Enhancing the 'good' reducing 'the bad' and managing the 'ugly': a participatory action research (PAR) project into group work in undergraduate business education.

The debate as to how to satisfy the learning networks of staff, students, government and businesses within the curriculum of a modern business school has been the focus of much research and academic discourse. A recent report from the Association of Business Schools (ABS, 2014) highlights the fact that employers expect business schools to develop graduates who can contribute positively from the start of their employment, and to equip graduates with skills as well as knowledge. They highlight the value of experiential learning as a means to developing skills and a business ready global mindset attuned to diversity. The ABS (2014) highlights the need for graduates to know how to have a difficult conversation about performance. They must also be able to manage a project, work in a team, and communicate and persuade – both orally and in writing.

'Working with others' has been identified as a key transferable skill valued by both academics and employers, and group work assessment and experiential learning is a feature of many of the undergraduate courses within business schools. Two publications were commissioned by the Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (HLST) and Business Management, Accountancy and Finance (BMAF) networks within the Higher Education Academy in 2009 and 2011; Enhancing Student Centred Learning (Ed. J.Buswell & N.Beckett, 2009) and Enhancing Graduate Impact (2011). A more recent review of marketing education research for The Higher Education Academy identifies four main themes in teaching and learning; ethics; CSR and sustainability; employability; curriculum design. Experiential learning and group projects are identified as significant sub-sections relevant to all four themes (Brennan, 2013).

Laurie (2005) identified a common area of debate within UK business schools, reflecting on what Caterall et al (2002) highlight as the 'education v. training' and 'applied v. academic' debate. Skilton *et al*. show that student group projects which involve realistic business situations promote integrated learning at levels comparable to real-life work projects. In other words, "Realistic projects do what we want them to" (Skilton *et al*., 2008, p. 63). Academic student group projects can also help to develop integrated learning, but only if they are organised in such a way that students operate interdependently. Such projects reflect a 'professional academic model' rather than a 'liberal arts' or 'vocational' model (Schibrowsky et al, 2002) and are believed by the authors to be the most appropriate framework for undergraduate business education today.

McCorkale et al (1999) discuss group working in terms of 'the good, the bad and the ugly'. The good; development of teamwork skills valued by academics, future employers and needed by students in their future careers and in life in general: the bad; identified as 'collective action' i.e. freeloading (no contribution) or social loafing (lower than expected contribution): the ugly; 'specialization of labour' i.e. students only learning part of a project but not about the project overall. They note that structural and process factors of group work management have an impact on freeloading and social loafing, and are linked to the prevalence of 'specialization of labour' and 'collective action'.

Context
This paper presents the outcomes of a piece of participatory action research (PAR) undertaken by three course leaders and colleagues into their professional practice in assessed group work (AGW) and how this has informed, and continues to inform, their practice and the practice of

others within a top 50 UK university business school. It would appear from a review of the literature on group working that there are few papers written which look at the topic across years and across awards, a point which this research looks to address.

The courses in Event Management, Travel & Tourism and Marketing Communication make more extensive use of group work assessment and experiential learning than many others in our Business School, all three courses utilising employer engagement and capstone client projects with a modular framework. The capstone client project aims to provide a more holistic learning experience for students, with assessment of programme-level outcomes being brought together in one project rather than just through individual modules (Healey et al 2013). All three of the courses introduce AGW in the first year of the degree for development of relevant skills and ways of thinking from the beginning of the degree, practice encouraged by Healey et al (2013). The authors between them manage four first year modules, three-second year and two final year modules which have assessed group work assignments. Module sizes range from 31 (Professional Practice in the Creative industries) to 194 students (Introduction to Marketing Communications, IMC), with a total of 700 students. The IMC module is a core module for all three awards.

We share the view that both group work and experiential learning approaches should be carefully planned into the learning process and need to be managed if they are to achieve the desired outcomes of deeper learning and creating a positive student experience. We believe skills should be taught in context, and competencies relevant to future employment should be developed over time. It is the view and experience of the authors that without commitment and support from their faculty to ensure staffing and CPD (Continuing Professional Development) activities are appropriate, the desired outcomes of experiential group work and learning will not be achieved; in fact the opposite will be the outcome. McCorkale et al, (1999) note that 'unless they (the administrative factors) are applied universally, students develop perceptions based on past experiences and guess work as to whether the administrative system will be effective in a particular situation.'

The challenges of managing the time required supporting student group working can result in academics avoiding assessed group work, and students feeling the 'transactional costs' are too high i.e. direct time and mental effort are high and do not necessarily increase overall productivity (McCorkale et al, 1999). Not all colleagues are comfortable in the delivery of experiential learning approaches, and group work assessment strategies that are graded in terms of process as well as outcomes. Within any course a mix of group versus individual, and year-long versus term-long or short-term group assignments, will provide students with the opportunity to achieve a good balance of graduate level knowledge and skills.

Brennan (2013, p4.) in his review of research into teaching marketing at university level asks '..are these experiential approaches as successful as they are reported to be because they implement excellent educational theory, or are they successful because the educator is highly motivated to make them succeed, and the students are intrigued because they are experiencing something new and different?' We are self confessed enthusiasts for experiential learning and group work that develops team working skills essential for business ready graduates.

Confusion and inconsistency in group work management and expectations was identified as a problem in discussions during a 2011 'away-day' forum for the subject group responsible for the courses, and this led to a request to develop a group work process model for each field (Marketing; Leisure Travel and Tourism). This model should reflect the good practices discussed, and will work toward a more consistent student group work experience.

The initial PAR project therefore had two aspects:
1. An 'affirmative approach' to agree elements of best practice currently used within the subject group.
2. A 'problem solving approach' to identify issues and problems experienced in group work, and to seek, evaluate and agree solutions.

To inform aspect 1 the following tasks were undertaken:
- Review and classification of current practice in group work across the subject groups, types of group work, process of group formation, and assessment.
- Identify elements of 'best practice' in relation to AGW within the curriculum of the modules and courses managed by the researchers against which to align their practice

Specific issues / problems to be explored were identified as
- A fair allocation of grades
- Reducing the 'bad': collective action, and 'ugly': specialisation of labour in AGW
- Ways of reducing incidences of 'socially destructive behaviors' which critically harm weaker students' ability to develop (Freeman and Greenacre, 2001).

The work of Freedman and Greenacre (2001) was used to aid us to 'understand the nature of social dynamics in groups and any problems that may be present; in particular, how group members support, or at least not undermine, fellow group members in projects' .

A methodological note
An anti-positivist approach through action research, where we are both researchers and the researched, is used. Zuber-Skerritt (1992) defines action research as a '..collaborative, critical enquiry by the academics themselves (rather than expert educational researchers) into their own teaching practice, into problems of student learning, and into curriculum problems. It is professional development through academic course development, group reflection, action, evaluation and improved practice.' This piece of action research is about our professional practice and is built on our understandings and skills; it is specific to the prevailing culture and experience within the student groups involved in the research. This limits the generalizable nature of the findings. Qualitative research is accepted as being an efficient way of getting a sense of the issues of concern to the population of interest. Observation and feedback from students and staff form the basis of the evidence used to justify the continued development and use of group work within an experiential learning framework.

The authors involved bring content knowledge in 3 subject specialist areas (Marketing, Travel and Tourism, and Event Management), course, classroom and student management experience, and a knowledge of pedagogical approaches to inform this project.

Stringer (1999, p17) advocates a simple 'look, think, act' model for community action research. It is recognised that there are many models that have been proposed. (Lewin 1948, Elliott, 1981, Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1982, cited in Oja and Smulyan). All recognise the spiral of cycles (Figure 1) involving in essence planning, acting, observing/evaluating, reflecting and re-planning. (Wellington, 1996). The research findings reported here cover 3 cycles (three academic years) and continue to inform the authors' academic professional practice.

Observations and Reflections

Discussions with colleagues across the subject groups were undertaken to ensure a full understanding of group working within the curriculum of the fields. An outcome of this research was identification and classification of various types of group and group activity used within colleagues' class sessions. This paper focuses on assessed group work (AGW) used in formal learning groups and study/consultancy teams. The classification framework from the work of Johnson, D. et al (1998) was adapted and is presented in table 1, Appendix 1. The resulting definitions and guidelines are reflected across the three academics' practice, and applied in their group and teamwork management.

Following review of current practices and our understanding of group and team working, an action plan of guiding principles was developed to draw our practices into line, to reduce confusion across modules, and to achieve a 'fair' and positive experience for students. Table 2 Appendix 2 details the principles agreed, and the variation in practice applied in the first action cycle. The observations recorded from action and the individual tutor reflections are then discussed in the next section.

Cycle 1 Observation and Reflection

Tutors reported that the positives outweighed the negatives for them; '*fewer queries to resolve compared with the previous year'.*

The need to facilitate the students' development and understanding of group work & team management in a professional context; '*The value of team-working skills for the workplace needs to be embedded more effectively, and emphasized early in the module.*' The same tutor also noted that, where the assessment had not been explicitly linked to the workplace, there seemed to be a lower level of enjoyment expressed by students.

Set up, checking and developing the usage of the VLE blogs was noted as time consuming for the tutors. All tutors noted variation in engagement of groups in the VLE group blogs. The following comment is indicative of the three tutors' experiences.

> '*Student feedback demonstrated that for the more organised groups, the logs helped them keep on top of the workload, communicate more effectively with their group and reflect on the process for the final report… the process did help (the tutors) when marking work more fairly and equally. ....the lack of evidence of contribution enabled tutors to take action and award grades fairly.*'

The percentage marks allocated to the individual element with the assessed group-work across all modules varied from 10% to 15%. A tutor using 10% noted '*When calculating the individual grades, it was evident that the 10% weighting was not of sufficient impact, as grades were not affected*', and one of the authors using 15% noted they *'may consider moving the individual grade to 20%'.*

The use of a student peer review as part of the process of adjustment of group grade and/or allocation of individual grade was managed differently by each tutor; the main difference being between tutors' evaluation of the nature of the content of the students posts and VLE blog comments alone, and that informed by additional direct peer feedback. Reflection of the tutor using peer review noted *'Many students commented that they would wait for the peer review to make their feelings clear re team member contribution'*

One group requested to use Facebook rather than the VLE blog to record student group meetings, as there is no notification of posts facility. The tutor agreed, and the Facebook page worked well. '*It also enabled me (tutor) to have a very clear and up to date picture of the progress of the event. I certainly preferd this to the blog.*'

Cycle 2 Plan
Course leadership remained the same, but teaching staff changed across some of the modules. A fourth academic joined the PAR tutors and has been part of the team for cycles 2 and 3. The observations of the 4th academic (a tutor of 2 years HE experience) enabled us to gain a viewpoint on the ease with which the best practice guide could be implemented, and the extent it could influence others' professional practice.

There were no key changes to the principles employed in cycle 1. The approach taken by tutors was to learn from their previous year in terms of assignment briefing and process management. The percentage allocated to the individual element was agreed at a minimum of 15%. Tutors were able to observe the student's reaction to the principles employed over the course of the three cycles (three years). A significant change in cycle 3 was a change in module leader of one of the large first year modules. The management of the group assessed project did not follow the best practice principles, in that the individual graded element was removed and the group VLE process was managed less rigorously.

Cycle 2/3 observation and reflection
Inconsistency in engagement of all groups in the first set of tasks that focused on group set up, ground rules and negotiation of expectations was noted in cycle 2. The new tutor noted '*Some students only saw the benefit of these tasks in hindsight when reflecting on the whole process at the end of the assignment, while others saw the guidelines around group work to be unnecessary.*' In discussion with the tutor team this was seen to be a challenge to be addressed across all AGW assignments.

In cycle 3, the fourth tutor confirmed using the principles for AGW in another module they manage; '*..similar processes of encouraging good team working skills and the use of the VLE to support group work and communications have been used.*'

The issue of the flaw in the messaging function on the VLE blog facility, noted in cycle 1 is an ongoing topic causing inconsistencies in student experience – *there is currently no functionality for students to receive notifications when a group member has posted a comment or message on group blogs – students have then argued that they prefer to use Facebook and WhatsApp for group communications as they trust these applications more than the VLE.* There continue to be different viewpoints from the academics involved in this research as to the use of Facebook for meetings. We all agree the lack of a notification function in the VLE is frustrating. The main concern expressed is that not all students have a Facebook page or wish not to have one, and that Facebook is not a 'professional' platform.

All three cycles have reinforced the view that consistency of student experience and application of any best practice guidelines for group management is difficult to achieve without strong faculty management commitment. Our fourth academic expresses this in their tutor reflection:

> '*It had been agreed that all tutors designing first year learning and assessment materials would adopt similar group work approaches – not only as a way to avoid confusion amongst students, but also as a way to develop consistent messages on best practice for*

group work - but this was difficult to embed due to staff change, and the wide range of modules from different subject areas.'

In terms of student reaction to the administrative factors, it was observed that

'(first year students)…*tend to be much more focused on the 'process' elements. As time goes on and they reflect on their group working experiences, I think they naturally become more concerned with the 'structural' elements, as it offers them more protection in a group environment…One issue that I have found to be prevalent with level 5 and 6 students is the lack of willingness to 'carry' other group members.'*

By level 6 the same tutor noted: '*There is much more reliance on the administrative structures such as meeting minutes, blogs and evidence of contribution, as they have learnt to almost 'protect' themselves.'*

This idea of looking for protection from the structural element resonates with this first cycle observation: '*Many students commented that they would wait for the peer review to make their feelings clear re team member contribution'.* A second tutor noted '*By the third year students involved in assessed group work are seeking advice as to how to record and manage the difficult conversations with regard to social loafers, rather than expecting staff to intervene. An important and positive skills development outcome.'*

Conclusion

Table 3, Appendix 3 illustrates the guiding principles model. McCorkale et al, (1999) note that 'unless they (the administrative factors) are applied universally, students develop perceptions based on past experiences and guess work as to whether the administrative system will be effective in a particular situation.' We would agree with this finding. Support from faculty management to ensure staffing and CPD activities are appropriate is essential to the application of best practice principles to achieve the desired outcomes of AGW and learning. Consistency within each level and across all levels was shown to reduce confusion.

Structural factors were found to be increasingly important to students in AGW as they develop their understanding of team working and the skills required, for example, leading to Level 6 students wanting to know how to have a difficult conversation about performance (ABS, 2014). At level 4, we need to focus on the process factors and the need to embed learning discussions around the following: previous group work experience, group set up, ground rules and negotiation of expectations (including discussion of collective action and specialization of labour: the bad and the ugly), and management of variable skills within the group. Exploration of students' attitude, and understanding of skills required in the workplace, promoted engagement in team working skills development, but this was still variable across cohorts. An area agreed for further research is: how students' attitudes to, and management of, collective action and socially destructive behavior in culturally diverse groups changes with experience.

The tasks set need to require interdependency, and should be relevant to the students' level of study and experience, and the principles of collaborative problem solving and team working should be made explicit and assumptions should be avoided. A significant factor in students' evaluations of AGW is the reward or grade distribution system; a minimum of 15% was discovered to be needed to have an impact on the overall student grade and their perception of fairness. The open discussion of potential issues before they occur and how to effectively document student engagement is essential – the VLE blog versus Facebook requires further exploration.

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Appendix 1

Table1:Current practice in group work across the field group: classification & formation

Definition	Use	Examples
Informal learning groups: ad hoc temporary clustering in a class session	All UG levels, any class size to:- • check understanding of material, • opportunity to apply learning, • to provide a change of pace.	• Asking students to take a minute or two talking to others • Students work in groups of 3-5 to solve a problem, review a case, discuss a topic
Formal learning groups: specific task,	• groups complete their work in a single class session or over several weeks - students stay together until task is graded	• A project or a student led seminar, with a written group report & or group presentation,
Study / consultancy teams long-term groups	• Stable membership aim for 'High Performing Team' • The larger the class the more complex the subject matter, the more valuable the study	• External client brief based project • Group research project

Group organisation / selection	
Students select their own groups	• Work best in small classes or groups who know each other well • Risks - challenge of friendship groups
Hybrid student & tutor selection	• Ask students to identify one or two students they would like to work with, commit to them having a minimum of one 'friend'
Tutor assigned groups to maximise their heterogeneity	• Mix of males and female; home and international students, • Verbal and quiet students, • Avoid friendship groups, • Ensure mixed ability or mixed discipline
Group size	• Groups of 4/5 work best. Larger groups decrease opt to participate, • The less skilful the group members, the smaller the groups should be • Shorter the time for group work, the smaller the groups should be. • Aim to keep groups together over time.
Dis-functional group management	Colleagues approach varied here ranging from • offering an alternative individual assignment • moving a student to another group • allowing groups to 'sack' non-contributing members • tutor intervention to discuss and resolve issues.

Appendix 2

Table 2: First cycle principles, variation in practice

Best Practice: Principle	Variation in practice
Where a capstone project is used relevant skills & ways of thinking should be developed from the beginning of the degree. Create assignments that fit the students' skills /ability levels.	Assessed group work is present at all three UG levels of the three awards. It was however recognised that there were inconsistencies in the management of assessed group work causing student confusion.
Facilitate the students development & understanding of group work & team management in a professional context.	Skills development was identified in current practices – Agreed to ensure time is allocated to Skills development support – e.g defining team working, group meeting management- agenda writing, & action planning, presentation skills…
Topic for assessed group work - create tasks that require interdependence & make link to employability (professional development).	All three awards utilise employer engagement & or work based learning projects culminating in a capstone project. Module & award documentation reviewed & updated
Principles of collaborative learning made explicit within documentation & project set up	Ensure group work is fully explained & placed in context to students
Create an On-line assessed VLE blog area for group communications, evidence of meetings - joint responsibility stressed. Were applicable create individual journals for reflection.	Process & set up standardized on VLE & within module – access points & directions given Formative assessment to be provided during the projects to ensure engagement of all students to avoid it becoming one student's responsibility for recording group activity – make principles of collaborative learning explicit & require evidence of group task division & contribution
Group & individual graded elements	- no individual grade - 10 – 15 % allocated to individual - peer review in some modules
Reflection is an essential part of the learning process	Reflection on learning was made explicit within the support documentation & assessment - individual & group reflection
Time allocated for group work within seminars – tutor present & group to minute meeting.	Week by week schedule adjusted

Appendix 3

Table 3: Guiding principles model

Teamwork skills development (the good): achieved through collaborative/experiential learning & AGW	
Administrative Factors:	
Structural	Task Characteristic: level specific & interdependency are essential
	Identifiable individual contribution
	Reward & punishment available to group members
	Effective group size – context & year dependent
	Time within class for AGW
Process	Openness of communication
	Cohesiveness & formulation of norms

Problems of group work: bad & ugly	
Specialisation of labour(ugly)	Designing assessment that require interdependency; make explicit the principles of collaborative learning and problem solving; professional context.
Inadequate rewards.	Individual contribution: task & process should be assessed, allocate a minimum of 15% for individual contribution.
Skills and attitude.	Early learning discussions of previous group work experience; the first set of tasks should focus on group set up, ground rules and negotiation of expectations, to include discussion of social loafing, freeloading and variable skills. Motivation and confidence building & affect management – ability to undertake difficult conversations during group problem solving is best develops through consistent AGW experiences developed over time.
Transaction-costs.	Time in class for group meetings: tutor role as supervisor /facilitator, all group meetings to be documented.
Collective action: free riding /social loafing (bad)	(a) interventions should be aimed at the student exhibiting the destructive behavior, (b) discussion should focus on the behavior not people, and (c) discussions need to focus on benefits to the group as a whole. (Freeman & Greenacre, 2001, p15)