How Do Students View Group Assignments in Real Estate and Property Development Studies?

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Abstract

It is generally accepted that group assignment tasks provide many benefits to postgraduate real estate students. Consequently, group assignments have become common place in university education. However students often have problems understanding group assignments, which may not be considered by lecturers when designing assessment tasks. This research aims to understand how postgraduate real estate students view group assignments in terms of the benefits they perceive and the problems they have experienced, as well as how group assignments can be improved. The results show that the benefits of group assignments are closely linked to teamwork skills such as: cooperation, communication, interpersonal, negotiation, and delegation while the main problems were 'different expectation and low quality work done by some members'. It is concluded that while group assignments are important and provide opportunities for students to learn course contents, share ideas, and develop teamwork skills, to avoid problems from arising in group assignment, it is necessary to establish a detail assessment criteria that provides the process and progression monitoring, recognize individual contribution and the final submissions. At the end, the students' preference was the combination of group and individual assignments.

Keyword: Real Estate Education, Group Assignment, Teamwork Skill, Assessment.

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Introduction

A growing number of real estate educators believe that real estate studies should focus on multidisciplinary aspects of the industry (Galuppo and Worzala, 2004). Various surveys of the real estate industry indicated that skills highly valued by industry include communication (oral and written), negotiation, legal concept, analytical decision-making, problem solving, computer proficiency, financial statement analysis, and team building (Butler, et al, 1998 and Gair, 2001).

The scope and complex nature of real estate studies requires skills to work effectively in a team environment. The authors believe that given the range of skills valued by industry, that real estate studies should be taught as an integrated unit and as a process of dynamic interactions, rather than as functional areas and historical numbers and facts (Black, et al, 1996). Furthermore, Butler et al (1998) discussed a process for developing an integrated real estate curriculum including team building and collaborative learning techniques.

University lecturers generally agree that they need to assist students in developing their critical- thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, and teamwork values (Duch, 1995). However, although group assignments are currently the most widespread technique to develop teamwork skills in graduates, little research has been done to investigate, from students' perspective, the benefits and difficulties of group formation, process monitoring, team performance, and assessment for group assignments.

The aims of this paper are to gain an appreciation of postgraduate real estate students' perspectives on group assignments and to develop strategies that lead to effective use of group assignments to enhance student learning outcomes.

Background

One role of universities is supplying industries with graduates not only capable and competent in doing the job as individuals but also who have the required skills to work effectively in a team environment. The University of New South Wales emphasised teamwork skill development in its policy on its Graduate Attributes (UNSW 2003) and UNSW Guidelines on Learning that Informs Teaching (UNSW 2004). Teamwork skills are also highlighted in Zou *et al.* (2004) where "skills required for collaborative and multidisciplinary work (UNSW Graduate Attributes 2003)" is considered as an essential attribute of graduates from the employers' perspective.

Universities have been trying to enrich their programs in ways to meet the industry expectations in relation to teamwork by incorporating collaborative and cooperative learning methods (e.g. group assignments) into their curricula. Using such methods, universities not only develop skills required by the industry in their graduates but also utilize other benefits of

such methods, like improved students performance, improved support to students, resource saving, learning in a more comfortable environment (Gibbs 1995).

Research methodology

A survey questionnaire was designed to empirically investigate from students' perspectives, benefits, difficulties and problems, group formation, process monitoring, team performance, assessment and their overall experience. Apart from close-ended questions, space was provided to the students to express their comments.

Sampling and Students' Profiles

The Master of Real Estate (MRE) program in the University of New South Wales covers the postgraduate study in development, investment and management of property and infrastructure. It also provides education to those broadening their current professional bases in architecture, landscape architecture, construction management, engineering, urban planning, and law.

The aforementioned questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 42 MRE students. A total of 41 students returned a completed questionnaire. Table 1 shows the students' profiles in the survey.

Table 1: Students' Profiles

Participating students	Local (%)	International (%)	Total (%)
Male	5 (12%)	19 (47%)	24 (59%)
Female	7 (17%)	10 (24%)	17 (41%)
Total	12 (29%)	29 (71%)	41 (100%)

The sample students came from 12 different countries. There are 12 local Australian students as majority, followed by 11 Chinese and 5 Indians. The rest were from the following countries: Botswana, Germany, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and United States.

The professional backgrounds of the sample students were diverse: Eleven had their professional backgrounds in Architecture, followed by 10 in Urban Design and Planning, 7 in Real Estate and Valuation, 5 in Landscape Architecture, and 4 in Civil Engineering. The other professional backgrounds included Building, Economics, Graphic Design, and Law.

Most of the students (90%) had experience in doing group assignments. Sample students were in different stages of their studies: 54% of the students were in their first semester; 15% in their second semester, and about one third (31%) in their third semester.

The diversity of the sample students' profiles provides an excellent opportunity for them to share knowledge and to generate different ideas for group works. However, at the same time, it also posts a challenge to the lecturers and the students themselves in managing the diversity in terms of cultural and technical background.

Results and Discussions

Benefits of Group Assignment

In the survey, each student was asked to rate the possible benefits of group assignment. A scale of 5 to 1 (strongly agree, agree, partially agree, disagree, to strongly disagree) was used. As shown in Table 2, there is a clear order of ranking, which achieved some consistency between mean value and variance, and this indicates the questionnaire is reliable and consistent. The five most important benefits of group assignments are closely linked to the teamwork skills such as cooperation, communication, interpersonal, negotiation, and delegation. It is generally agreed that the cooperation, communication, interpersonal, negotiation, and teamwork skills are essential managerial skills in today's real estate business. Therefore, in postgraduate real estate education, group assignment has its merit not only as a method for students to learn courses contents but also provides opportunities for them to learn essential managerial skills.

It is interesting to note that 'facilitating a deeper understanding of the course content' was ranked 15th, while 'resulting in an outcome with a greater depth and breadth than an individual assignment' was ranked 10th. Lecturers would normally regard these two issues were important benefits but the students' perception was otherwise.

Table 2: Benefits of Group Assignments

Ranking	Possible Benefit	Mean	Standard deviation
1	Development of cooperation skills	4.10	0.74
2	Development of communication skills	4.00	0.85
3	Development of interpersonal skills	3.85	1.03
4	Development of negotiation skills	3.78	0.83
5	Development of delegation skills	3.76	0.64
6	Allowing students to experience teamwork situations similar to the workplace	3.73	0.95
7	Exposing students to diverse ideas and approaches	3.73	0.85
8	Facilitating social interaction between students	3.70	1.04
9	Development of time management skills	3.68	1.42
10	Resulting in an outcome with a greater depth and breadth than an individual assignment	3.68	1.17
11	Development of organization skills	3.66	0.93
12	Development of conflict management skills	3.63	0.83
13	Development of leadership skills	3.63	0.89
14	Helping students to develop confidence and become active learners	3.63	0.74
15	Facilitating a deeper understanding of the course content	3.49	1.31
16	Facilitating collaboration and support as well as competition	3.15	1.08
17	Giving the students a chance to perform a number of different roles (e.g. Chair, Organizer, Innovator, …)	3.15	1.43

Problems and Difficulties of Group Assignment

Table 3 shows the ranking of the relative importance of problems and difficulties that can occur during group assignment work. It reveals that three of the top four ranked problems and difficulties were directly or indirectly related to individual contributions within the group members and these included 'different expectation resulting in dissatisfaction of some students', 'low quality work done by some members', and 'free riders, slackers, members not pulling their weight'. Recognition of an individual contribution without damaging the teamwork approach within a group is a challenging responsibility for lecturers and students.

Conversely, the possible problems and difficulties of 'members not wanting to share their ideas or knowledge' and 'confrontation clash and between some members apart from assignment' were ranked 13th (last) and 12th respectively. However, the results in Table 3 did not show consistency between mean value and variance. This may indicate that the results of this section are less reliable than the results of the previous section.

Table 3: Problems and Difficulties of Group Assignments

Ranking	Possible Problem/Difficulty	Mean	Standard deviation
1	Different expectation resulting in dissatisfaction of some students (some may want to get a high mark and some may just want a pass mark)	3.51	1.46
2	Low quality work done by some member/s in the group	3.49	1.41
3	Not learning all the materials covered in the course because of dividing the work	3.46	1.41
4	Free riders, slackers, member not pulling their weight	3.41	1.25
5	Unfair assessment (everyone receiving the same mark regardless to their contribution)	3.34	1.43
6	Hard to arrange time for group meetings	3.32	1.97
7	Having non-competent student(s) in the group	3.29	1.61
8	Higher level of risk to get good marks compared to individual assignments	3.18	1.53
9	One member dominating the group work (takes over the control of everything and decreases other members participation)	3.10	1.44
10	Dispute over an assignment related issue	2.71	1.01
11	Hard to allocate the work between members	2.63	1.49
12	Confrontation clash and between some members apart from assignment	2.22	1.48
13	Member(s) not wanting to share their ideas or knowledge	2.17	1.40

Group Size

The most appropriate size of a group is directly related to the complexity of the job to be done and the amount of time available. Gibbs (1995) asserts that the larger the group, the more problematic it would be for the members to cooperate and coordinate efforts, the easier it would be for students to hide, and the harder it would be to assess contributions. Conversely, the larger the group size, the more complicated and complex assignments tasks can be used and the more ideas may be generated.

The students were asked to choose what they considered to be the most appropriate number of members in group assignments. Figure 1 shows that more than half (53%) of students choose four members as the most appropriate group size. The students chose a group with five or more members.

Process Monitoring

The survey questionnaire attempted to find the current practice in process monitoring in group assignments. While most students (95%) indicated that the process monitoring for group assignment by lecturers is important, more than half (56%) of students answered that their lecturers did not monitor the process of group assignments. The rest of students indicated their lecturers' process monitoring methods as: giving feedback (21%), regular meeting with lecturers (16%), and asking for progress reports (7%).

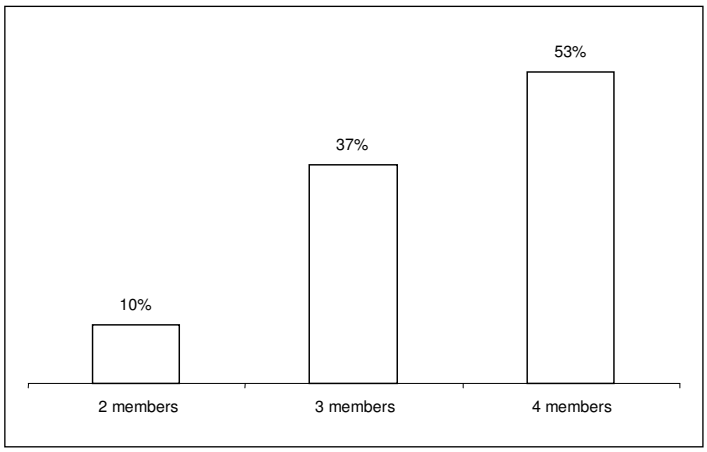

Figure 1: Students' view of group size

Team Performance

Gibbs (1994) suggests that in order to have a successful team in terms of output, each member should be assigned to the role they are most capable to playing, but to develop new skills students should take new roles and responsibilities that, in turn, may affect the final output and therefore the results of the group-work. The questionnaire also explored the issue of how students actually do their group assignments, including assigning roles, responsibility effect, and awareness of final submission. Only 20% of the students indicated that they changed their roles in every meeting, and 37% of the students changed their roles in every assignment,

while 39% of the students did not changed their roles for group assignments. It means that the students are generally more concerned about their final marks, as they tended not to change their roles for group assignment.

Responsibility effect: The questionnaire also attempted to measure students sense of responsibility for the work done by the group. It is anticipated that the quality of the group work may suffer when some members felt less responsible in the group-work environment. About 66% of the students felt more responsible when working in a group, while 17% felt less responsible and the rest (17%) mentioned that it makes no difference.

Awareness of contents of final submission: Often students divided the assignment into parts and each member completed his/her own part. Thus, the final submission was simply a compilation of the parts, which was not checked, nor proofread by other members in the group. It is found that 49% of them were always aware of the contents of the final submission, while 46% of them were sometimes aware of the contents.

Process assessment: 71 % of the students believed that assessing the process of doing the group assignment is important, while 10% regarded it as unimportant and the rest (19%) were not sure. This indicates that although near three quarters (71%) of the students considered process assessment as important, only 27% of the students preferred it to be assessed. Furthermore 10% of the students considered that the process assessment is best accomplished by students and lecturers together, while 49% considered students themselves and 24% considered lecturers as the most appropriate persons for the assessment of the process.

Evaluation of individual contribution: As shown in the 'Problems and Difficulties of Group Assignments' section (Table 3), 'free-riders' and 'unfair assessment' were considered as the major problems with group assignments. About 44% of the students considered evaluation of individual contributions as necessary and 29% indicated 'maybe', while 24% of the students considered it unnecessary. When asked who should evaluate individual contributions, 32% of the students chose group members for each other, while 20% chose lecturers and 24% chose students themselves. It confirms that more attention should be paid to the evaluation of individual contribution.

Overall Experience in Group Assignments

Eighty-three percent of the students considered group assignments helped them develop teamwork skills, while 10% of the students felt "maybe" on the issue and 7% of the students were negative about it.

For the distribution of the students' preference among different types of assignments, 61% of the students preferred the combination of individual assignments and group assignments. Whilst 20% of the students preferred individual assignments only, 17% of the students preferred group assignments only. Furthermore, 68% of the students took the view that combination of group and individual assignments provides a higher level of mastery over the course contents but 22% insisted that individual assignments allow them to master the course contents at a higher level, while 10% of the students took the group assignments for their higher achievement.

Conclusions

It is concluded that while group assignments are important and provide opportunities for postgraduate real estate students to learn course contents, share ideas, and develop cooperation and communication skills. Furthermore, both the lecturers and students should be mindful about the problems associated with group assignment and it is necessary to establish a detailed assessment criteria that provides the process and progression monitoring, individual contribution, and the final submissions. At the same time individual assignments should not be forgotten as part of learning and assessment tasks.

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