

Improving student experience of virtual teamwork in an online postgraduate coursework program in Veterinary Science

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The ability to work effectively in teams is a key graduate attribute in an online postgraduate coursework program in the Faculty of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney. To equip students, each distance unit in the program includes a group assignment that requires students to work in virtual teams in the online classroom. As these students, professionals working in the animal health sector, study from a variety of locations across Australia and internationally, supporting the development of virtual teamwork skills became an important issue for program management staff.

This paper will explore questions regarding student preparation for virtual teamwork, compare student perception of virtual teamwork between two cohorts provided with alternate preparation regimes (limited for the 2003 cohort and extended for the 2004 cohort) and discuss useful strategies for promoting successful teamwork on group assignments in a virtual learning environment.

In brief, the paper will compare cohort responses to a questionnaire that addressed common issues in the virtual teamwork process - inception, role allocation, expectations, problem solving, decision making, execution, time management, conflict resolution and net-etiquette (Palloff and Pratt, 1999). The responses indicated that, compared to the 2003 cohort, the 2004 cohort had fewer problems with team inception and conflict resolution, and a similar experience with other aspects of virtual teamwork. Some preparation strategies found to aid virtual teamwork were instruction on how people function in teams, the online software platform and net-etiquette, and exploration of problems encountered by virtual teams and approaches to overcome these.