# STUDY GROUPS

Whilst the academic activities of the university are there to help you learn, learning opportunities can also occur outside of any activities or systems that the university provides.

Study groups are informal groups, often set up by students, that run without any intervention by a tutor or lecturer. The way that these are set up, their function, the ways that they operate, are totally up to the students, but for convenience, they will usually involve a group of students living in close proximity to each other, studying the same subjects and who share a common approach to their studies, meeting together and discussing their modules with each other. The group may have some structure – e.g. a leader who organises the topics to be covered, a regular sharing of responsibilities, a weekly meeting in a particular place – or none at all and be far more informal. There are some which will form for a while to address a particularly complicated question and then discontinue, and others which will develop and maintain themselves through the degree. But at their core is that these are student groups, organised by students, to further their understanding of the modules that they study.

The effectiveness of such groups is determined by three factors:

* The extent to which the group is willing to push each other to ask questions that other members may or may not be able to answer (and may or may not be able to find out).
* The extent to which group members are honest with each other about what they know and don’t know.
* The extent to which the group members co-operate with each other and undertake the activities and tasks that the group sets them.

Where group members are unwilling or unable to push each other to ask and answer difficult questions, then the group’s understanding of what they have been reading and learning about in lectures, tutorials, seminars, online and in other ways will not really be moved on from those other opportunities for learning. In other words, it will be nice to meet together and encourage each other, but it solely becomes a social club and achieves little.

Where group members are not honest with each other and try to hide what they do not know, then the answers that the group gets when difficult questions are asked will either be superficial or incorrect. In other words, a group member might try to lie about what they don’t know. This can be damaging to the learning (and the trust) that is built up within the group, and again the group’s learning will not advance a great deal and the group will achieve little.

Finally, where group members are unwilling to co-operate with each other, then little will be achieved simply because there will be a breakdown of trust and no-one will be willing to get answers to questions that they cannot initially answer. In most good study groups trust is implicit, and one member not doing what they promised to do – and/or lying about the reasons for not having done what they promised – will gradually start to affect group effectiveness.



A good study group will meet regularly, challenge each other and enable any member of the group to find the answers to questions that they have about the subjects that they study, but there are two other issues to bear in mind – the accuracy of any answers given in the group, and the development of study and reading skills within the group. If there is an imbalance between members, with some who are able and more motivated to develop their thinking and knowledge than others, then relationships can become strained. Over time, the group members will assist each other to study more effectively, to understand the meanings of critical thinking, analysis and evaluation, and to gather and use information effectively by discussing how each other carries out their various study tasks.

We look at working in teams more generally in a great deal more detail in Chapter 10 of the book.