12 this leaves only 8 weeks available. Weeks 1 and 2 are generally devoted to setting up the groups and providing the opportunity for students to get to know one another. This leaves just 5 weeks for consolidation. If a member of the group has problems attending on just 2 of these weeks that makes for quite a dent in the programme. This point is particularly relevant for year one students who are less likely to know each other.
- 5) Carrying out individual vivas is resource intensive. But it is very worthwhile. The impression was that the students enjoyed having the opportunity to express their views and they valued the individual attention.
- 6) Having the individual vivas provided the opportunity to award individual grades. Students who were clearly not contributing to the group work activity or able to recognise the value of working with others were awarded lower grades.
- 7) The majority of the students did put much effort and time into the group work so it does deserve to take a reasonable weighting of the overall module assessment. Previously some modules have weighted group work at 20%; with this model in place a more appropriate weighting would be 40%.
- 8) It was pleasing to note at Level 3 that some students recognised that they may have learned more by participating in a group where they did not know the others so well. There was a natural tendency for friends to form their own groups. The students noted that this had both advantages and disadvantages. For instance because they were friends anyway, they didn't want to 'rock the boat' so they were less challenging than they might have been.
- 9) The students also realised that they needed to have a leader within the group. One student reported 'Things just didn't happen until x moved it on and then we knew what we had to do'.
- 10) Some students at Level 3 were able to take a very 'professional' approach with their group work. They were generally consistent about setting agendas and taking action more so than at levels one and two.
- 11) Group work does offer the opportunity to cover many of the key skills.
- 12) Students undertaking group work in year one do need more support, and some input about the dynamics of group work would be useful to include at this stage so that they have a frame of reference on which to reflect.
- 13) There can be problems with part-time students working together with full-time students. It can be difficult for them to meet up at convenient times.

Outcomes from the student perspective

A questionnaire was devised and distributed to the students, n=114. Not all students were present when these were distributed so it possible that some did not receive one.

The responses were n=73 (64%). Students were asked to answer the following 10 questions:

Question One:

I think that it is important to have a clear structure for the management of group work Yes or No

Question Two:

I think that group work should be managed in the same way for every module which includes group work as an assessment Yes or No

Question Three:

I think that working in groups is important so that I can learn to share ideas Yes or No

Question Four:

I think that working in groups is important so that I can learn to see another person's perspective more clearly Yes or No

Question Five:

I think that working in groups is important so that I can learn to learn how to get along with people in a professional way Yes or No

Question Six:

I find group work difficult because I am shy Yes or No

Question Seven:

I find group work difficult because others may not like my ideas Yes or No

Question Eight:

I find group work difficult because the task is boring

Yes or No

Question Nine:

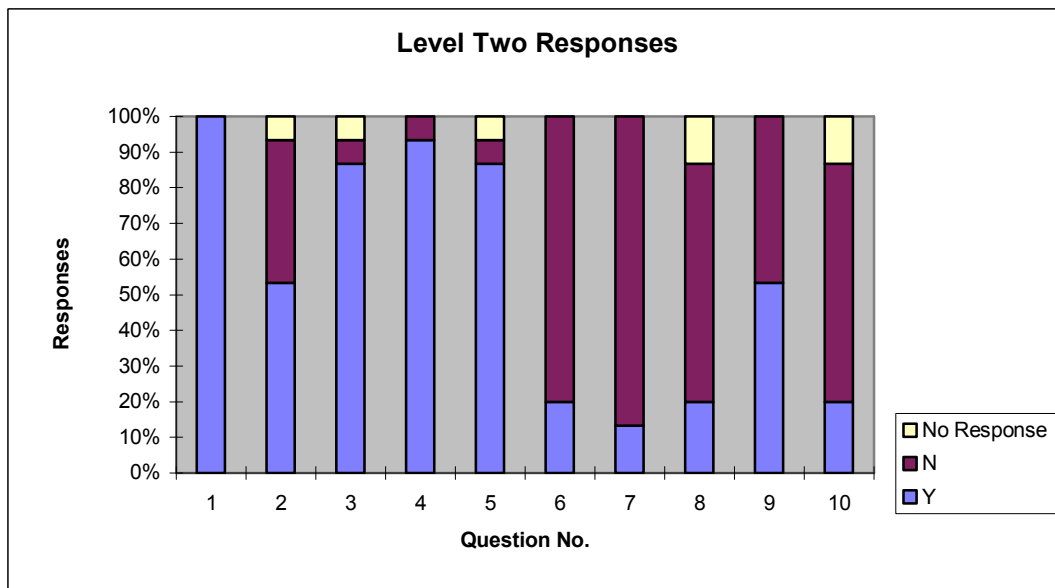
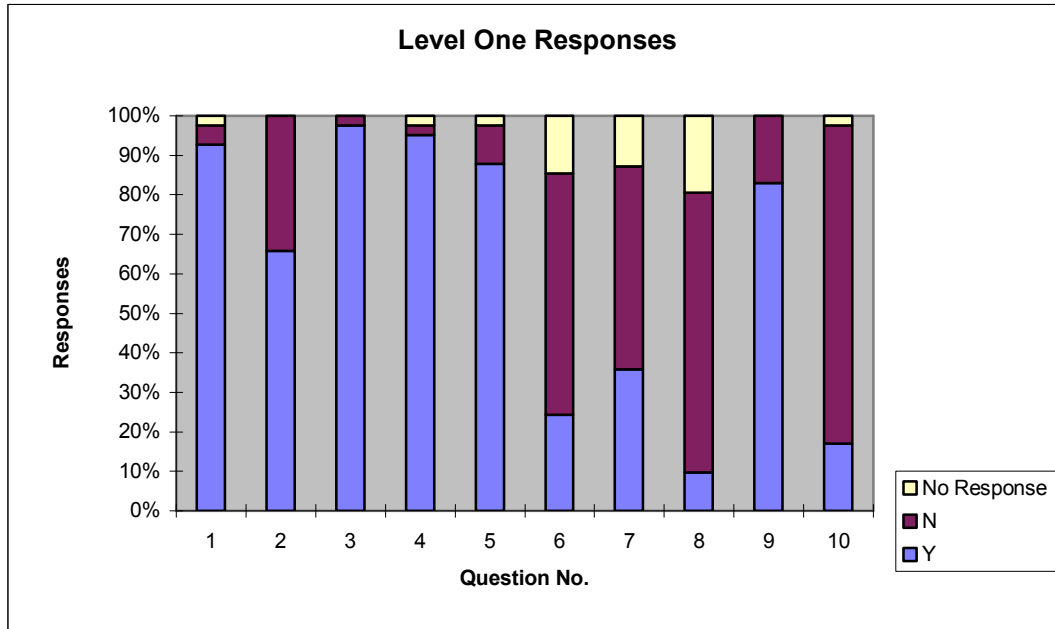
Students should undertake group work in all 3 years

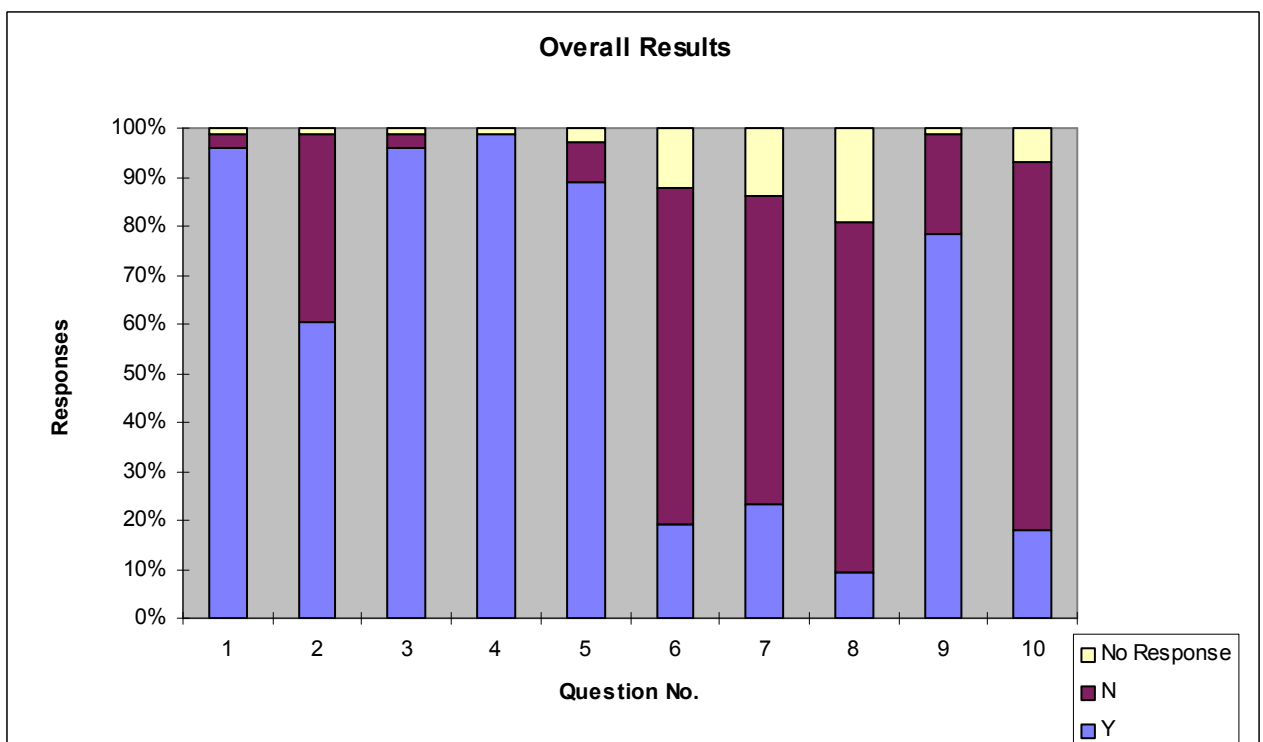
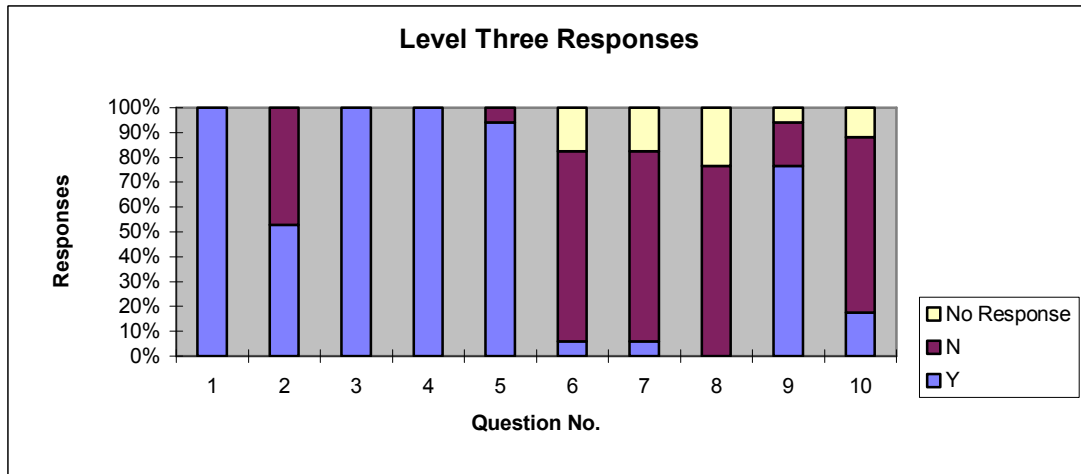
Yes or No

Question Ten:

The groups should be formed by the module leader and not by the students

Yes or No





Summary of results

For questions 1,2,3,4, and 5 the chart does not appear to demonstrate significant differences in responses between levels on two and three. Results from the overall chart identified the following:

- Q1 6% of students think it important to have a clear structure for the management of group work
- Q2 0% of students think that group work should be managed in the same way for every module which includes group work as an assessment
- Q3 95% of students think that working in groups enables them to share ideas
- Q4 98% of students recognise that working in a group enables them to see another person's perspective more clearly
- Q5 87% of students say that working in groups enables them to get along with people in a professional way

Questions 6 and 7 suggest that there are differences between the levels—22% of Level 1 students find group work difficult because they are shy. This is reduced to 19% at Level 2 and at Level 3 the

response is just 5%. The overall figure is 15%. Also 34% of students at Level 1 indicated that they felt that others may not like their ideas. This reduced to 11% at Level 2 and 5% at Level 3. The overall result here being 21%.

Question 8 may have been misunderstood by students. It was meant to be interpreted in 'general' terms. (Q8: I find group work difficult because the task is boring), but it is likely that they related the question to their specific group work activity and therefore this data has not been analysed.

Q9 asks if students think that they should undertake group work in all 3 years and the main difference in response come from Level 2. Here only 54% of them think that they should undertake group work in all three years while at Level 1 83% agree with this statement and at Level 3 the response is 75%. The overall agreement is 77%.

Finally students were asked how they felt about the module leader forming the groups and generally the responses here were consistent throughout the years. Overall 77% of students prefer to form their own groups.

Benefits

The evidence is here that Level 1 students need good support from academic staff when they are undertaking group work. It is also interesting to note that in the vivas students were asked if they felt that their contributions to the group work activity were valued and only a few of these identified this as a problem area. However, feeling shy and thinking that others may not value their ideas has been identified as an area of concern for many of these Level 1 students. It may be possible to generalise these findings to other Schools within the University. Ideally the questionnaire should have been tested prior to distribution and reviewed by a panel of experts. However this project was a pilot in itself and it can be developed further as a main study as it has raised some interesting issues. Group work does offer the opportunity to enable students to develop more self awareness and this relates to many of the key skills. This is of particular importance for students planning to work in 'Health'. However, implementing this model does require increased resources and these need to be taken into consideration in the planning cycle.

Future developments

- 1) Design a 30 credit module which incorporates group work and which could run over the academic year. This may be done by combining two modules that already exist and looking at how best to achieve the outcomes. This would enable the students to recognise the value of group work for their own learning and with support to manage problems that may arise. For the Health Division year one would be the best time to implement this.
- 2) Module leaders need to review any of their modules that incorporate assessed group work and consider exactly what it is they are assessing and ensure that this is as fair as possible.
- 3) If students are to value the time and effort they put into group work this should also be valued by the module leaders. If a module leader does not believe in the value of group work then a different type of assessment may be more appropriate for them.
- 4) If this model (or something similar) is to be implemented then it should attract a reasonable weighting—for instance Group Work activity 40%, Essay 60%.
- 5) Include some input on the dynamics of group development and the dynamics of working in a group as this will provide a frame of reference for reflection.
- 6) Extra resources should be made available for modules which incorporate assessed group work and use this type of model for its management.

Reference

Centre for Learning and Professional Development (1999) Group Work: An Introductory Guide for Students. University of Aberdeen.

Appendix A

GROUP WORKING GUIDELINES

Why do it?

Our purpose in organising group work activity is to provide you with the opportunity to develop key skills in communication and working together, skills that are considered highly desirable by employers. Working in a 'health' environment often involves taking part in a project, contributing to meetings and being a good 'team player'. We recognise the importance of developing these skills and to that extent we plan to assess not only the final outcome of any group work, but also the processes involved in the group work activity itself.

How to do it

First of all get to know something about each other (such as course background) and spend time swapping names, addresses, emails, contact numbers. It is important that you establish clear lines of communication early on as you will be planning meetings outside of the formal class time and you need to be able to contact each other.

Establish ground rules

- all members of the group will attend all meetings
- work to be shared out fairly between group members
- members to encourage everyone to contribute
- individual tasks to be completed by an agreed deadline
- roles, such as chairman and note taker to be rotated around the group
- write up the list of ground rules and ensure that everyone has a copy

It is a good idea to rotate the roles so that each member experiences different responsibilities; ensure that you know what role it is that you are taking on. If any of you have special talents make use of them for example, for illustrations, computer work etc.

Planning the programme

Proper planning of your work in the group is one of the major keys to its success

- share out the job of researching information or collecting resources for the task so as to avoid everyone looking for the same books etc.
- use the time effectively by making an overall timetable for the work and planning how often the group will meet
- have a structured approach to each meeting so that there is a sense of purpose, but maintain a degree of flexibility so that any matters arising can be addressed

Example: Meeting Agenda

1. Notes of the last meeting (including responsibilities)
2. Matters arising from the last meeting—what progress has been made
3. Items for discussion (main part of the meeting)
4. Any other business (AOB)
5. Time and place of next meeting and statement of purpose.

A Checklist of Progress

The group has understood and agreed upon the task

The group has agreed upon the ground rules for the group

The group understands the assessment procedures and criteria

All members of the group are involved and understand their role

Common Problems

Accept that there are likely to be some problems. Sometimes it is not easy to actually identify what the problem is and it is worth considering the nature of the problem. Is it related to the task itself for instance is it

- a lack of clarity about goals
- a lack of time
- a lack of resources

- a lack of skills for the task
- difficulty with organising meetings
- not reviewing work

Or is it related to the maintenance of the group, for instance

- members being too dominant
- members not contributing
- members being excluded
- conflict between members
- members not compromising

Help

Although group work is self managed, the module leader or other designated member of staff will be pleased to act as a facilitator or give help if you need it. Being part of a team means that you have ownership of the work being done by the team and therefore a responsibility to the other team members. The most common complaint expressed by students doing this kind of work is lack of effort and consideration by some group members. If you are going to miss a meeting or you are having difficulty with your task due to other commitments, let the others in the group know.

Appendix B

MODEL FOR ASSESSING GROUP WORK

Stage one:

Each group member maintains their own log/diary of events from meetings and outcomes agreed from these meetings. Include any meetings you have had with your group mentor/facilitator. Note the activity/research area you are involved in and monitor progress here. Include a reflection of your thoughts—how was any challenge/confrontation handled? What is your own role in the group and are you satisfied with it?

Stage two:

Prior to the presentation there will be a group viva. The purposes of this are twofold:

- 1 To offer the opportunity for individual members of the group to reflect as objectively as possible on their experiences as a group member and these are outlined in the assessment criteria.
- 2 To ensure that the work involved has been distributed fairly and that individuals have a clear understanding of the work they are contributing to the final presentation. This will require that the individual learning logs are available as a basis for discussion.

Assessment criteria for the viva include recognition of the following:

- how you have contributed to the group discussion
- where there have been differences of opinion
- what your role has been within the group
- the time commitment required to achieve the group outcome
- ways in which the group has developed
- the need to work flexibly within the group

As a result of this viva each individual group member will be awarded a percentage which will contribute 50% to their final grade.

Stage three:

At an agreed date and time present your work as a group in the way that you have been advised by the module leader. The module leader will provide assessment criteria for the presentation which will include the following:

An introduction to the topic

A statement of objectives

Use of any visual aids

Contributions are evident from all group members

Ability to encourage questions from the audience (if appropriate*)

Ability to respond to any questions from the audience or colleagues

Ability to bring the presentation to a conclusion within an agreed time span (if appropriate*)

* 'if appropriate' is bracketed here as not all presentations may require these criteria—for instance, a poster presentation may not require you to invite questions from an audience.

Specific criteria will also be drawn up that will relate to the subject area.

Stage four:

Using your individual logs/diaries compile a group report of approximately 1,000 words to demonstrate the following:

- an outline of meetings and individual student contributions/roles
- methods of collecting relevant information/data
- recognition of the problems encountered along the way
- skills learned
- a reflection on the final presentation taking into account the above criteria
- comments for future group work presentations

A final grade will be awarded by:

Taking the mark for each individual that was awarded at the group viva together with the group presentation and group report mark. For example within the same group the following 2 students may vary:

Group viva Jane receives 20%
Group presentation and group report mark 60%
Jane has an overall grade of D5 or 40%

Group viva Rose receives 80%
Group presentation and group report mark 60%
Rose has an overall grade of A14 or 70%.

Please note that 50% of the grade will be allocated to the processes underpinning the group work so the ability to reflect on these is paramount both within the written work and orally.

Appendix C

Criteria for marking Viva

Marking Grid

Viva:

Name

Group
Title

	A	B	C	D	E
Overall reflection (best and worse things)					
Handling issues which were uncomfortable					
Contribution to group discussion					
Awareness of Time management					
Awareness of group dynamics					
Contribution to the research required					

Comments