Perceptions and Challenges of Online Group Work Among Emirati Female Undergraduates

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of female undergraduate students at a federal university in the UAE with online group work. Using a questionnaire, the attitudes and perceptions of 32 female Emirati students were analyzed. Results indicate a generally positive attitude towards online group projects, highlighting the development of skills such as time management, teamwork, and leadership. Despite these benefits, challenges such as low contribution and poor communication were noted. The study recommends the careful design of online group assignments to ensure meaningful participation. Further research is suggested to explore faculty perspectives and conflict management in online group settings.

Keywords: Online group work, Emirati students, Higher education, Collaborative learning, Student attitudes.

Introduction

Equipping students with group work skills is crucial for preparing them for the world of work. As a teaching method, group work has become a common practice because educators view it as an effective tool to promote students' learning and achievement. For example, group work helps students achieve core competencies, including critical thinking and problem-solving skills and the capacity to solve complex problems within their capabilities (Idaresit Akpan et al., 2020). Today, higher education institutions adapt various educational technology tools such as Blackboard, Webex, and Zoom to provide online or hybrid instruction, either as part of their teaching methodologies or as contingency plans when face-to-face instruction becomes difficult. Although online learning in general can increase student engagement as they become more independent and responsible for their own learning, students have reported challenges in maintaining group dynamics and communication in online environments (Korzycka et al., 2021; Langegård et al., 2021; Suliman et al., 2021). Collaborative learning is seen as an essential 21st Century skill where students are enabled to actively interact with each other and co-construct knowledge by working in groups (Trongtorsak et al., 2021). Group work is one of the methods teachers adopt to help students discover knowledge through collaborating with their peers. Students' attitudes and experiences in groups influence their learning outcomes. While some students find groups beneficial to their learning process, some have negative attitudes due to negative past experiences. Several studies were conducted to explore students' experiences of working in groups in a face-to-face setting in higher education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Bell et. al, 2013; Prabhakar, 2016; Elmassah et. al, 2020; Mohammed & PashaZaidi, 2014; Pasha-Zaidi et. al, 2015; Deveci, 2015). However, there is limited research that explores the issue in online settings (Jieun & Osman, 2021). It is important to elucidate students' positive and negative views of working in online groups to understand why does or why doesn't group work in online learning environments work. This study therefore focuses on the experiences of undergraduate students enrolled in an online early education course at a university in the UAE. The study's research questions are:

1. What factors of group work do students recognize as beneficial in the learning process?
2. What factors of group work do students recognize as challenging in the learning process?
3. How does demographic information (such as age and city of residence) affect students' experiences with online group work?

Literature Review

Online Group Work

Group work is defined as "more than one person working together to complete a task or an assignment" (Situmorang, 2021). It is an active learning strategy where "students work in teams to construct knowledge and accomplish tasks through collaborative interaction" (Rance-Roney, J.A. 2010, p. 20). The definition of group work builds on the principles of constructive learning theory which posits that learning is an active process where people connect new ideas to their existing knowledge and experiences. Teaching methods in constructivism therefore focus on activities that help students find their own answers, with teachers working as enablers and facilitators. Through group work, students are expected to co-construct knowledge through communication, interaction, and collaboration. Studies that compare students' acquisition

of group work skills in online and face-to-face settings have mixed results. Some research suggests that online group work can be as effective as face-to-face group work (Rezaei, 2017). For instance, Myers et al. (2014) concluded that the development of group work skills in online courses can be as effective as in face-to-face courses for ICT students. On the other hand, there is a perception that soft skills development in online programs is overlooked and is not as strong as face-to-face development. Developing such skills in online learning environments can be difficult because of the nature of online learning that isolates students (Myers et al., 2014). Some of the challenges of online group work that students might face are delayed or miscommunication (Chang & Kang, 2016). Garratt-Reed et al. (2016) reported that students enrolled in an online undergraduate psychology course scored less in the group assessment of the course.

With the global increase in adopting online education in colleges and universities, the need for effective methods to increase students' engagement and achievement in online learning environments increased. Online group work can be an effective teaching and learning tool to facilitate cooperation and collaboration amongst students and optimize their learning (Chang & Kang, 2016). On the other hand, online group work has its unique challenges and drawbacks. It lacks physical presence and verbal and non-verbal communication cues, and usually there is a lack of delayed feedback from group members (Chang & Kang, 2016). According to (Wai et al., 2023), the success of group work depends on a) essential communication and interaction, b) a collaborative team, c) knowledge enrichment, d) development of intellectual skills, and e) tutor involvement. Many factors affect online group work dynamics and students' experiences and attitudes towards it. These include the group size, group member assignment, types of tasks, individual accountability, and lack of communication.

Students' experiences of group work

Students often don't understand the importance of group work for their learning and future prospects and are intimidated by the experience. It is established that students' perceptions of group work influence their level of engagement and therefore their achievement in group work, both in face-to-face and online classroom settings (Konak Kulturel-Konak & Cheung, 2019). Thompson and Ku (2011) concluded that there is a positive correlation between the degree of collaboration and group performance in online group projects. Studies show that students' perception of group work is shaped by their past experiences (Chang & Kang, 2016; Elmassah et al., 2020). Whether positive or negative, students' previous experiences of online group work dictate their attitudes and intentions towards it (Cheng, 2017). Studies on students' perceptions of online group work have mixed results. For instance, Goñi et al. (2020) found that the perceived group challenges of engineering students in both online and face-to-face environments were comparable. Donelan and Kear (2018) concluded that students' attitudes towards group projects were generally favorable. On the contrary, Konak Kulturel-Konak & Cheung (2019) found that online students have more negative attitudes towards group work than their face-to-face counterparts. (Garratt-Reed et al., 2016) also reported that the only component students in an online undergraduate psychology course were dissatisfied with was a group assignment.

Methodology

Participants and procedures

Participants in this study were female undergraduate students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Education, majoring in Early Childhood Education at Zayed University (Dubai and Abu Dhabi Campuses). All participants were enrolled in a required early childhood education course that was offered completely online. The author of this paper was the instructor of the course. The course was 16 weeks long and was delivered entirely online using Zoom and Blackboard. During the eighth week of the semester, students were placed randomly in groups of 3 to 4 members to work on the final group project that required creating a thematic unit for early childhood classes focusing on the integration of language and content (Content and Language Integrated Learning - CLIL - project). The random assignment to groups was the students' choice after the instructor gave them the option of being assigned randomly or choosing their own groups. Students were required to come up with a theme for the unit, write the unit's learning objectives, and then design a number of lessons incorporating what they learned in the course related to content and language integrated learning for early childhood education. The project consisted of seven parts, all of which received a group grade, except for the seventh part, which students worked on individually and received an individual grade for. Students were notified that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and anonymous and were ensured that their participation would not affect their grades in the course in any way.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using an online self-administered questionnaire that consisted of three sections. The first section used a 5-point Likert scale to measure students' attitudes towards working in groups, group formation, and resolving conflicts within groups. The second part included multiple-choice questions about students' specific experience with working in groups on the CLIL project. The questionnaire also included three open-ended questions. The last section of the questionnaire included demographic questions. The raw data was extracted from the online survey platform (SurveyMonkey) and was analyzed using SPSS (version 27). Analysis was performed using descriptive statistics. The mean, median, mode, variance, standard deviation, and count were calculated. Correlation analysis was performed using T-tests and ANOVA. The open-ended questions were analyzed using the qualitative thematic analysis approach to find and allocate appropriate themes.

Results

Participants' ages ranged between 21 to 46 years with a mean age of (M= 22.06, SD= 5.048). Among the study participants, 62.5% (20) were from Abu Dhabi, while 37.5% (12) were from Dubai. In the sample, 40.6% (13) of the participants were in their second year, and 40.6% (13) were in Year 4. The rest of the participants were either in their fifth year (12.5%, 4) or in their second year at the school (6.3%, 2).

Table 1. *Demographic analysis*

	Frequency	Percent
In which Emirate do you live?		
Abu Dhabi	20	62.5
Dubai	12	37.5
In which year are you at ZU?		
Year 2	2	6.3
Year 3	13	40.6
Year 4	13	40.6
Year 5	4	12.5

Skills Developed in Group Work

The majority of respondents (88%) identified time management as a top skill acquired through group work. Teamwork skills came second in the list, with 81% of participants identifying it as a skill developed in group work. Moreover, 78% of participants identified leadership as a skill acquired within the context of group work. Interpersonal skills and communication were equally rated, as both received 69% of participants' acknowledgement of developing these two skills through group work.

Table 2. *Skills developed in group work*

Skills you can develop in group work	Frequency	Percentage
Time management	28	88%
Teamwork	26	81%
Leadership	25	78%
Interpersonal skills	22	69%
Communication	22	69%
Academic development	19	59%
Self-development	13	41%

Drawbacks Experienced in Group Work

Interestingly, 44% of participants reported experiencing no drawbacks during group work, indicating a positive perception of their group work experiences. The most reported drawbacks by the other participants were low contribution from some group members (31%), poor commitment (28%), poor attendance at group meetings (25%), and poor communication (22%).

Table 3. *Drawbacks of group work*

	Frequency	Percent

Drawbacks experienced during group work	Frequency	Percentage
No Drawback	14	44%
Low contribution from some group members	10	31%
Poor commitment	9	28%
Poor attendance at group meetings	8	25%
Poor communication	7	22%
Poor attitude	6	19%
Getting credit without doing equal work	6	19%
Different grade expectations	5	16%
Lack of formal leadership	3	9%
Some students worked a lot more than the others	2	6%

Attitudes towards group projects

Generally, participants showed a positive attitude towards group projects. The majority (84.37%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they learn more when working with others. The majority (75%) also agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoy working with others. Despite their positive attitude towards working in groups, 81% agreed or strongly agreed that they'd rather depend on themselves than on others. On the other hand, 78% agreed or strongly agreed that working on a project as a part of a team makes it easier to get the job done. Additionally, 84% agreed or strongly agreed that group projects helped them learn how to deal with people more effectively. Despite these results that show a positive attitude towards group work, when it came to evaluation, a majority of 75% indicated that they prefer to be evaluated individually rather than as a team.

Table 4. *Attitudes towards group projects*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I enjoy working with others	6.25 (2)	6.25 (2)	12.5 (4)	43.75 (14)	31.25 (10)
I learn more when I work with others		3.125 (1)	12.5 (4)	46.875 (15)	37.5 (12)
I'd rather depend on myself than others		3.125 (1)	15.625 (5)	21.875 (7)	59.375 (19)
I usually make strong contributions to group work		6.25 (2)	3.125 (1)	37.5 (12)	53.125 (17)
Working on a project as a part of a team makes it easier to get the job done	3.125 (1)		18.75 (6)	40.625 (13)	37.5 (12)
Group projects have helped me learn how to more effectively deal with people		3.125 (1)	12.5 (4)	46.875 (15)	37.5 (12)
I feel comfortable when presenting with someone else		9.375 (3)	6.25 (2)	40.625 (13)	43.75 (14)
I prefer giving presentations by myself		3.125 (1)	12.5 (4)	46.875 (15)	37.5 (12)
I prefer to be evaluated individually rather than as a team	3.125 (1)		21.875 (7)	31.25 (10)	43.75 (14)
Group projects create conflict between students	9.375 (3)	6.25 (2)	34.375 (11)	25 (8)	25 (8)

Attitudes towards forming teams for group projects

The majority of participants expressed a preference for having the autonomy to choose their team members, with 71.9% agreeing or strongly agreeing that students should be allowed to select their own team members. On the other hand, 84.4% indicated that they should be allowed the option of working alone if that is their preference.

Table 5. *Attitudes towards forming teams for group projects*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Students should be allowed to choose their team members			28.1 (9)	25 (8)	46.9 (15)
The professor should assign students to teams	6.3 (2)	25 (8)	28.1 (9)	31.3 (10)	9.4 (3)
Team assignments should be completely random	6.3 (2)	28.1 (9)	43.8 (14)	9.4 (3)	12.5 (4)
It does not matter how students are assigned to teams	25 (8)	43.8 (14)	18.8 (6)	6.3 (2)	6.3 (2)
The professor should allow us to provide him/her input on my team member preferences	31.3 (10)	3.1 (1)		50 (16)	15.6 (5)
I should be allowed the option of working alone if that is my preference			15.6 (5)	46.9 (15)	37.5 (12)

Attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members

The majority of participants (87.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that the professor should be informed if there was conflict in the group. In the same vein, 90.7% agreed or strongly agreed that the professor should meet with the group to help resolve conflicts. The majority of participants (75%) agreed or strongly agreed that if a conflict arises, they will confront the person causing it individually. The majority also (90.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that they will do whatever they can to avoid conflict in their group. Voting was seen as a solution for when members are not able to agree on a decision, with 78% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

Table 6. *Attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I will sacrifice my own needs in order to maintain harmony in the group	6.3 (2)	9.4 (3)	28.1 (9)	40.6 (13)	15.6 (5)
The professor should be informed if there is conflict in the group			12.5 (4)	25 (8)	62.5 (20)
I will do whatever I can to avoid conflict in a group		3.1 (1)	6.3 (2)	40.6 (13)	50 (16)
Groups should resolve any conflict that occurs between team members without involving anyone outside the group		9.4 (3)	28.1 (9)	31.3 (10)	31.3 (10)
When conflicts arise in a group, I remove myself from the situation	6.3 (2)	15.6 (5)	40.6 (13)	25 (8)	12.5 (4)
The professor should meet with the group to help resolve conflicts among team members			9.4 (3)	34.4 (11)	56.3 (18)
I will stand my ground for something I believe in when working on a group project even if it creates conflict within the team	6.3 (2)	12.5 (4)	43.8 (14)	18.8 (6)	18.8 (6)
If group members cannot agree on a decision, a vote should be taken with a majority rule			21.9 (7)	37.5 (12)	40.6 (13)
When a conflict occurs in a group, team members should ignore it in order to complete the task at hand	9.4 (3)	21.9 (7)	21.9 (7)	28.1 (9)	18.8 (6)
I will confront a person causing conflict within the group individually			25 (8)	53.1 (17)	21.9 (7)

Correlation analysis

Correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between participants' age, attitude towards group projects, attitudes towards forming teams for group projects, and attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members. Regarding the correlation between age and attitudes towards group projects, results revealed no significant relationship between the two variables ($r = 0.063$, $p = 0.73$). Examining the relationship between age and attitudes towards forming teams for group projects, the results revealed no significant relationship as determined by ($r = -0.112$, $p = 0.541$). The correlation analysis revealed no significant relationship between age and attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members ($r = 0.165$, $p = 0.367$). The findings of the correlation analysis revealed that age is not significantly related to the attitude towards group projects, attitudes towards forming teams for group projects, and attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members.

Table 7. *Correlation analysis*

	How old are you?	Attitudes towards group projects	Attitudes towards forming teams for group projects	Attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members
How old are you?	1	0.063	-0.112	0.165
		0.73	0.541	0.367
Attitudes towards group projects	0.063	1	0.488	0.476
	0.73		0.005	0.006
Attitudes towards forming teams for group projects	-0.112	0.488	1	0.558
	0.541	0.005		0.001
Attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members	0.165	0.476	0.558	1
	0.367	0.006	0.001	

T-test analysis

The t-test analysis was conducted to examine the effect of place of residence, specifically between participants residing in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, on their attitudes towards group projects, attitudes towards forming teams for group projects, and attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members. For attitudes towards group projects, the mean score for participants residing in Dubai was 40.58 (SD = 4.1), while for those in Abu Dhabi, it was 40.55 (SD = 3.576). The t-test revealed a t-statistic of 0.024 with a corresponding p-value of 0.981, indicating no statistically significant difference in attitudes towards group projects between residents of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Regarding attitudes towards forming teams for group projects, participants in Dubai had a mean score of 21.25 (SD = 3.108), whereas participants in Abu Dhabi had a mean score of 20.55 (SD = 2.395). The t-test yielded a t-statistic of 0.716 with a p-value of 0.48, suggesting no statistically significant difference in attitudes towards forming teams for group projects between residents of the two Emirates. Furthermore, concerning attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members, participants in Dubai had a mean score of 38.67 (SD = 3.962), while participants in Abu Dhabi had a mean score of 38.6 (SD = 4.925). The t-test produced a t-statistic of 0.04 with a p-value of 0.969, indicating no statistically significant difference in attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members between residents of Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

Table 8. *T-test*

	In which Emirate do you live?	N	Mean	SD	t	p- value
Attitudes towards group projects	Dubai	12	40.58	4.1	0.024	0.981
	Abu Dhabi	20	40.55	3.576		
Attitudes towards forming teams for group projects	Dubai	12	21.25	3.108	0.716	0.48
	Abu Dhabi	20	20.55	2.395		
Attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members	Dubai	12	38.67	3.962	0.04	0.969
	Abu Dhabi	20	38.6	4.925		

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore the effect of the year of study on participants' attitudes

towards group projects, attitudes towards forming teams for group projects, and attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members. For attitudes towards group projects, participants across different years of study exhibited varying mean scores. Specifically, participants in Year 2 had a mean score of 44 (SD = 0), Year 3 participants had a mean score of 40.54 (SD = 4.352), Year 4 participants had a mean score of 39.92 (SD = 3.707), and Year 5 participants had a mean score of 41 (SD = 1.414). The ANOVA revealed an F statistic of 0.697 with a corresponding p-value of 0.562, indicating no statistically significant difference in attitudes towards group projects across different years of study.

Concerning attitudes towards forming teams for group projects, participants in Year 2 had a mean score of 22.5 (SD = 0.707), Year 3 participants had a mean score of 20.92 (SD = 3.252), Year 4 participants had a mean score of 20.62 (SD = 2.567), and Year 5 participants had a mean score of 20.25 (SD = 1.258). The ANOVA yielded an F statistic of 0.337 with a p-value of 0.799, indicating no statistically significant difference in attitudes towards forming teams for group projects across different years of study. Moreover, for attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members, participants in Year 2 had a mean score of 38 (SD = 1.414), Year 3 participants had a mean score of 39.15 (SD = 4.741), Year 4 participants had a mean score of 38.23 (SD = 4.711), and Year 5 participants had a mean score of 38.5 (SD = 5.447). The ANOVA produced an F statistic of 0.097 with a p-value of 0.961, indicating no statistically significant difference in attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members across different years of study.

Table 9. *Analysis of variance*

		N	Mean	SD	F	p- value
Attitudes towards group projects	Year 2	2	44	0	0.697	0.562
	Year 3	13	40.54	4.352		
	Year 4	13	39.92	3.707		
	Year 5	4	41	1.414		
Attitudes towards forming teams for group projects	Year 2	2	22.5	0.707	0.337	0.799
	Year 3	13	20.92	3.252		
	Year 4	13	20.62	2.567		
	Year 5	4	20.25	1.258		
Attitudes towards resolving conflict among group members	Year 2	2	38	1.414	0.097	0.961
	Year 3	13	39.15	4.741		
	Year 4	13	38.23	4.711		
	Year 5	4	38.5	5.447		

Discussion and Recommendations

The main purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and attitudes of undergraduate female students towards group work in an online course at a government university in the UAE. Creating collaborative learning environments in the classroom is paramount for students' learning and is also considered important for preparing them for employment (Rezaei, 2017). One of the questions always raised by employers in the UAE is whether or not Emirati university

graduates are equipped with the required skills for the world of work, and teamwork is considered one of the essential skills. It is therefore important that students are given ample opportunities to develop teamwork skills while they are in the university. Students' perceptions and attitudes toward group work can positively or negatively impact their learning and development of teamwork skills (Cheng, 2017). As discussed in the literature review section of this paper, studies have found mixed results when examining students' perceptions and attitudes towards online group work assignments (Goñi et al., 2020; Konak Kulturel-Konak & Cheung, 2019; Garratt-Reed et al., 2016). The findings of this study show that students have a positive attitude towards group work and believe that it helps them develop their teamwork skills. This agrees with the results from Alhrahsheh et al. (2022), who concluded that Emirati students perceive teamwork positively and as an important skill for employment.

Informing students about specific group work skills and how to effectively work in groups can promote greater skill use (Kelly et al., 2022; Chapman & Van Auken, 2001). The findings of this study show that students believe that their teamwork, leadership, and time management skills are the most likely skills to be developed through online group work assignments and projects. This is in line with the findings of Pienaar & Adams (2016), who concluded that students could develop leadership skills through the distinct roles they play in online projects. It was surprising that students ranked time management high on the list. It could be that the accountability experienced while working in a group helped them appreciate time better and, therefore, they were able to manage their time effectively. Most of the students in this study believed that working in groups on the CLIL project will help them in their future careers. Most of them also indicated that working in a group on the project helped them understand what was taught in class and directly apply the class concepts. This is consistent with the findings from a number of studies that concluded that students viewed group work as beneficial for their learning (Burdett & Hastie, 2009; Chang & Kang, 2016; Hammar Chiriac, 2014). Students in this study also found sharing and exchanging ideas was one of the benefits of working on the CLIL group project.

Previous studies have affirmed that group work does not come without challenges (AlSheikh & Iqbal, 2019). In online settings, evaluating the appropriateness of team assignments while incorporating teamwork is essential (Konak, Kulturel-Konak & Cheung, 2019). Students usually face more difficulty in communication in online settings compared to face-to-face settings (Chang & Kang, 2016; Koh & Hill, 2009). The absence of physical presence makes communicating and holding group members accountable for their individual tasks even more difficult. One of the characteristics of group work is the varying levels of interest, commitment, and contribution by group members (Hammar Chiriac, 2014). Although the majority of students in this study indicated that they usually make strong contributions to group work, low contribution from some group members, poor commitment, and poor attendance at group meetings were mentioned as the most faced challenges. Usually more motivated students resent the additional work they have to do to compensate for the low contribution and commitment of low-standard students (Burdett & Hastie, 2009). The results of this study show that most students were happy to contribute more than their fair share of work either because they wanted to improve the group grade, learn more from the experience, or help other group members. Chang and Brickman (2018) study concluded that students in low-performing groups assigned harsh ratings to their low-performing group members. When asked if they would give considerably low contributors an individual grade in the CLIL project, the majority of the students in the present study indicated that they would give them a grade that truly reflects their low contribution rather than a similar grade

regardless of their contribution. Some faculty members are also in agreement with this method as they indicated that finding a mechanism to individualize grades for students who are notably and evidently low contributes (Morgan et al., 2014). This was echoed in the last open-ended question of the questionnaire in this study by some students as follows:

> *"Only the grading (low contribution students should not take the same grade as other participants)"*
>
> *"Give each student a grade but on her own part."*

Students in this study indicated that they would encourage fair contribution from all group members by respecting their opinions, sharing ideas and information, and helping each other. Low contribution from some group members can be avoided by designing group work assignments that require genuine collaboration, evenly distributing the workload, allowing in-class group meetings (Burdett & Hastie, 2009). Peer assessment is another strategy faculty can use to allow students to hold each other accountable for their assigned roles and tasks (Burdett & Hastie, 2009). Low contribution can also be mitigated by giving timely and specific feedback (Myers et al., 2014), as one student indicated as a suggestion to improve their group work experience:

> *"Have one day to review the work with the instructor."*
>
> *"Work should be evaluated before submission."*

Although students in this study perceived group work in a positive manner, the majority (81.25%) of them preferred splitting up the work between group members instead of working together. Some students also emphasized this in the last open-ended question. For example, one student mentioned:

> *"Work should be divided among group members, everyone should participate."*

It is therefore important for faculty to closely supervise group work to ensure all group members clearly understand its goals. Some students end up with negative experiences of group work because of a lack of clarity on aspects such as rules and ways of cooperation (Hammar Chiriac, 2014). Group work experiences can be improved if faculty set up clear rules, roles, and expectations. Whether students work collaboratively or cooperatively is an important expectation to clarify from the beginning. Also, asking students to define specific roles for each group member is a good strategy to avoid conflict and misunderstandings. This is particularly important as the tendency to avoid conflict was very evident in the results of this study. The culture of UAE nationals is collectivist in nature. It was, therefore, not surprising that most of the students in this study were ready to sacrifice their own needs in order to avoid conflict and maintain harmony in the group. The faculty's role, as indicated by students, is important in resolving conflict as their preference is not to do so on their own. A strategy that can minimize conflict within online groups is to give students the autonomy of choosing their group members when assigning group work projects. Students in this study showed a high preference for this choice. In general, conflict and conflict management in online group work projects is a topic that should be investigated using qualitative

methods for a better understanding (Goñi et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating undergraduate students' experiences with group work as part of an online course at a federal university in the UAE. The results showed that overall students had a favorable attitude towards the online group project. Although students thought that online group work was beneficial for their learning, several challenges were raised as part of their experience. The experience of working in online groups can be enhanced to ensure maximum benefits. Faculty members can do so by carefully designing online group assignments and projects to ensure meaningful contributions from all group members. Students' previous experiences with online group work should also be considered when designing such assignments and projects. Faculty members should encourage students to reflect on these experiences to provide a better understanding of their attitudes towards online group work. Further research using qualitative methods is needed for a deeper understanding of students' experiences of online group work. Research that investigates faculty members' perceptions and experiences of facilitating online group work is also needed.

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