Peer-Reviewed Paper

From Team Charter to Team Experience: What Students Teach Us About Designing Collaborative Groupwork for Higher Education

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Abstract

Collaborative groupwork is widely used in higher education to develop disciplinary knowledge alongside communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Despite these intended benefits, students frequently report challenges that can undermine equitable participation and affect the success of a collaborative learning experience. This study collected data from two cohorts of students enrolled in a mandatory education foundations unit across two semesters at one university. In this qualitative study, a hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis method was chosen to support the amplification of student voice to better understand students' anticipated and enacted experiences of a groupwork task. Hybrid thematic analysis, informed by sensitising concepts within the literature, was used to identify patterns within student responses to report their anticipated challenges and how they created conditions for positive collaborative experiences in collaborative learning and assessment through problem-solving. Data comprised eight team charters developed at the commencement of groupwork and 48 reflective statements completed following a six-week collaborative assessment task, during which students worked in groups for two-hour weekly tutorials to prepare a final group presentation. Both types of artefacts were written collaboratively by groups. Findings revealed that students actively recognised potential barriers to effective collaboration early in the process and employed a range of strategies to foster equitable participation, effective communication, flexibility, and accountability throughout their collaboration. Recommendations, derived from the student experience, provide practical guidance for designing collaborative learning experiences that have the potential to better support successful collaborative groupwork in higher education.

Keywords

Collaborative learning; Higher education; Groupwork; Student voice; Team charters; Assessment design; Reflective practice.

Introduction

Collaborative groupwork has long been recognised as an important pedagogical approach in higher education and is commonly incorporated into teaching and assessment to develop students' collaborative and teamwork skills (Francis et al., 2025). In higher education contexts, it promotes active learning to deepen disciplinary knowledge while developing transferable capabilities such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and the leadership skills expected of graduates (Sjølie et al., 2026). Collaborative groupwork therefore has value not only as a way of completing assessment tasks but as a pedagogical approach through which students learn with, from, and through one another (Johnsen et al., 2024).

Although collaborative groupwork is widely promoted for its pedagogical benefits, evidence suggests that students' experiences are often characterised by pervasive tensions. Research has increasingly highlighted how the effectiveness of teamwork is influenced by communication processes, patterns of participation, and the interaction between individual characteristics and task design (Bravo et al., 2019). Concerns remain regarding unequal contribution, free riding (also known as social loafing), difficulties coordinating schedules, interpersonal conflict, unclear expectations, and perceived inequities in assessment. All of these factors can undermine both the collaborative process and students' perceptions of its value as students avoid and dislike these activities (Francis et al., 2025). These concerns can affect not only the quality of the final product, but also students' experiences of fairness, belonging, confidence, and engagement (Branch & Lee,

2020). Groupwork can therefore become inequitable when some students carry disproportionate organisational, intellectual, or emotional labour while others contribute less visibly or less consistently.

These concerns are particularly important because collaborative learning does not automatically lead to equitable participation. Students are often placed in groups with the expectation that collaboration will occur naturally; however, effective teamwork requires explicit skills in communication, time management, conflict resolution, decision-making, and accountability. Hogan and Young (2021) argue that students are not necessarily equipped with these skills simply because they are asked to work in teams. Rather, educators need to intentionally structure groupwork so that students are supported to establish expectations, allocate responsibilities, monitor progress, and respond collaboratively to problems. This shifts attention from groupwork as an assessment product to collaboration as a process that requires deliberate pedagogical design.

Fostering a sense of community among team members, strengthening interpersonal relationships and skills, and embracing diversity are factors contributing to successful collaboration in tertiary education (Balgopal et al., 2017; Bravo et al., 2019; Omodan, 2021). One way to support these factors is through team charters, presented to student groups in the initial stages of the collaboration. Team charters have been shown to be both a practical planning tool and a pedagogical scaffold for equitable collaboration as students authentically engage in effective peer collaboration, hold each other accountable, and improve their performance (Aaron et al., 2014; Hunsaker et al., 2011; Mathieu & Rapp, 2009). A team charter is presented to team members at the time of group formation, allowing the group to discuss and ultimately reach a consensus on expectations regarding communication and behaviour, meeting management, distribution of tasks, challenge identification, and progress monitoring (Barron, 2000).

Reflective statements offer a complementary mechanism for supporting students' learning through collaborative groupwork, and providing opportunities for scaffolded reflection can strengthen students' self-awareness, collaborative capability, and capacity to make sense of complex learning experiences (Rook et al., 2026; Schürmann et al., 2025). While team charters capture students' anticipated goals, challenges, and approaches to groupwork, reflective statements invite students to look back on how the collaboration was enacted in practice. Therefore, in the context of collaborative groupwork, reflective statements can prompt students to evaluate how effectively they communicated, shared responsibilities, navigated challenges, and contributed to collective goals.

Although team charters and reflective statements can both be used in isolation in higher education, there remains value in examining them together. The relationship between students' anticipated challenges at the start of groupwork and their enacted experiences at the end of a collaborative task is not always made visible. This distinction matters because students often enter groupwork with prior experiences, assumptions, concerns, and strategies that shape how they participate. Team charters can reveal what students anticipate may support or hinder collaboration, while reflective statements can illuminate how groups actually negotiated these issues over time. Examining both forms of student-generated data provides insight into collaboration as a dynamic and relational process.

Student voice is central to this study because students are uniquely positioned to describe how collaborative assessment is experienced in practice. Although groupwork is typically designed to support engagement, peer learning, and teamwork skills, students' accounts can reveal tensions around fairness, accountability, communication, and participation that may not be visible from assessment outcomes alone. Student voice research emphasises that students' perspectives on learning warrant meaningful attention and response, while also cautioning that student participation

in higher education decision-making can be uneven and shaped by questions of access, representation, and influence (Cook-Sather, 2006; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023).

This study aims to amplify student voice by examining students' anticipated and enacted experiences of collaborative groupwork in a mandatory education foundations unit at a large metropolitan Australian university. The team charters and reflective statements provide insight into students' anticipated barriers to collaboration and how they overcame challenges during a six-week group presentation task. The findings offer practical implications for educators seeking to design successful collaborative groupwork and assessment tasks in higher education.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What challenges did students anticipate at the commencement of collaborative groupwork?
2. What strategies did students use to respond to actual challenges for successful collaborative groupwork in higher education?

Method

This study used a hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis process to explore how students made sense of their anticipated and enacted experiences of collaborative groupwork. This method was chosen because the purpose of this study was to amplify student voice by identifying common patterns in the challenges students anticipated with collaborative groupwork and the strategies they used to support equitable participation within these teams.

The study drew on data from a mandatory education foundations unit at a large metropolitan Australian university. The unit included a six-week collaborative assessment task in which students worked in groups during weekly two-hour tutorials to develop and deliver a final group presentation based on a scenario. This collaborative task was designed to support disciplinary learning while also providing opportunities for students to develop communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and shared accountability. Data comprised student-generated documents produced at two points in the collaborative assessment process: team charters completed at the commencement of groupwork and reflective statements completed following submission of the final group presentation. Both artefact types were produced collectively by student groups rather than by individual students, and therefore provided group-level accounts of anticipated and enacted collaboration. The dataset analysed for this study included eight team charters and 48 reflective statements collected across two semesters of the unit.

Team charters were used to capture students' initial expectations for working together. These documents invited groups to identify anticipated challenges; agree on shared expectations; allocate responsibilities; and plan strategies for communicating, organising tasks, and managing potential difficulties. Therefore, the team charters provided insight into students' anticipated challenges and planned approaches to collaborative groupwork before substantial groupwork had begun. On the other hand, reflective statements were completed after the six-week collaborative task and provided retrospective accounts of how students experienced the groupwork process. Student groups were invited to reflect on the quality of collaboration, factors that supported or hindered participation, strategies used to manage challenges, and the extent to which group members contributed to the task. These statements provided descriptions of students' enacted experiences of collaboration, including how groups adapted their plans, negotiated difficulties, and solved problems. All documents were submitted through the university's learning management system as part of the assessment process. For the purposes of this study, only anonymised student data were analysed. Ethics approval was obtained to use student-generated assessment-related data for scholarship of teaching and learning purposes.

Data were analysed using a hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis process involving an iterative and reflexive process of developing codes and themes that took both theory and empirical data into account (Xu & Zammit, 2020). This approach was selected because the study was informed by sensitising concepts within the existing literature on collaborative learning, including concerns related to communication, accountability, equitable participation, social loafing, conflict management, and problem-solving, while also seeking to foreground students' own accounts of groupwork. Initial coding was guided by these broad sensitising concepts from the literature and the study's research questions; however, the coding process remained open to unexpected patterns within the data. This approach enabled the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns in how students anticipated, negotiated, and reflected on collaborative groupwork. The team charters and reflective statements were analysed separately to preserve the distinction between students' planned approaches and anticipations and their retrospective accounts of how they problem-solved and created conditions for success.

Results

The team charters captured students' anticipated challenges at the onset of the collaborative task, while the reflective statements provided insight into the challenges students subsequently encountered and the strategies they employed to navigate them. Hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis revealed three themes in the team charters: scheduling conflicts, task conflicts and disagreements, and respectful interactions. Table 1 provides a summary of the anticipated challenges in the team charter documents. Frequency counts are reported to indicate the number of times each of the themes were identified across the entire team charter dataset of eight documents.

Table 1

Anticipated Collaborative Groupwork Challenges

Theme	Description of anticipated challenge	Frequency	Illustrative student comments
Scheduling conflicts	Anticipated difficulties coordinating meeting times and managing availability across the group.	n=3	"All group members will contribute to the assignment, attend agreed upon meetings, be contactable (active to responding to messages), complete assigned roles and tasks in a timely manner."
Task conflicts and disagreements	Anticipated differences in opinions, approaches, or decisions about the group task.	n=3	"Conflicting ideas can be discussed and resolved collaboratively during meetings." "Consulting with individuals causing conflict."
Respectful interactions	Anticipated difficulties maintaining respectful communication and interactions among group members.	n=3	"Resolve differences of opinion and make informed decisions as a group through open/honest discussions and meetings … communicating with respect."

Six themes were generated from the reflective statements: scheduling conflicts, communication barriers, difficulty of task, timely completion of task, contribution overlap, and inequitable workload. In most cases, groups' reflections not only identified challenges but also described the problem-solving strategies used to manage these challenges. Table 2 provides an overview of these themes and associated solutions. Frequency counts are reported to indicate how often each theme was identified across the 48 reflective statements. These counts are intended to provide a descriptive overview of the prevalence of themes within the dataset.

Table 2

Challenges and Problem-Solving Strategies Identified in Reflctive Statements

Theme	Description of challenge	Illustrative student comments	Frequency	Associated solutions	Illustrative student comments
Scheduling conflicts	Students reported difficulty coordinating meeting times, managing competing commitments, and finding shared availability.	"For the challenges that we faced, we were not able to find a time to meet up face-to-face." "We encountered some challenges such as coordinating schedules."	n=15	Students used online tools such as Google Docs, WhatsApp, and WeChat to work asynchronously, communicate, and collaborate.	"First we had clear communication channels, an open and reliable method of communication through Google documents and regular visits to the library or Zoom."
Communication barriers	Students identified issues such as delayed responses, unclear communication, difficulty maintaining consistent communication, and language barriers.	"We also had language barriers of some students not speaking fluent English." "There was the difficulty of communicating with each other because we had forgotten to create a group chat."	n=9	Students reported using individual strengths, active listening strategies, clear and honest communication, and the use of structured decision-making and communication processes.	"By establishing an open communicative style of collaboration our group was able to avoid conflict." "We solved this and eased anxieties by creating a system of democracy where a poll would be used to decide plans for the assignment."
Difficulty of task	Students described uncertainty about task requirements, complexity of content, or difficulty understanding expectations.	"One of the challenges we faced was our initial interpretation of the assignment. The freedom to be creative in how we decided to frame the information was surprising and took	n=8	Students revisited the task description and marking rubric, asked their tutors and peers clarifying questions about the task, and worked in shared physical spaces to assist one another.	"We consulted our tutor and got some suggestions, which we applied to the speech." "Actively communicating with each other and by

		a little longer to decide on."			seeking the help of our tutor."
Timely completion of task	Students reported challenges completing work within expected timeframes or managing delays in group progress.	"Worth mentioning, the challenge in our collaboration is probably time management as we were approaching the end of the semester."	n=9	Students used self-regulation and executive functioning skills such as prioritisation, time management strategies, goal setting, and progress monitoring.	"Each member of the team had a clear division of labour. Team members regularly checked their progress and shared their individual progress."
Contribution overlap	Students noted instances where multiple group members worked on similar task components or created duplicated outputs.	"In the beginning, we struggled to allocate roles because of our large group." "We would have mixed information when working on the collaboration, making each part of the information repetitive."	n=3	Students identified the importance of task delegation in the early stages of collaborative groupwork planning.	"We were able to pull through and work out what roles suited each student and made sure that we were able to confidently do our roles, supporting weaknesses and strengths."
Inequitable workload	Students described uneven contribution or perceptions that some team members completed more work or attended more collaborative meetings than others.	"A challenge we experienced was one of our group members' absence … away for two of our in-person check-ins." "Some group members leaving their allocated parts to the last minute."	n=3	Students reported completing tasks that were assigned to other group members.	"Resulting in different members completing different loads of work."

Across both data sources, scheduling conflicts emerged as a consistent concern, appearing as both an anticipated challenge in the team charters and the most frequently reported challenge in the reflective statements. In contrast, respectful interactions, while anticipated as a potential issue, did not emerge as a challenge during enactment. The reflective statements instead highlighted additional task management and communication challenges that became apparent once students were actively engaged in the groupwork process.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to amplify collective student voice by examining students' anticipated and enacted experiences of collaborative groupwork in a mandatory education foundations unit. By analysing team charters and reflective statements, the findings provide insight into how student groups both anticipated barriers to collaboration and actively worked to create conditions for successful collaboration during a six-week group assessment task. The results highlight both continuity and divergence between anticipated and enacted experiences and offer practical implications for the design of collaborative learning experiences and assessment in higher education.

In response to the first research question, student groups anticipated a relatively focused set of challenges at the commencement of collaborative groupwork. These anticipated challenges were primarily centred on interpersonal dynamics and coordination, including task conflicts and disagreements, respectful interactions, and scheduling conflicts. This was seen within the team charters under headings such as "What we don't want to see," "Managing conflict," and "Conflict resolution." This suggests that, prior to engagement in groupwork, groups tended to conceptualise groupwork as a process requiring careful management of relationships and shared expectations. The inclusion of respectful interactions as an anticipated challenge indicates an awareness of the potential for interpersonal tension and the importance of establishing positive group norms to guide communication and collaboration (Hagvall Svensson et al., 2024). However, this concern did not emerge in the reflective statements as an enacted challenge, suggesting that anticipated interpersonal difficulties may have been mitigated early, potentially through the team charter process itself.

In contrast, scheduling conflicts were both anticipated and enacted and remained the most frequently reported challenge across the dataset. For example, several of the team charters listed scheduling of, and attendance at, meetings as a potential concern. This was identified again in the reflective statements with comments such as "a challenge arose through our different work/lives schedules" and "the biggest challenge for us is that each of us has many classes and assignments to complete at different times. This makes it difficult for us to have a shared free time to get together and discuss our work." This consistency highlights the enduring structural constraints student groups face when coordinating groupwork alongside competing academic, employment, and personal commitments.

The reflective statement data revealed a broader and more complex range of challenges than those initially anticipated by student groups. Groups reported additional difficulties related to task interpretation, communication barriers, timely completion of tasks, and equitable workload distribution. These findings suggest that students may underestimate the cognitive and organisational demands of collaborative assignment tasks from the outset, particularly when tasks are open-ended, creative, or require sustained coordination over time.

In response to the second research question, the findings demonstrate that student groups employed a range of strategies to respond to challenges and support successful collaborative groupwork. These strategies reflect adaptive, resourceful, and often pragmatic responses to the demands of the

task. First, groups adopted flexible coordination strategies to manage scheduling challenges. For example, the widespread use of digital tools, including Google Docs, WhatsApp, and WeChat, enabled asynchronous communication, ongoing collaboration, and reduced reliance on in-person meetings. Communication strategies were central to addressing interpersonal and language-related challenges. This finding aligns with recent research highlighting open, respectful communication and constructive feedback as important features of effective teamwork in higher education (Wang et al., 2025). Notably, some groups leveraged individual strengths (Balgopal et al., 2017), suggesting an asset-based approach to collaboration in which diversity within the group was recognised as a resource rather than a barrier.

Group-reported task-related challenges also highlighted the importance of assignment task design. For example, one group reported that the "definition of the terms or being unsure about the task requirement" was their main challenge. When student groups perceive a groupwork task as overly complex or cognitively demanding, they may engage only superficially (Bravo et al., 2019). This reinforces the need for careful task design that balances workload demands with students' knowledge and skills (Bravo et al., 2019; McKay & Sridharan, 2024). As a real-time solution to task complexity, groups demonstrated the use of task management; self-regulation; and executive functioning strategies, including prioritisation, time management, goal setting, and progress monitoring. These findings illustrate how students can adapt their skills for more complex tasks while confirming that collaborative groupwork can support the development of transferable academic capabilities beyond disciplinary knowledge (Aaron et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2014; Kyndt et al., 2013).

However, in instances of inequitable workload, some reflective statements reported students compensating by completing tasks assigned to other group members. While this approach ensured the completion of the task, it may also obscure underlying issues of accountability and contribution. Inequitable contribution, sometimes referred to as social loafing or free riding, remains the most commonly cited challenge experienced by students engaging in collaborative groupwork (Bravo et al., 2019), often resulting in poor collective performance and an unpleasant experience (Branch & Lee, 2020; Hall & Buzwell, 2013).

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, although the reflective statements were not formally graded, they were closely associated with a coursework assessment task. This context may have influenced how student groups framed their responses, potentially encouraging them to present their experiences in a more favourable, reflective, or professionally appropriate manner (McKay & Sridharan, 2024). Therefore, it is possible that some challenges, tensions, or instances of conflict may have been underreported. While the reflective statements provided valuable insight into groups' perspectives and enacted strategies, there was a reliance on only two datasets. Future studies may benefit from incorporating additional data sources, such as interviews, focus groups, or observations, to capture a broader and potentially more candid account of collaborative groupwork experiences and processes.

Secondly, this study used data from a single unit of study at a large metropolitan Australian university, which may limit the transferability of findings to other institutional, disciplinary, or cohort contexts. The specific design of the assessment task, the student cohort, and the duration of the groupwork may have shaped both the types of challenges experienced and the strategies employed. Further research across diverse settings would strengthen understanding of how task design can support successful collaborative groupwork across different higher education contexts. In addition, since all team charters and collaborative statements were written by student groups,

rather than individual students, there is potential for bias as more dominant voices may have been overrepresented in these documents.

Finally, recent evidence demonstrates that the literature on collaborative groupwork in higher education is typically concerned with students' academic achievement and satisfaction, failing to consider institutional, program-level, and instructor perspectives (Sjølie et al., 2026). The current study has not collected evidence beyond student voice, which limits the extent to which the recommendations can be implemented without changing the broader system in which collaborative groupwork is positioned.

Recommendations

The findings from this study offer several implications for educators designing collaborative learning experiences in higher education. First, the prominence of scheduling and coordination challenges reinforces the importance of designing group tasks that accommodate flexibility, including the intentional integration of digital collaboration tools, and providing opportunities for collaborative work during scheduled class time where possible. Recognising that many students balance study alongside employment, caregiving responsibilities, and other personal commitments, instructors should avoid assuming that regular face-to-face meetings outside class are feasible. Instead, designing collaborative tasks that can be completed through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous modes may reduce logistical barriers while supporting meaningful participation. Clear communication protocols, shared online workspaces, and staged milestones can further assist groups to coordinate their efforts without requiring frequent co-located meetings. By embedding flexibility into the design of collaborative assignments, educators can minimise unnecessary organisational challenges and allow students to focus their efforts on the cognitive and interpersonal aspects of teamwork, rather than the logistics of coordinating their participation.

The task-related challenges reported by student groups indicate that they may benefit from more explicit scaffolding around task interpretation and expectations, particularly for open-ended assignment tasks (Balgopal et al., 2017). The effectiveness of the student-generated strategies used to navigate task complexity points to the value of embedding structured planning opportunities throughout the collaborative process, including team charters, structured decision-making processes, staged checkpoints, and progress monitoring activities, alongside ongoing reflective practices. Rather than assuming students possess the organisational skills needed to manage complex collaborative tasks, instructors can explicitly teach and model approaches to planning, goal setting, task sequencing, and monitoring progress. Such scaffolds may help students navigate ambiguity, coordinate their efforts more effectively, and make informed decisions as projects evolve.

The findings also highlight the importance of supporting students' development of organisational and self-regulatory skills alongside interpersonal capabilities. Effective collaboration requires students to regulate both their own learning and the collective work of the team, including managing time, negotiating priorities, adapting to changing circumstances, managing challenges, and reflecting on group processes. Providing structured opportunities for planning, reflection, and accountability has been shown to strengthen collaborative processes and improve students' capacity to work effectively in teams (Planas-Lladó et al., 2021). Embedding these practices within collaborative assignments may therefore not only improve students' experiences of groupwork but also foster the transferable teamwork, project management, and problem-solving skills that are increasingly valued in professional contexts.

Finally, challenges related to inequitable workload indicate a need for more structured mechanisms to support accountability and equitable participation. Instructors may consider incorporating tools and processes that clarify roles, monitor individual contributions, and support shared responsibility,

rather than relying solely on students to manage group dynamics independently (Aaron et al., 2014; Hunsaker et al., 2011; Mathieu & Rapp, 2009). These supports might include clearly defined milestones, regular progress check-ins, structured opportunities for peer feedback, and mechanisms for groups to raise concerns early when participation becomes unbalanced. Rather than viewing accountability as an end-of-project evaluation, embedding it throughout the collaborative process can help identify emerging issues before they escalate, promote more equitable engagement, and encourage students to develop the interpersonal and self-regulatory skills required for effective teamwork. Such an approach positions instructors as facilitators of productive collaboration, creating conditions that support both positive group processes and meaningful learning outcomes (Sjølie et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This study extends understandings of collaborative groupwork by illustrating how student groups anticipate, experience, and respond to challenges throughout the collaborative process. While groups initially focused on interpersonal and logistical concerns, their lived experiences revealed that task-related and organisational demands became equally, if not more, salient as collaboration progressed. Encouragingly, groups demonstrated adaptability and agency by developing and adapting strategies to address the challenges they encountered, highlighting their capacity to navigate complex collaborative experiences when provided with appropriate opportunities and support. These findings offer valuable insight into how collaborative learning experiences can be more intentionally designed to scaffold not only interpersonal interactions but also the organisational and self-regulatory demands of teamwork in higher education.

Declaration of interest

Nothing to declare.

Artificial intelligence disclosure statement

Microsoft 365 Copilot was used to assist with language editing and refinement of portions of the manuscript. The tool was used to improve clarity, grammar, readability, and overall written expression. All substantive intellectual contributions, including study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and final manuscript content, were undertaken by the author. The author reviewed and edited all AI-assisted outputs and take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the manuscript.

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