Research Article

Reconsidering Group Work Assessment in Higher Education: A Social Constructivist Analysis of Challenges and Perceptions

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Abstract: The strategy, which aims to promote student participation, peer interaction, and shared knowledge construction, is increasingly called into question by empirical evidence suggesting that this assumption does not consistently hold true, particularly in diverse and resource-constrained contexts. This study investigated group work assessment as a form of collaborative learning in higher education, focusing on the challenges associated with its implementation and the perceptions of both lecturers and students regarding its effectiveness. Guided by Social Constructivism Theory, which emphasises learning through social interaction and mediated collaboration, the study adopted a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm. A case study design was employed, involving ten purposively selected participants, five lecturers and five final-year students, from a Faculty of Education at a selected university in South Africa. Data were generated using reflective instruments and analysed through thematic analysis in accordance with Braun and Clarke's six-step procedure. The findings revealed that group work assessment is hindered by significant challenges, including poor communication, lack of participation, absence of leadership, and its time-consuming nature, all of which undermine meaningful collaboration. While lecturers generally perceived group work as a valuable pedagogical tool, students' experiences were more ambivalent, highlighting a disconnect between intention and practice. The study concludes that group work assessment does not automatically foster participation and must be intentionally designed and facilitated. It recommends clear instructional guidelines, structured leadership roles, active monitoring, and assessment designs that balance collaboration with individual accountability to enhance inclusive and effective learning outcomes in higher education.

Keywords: Group work assessment, collaborative learning, student participation, higher education, social constructivism.

1. Introduction

Assessment of students within higher education remains a core lever for shaping not only learners' achievements but also how they learn, participate, and develop disciplinary and transferable skills, particularly in systems committed to widening participation and social justice, such as South Africa. Within this context, collaborative learning has increasingly been positioned as both a pedagogy and an assessment modality capable of cultivating active engagement, peer-supported learning, and graduate attributes aligned with contemporary workplace and citizenship demands (Degirmenci, 2021). In the present study, collaborative learning is conceptualised as an assessment-oriented umbrella that accommodates participatory assessment practices, including group work, peer learning, and other forms of shared academic production; among these, group work assessment is foregrounded because it is widely adopted across programmes and is assumed to promote participation through structured interdependence (Adebola & Tsotetsi, 2022; Silvestre et al., 2024). In principle, group work assessment is expected to provide inclusive spaces where students from diverse linguistic, cultural, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds can jointly interpret tasks, negotiate meaning, exchange perspectives, and co-construct knowledge, while also developing communication, collaboration, and critical thinking competencies (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023).

Empirical scholarship further suggests that, when well-designed and appropriately facilitated, collaborative assessment can strengthen students' learning gains, sense of belonging, and preparedness for team-based professional environments, and can function as a high-impact practice for deepening engagement beyond individualised assessment regimes (Boud & Bearman, 2024; Francis, 2024; Levrai, 2025). However, the implementation reality of group work assessment is often more complex than the normative promise of collaborative learning suggests.

A growing empirical evidence base indicates that group work assessment frequently produces uneven learning opportunities and contested participation, especially when collaborative assessment is enacted primarily as a logistical grouping strategy rather than a carefully scaffolded social learning process. Studies repeatedly document social loafing, unequal contribution, dominance by confident or high-status members, and the marginalisation of quieter students, dynamics that can lead to "participation by proxy," where a small subset of students carries the cognitive and production labour while all members receive comparable grades (Chang & Brickman, 2018; Forsell et al., 2019; Forsell et al., 2021). In higher education settings, these issues are commonly compounded by ambiguous instructions, poorly specified roles, weak accountability architectures, and assessment criteria that inadequately differentiate individual contributions from collective output (Chang & Brickman, 2018; Boud & Bearman, 2024; Levrai, 2025). Recent empirical work also highlights that instructors often prioritise group formation and deadlines, while underinvesting in structured facilitation and reflective monitoring, conditions that increase the likelihood of conflict, fragmentation, and disengagement (Jessop, 2023). In the South African context specifically, the collaborative space is additionally shaped by the realities of multilingualism, uneven academic capital, variable digital access, and the lingering effects of historical inequality. As Forsell et al. (2021) and Chiriac and Frykedal (2023) show, language barriers and confidence asymmetries can silence participation, while the distribution of work and decision-making may reproduce power hierarchies within the group. Related empirical studies in South African universities further indicate that collaborative tasks may trigger identity-based tensions, conflict, and exclusion unless they are intentionally mediated through equity-sensitive designs (Omodan, 2023).

Consequently, group work assessment can become problematic in nature: rather than functioning as a democratising assessment practice, it may unintentionally reinforce inequities, erode students' assessment trust, and undermine the very participation it is expected to promote.

This concern is not merely procedural; it is pedagogically and ethically consequential. When group work assessment systematically enables non-participation without meaningful accountability, it can weaken learning integrity and produce assessment outcomes that are misaligned with individual competence. For students who are consistently marginalised in group interactions, whether due to language proficiency constraints, social positioning, or intimidation by dominant peers, group work may become an assessment environment that reduces academic confidence and constrains participation, with implications for performance, persistence, and professional identity formation (Pitan & Muller, 2021; Michel-Villarreal et al., 2023). At the same time, empirical work in this area also demonstrates that collaborative assessment can be made more educative and equitable when it is scaffolded through clear task structures, explicit participation expectations, facilitation routines, peer feedback, and assessment architectures that recognise both collective and individual learning (Boud & Bearman, 2024; Levrai, 2025). Importantly, scholarship from South Africa and comparable contexts, including Omodan's contributions on collaborative learning, group tasks, and participation, shows that collaborative assessment can be positioned as a transformative and even decolonial pedagogy, but only when its social, relational, and power dimensions are explicitly addressed rather than assumed away (Omodan, 2020; Omodan et al., 2024; Adebola & Tsotetsi, 2022). These empirical insights sharpen the central problem that motivates the present study: the prevailing assumption that group work assessment "automatically" promotes participation is not consistently

supported in practice and may conceal patterns of inequity and disengagement within assessment groups.

1.1 Study gap and justification

Although the literature on collaborative learning and group work is substantial, two gaps remain particularly salient for the South African higher education context that this study addresses. First, much of the empirical work either prioritises student-only accounts or treats lecturers' roles primarily as design agents, rather than examining how lecturers and students *simultaneously* interpret participation, fairness, and effectiveness within group work assessment as it is enacted in real institutional settings. Second, there is limited context-sensitive empirical evidence focusing specifically on group work assessment within faculties of education in rural or under-resourced universities, contexts where multilingualism, uneven participation cultures, and constraints on monitoring can intensify the challenges documented in broader higher education studies (Forsell et al., 2021; Chiriac & Frykedal, 2023; Omodan et al., 2024). Therefore, by empirically interrogating both students' and lecturers' perceptions, and by treating group work assessment as a contested practice shaped by facilitation, power, and context, this study seeks to fill these gaps and generate practically relevant evidence for strengthening collaborative assessment designs in higher education.

1.2 Literature review

Assessment practices in higher education have undergone significant transformation in recent decades, driven largely by a pedagogical shift from teacher-centred instruction towards student-centred and participatory learning paradigms. Within this shift, assessment is no longer viewed solely as a summative mechanism for measuring learning outcomes but increasingly as a formative and social process that shapes how students engage with knowledge, peers, and learning tasks (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Biggs & Tang, 2011). Munna and Kalam (2021) argue that this transformation necessitates a critical re-examination of how and why lecturers assess students, particularly in contexts such as South Africa, where higher education carries an explicit mandate for equity, participation, and social transformation. As learning environments become more diverse and complex, assessment practices must be interrogated to determine whether they genuinely respond to students' learning needs or merely reproduce traditional assumptions about engagement and performance.

Within this pedagogical landscape, collaborative learning has emerged as a dominant approach for promoting active engagement, peer interaction, and the construction of shared knowledge in higher education. Grounded in social constructivist theory, collaborative learning assumes that learning is enhanced when students work together to negotiate meaning, solve problems, and co-construct understanding through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Gillies, 2016). Group work assessment, as a practical expression of collaborative learning, is widely implemented as a student-centred assessment strategy in which students are organised into small groups to jointly complete academic tasks, exchange ideas, and develop cognitive and social skills such as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking (Adarkwah, 2021; Johnson et al., 2014). Empirical studies report that, under appropriate conditions, group work assessment can enhance learning depth, promote peer-supported engagement, and prepare students for collaborative professional environments (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023; Boud & Bearman, 2024). These reported benefits have contributed to the widespread adoption of group work assessment across disciplines and institutions, often with the assumption that collaboration naturally leads to increased participation.

However, a substantial and growing body of empirical literature complicates this optimistic narrative by demonstrating that group work assessment frequently generates significant challenges that undermine its intended pedagogical goals. Research across higher education contexts consistently identifies problems such as unequal contributions, social loafing, dominance by

outspoken or high-achieving students, lack of accountability, and ineffective coordination within groups (Chang & Brickman, 2018; Forsell et al., 2019, 2021). These studies reveal that group work assessment often masks individual disengagement rather than fostering universal participation, with a small number of students shouldering the bulk of the academic labour while others benefit from shared grades without meaningful contribution. Such findings directly challenge the assumption that group work assessment inherently promotes collaboration and participation, thereby justifying the need for a systematic exploration of the *challenges* associated with this assessment method in higher education.

The nature and intensity of these challenges are further shaped by contextual factors, particularly in multilingual and socio-economically diverse systems such as South African higher education. Empirical studies suggest that language proficiency, confidence levels, and unequal access to academic and digital resources significantly impact students' ability to participate in group work (Pitan & Muller, 2021; Forsell et al., 2021). Students who struggle to communicate in the dominant language of instruction may withdraw from discussions, defer to more confident peers, or adopt passive roles, leading to experiences of marginalisation and reduced academic self-efficacy. Chiriac and Frykedal (2023) further show that group work assessment can intensify feelings of inferiority, conflict, and frustration when task distribution is uneven and expectations are unclear. These findings underscore that the challenges of group work assessment are not incidental but structurally embedded, warranting focused empirical investigation rather than normative endorsement.

Beyond identifying challenges, the literature also highlights a critical gap concerning how group work assessment is *perceived* by its primary stakeholders, students and lecturers. While many studies document student dissatisfaction with group work due to perceived unfairness and unequal contribution (Chang & Brickman, 2018), fewer studies systematically examine lecturers' perspectives on these same practices, particularly in relation to assessment design, monitoring, and pedagogical intent. Forsell et al. (2021) demonstrate that lecturers often recognise the limitations of group work assessment but feel constrained by institutional expectations, large class sizes, or assessment workloads, leading to compromises in facilitation and feedback. In the South African context, Omodan (2020, 2021) and Omodan et al. (2024) argue that collaborative learning practices are frequently implemented without sufficient attention to power relations, student voice, and democratic participation, resulting in a disconnect between lecturers' intentions and students' lived experiences. This divergence in perceptions suggests that understanding group work assessment requires capturing both student and lecturer viewpoints, rather than privileging one perspective over the other.

Higher education institutions, including universities, colleges, and TVET institutions, are expected to cultivate graduates equipped with problem-solving abilities, collaborative competence, and social responsibility (Du Plessis et al., 2022; Dempere et al., 2023). Assessment practices are central to achieving these goals, as they signal what forms of learning and participation are valued. However, Heleta (2023) cautions that simply adopting group work assessment in the name of collaboration is insufficient; without intentional design, clear expectations, and effective monitoring, such practices risk undermining learning quality and equity. The literature, therefore, points to a critical need to move beyond abstract endorsements of collaborative assessment towards empirical scrutiny of how group work assessment functions in practice, how it is experienced by students and lecturers, and what challenges constrain its effectiveness.

Taken together, existing scholarship reveals two interrelated gaps. First, despite extensive discussion of collaborative learning, there remains insufficient empirical exploration of the *specific challenges* that limit the effectiveness of group work assessment as a form of collaborative learning in higher education, particularly in contextually complex environments. Second, there is limited research that simultaneously examines *lecturers' and students' perceptions* of group work assessment, especially

within South African higher education contexts where issues of language, power, and participation are pronounced. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing evidence-informed assessment practices that move beyond assumptions and respond to the realities of collaborative learning in practice.

In response to these gaps, the present study is guided by the following research objectives:
- To explore challenges associated with the group work assessment method as a form of collaborative learning in higher education.
- To understand lecturers' and students' perceptions of the group work method assessment in higher education.

2. Theoretical Framework: Social Constructivism Theory

This study is grounded in Social Constructivism Theory (SCT), most notably associated with the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1979), which conceptualises learning as a socially mediated process that emerges through interaction, dialogue, and shared activity. SCT challenges individualistic views of learning by emphasising that knowledge is co-constructed through engagement with others and is shaped by cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts. Central to this theory is the assumption that students learn more effectively when they collaborate, exchange perspectives, and participate in structured social learning environments. Within higher education, SCT provides a robust theoretical justification for collaborative learning and group work assessment, as these practices are designed to create spaces where learners can jointly negotiate meaning, support one another's learning, and extend their understanding through interaction (Gillies, 2016; McLeod, 2019).

From a social constructivist perspective, the effectiveness of group work assessment is contingent upon how social interaction is structured and facilitated. SCT does not assume that collaboration is inherently beneficial; rather, it highlights the role of the lecturer as a mediator who provides scaffolding, clarifies expectations, assigns roles, and creates conditions that enable all students to participate meaningfully (Vygotsky, 1979). When applied to group work assessment, this implies that learning and participation are more likely to occur when tasks are clearly designed, responsibilities are distributed, and interaction is guided towards shared learning outcomes. Empirical studies informed by SCT demonstrate that poorly structured group work can reproduce power imbalances, marginalise less confident or linguistically disadvantaged students, and undermine participation, thereby limiting the co-construction of knowledge that the theory anticipates (Forsell et al., 2021; Chiriac & Frykedal, 2023). This theoretical position is particularly relevant in diverse higher education contexts such as South Africa, where language, confidence, and social positioning significantly shape students' participation in collaborative settings.

Importantly, SCT reframes assessment as a social practice rather than a purely individual measure of achievement. Within this framework, group work assessment is understood as a process through which learning is collectively enacted, involving dialogue, shared responsibility, and the creation of collective meaning (Erbil, 2020). This perspective aligns with contemporary assessment scholarship that positions collaborative assessment as a means of fostering learning through participation and interaction rather than solely evaluating individual performance (Boud & Bearman, 2024). In the context of this study, SCT provides a coherent lens for examining both the challenges associated with group work assessment and the perceptions of lecturers and students regarding its effectiveness. By foregrounding interaction, facilitation, and participation, the theory enables a critical interrogation of why group work assessment may fail to promote inclusive participation in practice, despite its strong theoretical promise.

3. Methodology

This study is situated within the interpretivist research paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and that individuals ascribe meaning to phenomena based on their lived experiences

and contextual realities (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Guided by this paradigm, the research adopts a qualitative approach, as this methodology is particularly well-suited for exploring subjective meanings, perceptions, and interpretations of social practices within natural settings (Nickerson, 2022). A case study research design was employed to facilitate an in-depth, context-sensitive examination of group work assessment as a form of collaborative learning within a selected university's Faculty of Education in South Africa. The case study design was deemed appropriate because it permits a rich, holistic exploration of a bounded system and fosters a nuanced understanding of how group work assessment is experienced and interpreted by various stakeholders within a specific institutional context (Phillips, 2024). This methodological orientation aligns with the study's objective of capturing both lecturers' and students' perceptions of group work assessment rather than measuring predefined outcomes.

Participants were purposively selected to ensure relevance and the generation of information-rich data. The study involved ten participants, comprising five lecturers and five final-year undergraduate students from the Faculty of Education at the selected university in South Africa. Final-year students were chosen due to their sustained exposure to group work assessment across multiple modules, while lecturers were included based on their direct involvement in designing, administering, and assessing group work tasks. Data were generated using a reflective instrument, which enabled participants to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to group work assessment in a structured yet flexible manner. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2017), which allows for systematic identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns across the dataset. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility (clear audit trail and use of verbatim extracts), dependability (transparent description of procedures), and confirmability (thematic grounding in participants' accounts). Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of the Free State Ethics Committee, and ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality were strictly upheld throughout the research process.

4. Results and Findings

This section presents the results and findings of the study in relation to the identified research questions, exploring the challenges associated with the group work assessment method as a form of collaborative learning in higher education. It also aims to understand lecturers' and students' perceptions of the group work assessment method in higher education. Four themes were identified as challenges associated with group work assessment, while two themes were related to the perceptions of students and lecturers. To ensure anonymity, Lecturers 1-5 and Students 1-5 are used to represent lecturers and students, respectively.

4.1 Objective 1, theme 1: Communication as a challenge

Effective communication is fundamental to collaborative learning and group work assessment, as it facilitates interaction, coordination, and the co-construction of shared meaning among group members. In a social constructivist learning environment, communication transcends its role as a mere functional requirement and acts as a pedagogical process through which knowledge is negotiated and collaboratively constructed. Nevertheless, evidence gathered from participants in this study indicates that communication within group work assessments is frequently fragmented, constrained, and uneven, thereby undermining the collaborative objectives of such assessments.

> *Lecturer 1:* "*Normally, individual student rarely participates during classes. When a question is posed by the lecturer, even if a student knows the answer, the student may not want to say the answer for some reasons such as shyness, fear of being termed 'I too know', fear of other student seeing him/her as outspoken/forward, fear of 'how will my lecturer perceive my answers and my personality'.*"

> **Student 4:** *"At times, lines of communication may be a challenge, as one will come up with the excuse of not having access to the internet or data. Others might say electricity this and that… only one or two students will do the whole assignment as they don't want to fail."*

> **Student 5:** *"Communication is one of the biggest problems in group work. Some group members do not respond to messages or attend meetings, and when they do, they contribute very little. Sometimes it is because of internet issues or language confidence, but other times it feels like they assume others will do the work, which makes communication frustrating and ineffective."*

> **Lecturer 2:** *"From my experience, communication within group work is often assumed rather than structured. Students are placed in groups with the expectation that they will naturally communicate, but in reality, many of them do not engage in meaningful discussion. Some students remain silent throughout the process, while others dominate conversations, which limits genuine collaboration and affects the quality of the group outcome."*

The participants' accounts reveal that communication breakdowns in group work assessment manifest in multiple forms, including silence, avoidance, dominance, and logistical barriers such as limited access to digital resources. Lecturers attributed communication challenges largely to affective factors, including fear, shyness, and concerns regarding peer or lecturer judgment, which inhibit students from expressing their views openly. From the students' perspective, communication difficulties were further exacerbated by structural constraints, including poor internet connectivity, inconsistent attendance at group meetings, and unequal commitment among group members. Notably, both students and lecturers highlighted that communication is often *assumed* rather than intentionally facilitated, resulting in uncoordinated interactions and superficial collaboration. These dynamics suggest that the mere formation of groups does not guarantee communicative engagement, and that without deliberate scaffolding, group work assessment may fail to create the dialogic spaces necessary for collaborative learning.

The findings indicate that communication constitutes a fundamental challenge in group work assessment, significantly limiting student participation and undermining the collaborative intent of such assessments. Consistent with existing empirical literature, ineffective communication in group work has been linked to unequal participation, social loafing, and the marginalisation of less confident or less resourced students (Chang & Brickman, 2018; Forsell et al., 2021; Chiriac & Frykedal, 2023). Studies have also demonstrated that when communication is not explicitly structured through clear roles, guided interaction, and ongoing facilitation, group work tends to privilege dominant voices while silencing others, leading to frustration and disengagement (Boud & Bearman, 2024; Panadero et al., 2016). From a Social Constructivism Theory perspective, this finding is particularly significant, as SCT assumes that learning occurs through purposeful social interaction, dialogue, and mediation. The breakdown of communication observed in this study indicates a misalignment between the theoretical expectations of collaborative learning and the practical realities of group work assessment. Without intentional lecturer mediation and supportive communicative structures, the social processes necessary for the co-construction of knowledge are weakened, thereby limiting the effectiveness of group work assessment as a collaborative learning strategy.

4.2 Objective 1, theme 2: Lack of participation as a challenge

Student participation is a fundamental principle of collaborative learning and a primary justification for the utilisation of group work assessment in higher education. Within collaborative assessment frameworks, students are expected to actively engage with both academic content and their peers through discussion, negotiation, and the completion of shared tasks. However, evidence from this study indicates that active participation is often lacking in group work contexts, raising concerns

regarding the pedagogical effectiveness and fairness of group work assessment as a collaborative learning strategy.

> **Student 5:** *"Some students do not want to participate, maybe because of a communication barrier, hence they end up not engaging."*
>
> **Student 2:** *"Most of the time, students will rather keep mute and rarely want to participate except under compulsion."*
>
> **Student 3:** *"Some students are lazy; they do not want to contribute but want to be graded."*
>
> **Lecturer 3:** *"There are students who do not take part in discussions and meetings; this, to me, is a challenge. They will only show up after the assignment is done."*
>
> **Lecturer 1:** *"Sometimes group work is not foolproof because there is a possibility of only one or a few members of the group doing the assignment, and every other member of the group is very passive with little or no participation."*
>
> **Lecturer 3:** *"I think, if possible, we can avoid group work as they also submit work that is not up to standard due to one or two members doing the assignment, and the rest just receive marks."*

The narratives provided by both students and lecturers indicate that a lack of participation constitutes a persistent and deeply embedded challenge in group work assessment. Students identified non-participation as arising from communication barriers, low motivation, and an expectation that others would complete the tasks. Lecturers corroborated these accounts by describing patterns of absenteeism, last-minute involvement, and passive membership, wherein students benefit from collective grading without contributing meaningfully to the learning process. Notably, lecturers expressed frustration not only with the lack of participation but also with the decline in the quality of submitted work, which they attributed to the disproportionate workloads borne by a few committed students. These experiences suggest that group work assessment often operates as a site of unequal labour distribution, where participation is optional rather than integral, thereby undermining both collaborative learning and the integrity of assessment.

The findings indicated that a lack of student participation significantly constrains the effectiveness of group work assessment as a form of collaborative learning in higher education. This finding aligns with empirical research demonstrating that group work frequently suffers from social loafing, free-riding, and passive engagement when participation expectations are unclear or weakly enforced (Chang & Brickman, 2018; Forsell et al., 2019; Forsell et al., 2021). Studies have further shown that uneven participation not only compromises individual learning but also engenders resentment among active group members and diminishes the overall quality of group outputs (Chiriac & Frykedal, 2023; Boud & Bearman, 2024). From the perspective of Social Constructivism Theory, this finding is particularly problematic, as SCT positions active participation as essential for learning through social interaction and the co-construction of knowledge. When students remain silent, disengaged, or absent from group processes, the social conditions required for learning within the Zone of Proximal Development are disrupted. Consequently, this study reinforces the argument that group work assessment should not be uncritically assumed to promote participation but rather requires intentional design, clear role allocation, and sustained lecturer facilitation to align practice with the theoretical principles of collaborative learning.

4.3 Objective 1, theme 3: Lack of leadership as a challenge

Effective leadership constitutes a crucial, albeit frequently neglected, component of successful collaborative learning and group work assessment. Within the context of group-based assessment, leadership assumes a coordinating role by guiding task allocation, managing group dynamics, facilitating decision-making, and ensuring that all members contribute meaningfully. In the absence of clearly defined leadership structures, whether formally assigned by lecturers or organically

developed within groups, collaborative learning processes may devolve into disorganisation, conflict, and inequity. Evidence from this study suggests that a lack of leadership significantly undermines student participation and the overall effectiveness of group work assessments.

> *Lecturer 4:* "*The groupwork lacks leadership. Group assignments can end up being a burden for a few members, and other group members may end up getting marks without meaningful participation.*"

> *Student 1:* "*Some group members do not want to listen to other students' opinions on the group assignment, and we end up arguing.*"

> *Student 3:* "*Sometimes there is no one to coordinate the group. Everyone is doing their own thing, and when deadlines are close, confusion and blame start, which affects how much people are willing to contribute.*"

The participants' accounts highlight the absence of leadership as a central factor contributing to dysfunction within group work assessment. Lecturers described leadership deficits as resulting in unequal workload distribution, where a small number of committed students assume responsibility for task completion while others remain passive beneficiaries of shared grades. Students, on the other hand, emphasised interpersonal conflict, lack of coordination, and domination by certain group members as consequences of weak or non-existent leadership. Without a recognised leader to facilitate dialogue, mediate disagreements, and organise group processes, collaborative tasks often deteriorated into fragmented efforts marked by tension and disengagement. These experiences suggest that leadership is not merely an administrative concern but a pedagogical necessity for sustaining participation and collaboration in group work assessment.

The findings indicate that a lack of leadership constitutes a significant challenge in group work assessment, directly affecting student participation, group cohesion, and the quality of learning. This finding is consistent with empirical studies indicating that groups without clear leadership structures are more susceptible to conflict, uneven contributions, and reduced engagement (Forsell et al., 2021; Chiriac & Frykedal, 2023). Research has further demonstrated that effective leadership, whether assigned or emergent, enhances accountability, facilitates communication, and supports equitable participation in collaborative tasks (Johnson et al., 2014; Boud & Bearman, 2024). From a Social Constructivist Theory perspective, leadership functions as a mediating mechanism that enables productive social interaction and scaffolding within the learning group. In the absence of such mediation, opportunities for co-construction of knowledge are constrained, and dominant voices may overshadow others, thereby undermining the collaborative conditions required for learning within the Zone of Proximal Development. This finding reinforces the argument that group work assessment must be intentionally structured, with explicit attention to leadership roles, if it is to align with the theoretical principles of collaborative learning and inclusive participation.

4.4 Objective 1, theme 4: Time-consuming nature as a challenge

Time efficiency is frequently identified as one of the anticipated advantages of collaborative learning, predicated on the assumption that a collective effort diminishes individual workload and expedites task completion. In the context of higher education, group work assessment is commonly implemented with the expectation that collaboration will enhance learning processes and facilitate improved collective outcomes for students. However, evidence from this study indicates that group work assessment is often perceived as time-consuming, with delays, coordination challenges, and scheduling conflicts substantially impeding student participation and the completion of tasks.

> *Student 1:* "*Time-consuming and inability to reach an agreement because of differences in opinion and understanding.*"

> *Student 2:* "*Some students do not want to arrive on time when you have decided to meet for a group assignment; they need to be followed up on all the time.*"

> ***Lecturer 2:*** *"Group work takes much longer than expected because students struggle to coordinate their schedules. A lot of time is spent waiting for members, resolving disagreements, or trying to catch up with those who missed meetings."*

The participants' accounts indicate that the time-consuming nature of group work assessment arises from both logistical and interpersonal factors. Students highlighted prolonged discussions, disagreements stemming from divergent viewpoints, and repeated rescheduling of meetings as significant sources of delay. Lecturers further emphasised the challenges of coordination, noting that inconsistent attendance and poor time management among group members often result in extended completion periods and rushed final submissions. Rather than facilitating efficient workload distribution, group work in these instances became a source of frustration, as committed students expended additional time compensating for absent or disengaged peers. These experiences suggest that time inefficiency in group work assessment is not incidental but structurally linked to weak coordination, uneven commitment, and insufficient facilitation.

The findings indicate that the time-consuming nature of group work assessment constitutes a significant barrier to effective participation and learning in higher education. This finding aligns with empirical studies reporting that group work frequently necessitates more time than individual tasks due to scheduling conflicts, coordination demands, and prolonged negotiation processes (Forsell et al., 2021; Chang & Brickman, 2018). Research further indicates that when group work lacks clear timelines, role allocation, and monitoring, delays and inefficiencies are exacerbated, often resulting in stress, missed deadlines, and diminished learning quality (Chiriac & Frykedal, 2023; Boud & Bearman, 2024). From the perspective of Social Constructivism Theory, this finding highlights a critical tension between theory and practice. While SCT posits that collaboration can enhance efficiency and learning through shared problem-solving and mutual support (Amineh & Asl, 2015), such benefits are contingent upon structured interaction and effective mediation. In the absence of these conditions, collaborative learning may become time-intensive rather than time-saving, thereby limiting the realisation of its theoretical promise within group work assessment contexts.

4.5 Objective 2, theme 1: Clear instruction as a solution

Clear instructional guidance and structured facilitation emerged as a central condition influencing lecturers' positive perceptions of group work assessment. In collaborative learning environments, instruction serves not only as procedural direction but also as a pedagogical scaffold that structures interaction, regulates participation, and aligns assessment tasks with learning outcomes. Lecturers in this study emphasised that group work assessment attains pedagogical significance when expectations are made explicit, participation is monitored, and assessment criteria are clearly communicated to students.

> ***Lecturer 2:*** *"My perception is of a positive mindset. Students need to be monitored, and clear instructions should be given to ensure full participation of members. Group work prepares pre-service teachers to be ready for a working environment where they will work with different colleagues."*

> ***Lecturer 5:*** *"As a lecturer, I perceive group work as a valuable tool to foster cooperative learning, increase motivation, and prepare students for real-world situations where collaboration is essential. However, it requires careful planning and clear assessment criteria to ensure fair contribution from all members."*

These accounts indicate that lecturers do not reject group work assessment outright; rather, they perceive its effectiveness as conditional upon instructional clarity and active oversight. Lecturers viewed clear instructions as a mechanism for reducing ambiguity, minimising free-riding, and encouraging equitable participation, while also framing group work as a means of preparing pre-service teachers for collaborative professional environments. This perception positions instruction as

a form of pedagogical control that mediates the social dynamics of group work, transforming it from an unstructured activity into a guided learning process.

The findings demonstrate that clear instruction and structured monitoring are perceived by lecturers as essential solutions for enhancing the effectiveness of group work assessment, although this perception is not uniformly supported across the literature. Empirical studies converge with this finding by demonstrating that explicit task guidelines, role allocation, and transparent assessment criteria significantly improve participation and accountability in group work contexts (Gillies, 2016; Panadero, Brown, & Strijbos, 2016; Boud & Bearman, 2024). However, other studies caution that clarity alone does not guarantee meaningful collaboration. Forsell et al. (2021) found that even well-instructed group work can fail when monitoring is superficial or when institutional constraints limit sustained lecturer engagement. Similarly, Chang and Brickman (2018) report that students may continue to perceive group work as unfair despite clear instructions, particularly when grading structures do not adequately recognise individual contributions. These contrasting findings suggest that while clear instruction is necessary, it is not sufficient on its own.

4.6 Objective 2, theme 2: Collaboration as a solution

Collaboration emerged as a central framework through which lecturers perceived the value and potential of group work assessment in higher education. From the lecturers' perspectives, group work transcends a mere assessment technique; it constitutes a pedagogical space that facilitates peer learning, shared problem-solving, and collective knowledge construction. In this context, collaboration is regarded as a corrective to individualised learning practices, particularly within professional programmes such as education, where teamwork and collegial engagement are essential to future practice.

> *Lecturer 4:* "*In a context where group work is feasible, I support the idea of giving student group assignments since this allows students to learn from one another. Furthermore, group work promotes collaborative learning among students, enabling them to solve problems and construct knowledge together as a group.*"

> *Lecturer 1:* "*Moreover, group assignments promote participation because at the group level, each member of the group sees every other member as peers and at the same level with one another.*"

> *Lecturer 2:* "*Group work does promote student participation, but the instructions should be in such a way that allows all members to participate.*"

The accounts provided by the lecturers reflect a shared perception that when effectively facilitated, collaboration fosters more egalitarian learning environments where students engage with peers as co-learners rather than competitors. The lecturers underscored that group work allows students to learn from one another, amalgamate diverse perspectives, and collectively address academic tasks, thereby promoting both cognitive and social development. Concurrently, lecturers acknowledged that collaboration does not occur automatically; it relies on instructional design that creates opportunities for inclusive participation. Notably, while lecturers predominantly framed collaboration as a remedy for participation challenges, they also recognised a tension between their intentions and students' lived experiences, as students frequently expressed scepticism regarding whether group work genuinely facilitates collaboration in practice.

The findings revealed that lecturers generally perceive collaboration as a pivotal solution to the challenges associated with group work assessment, particularly in terms of enhancing peer learning, participation, and shared knowledge construction. This perception is corroborated by empirical studies indicating that collaborative learning can improve engagement, problem-solving, and transferable skills when students interact meaningfully with their peers (Johnson et al., 2014; Gillies, 2016; Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). However, contrasting literature cautions that collaboration is often

uneven in practice, with students reporting experiences of exclusion, dominance, and superficial interactions that undermine authentic collaboration (Chang & Brickman, 2018; Forsell et al., 2021; Chiriac & Frykedal, 2023). From the perspective of Social Constructivism Theory, this finding underscores that collaboration is a conditional rather than an automatic solution: while SCT positions peer interaction and the co-construction of knowledge as central to learning (Vygotsky, 1978), such outcomes depend on mediated interactions, inclusive norms, and instructional scaffolding. The divergence between lecturers' positive perceptions and students' scepticism thus suggests a gap between the theoretical potential of collaboration and its actual implementation in practice, reinforcing the necessity for intentional design and facilitation of group work assessment.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined group work assessment as a form of collaborative learning in higher education by exploring the challenges associated with its implementation and analysing lecturers' and students' perceptions of its effectiveness. The findings revealed that, contrary to widely held assumptions, group work assessment does not automatically promote student participation. Instead, persistent challenges, including poor communication, lack of participation, absence of leadership, and the time-consuming nature of group tasks, often undermine its pedagogical intent. While lecturers generally perceived group work as a valuable strategy for fostering collaboration, peer learning, and professional preparedness, students' experiences were more ambivalent and, at times, negative. This divergence highlights a critical disconnect between the theoretical promise of collaborative assessment and its practical enactment. Framed within Social Constructivism Theory, the findings suggest that collaborative learning outcomes are highly contingent upon structured interaction, effective facilitation, and inclusive learning conditions. Without intentional design and mediation, the social processes required for the co-construction of knowledge are weakened, thereby limiting the effectiveness of group work assessment as a collaborative learning strategy.

Based on these findings, the study recommends that higher education institutions and lecturers adopt a more deliberate and reflective approach to group work assessment. Clear instructional guidelines, explicit role allocation, and transparent assessment criteria should be established to support equitable participation and accountability. Lecturers should actively monitor group processes and incorporate formative feedback mechanisms to address emerging challenges during task implementation. Additionally, structured leadership roles within groups and the integration of individual accountability measures can help mitigate free riding and uneven participation. At an institutional level, professional development initiatives should be introduced to support lecturers in designing and facilitating collaborative assessments aligned with social constructivist principles. Rather than assuming that group work is inherently collaborative, higher education practices should prioritise intentional, context-sensitive assessment designs that genuinely promote participation, learning, and inclusion.

5.1 Limitations and future research

This study was conducted within a single Faculty of Education, utilising a small, purposively selected sample of lecturers and final-year students, which restricts the generalisability of the findings beyond the specific institutional context. Furthermore, the reliance on reflective qualitative data, based on participants' self-reported experiences, may be subject to personal biases or subjective interpretations. Future research could address these limitations by adopting multi-institutional or comparative designs across diverse disciplines and higher education contexts, as well as employing mixed methods approaches to investigate how structured interventions in group work assessment influence participation, leadership, and learning outcomes over time.

6. Declarations

Acknowledgements: The authors made known acknowledgements.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest

Data Availability: The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants and ethical restrictions imposed by the Institutional Review Board. However, de-identified data can be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to approval by the ethics committee.

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