CREATING QUALITY UNIT OF STUDY OUTLINES

Whilst it is recognised that group work comprises only one component of the learning, teaching and assessment activities available to educators it is important for both educators and students to fully appreciate and understand the connections between the various components of the unit of study and the use of group work (or any other teaching or assessment method). This can be achieved by careful planning of the Unit of Study Outline.

It may also be a good idea to include a brief explanation for the use of group work in your outlines as this improves the transparency of teaching and assessment aims and may also ease student tensions, concerns or confusion.

In order to evaluate an outline or to design quality Unit of Study Outlines it is firstly important to be familiar with a number of key definitions or terms contained in most outlines. We realise that most of you will be very familiar with these terms but provide them for those of us who are new to the Higher Education context.

Developing meaningful outcomes

Evidence suggests that the use of group work can have a positive impact on student learning, understanding, participation and motivation, but it is not always the answer. Group work should not be used as a way of reducing the marking or teaching load associated with large classes because if used in this goal alone, it may result in student disenchantment with the process. Often the reluctance on the part of the students to undertake group work is because they fail to see the connection between what they are being asked to do and the outcomes stated for the course. Therefore it is important that we demonstrate a clear relationship between group work and the course aims, objectives and outcomes.

It is imperative that the desired learning outcomes for the Unit of Study be linked to the overall aims and objectives of the unit and should be listed explicitly within the Unit of Study Outline, and explained in detail to students in initial class meetings. Developing meaningful learning outcomes that challenge and inspire students is an essential part of this process. This is about writing and including quality outcomes that motivate students, contextualise the learning context, and facilitate learning and teaching. Quality learning outcomes also require the choice of relevant and effective teaching and assessment methods (some of which may involve collaborative work).

Learning taxonomies and models

If you are finding it difficult to write learning outcomes or want to make the ones you already have more explicit, refined or student focussed, then we suggest using a learning taxonomy or model. These models provide a hierarchical framework that help educators to formulate outcomes at specific levels of expected or required student achievement. They provide educators with different levels of complexity of understanding and skill development, thus catering for the needs of students at all levels. They are also helpful
when deciding upon learning and teaching strategies (see ‘Section 3’), and writing assessment tasks (see ‘Section 4’).

Two examples of learning taxonomies are: ‘Blooms taxonomy’ (Bloom, 1956), and ‘the SOLO taxonomy’ (Biggs & Collis, 1982) (see ‘Biggs, 1996’, ‘Biggs, 1999’). It may also help to have a ‘list of action words’ to draw upon when developing your outlines which help with wording for outcomes and assessment tasks (and marking criteria).

**Designing or re-evaluating your Unit of Study Outline**

The process of designing or re-evaluating a Unit of Study Outline involves reflecting upon the ‘old’ outline in light of what you are now trying to change or achieve. This involves evaluating how effective the ‘old’ outcomes, content, teaching and learning experiences and assessments have been in the past and deciding upon what you now want them to do (in terms of student learning). A simple ‘proforma’ which compares and contrasts the ‘old’ and ‘new’ may help, as will collecting ‘sample unit of study re-evaluations’.

When re-designing a Unit of Study Outline it is important to think of the whole unit of study and how you desire it to logically progress in order for students to have the best opportunity to show what they know and can do. This might mean re-writing only some or all aspects of the ‘old’ outline (aim, objectives, outcomes, content, assessments) in light of:

- A concerted process of ‘reflection’ on the Unit of Study, the students, and your teaching
- Pedagogical or philosophical changes in higher education, teaching and learning or in your discipline
- New and updated research, information, practices or skills in your field
- Increasing demands from the University or vocational bodies with regards to finances, class sizes, employment skills, graduate attributes
- Meeting the needs and interests of an increasingly diverse population of students
- Viewing ‘sample Unit of Study Outlines’ which have been constructively aligned
- Using information from colleagues of a ‘TIPS sheet’ for designing Units of Study

The University of Sydney provides clear guidelines and suggestions for the development of quality Unit of Study Outlines via the ‘Academic Board Resolutions’ (see Part 5). Some Faculties have developed their own outline templates, for instance the Faculty of Education and Social Work has developed a draft ‘Unit of Study Template’.