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Achieving Fairness in Assessing Student Groupwork

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A key challenge for lecturers using group work with students is to find ways to maximize student learning from group projects while ensuring fair and accurate assessment methods. Teamwork and group projects are ubiquitous in education because they enhance the development of skills and knowledge particularly relevant to the real world, provide an excellent forum for experiential learning, promote collaborative learning, and help to more efficiently instruct large student numbers.

Beyond the pragmatic advantages to instructors of large classes, the learning benefits include the provision of opportunities to apply conceptual skills and theoretical knowledge; to experience and learn about group dynamics; to include tasks and activities more directly relevant to professional practice; to broaden exposure to different views and ideas; to increase familiarization with different perspectives and problem-solving approaches; to develop and extend interpersonal and social skills such as collaboration and networking; to work on larger, more comprehensive assignments individuals would not be able

to cope with; to increase student motivation and engagement; and generally to promote students' learning from each other.

Although the promise of group work as an instructional tool is rarely disputed, its use often brings about problems that limit and even negate potential benefits. Specifically, the difficulties associated with accurately and fairly assessing individual performance, conflict within work groups, and free riding of individual members are frequently cited problems associated with group work. Like many other instructors, I have long struggled with the challenge to find ways to maximize student learning from group projects while providing fair and accurate assessment methods and countering the potential negative impact of free riding and internal conflict.

The focus of this fellowship project will be on the use of peer evaluation of individual contributions to group work. Generally this is not possible with common assessment practices that focus on outcome assessment. Assessing such inputs (individual contributions) to group work requires a focus on complex group processes that instructors can usually not observe and assess.

I propose to roll out the use of a technology called Sparkplus to all students studying business in first year. These lectures are among the largest in NUIM averaging 450 students. Sparkplus is a technology designed to achieve the objectives of providing accurate and fair assessment, supporting student learning, and enabling group self-management.



Graham E. Heaslip is Deputy Head of the Business School and programme director for the MSc in humanitarian Logistics and Emergency Management. Graham completed his PhD studies in the area of Civil Military Cooperation / Coordination at the Logistics Institute, University of Hull, for which he was awarded the James Cooper Memorial Cup for best PhD in Logistics and Supply Chain Management by the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport. Prior to entering academia Graham spent fourteen years working in the Irish Defence Forces both at home and abroad in a variety of logistical appointments, as well as spending time seconded to Humanitarian agencies in a logistical capacity. Graham's research interests are broadly in the intersections between global logistics/ supply chain management, humanitarian logistics and organisational management development.