

A Proposed Framework for Better Managing Small Group Projects on an Undergraduate Foundation Programme at an International University Campus

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Abstract : Each year, selected students from around 20 countries begin their degrees at Middlesex University with the International Foundation Program (IFP), developing the skills required for academic study at a UK university. The IFP runs for 30 learning/teaching weeks at Middlesex University Mauritius Branch Campus, which is an international campus of UK's Middlesex University. Successful IFP students join their degree courses already settled into life at their chosen campus (London, Dubai, Mauritius or Malta) and confident that they understand what is required for degree study. Although part of the School of Science and Technology, in Mauritius it prepares students for undergraduate level across all Schools represented on campus - including disciplines such as Accounting, Business, Computing, Law, Media and Psychology. The researcher has critically reviewed the framework and resources in the curriculum for a particular six week period of IFP study (dedicated group work phase). Despite working together closely for 24 weeks, IFP students approach the final 6 week small group work project phase with mainly inhibitive feelings. It was observed that students did not engage effectively in the group work exercise. Additionally, groups who seemed to be working well did not necessarily produce results reflecting effective collaboration, nor individual members' results which were better than prior efforts. The researcher identified scope for change and innovation in the IFP curriculum and how group work is introduced and facilitated. The study explores the challenges of groupwork in the context of the Mauritius campus, though it is clear that the implications of the project are not restricted to one campus only. The presentation offers a reflective review on the previous structure put in place for the management of small group assessed projects on the programme from both the student and tutor perspective. The focus of the research perspective is the student voice, by taking into consideration past and present IFP students' experiences as written in their learning journals. Further, it proposes the introduction of a revised framework to help students take greater ownership of the group work process in order to engage more effectively with the learning outcomes of this crucial phase of the programme. The study has critically reviewed recent and seminal literature on how to achieve greater student ownership during this phase especially under an environment of assessed multicultural group work. The presentation proposes several new approaches for encouraging students to take more control of the collaboration process. Detailed consideration is given to how the proposed changes impact on the work of other stakeholders, or partners to student learning. Clear proposals are laid out for evaluation of the different approaches intended to be implemented during the upcoming academic year (student voice through their own submitted reflections, focus group interviews and through the assessment results). The proposals presented are all realistic and have the potential to transform students' learning. Furthermore, the study has engaged with the UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education, and demonstrates practice at the level of 'fellow' of the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

Keywords : collaborative peer learning, enhancing learning experiences, group work assessment, learning communities, multicultural diverse classrooms, studying abroad

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