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**ACCOUNTING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS GROUP
WORK**

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Abstract

The research aims to explore students' perception towards group work. Respondents were students who took seminar in management accounting at a private university. The research uses descriptive approach method. Data was gathered via a questionnaire survey. Students' perception towards group work was investigated in terms of the activities they performed during group work, strategies implemented to encourage fair contribution among members, skills developed in work group activities and peer evaluation of members. The results conclude that students perceived group work positively in that it improved their teamwork, communication and leadership skills through brainstorming, active participation as well as having to keep a deadline (among others). Students' lack of knowledge was found to impede their capability in group work. It was also confirmed that students' contribution in group work was not fairly appraised via peer evaluation because the assessor felt uncomfortable appraising their peers' work as it might affect the final grading.

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1. Introduction

Group work enhances student's skills in terms of teamwork and communication. Group work motivates students, inspire active learning as well as enhances critical-thinking, communication and decision-making ability. Group work is gaining importance in the professional world. Group work enhances student skills (Caruso & Woolley, 2008; Mannix & Neale, 2005). Group work motivates students, inspire active learning as well as enhances critical-thinking, communication and decision-making ability.

Daba et al. (2017) iterate that group work is frequent and commonly used nowadays as a learning method by nearly all instructors. The shift to group work is a way of reducing pressures for students by providing them with a "safe" environment to interact freely without pressures from all eyes focusing on them in the classroom. The change develops students' critical thinking ability and boost their confidence to speak up.

Nevertheless, group work may become frustrating to students and instructors and can be problematic without careful planning – especially in terms of group efficiency to carry out tasks to the grading of the group work due to free riders, among others (Healy et al., 2014). Free rider creates discontent among other members when at least one member in the group does not contribute much to a group assignment but is given the same grade as the other hardworking members - the grade would be misleading and unfair. With differing perspectives of group work, it would be interesting to investigate whether students perceive group work in a positive or negative light. Thus, the research aims to explore accounting students' perception of group work.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Experiential technique: Semi structured classroom activity

The group assignment, which was part of continuous assessment for this research, is a semi structured classroom activity. A semi structured classroom activity is different from traditional classroom activities because students are expected to be more critical and creative. The students are also expected to apply the knowledge learnt in classroom and use these theoretical understanding in mini projects, which build problem solving skills via real business situations similar to Hamer's findings in 2000. Hamer (2000) discovered there was significant impact in using experiential technique on student learning. Hamer revealed that the type of teaching method is suitable for courses where application of knowledge is essential. However, he also found differences in students' performance when using semi-structured activity in that students with low academic performance were seen to require more time to strengthen their understanding of knowledge before they can apply the knowledge to solve problems. Handhika et al. (2018) analysis on project based learning that involve students working in groups concluded that group work improved students' conception and critical thinking abilities.

2.2. Group work

Not many students relish group work or activities that would entail working with others in a group to complete a particular objective (Burke, 2011). Beebe and Masterson (2016) listed six advantages of

group work namely, a group has more information than an individual, motivate members to be more creative, information retention improves, self-satisfaction, gain better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and interpersonal skills. Prior research also discovered that student who did collaborative work achieved better academic performance. Hamer (2000) for example, iterates that group work creates a stage for students to learn and work together with one another in completing tasks assigned. Nonetheless, there are disadvantages of group work such as pressures to conform to popular opinion, a dominant figure controlling the group discussion, members relying on other members to complete group tasks and time consuming (Beebe & Masterson, 2016).

2.2.1. Activities performed

We review literature on activities performed throughout the planning, preparation and completion of group work. For example, the most popular activity is brainstorming. According to Hirshfield and Chachra (2015), brainstorming is one of the top five activities conducted in group work. Further, Burga et al. (2020) and Wilson et al. (2017) revealed that having an informal chat is also one activity that is popular, formal discussions was discovered to be an unpopular activity however. Burke (2011) and Burga et al. (2020) also listed sitting down together and working on the assignment as another popular activity. Other activities conducted in a group work were exchanging of files and documents, rapid questions and holding regular meetings (Burga et al., 2020) but Wilson et al. (2017) continued to add that having regular meetings are not very popular as scheduling meetings were difficult.

2.2.2. Fair contribution among members

One of the concerns of group work is whether there are elements of fair distribution of work among group members. Sharing of workload in group work is one of the main issues that was highlighted in previous studies (refer Table 1). For example, Wilson et al. (2017) discovered that a group that does not share equal workload will result in poor teamwork. Burga et al. (2020) posit that self-efficacy is important for the success of groups and they are: good communication among members, leadership and time management. Level of contribution among members were important in highlighting peer strength.

Table 1. Fair contribution of work

Author(s)	Fair contribution of work
Wilson et al. (2017)	Share workload
Burga et al. (2020)	Use peer strength, mutual agreement, help each other, encourage participation

2.2.3. Skills gained from group work

The skills gained from group work as documented by previous studies are numerous. Some of them were teamwork skills, self-development, social skill, lifelong learning, critical thinking, academic development, interpersonal skill, communication skill, time management and leadership skills (refer Table 2).

Nonetheless, Wilson et al. (2017) cautioned that although group work enhances teamwork skill, not all students were able to pick up the skill. Hamer (2000) asserts that group work stimulates student's self-development to which they are able to solve problems better. Further, Hirshfield and Chachra (2015) posit that when a student is familiar to the tasks, they will strive to do better.

Hamer (2000) shares inconsistency in results of academic development among students with group work, where not all students excel academically as a result. Additionally, the most noticeable of skills acquired from group work were communication skills and leadership skills.

Table 2. Skills gained from group work

Author(s)	Skill(s) gained
Burke (2011), Handhika et al. (2018), Cole et al. (2019), Wilson et al. (2017)	Teamwork Skills
Hamer (2000), Hirshfield and Chachra (2015)	Self-Development
Kriflik and Mullan (2007)	Social Skills
Rossin and Hyland (2003)	Lifelong Learning
Handhika et al. (2018)	Critical Thinking
Hamer (2000)	Academic Development
Rossin and Hyland (2003), Kriflik and Mullan (2007)	Interpersonal Skill
Hamer (2000), Rossin and Hyland (2003), Kriflik and Mullan (2007), Handhika et al. (2018), Cole et al. (2019)	Communication Skills
Burga et al (2020)	Time Management
Kriflik and Mullan (2007), Handhika et al. (2018), Burga et al. (2020)	Leadership

2.3. Peer evaluation

Prior research reveals that peer assessment increases student motivation, builds up on self-confidence (Kriflik & Mullan, 2007; Handhika et al., 2018, Burga et al., 2020) and stimulates critical thinking (Handhika et al., 2018). Thus, it is a particularly useful strategy to assess each student's contribution in group work (Rodilla, 2007). However, Sridharan et al. (2019) discovered that students are unwilling to take part in peer evaluation if their negative evaluation may jeopardise their fellow team member. Consequently, they concluded that peer evaluation might not be appropriate as part measure of final grading.

3. Method

3.1. Population and sample

The research focuses on third year accounting students taking seminar in management accounting (AMAB343) course from a private university. Part of the subject's continuous assessment consist of one group assignment activity, with specific requirements that were clearly informed in class at the beginning of the semester. The students were given 1.5 months to complete the assignment, whereby each group was to submit one report via email to the instructor. The instructor randomly selected four to five members per group using an online group generator. The students were given the freedom to operate and steer the group direction themselves. There were 127 students enrolled for the subject in that year. The minimum target

sample size for is determined at 96 (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The final sample for the research was 103 responses.

3.2. Data collection

The research used questionnaire survey to collect data. The questionnaires were distributed to students who registered for Seminar in Management Accounting (AMAB343) subject. These students had completed their management accounting course and they were generally in their third year of study. Students from this subject were chosen as sample because one of the assessment elements is in the form of group assignment. The assignment has three components, namely: Group report, presentation and peer evaluation. The group report score was awarded based on group submission. However, presentation and peer evaluation were evaluated individually. The instructor preassigned members of each group. This means that the students were not in their 'comfort zone', they had to work with unfamiliar faces for the first time as a group. 127 questionnaires were distributed to the students who were taking AMAB343 in that year. Only 103 questionnaires collected were usable for analysis. Prior to distribution of the questionnaire, reliability test was conducted. The alpha for the variables were above .70 and deemed acceptable (Field, 2009).

3.3. Measurement of variables

The research questionnaire used for the research consists of demographic profile consisting of: gender, race, previous semester cumulative grade point average (CGPA), peer assessment score and group assignment score. The questionnaire also includes questions inquiring students' perception of group work, namely: list of activities performed by students, encouraging fair contribution of work, skills developed during group assignment preparation and fair peer evaluation based on previous studies churned from previous literature (refer 2.1 and 2.3). A summary of each variable measurement is in Table 3.

Table 3. Measurement of variables

Variable	Measurement
Gender	1= Male, 2= Female
Race	1= Malay, 2= Chinese, 3= Indian, 4= Others
CGPA	1= Below Average (< 2.00), 2= Average (2.00 - 2.99), 3= Good (3.00 - 3.49), 4= Excellent (3.50 - 4.00)
Group assignment score	1= Below Average (< 50), 2= Average (50-64), 3= Good (65-79), 4= Excellent (80+)
Activities performed in group assignment.	0= No, 1= Yes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brainstorm • Have an informal chat • Sit down and work together • Exchange files/documents • Ask quick questions • Sit down for a formal discussion • Have regular meetings 	

Encouraging fair contribution in workload. 0= No, 1= Yes

- Share workload
- Set deadlines
- Use peer strength
- Mutual agreement
- Help each other
- Share ideas and information
- Have meetings
- Encourage participation
- Better communication

Skills developed during group assignment. 0= No, 1= Yes

- Teamwork Skills
- Self-development
- Academic development
- Interpersonal & inter-cultural communication
- Communication skills
- Time management
- Leadership

Peer assessment: 0= No, 1= Yes

- Do you tend to keep record of what each member has done for peer-to-peer review purpose?
 - I give each group member grades that truly reflect their contribution.
 - I submit an anonymous peer evaluation form.
-

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Demographic profile

This section summarises demographic profile of respondents consisting of accounting students taking AMAB343 at a private university. We distributed 127 questionnaires to the students taking the subject. We managed to collect 113 responses, however only 103 were usable for analysis.

Table 4 presents an overview of the demographics profile of respondents. Our analysis discovered that majority of the respondents were female at 77 percent, while the male students were at 25 percent. Further, 85 percent of the responses were Malay and the rest were Indian students. Next, the distribution of previous CGPA shows that majority of the respondents (54 present) obtained CGPA of 3.00 to 3.49. Approximately 38 percent had CGPA of 3.50 and above, while 8 percent of the students achieved CGPA of 2.0 to 2.99. Further, in terms of the respondents' group assignment results, 51 present received excellent results, while 15 percent obtained average result (between 51 to 64 marks). Analysis of peer evaluation score show that 72 percent of the students achieved scores between 4 to 5 points, 5 being the maximum.

We asked whether the students prefer preassigned members for group work, or to choose their own group members, 77 percent of the students chose to select their own group members.

Table 4. Demographic Profile (N =103)

		Freq.	%
Gender	Male	26	25.0
	Female	77	75.0
Race	Malay	88	85.4
	Indian	15	14.6
Previous semester CGPA	Average (2.00 - 2.99)	8	7.8
	Good (3.00 - 3.49)	56	54.4
	Excellent (3.50 - 4.00)	39	37.9
Group Assignment score	Average (51-64)	15	14.5
	Good (65-79)	36	35.0
	Excellent (80+)	52	50.5
Peer Evaluation Score	3.00 – 3.99	29	28.2
	4.00 – 5.00	74	71.8
I like group work more when we can make our own groups	Yes	79	77.0
	No	24	23.0

4.2. Descriptive Statistics

4.2.1. Activities performed for group assignment

Table 5 presents findings on students’ reflection of the activities performed in completing their group assignment. Brainstorming was the activity that majority of the students performed at 81.6 percent - the highest percentage among all activities carried out. The finding is consistent with Wagbara (2020) and Hirshfield and Chachra (2015) who revealed that one of the activities in group work is brainstorming activity. Ayu Astiti (2018) further claim that brainstorming technique positively affects student performance.

Next, among the students that performed brainstorming; majority (91 percent) were the average scorer, as compared to 81 percent were good scorer group and only 78 percent were the excellent scorers. The second highest score for activities performed in group assignment is “having an informal chat” (at 78 percent), starkly higher than “having a ‘formal’ discussion” (46 percent). Further, it was revealed that less than half of the students had formal discussions or conduct regular meetings for their group assignment. This finding is consistent with Wilson et al. (2017) who concluded from their research that students found scheduling formal group meetings as difficult.

Table 5. Activities performed during group assignment (dichotomy calculated at value 1)

Activity	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Brainstorm	84	17.9%	81.6%
Have an informal chat	80	17.1%	77.7%
Sit down and work together	75	16.0%	72.8%
Exchange files/ documents	56	11.9%	54.4%
Ask quick questions	77	16.4%	74.8%
Sit down for a formal discussion	47	10.0%	45.6%
Have regular meetings	50	10.7%	48.5%
Total	469	100.0%	455.3%

4.2.2. Fair contribution of work

Next is strategies implemented to ensure fair contribution of work (Table 6). Majority of the students perceive that sharing ideas and information as the most important factor of having fair contribution towards group assignment at 13.4 percent, with 92 percent of respondents agreeing to the statement. Surprisingly, the excellent scorers' proportion is lower than the other two levels of scorers; although the proportion is still considered high at 88 percent. This finding is consistent with Cheng et al. (2008) where they posit that a person who is confident that they will achieve good result will persist in completing their tasks until it succeeds.

Setting deadline and better communication were perceived as good strategies for group assignment (both at 91.3 percent). Further analysis revealed that although majority of the average scorer agree that setting deadline was a good strategy, their overall acceptance was lower (87 percent) as compared to their counterparts in the good and excellent levels (both were above the 91 percent level).

The strategy with the least contribution as perceived by students was 'use peer strength' at 6.4 percent, where majority of the students did not agree that peer strength is a strategy to encourage fair contribution from peers.

Table 6. Strategies to encourage fair contribution from all members to a group assignment (dichotomy calculated at value 1)

	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Share workload	81	11.4%	78.6%
Set deadlines	94	13.3%	91.3%
Use peer strength	45	6.4%	43.7%
Mutual agreement	67	9.5%	65.0%
Help each other	93	13.1%	90.3%
Share ideas and information	95	13.4%	92.2%
Have meetings	68	9.6%	66.0%
Encourage_ participation	71	10.0%	68.9%
Better communication	94	13.3%	91.3%
Total	708	100.0%	687.4%

4.2.3. Skills developed from group work

In terms of skills developed while working on group assignment, majority of the students perceived they developed teamwork and communication skills. These skills were ranked higher than the other skill sets at approximately 18 percent, with individual frequencies at 97.1 percent and 96.1 responses respectively (refer Table 7). Students also perceived that they developed time management skill (16.3 percent), which is in line with the deadline set by the instructor for the group assignment be submitted.

Interestingly, academic development skill was ranked lowest in overall responses from the students at 10.5 percent although the task was academic related.

Table 7. Skills developed working on group assignment (dichotomy calculated at value 1)

	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Teamwork skills	100	18.7%	97.1%
Self-development	67	12.5%	65.0%
Academic development	56	10.5%	54.4%
Interpersonal and inter-cultural communication	58	10.9%	56.3%
Communication skills	99	18.5%	96.1%
Time management	87	16.3%	84.5%
Leadership	67	12.5%	65.0%
Total	534	100.0%	518.4%

4.2.4. Peer evaluation

One of the rubrics for the group assignment is peer evaluation. The peer evaluation was designed to mitigate free riders and evaluate fair distribution of work among team members, among others. Firstly, because the group are preassigned therefore, the instructor is able to analyses each member's contribution to the assignment and secondly some aspect of fair assessment would be achieved, in line with suggestions from Cheng and Warren (2000).

The instructor provided clear instruction to students that they have to evaluate their team members' contribution throughout the group assignment exercise. A peer evaluation form has to be filled up and emailed personally to the instructor. Students were also informed beforehand that the peer assessment needed to be truthful, fair and kept strictly confidential (meaning that there should be no discussions among the team members about the evaluation).

It was discovered that only 65 percent of the students record tasks completed by their team members, or less than half of the students evaluated their team members based on work done (refer Table 8). The finding suggests that 56 percent of the students did not evaluate their team members based on work done and therefore not fairly appraised. This result is consistent with Sridharan et al. (2019) who discovered that students will not jeopardise their peers' assessment when they know the action may affect their peers, which may lead to unfair judgements.

Further analysis into this matter discovered that only 66 percent of the students submit their peer review anonymously, suggesting that other 34 percent did not.

Table 8. Providing fair marks to group members in peer evaluation (dichotomy calculated at value 1)

	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Record work done by team member	60	37.3%	65.2%
Grade member based on work done	40	24.8%	43.5%
Submit peer evaluation anonymously	61	37.9%	66.3%
Total	161	100.0%	175.0%

4.3. Discussion

The objective of this research was to explore students' perception towards group work. Overall, the students' perception was positive in terms of activities performed, distribution of work among members and skills gained.

We investigated activities performed by students to complete their work. These activities play a significant role at ensuring the success of group work. For instance, brainstorming was highly rated among the activities performed, consistent with Wagbara (2020) and Hirshfield and Chachra (2015). Brainstorming created positive synergy among members and promote oneness. It positively affects motivation, participation and confidence in students (Unin & Bearing, 2016). Additionally, informal chat was another main activity the students performed. Informal discussion encouraged the students to be more confident to share their ideas in small groups, consistent with Unin and Bearing (2016) and Hamzah and Lu (2010). Informal discussions were also an activity preferred compared to formal discussions as the students felt more at ease to convey their ideas.

In terms of strategies implemented to ensure tasks were distributed fairly, most students perceived sharing of ideas as an indicator of fair distribution, consistent with Unin and Bearing (2016). Students also perceived the setting of deadline encouraged fair contribution of task. The students identified meeting deadline as equivalent to completing group work. However, Gevers et al. (2006) recommend to group students with similar working style to increase possibility of meeting deadlines. However, because the grouping was not constructed based on working style, we did not examine the effect of grouping the students according to specific criteria. The responses indicate that setting deadline resulted in fair contribution. Next is better communication among members and helping each other. Better communication among group members creates opportunity for open discussions and encourage better understanding of preparation, process and completion of work within the deadline set. However, more than half of the students did not distribute group work according to group members' strengths. Different strengths in a group would complement each other and increase the overall strength and ability of a group to do better (Sridharan et al., 2018).

The results of skills developed while working as a group demonstrate that majority of the students perceived teamwork and communication skills improved during this time. Nonetheless, underlying factors impeding good teamwork are inability to schedule meetings and contribution among members (Wilson et al., 2017). The students also perceive that their time management skills improved with group work, as assignment submission deadline was established. It was also revealed that leadership and self-development skills were enhanced through group work, however at lesser percentages.

Lastly, peer evaluation. A valid motivation for including peer evaluation in group work is to ensure that all members contribute to the preparation and completion of the work, curbing issues of free-riders, group dispute, unfair workload and ensuring fair distribution of marks (Fellenz, 2006). In this research, it was discovered only 62 percent of the students (60 out of 103 responses) record work completed by team members; which suggests that the peer evaluation scores awarded to each member may not always be based on actual tasks completed. Sridharan et al. (2019) explained that one reason for this phenomenon was that the students felt uncomfortable evaluating their peers, especially when the evaluation affects their grades. The scores awarded to students were above 3, where all students achieved more than 50 percent of the full

score of 5. Although there is a specific rubric for the peer evaluation, there is no guarantee that the scores adequately represented fair evaluation as the scores' validity and reliability can be questioned. Nonetheless, the practice of peer evaluation in this case is different from marking academic content where a person needs to have extensive knowledge to make fair assessment. This is to avoid biasness in evaluation (Steverding et al., 2016).

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This research investigated accounting students' perception towards group work. The findings confirm that when group work is done properly - fairly, timely and with active participation of all group members; group work would be successful. In terms of peer evaluation, it can be concluded that the peer evaluation scores may not be a representation of quality of work completed as some of students confirmed that the peer evaluation were not based on work done (refer Table 8).

The research contains some limitations and recommendations moving forward. First is the number of respondents. Although the responses collected was 81 percent of the population of accounting students taking AMAB343 (acceptable number was 96 according to Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), the result may not represent all accounting students in Malaysia or the perceptions of all students towards group work. Therefore, care should be taken when generalising the results. Additionally, replicating the research for larger response rate may give better representation of the phenomenon investigated. Secondly, the grouping of students was completed with the aid of an online group generator. No attempt was made to group students within a specific category such as creating groups that represent all level of academic performance. Therefore, it would be interesting for future research to investigate and contrast student groups according to specific categories. The last limitation is on peer evaluation. Findings indicate that even though peer evaluation may not be fairly conducted for different reasons, there is still an opportunity for improvement in executing the evaluation. Therefore, it is essential for instructors to regularly remind students of the importance of fairness in evaluation, to provide explicit instruction as to the extent of evaluation so that each score is fair and reflect the time, resources and commitment given by each group member. Group work becomes effective when problems such as accuracy and fair assessment are successfully tackled (Fellenz, 2006).

This research contributes to the literature findings on group work and peer evaluation. Group work as perceived by the accounting students enhanced their competencies, self-efficacy and developed their leadership and teamwork skills.

The implication of this research on practitioners/ instructors/ would be that the findings would shed light on the possibility of engaging students through group work to navigate students into better leader, team player, negotiator, communicator, listener, etc. Group work has been practiced widely nowadays but probably not in all fields of study. The important part of group work is in the design and planning stage. Instructors must ensure that each group work activity encourages collaboration among students, enhances self- confidence and self-efficacy.

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