

Inclusive Group Work Guidance

HOW TO CREATE INCLUSIVE GROUP WORK
EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS

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Introduction

This guide aims to equip teaching staff with the tools and strategies needed to create inclusive group work experiences, ensuring that all students can fully participate and benefit from these course activities. It incorporates valuable insights from students with lived experience in university group work and its unique challenges.

This guide was developed by UG student Kai Harper as part of a Student Disability Partners project supervised by Dr Dave Lawson in the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Bristol. This collaborative project brought together staff and students to audit, review, and develop teaching resources that foster inclusivity and accessibility within our school.

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Group work accommodations and why we need them

Group work accommodations are essential, not based on preference, but because of the significant stress and energy that some students, especially neurodivergent ones with autism and social anxiety, experience when working with unfamiliar people (Drexler, 2024). These students often face unique challenges in group settings, where social dynamics can feel overwhelming due to difficulties in reading non-verbal cues, adjusting to fast-paced interactions, and navigating unstructured roles, all of which can lead to anxiety and isolation.

Effective group work requires clear communication and coordination, yet when expectations are not explicit or when conflicts arise, these situations can become particularly stressful. Without adequate understanding from peers or facilitators, neurodivergent students' contributions may be under-recognised, limiting their ability to participate and succeed in group activities fully.

The following guide explores best practices for accommodating these barriers and how to ensure that students do not feel 'othered' by the process.

General Actions for Inclusive Student Group Working

Small changes can make a large difference for students undertaking group work. Below is a list of actions that teaching staff can take to make group work more inclusive.

- Share the details of the groupwork task as far in advance as possible, such as how groups will be assigned with a written record for reference.
- Match the group work to the unit's intended learning outcomes. Explicitly communicate the learning goals and how group work can help meet those goals.
- Devote in-class time to building teamwork skills and setting expectations.
- Talk openly about accessibility and acknowledge a diversity of learners.
- Add guidance on conducting regular structured check-ins for longer group work projects, allowing students to discuss progress, raise concerns, or request adjustments without stress.

Clarifying expectations of group work

In addition to making your own expectations clear, it can be helpful to motivate students to establish their own norms for working in groups by considering questions such as:

- What are some positive and negative aspects of group work?
- What is the group's approach to accomplishing the project goals?
- How will group members communicate with each other?
- What are the expectations for group meetings?
- How will the group manage situations where a group member(s) does not meet expectations, and how will conflict be addressed and resolved?
- Who will be responsible for what tasks? Will roles rotate?
- How will the group share work?

Contacting a student about group work

Before starting a new piece of group-based work (e.g. coursework, labs, fieldwork), please check whether any students on the programme have any SSPs via eVision. General guidance on accessing SSP information [can be found on the University SharePoint](#). For School of Biological Sciences staff, please find [more bespoke guidance here](#).

Where possible, please email the relevant student(s) to discuss their needs in relation to group work.

- Some students may like working in a group, but only with people they know.
- Some students may prefer working alone where possible.

Contacting the student before the group work greatly reduces the potential stress caused by worrying about the group allocations.

- If a student's group work adjustments are only discussed on the group working day, this can be very 'othering'.
 - o E.g. A student has not been contacted about their group work adjustment before the group working. The student arrives on the day and is randomly assigned a group. Now, the students must make themselves stand out by asking to change groups/not work in a group, and spend energy advocating for disability adjustments when they could otherwise be focussing on the work at hand.

Email Template for Contacting Students with Relevant SSP Adjustments

Below are template emails you could send to a student with a group work SSP. These are just an example to save you time; naturally, feel free to edit or totally rewrite as you see fit.

Email template (where group work is *mandatory*):

Subject: Support for Group Work in [Coursework/Practical Name]

Dear [Student's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. I'm [Your Name], the unit lead for [Unit Name], and I wanted to reach out regarding your study support plan, particularly around group work accommodations, ahead of [Coursework/Practical Name].

In this [Coursework/Practical Name], students will be working collaboratively to [describe group work activity]. Group work is essential for this activity because [briefly explain the purpose and benefit of group work in this context, such as developing teamwork skills, encouraging diverse perspectives, etc.]. However, I want to ensure the process feels as supportive as possible for you and have a few accommodation options in place to make participation smoother.

[Insert possible accommodations, such as choosing group members, providing alternative grouping methods, offering structured check-ins, or suggesting alternative roles within the group based on comfort level.]

If there's anything specific you'd like to discuss about the upcoming group work or any adjustments that would make this experience more accessible for you, please let me know. We can work together to create an approach that supports both your participation and comfort.

All the best,

[Your Name]

Email template (group work *isn't mandatory*):

Subject: Support for Group Work in [Coursework/Practical Name]

Dear [Student's Name],

I'm [Your Name], the unit lead for [Unit Name], and I wanted to reach out regarding your study support plan, particularly around group work, ahead of [Coursework/Practical Name].

In this [Coursework/Practical Name], students will [describe group work activity]. While working in a group is encouraged to support [briefly explain benefits, like skill-building, collaborative learning, etc.], it's by no means mandatory. As part of your study support plan, you're welcome to choose your own group members if that's preferable, or you're equally welcome to work independently if that would make this assignment more accessible for you.

Please let me know which option would be most comfortable for you, and don't hesitate to reach out if there's anything specific I can do to support you in this activity.

All the best,
[Your Name]

When unable to contact a student before group work

If you have emailed a student, and have not had a response before the group working, adjustments will have to be made on the day.

- When arranging adjustments with a student on the day, try not to make them stand out from the larger group where possible.
 - o Potential accommodation: Ask the entire group if they are comfortable with their group arrangements and clarify that it is not an issue if anyone needs changes. Tell the group that if anyone would like changes, they can come and talk to the relevant member of staff privately, and give time to do this. The key aspect here is that individual student(s) are not called upon to advocate for changes in front of the entire cohort.

Alternative Grouping Methods

The list below suggests possible alternative methods for navigating group allocations but is not exhaustive. Please alter these suggestions as needed to the format of the relevant work.

Direct student choice

Students (with a group work-related SSP adjustment) can directly choose all members of their group, regardless of group size

- Provides the greatest accessibility for students who require group work adjustments.
- But reduces mixing of new students together (less shared knowledge, socialising, etc).

Paired grouping

Students (with a group work-related SSP adjustment) can choose one other person to be placed into a larger group with

- This allows a student to still work with someone they are comfortable with, without losing the ability to mix students and improve group working abilities.
- This still allows random ranked choice allocation (e.g. field courses) to exist, whilst still accommodating students with a groupwork SSP.

Random assignment (with adjustment flexibility)

Students are assigned groups randomly, but before making groupings official, students with a group work-related SSP adjustment are contacted to see if they need adjustments (e.g. changing to a group with someone they know)

- Increases the chance that groups can be randomised, whilst still allowing adjustments if needed.
- Like paired grouping, this still allows random ranked choice allocation (e.g. field courses) to exist, whilst still accommodating students with a groupwork SSP.

Independent working

For some students, the stress of and energetic requirement is too large and can prevent them from working to the best of their ability. Wherever possible, it is best to accommodate this need.

- Try not to use phrases like “In future jobs, you’ll need to work in groups”. The student will be aware of this but wishes to be able to work to their best ability in their degree.
 - The issues that lead to issues in group work (e.g. communication challenges, energetic investment) won’t be resolved by forcing a student to work in a group when it is not necessary.
 - Additionally, some elements of the course feature mandatory group work (e.g. for safety), so the student will still have the chance to experience group work several times during their degree.

Please also see the [Inclusive and Accessible Teaching Guide](#) for more insights into how to make group work more inclusive and accessible.

If you have any questions about implanting reasonable adjustments to groupwork, or other activities, please contact the School of Biological Sciences School Disability Coordinator David Lawson at david.lawson@bristol.ac.uk.

References

Drexler, S., 2024. Autistic Students' Communication Experiences in Group Work: A Mixed Methods Study (Master's thesis, Bowling Green State University).