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Cooperative learning amongst MBA students in South Africa

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Cooperative learning amongst MBA students in South Africa

Bashir Amanjee

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration

Johannesburg, 2012

ABSTRACT

This study analysed the experiences of MBA students who were members of syndicate groups whilst engaged in the MBA programme at Wits Business School (WBS). Questions regarding the effectiveness of syndicate groups were raised when a number of study groups were spontaneously formed by students, even though WBS advised that the syndicate groups created by the school were created as the ideal vehicle for learning, where interaction and debate could flourish.

A qualitative study followed whereby a sample of students from the MBA programme at WBS was interviewed to gain insight into their experiences of syndicate and study groups. The key components of the interview included individual expectations of syndicate groups, actual experiences whilst a member of the syndicate group, individual learning styles, perception of team dynamics, roles within the group and team dynamics such as decision-making, conflict, and diversity. Reasons for the establishment of study groups was also investigated.

Initial findings indicated that personality and other team-related dynamics were at the root of the ineffectiveness within syndicate groups. It later transpired that one of the primary reasons explaining the ineffectiveness of syndicate groups, and the formation of study groups was the realisation that not all members of the syndicate group shared the same goal of the programme. This impacted team relationships and learning potential. Study groups on the other hand, created environments for its members that were devoid of personality clashes, political posturing, individual egos and other dynamics which inhibited team development. In many respects, study groups were largely representative of cooperative learning groups, both in terms of function and outcome, and represents a key learning opportunity for the business school in terms of its operationalisation of syndicate groups.

Further analysis revealed the existence of a number of faulty assumptions regarding the value of syndicate groups, on the part of both the school and students. On the part of the school, faulty assumptions tended to relate to specific student-related processes. Faulty assumptions on the part of students originate where clear communication and guidance is lacking, and at times through a lack of initiative to seek clarity.

Key recommendations to the school include that it must firstly agree if syndicate groups are intended to operate as cooperative learning groups, and if they are, to establish the environment needed for such groups to flourish. Syndicate evaluation processes, as well as lecturer involvement with syndicate groups must be enhanced to facilitate learning within these groups. Recommendations to students are also provided, the most relevant of these being the need to be more proactive in seeking clarification from the School, and learning to deal with group dynamics, particularly, dealing with conflict.

DECLARATION

I, Bashir Amanjee, declare that this research report is my own work except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.

Bashir A E Amanjee

Signed at Johannesburg

On the 29th day of February 2012

DEDICATION

This report is dedicated to my *Chicken* and my *Pudding*.

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I would like to acknowledge the following people:

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research is to determine how cooperative learning amongst MBA students in South Africa can be enhanced. The study examines, amongst other things, cooperative learning principles, team development, learning theory, and adult learning.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) propose a model of cooperative learning encompassing five basic elements, namely, positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive action, social skills and group processing; which they argue must be present for an activity to be considered cooperative. This report assessed if syndicate groups were cooperative using the elements suggested above, and whether a syndicate group is the ideal forum in which learning should occur.

1.2. Context of the study

Based on personal anecdotal experiences of the MBA programme at Wits Business School (WBS), questions about the effectiveness of pre-defined syndicate groups, as a form of cooperative work group, were raised when it became apparent that not all members of the syndicate group shared similar goals and aspirations for the syndicate and overall MBA programme. For some members, the aim was to maximise learning through all available channels, and they considered interacting with each other as one of the more appropriate mediums to achieve this. Other syndicate group members clearly expressed their intentions to do the minimum amount of work necessary to enable them to complete the programme. The subsequent behaviours of the two sub-groups thus formed the basis of significant inter-personal conflict and tension within syndicate groups.

As a consequence of intragroup conflict, a parallel study group structure developed in which people with similar values and goals formed ‘study groups’ which were characterised by:

1. Controlled entry, thereby preventing the replication of the syndicate group mixed-aspiration scenario.
2. A high degree of trust in the competence of group members, translating into a general willingness to ‘go the extra mile’, both for the individual and for the other members of the study group.
3. A decrease or lack of interpersonal competition. The study group was not about doing better than a colleague rather it sought to ensure that all members of the group performed well in the programme.
4. The study group was self-regulated and leveraged the specialist skills in the group to achieve the best possible learning and assessment outcomes for the group.
5. Members interacted purposefully on a social level and not solely as a by-product of being in a team.

The ‘study group’ phenomena also resulted in the need to invest additional time and effort into an already challenging schedule, thereby reinforcing concerns about the effectiveness of the primary tool for interaction and active participation in the MBA programme - the syndicate group. One of the key differences between the syndicate and study group related to the access to the group. Students were allocated to syndicate groups based on criteria applied by WBS, and participation in syndicate group activities was compulsory. However, students elect to form or join study groups and access to a study group is maintained by the group itself.

This study used the WBS MBA programme structure, the allocation to syndicate groups by WBS, and the natural formation of study groups by students as its context to determine how cooperative learning amongst MBA students can be enhanced.

1.2.1. Cooperative Learning

A working definition of cooperative learning is offered by Johnson and Johnson (1999) and describes cooperative learning as the instructional use of small groups enabling students to work together towards the maximisation of their own and others' learning. They suggest that the benefit of the cooperative learning model is that it develops and reinforces active learning, i.e. learning how to learn, interpersonal communication and teamwork. These are skills which are in demand in many professional sectors. Koppenhaver and Shrader (2003) also found that cooperative learning represents an active method of acquiring knowledge, which unlike the passive nature of lecturing, results in enhanced information retention. They also noted that interpersonal skills and dynamics and the quality of problem solving and decision-making within the group are likely to improve.

More recently, Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) found that cooperative learning promotes internalisation of course materials through the diversity of perspectives that learners are exposed to. Students achieve not only higher grades in cooperative learning but they also acquire social skills and values which benefit them throughout their lives. Cooperative learning also encouraged higher-order critical thinking skills. Shihab (2011) found that students within successful cooperative learning environments exhibit greater intrinsic motivation to learn and consequently, achieve higher grades.

Research focusing on the impact of cooperative group process on achievement (Johnson, Johnson, Stanne and Garibaldi 1990), as well as the impact of cooperative groups amongst high-achievement students (Johnson, Johnson and Taylor 1993), has yielded outcomes of increased achievement associated with cooperative learning groups. Johnson and Johnson (1999) cite their own and other instances of research conducted which prove that working together to achieve a common goal results in higher achievement and improved productivity. Bertucci, Conte, Johnson and Johnson (2010) examined the impact of group size on achievement and found that students working in pairs or

groups of four (cooperative pairs and cooperative groups) achieved significantly higher grades than individuals working alone. Similar results were found by Hsiung (2010) which compared the performance of two groups of learners, and found that the performance of students in cooperative learning teams was significantly higher than that of students in individual study settings.

Cooperative learning is also argued to contribute towards a need which learners may have for a sense of belongingness and acceptance (Bulut 2010).

1.2.1.1. Summary

Proponents of cooperative learning offer a substantial amount of research which highlights the value of cooperative learning groups, ranging between improvements to individual academic results and enhanced life-skills and values. The primary driver to these benefits is the interaction to which cooperative group members are exposed, and the consequent perspectives which inform how they approach problems and challenges.

Given these benefits to individuals within a learning environment, it is no surprise that a review of MBA brochures from business schools and MBA ranking information in South Africa highlights the centrality of syndicate groups to the MBA learning process (University of Stellenbosch 2009; GIBS 2011; MBA.co.za 2011), on the assumption that cooperative learning occurs within syndicate groups.

1.2.2. Cooperative learning misconceptions

Cooperative learning is not without its pitfalls. The effects of cooperative learning do not merely arise through the formation of work groups (Johnson et al. 1990). They argue that students are often unsure of course goals, which can be remedied by the instructor carefully structuring the assignment to facilitate understanding. Without such involvement, students are likely to digress from the task at hand and become unproductive and disillusioned.

Fellers (1993) highlights a fundamental flaw in the cooperative learning process, that is, the widely held belief that anyone who has expertise in a given field can teach. This belief, he argues, must be based on the incorrect assumption that content (what is taught) is more important than process (how it is taught). This error, according to the same author, explains the non-realisation of syndicate goals which can only be corrected by ensuring the correct mix of skills and knowledge is combined into such cooperative learning groups.

According to Koppenhaver and Shrader (2003), cooperative groups require additional time to meet which provides an increased opportunity for group conflict. They further argue that such groups may create a sense of frustration amongst high achievement individuals who may believe that they are doing the job of the instructor, while seemingly not gaining much benefit from the group.

Furthermore, research conducted by Krause and Stark (2010) found that cooperative learning did not facilitate learning when comparing students who worked individually and students working in groups. Even with interaction and participation in the group setting, no noticeable gain in performance was noted.

Similarly, Chin-Min (2011) argued that groups with extremely diverse characteristics, particularly regarding learning ethic, abilities and learning styles, are forced to work together, difficulties may arise leading to dysfunctional behaviour in the group. Resulting in the loss of benefits associated with cooperative learning.

1.2.2.1. Summary

Research was presented which supports and contradicts the outcomes achieved through cooperative learning groups, namely that superior achievement is not always replicated. Also the process required to operationalise cooperative learning groups, namely the incorrect grouping of learners, could result in dysfunctional groups, or that the mere grouping of

learners will not result in learning taking place. Furthermore, the role of the lecturer or instructor is crucial and often overlooked in the process.

1.2.3. The elements of cooperative learning

Johnson and Johnson (1999) identify five elements which must be present if a group or team is to be considered cooperative. These are presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Five elements essential for cooperative activity

Element	Description
Positive interdependence	The perception that we are linked to others in such a manner that we cannot succeed unless we help them to succeed. Our actions benefit them and their actions benefit me.
Individual accountability	Members are held individually accountable to perform their work. Performance of individual members is shared with the group and the individual.
Face-to-face promotive action	Promoting others' success by helping, supporting encouraging and praising individual efforts. Taking the time to explain and discuss problems and issues. Not a silent group member.
Social skills	Team members must be socially competent i.e. they must have the requisite leadership, decision-making, trust building, communication and conflict management skills if they are to contribute to the success of the group.
Group processing	Occurs when dialogue about goal achievement and team relationships transpires amongst team members. Desirable behaviour is reinforced and undesirable behaviour is admonished. Effective problem resolution is achieved.

(Johnson and Johnson 1999)

These authors argue further that instructors / lecturers at schools have a responsibility to create an environment conducive to these elements, which should include developing the required social skills needed to enable group functioning. Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) concur with this skills development sentiment and have taken this a step further by suggesting tangible actions which could be taken to ensure the successful implementation of cooperative

learning. These include the establishment of group goals and rewards, the communication of the cooperative process to students, the development of students' social skills before classroom groups start engaging and monitoring group performance through peer evaluation and other techniques.

1.2.3.1. Summary

Cooperative learning is the process of creating and maintaining an environment in which group members can interact in a structured and facilitated manner. It requires the active participation of lecturers, curriculum planners, assessors and students to be successful. It also requires that students are enabled to operate in such an environment, such that they have the requisite level of social skills and emotional competence to achieve maximum benefit from the group.

The elements listed in Table 1 provide insight into the nature of interpersonal competence that the individual and group must develop. It is partly the responsibility of the lecturer / instructor / curriculum planner to close the gap which may exist in terms of the presence of these elements.

1.2.4. Value of this research

The intended value of syndicate work within the context of the MBA programme at WBS could be extrapolated from the many benefits of cooperative learning presented above, and should translate to an improved learning experience and higher levels of achievement for students.

However, given the stated benefits arising from cooperative groups provided earlier, numerous students still go on to form study groups which become the primary study and interaction forum. These study groups are less formal in nature and are used as a sounding board for ideas, assignments and more importantly, preparation for examinations.

Based on the description provided, this form of study group could be likened to the high-performance cooperative learning group described by Johnson and Johnson (1999), which they describe as having all the elements of a cooperative learning group, and is characterised by superior individual and team performance, higher levels of achievement and greater commitment to team success.

The implications of these study groups for students are substantial:

1. Time needs to be set aside for meetings with both the formal cooperative group (syndicate) as well as for the study group.
2. The amount of group process, for example, communication, conflict resolution and decision making required to sustain participation in both groups' doubles. Using Tuckman's model of team development Form, Norm, Storm, Perform and Adjourn (Tuckman and Jensen 1977), the student has to adapt to the different phase in which either group may find itself.
3. The student must adapt to the different roles that must be performed in the respective groups. Aritzeta, Swailes and Senior (2007) and Belbin Associates (2012) argue that teams must have a balanced representation of all nine team roles and high performing teams necessitate the presence of each role. The student must therefore ensure these roles are applied as necessary.
4. Questions regarding the perceived value of the two groups will need to be clarified. Kearney, Gebert and Voelpel (2009) state that the student will question the intrinsic or cognitive value obtained from a team, which in the context of this research raises questions regarding the value obtained from the two groups.

The direct impact of these study groups for a business school is paradoxical in that the business school experiences reputational benefit through the higher grades achieved by students. Business schools will likely and incorrectly

attribute these achievements to the success of the syndicate structure, when in reality it is the parallel study group structure driving this achievement.

The existence of such informal cooperative learning groups thus informs the purpose or value of this study, namely, is the syndicate group the most effective method for implementing cooperative learning amongst MBA students? It is envisaged that this research provides insight into the cooperative nature of syndicate groups (or the lack thereof), and whether the syndicate group is the correct medium to drive cooperative learning.

1.3. Problem statement

How, through the adoption of cooperative learning group principles; from a perspective of learning theory, adult learning, team development and the theory underlying cooperative learning groups; can learning amongst MBA students in South Africa be enhanced?

1.4. Significance of the study

This study fills a gap in that research into the functioning and levels of success achieved by syndicate groups in the context of the MBA programme is limited. The majority of available research, namely Kotey (2007), Schaffer, Kimfong and Paulino (2008), Kuipers and Stoker (2009) and Akdemir, Erdem and Polat (2010), amongst others, have either focused on the factors which drive team success within the organisational context or placed focus on team development theory to inform team success.

Raeburn (1991) sought to assess the functional and dysfunctional factors which influence syndicate groups at the WBS, and found a strong correlation between identified factors when compared to general group development theory. In this research, the factors which proved dysfunctional in the syndicate groups included:

1. Syndicate function: The role of the syndicate over and above compulsory assignments. Does the syndicate offer all it can, or does it provide the basic minimum?
2. Task completion norms: Refers to completion of the task at the last minute, due to poor time management, poor organisation, etc.
3. Intra-syndicate motivation: Individuals in the syndicate do not share a common goal. Some wish to excel while others wish to pass comfortably, because there are different levels of commitment.
4. Effect of careers: Impact of career and work commitments on ability to participate in MBA programme.
5. Effect of family: Does family commitment hinder the ability to participate in the syndicate?
6. Group think: The general lack of creativity or fresh thinking. Possibly a consequence of conflict avoidance behaviour.

Fellers (1993) conducted an assessment of students attending MBA courses, with paradoxical results. Overall, students reported a general positive group experience citing interpersonal conflict, time constraints and unequal contribution from group members as the biggest issues. However, when asked if they would opt for group-work again as part of the MBA programme, the responses were neutral. When asked if they would prefer individual exams with a team score or a team exam, 29% opted for the former and 61% for the latter. One of the outcomes from this study was that even though students in the study felt positive about their group experience, they were hesitant to agree on a team exam and the sharing of a group grade. Reasons for this were not provided, though it could be indicative of underlying group trust and individual performance issues.

It has also become common practice at business schools globally to allocate students enrolled for MBA programmes (part-time or full-time) to syndicate groups. Koppenhaver and Shrader (2003) and Mishra and Sahgal (2005) further

highlight the value of teams and teamwork to academic institutions, as evidenced by the incorporation of group work into business school instruction.

It was reported by the Financial Mail (2009) that approximately 4000 students enrolled for MBA programmes at South African business schools and with study fees ranging between R 55 000 – R 167 000 (Financial Mail 2009; MBA.co.za 2010), the MBA market is substantial. On the assumption that syndicate groups operate as cooperative learning groups, a study such as this benefits both business schools and students as it can provide the reassurance that syndicate groups are not simply a means to lessen lecturer workload, but rather, that these are carefully structured and facilitated forums through which knowledge and other skills are be developed.

The value of syndicate group work seems to be promoted primarily through word-of-mouth from current students and alumni, by business schools in MBA brochures or via independent MBA ranking surveys, without verifiable facts. The outcome of this study will either support existing communication or provide recommendations to business schools on how they should proceed towards implementing cooperative learning.

One of the factors referenced in a Financial Mail (2009) article was *Business Connections,* with the top three South African business schools mentioned. As presented earlier, many business schools emphasise the inherent role of syndicate work in their MBA programmes and promote the value of the syndicate group in forming long-lasting business relationships. Such market or opinion surveys must be treated with caution and whilst seemingly relevant, may offer little or no insight into the cooperative nature of syndicate groups.

In summary, existing academic research relating to the effectiveness of syndicate groups within the context of MBA programmes is limited, with Raeburn's (1991) research which proving inconclusive in contributing to the question of how cooperative learning through syndicate groups could be enhanced. It does however still provide a foundation for the proposed research.

Fellers (1993) suggested that if given a chance, students assigned to group work would prefer to have an individual exam instead of a group grade. Other research from Kotey (2007), Schaffer, Kimfong and Paulino (2008), Kuipers and Stoker (2009) and Akdemir, Erdem and Polat (2010) focused on team theory. Thus, this research could make a significant contribution to understanding how syndicate groups function within the context of the MBA programmes.

1.4.1. Benefits of this research

The study offers guidance to academics, curriculum planners and assessors on how to structure and manage syndicate groups for maximum effectiveness.

The group dynamics programme attended by MBA students in 2009 (Wits Business School 2009a) comprised four modules, each aimed at enhancing the immersion of the student into the MBA programme. A high-level analysis of the content of the programme to determine the extent to which it covered the key principles espoused in cooperative learning is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Assessment of group dynamics programme content from the perspective of cooperative learning

Group dynamics programme content (Wits Business School 2009a)	Extent to which cooperative learning principles were addressed
Syndicate introduction exercise: • Sharing information about the self. • Reasons for enrolment to the MBA programme. • Allocating a syndicate group name. • Sharing individual goals and aspirations.	Contributed towards relationship development and individual expectation setting. Not linked to cooperative learning whereby interdependence must be created through common group goals. In addition, the goal setting discussion should focus on how the team will assist each other to achieve common group goals and success.
Syndicate song development: • Each syndicate was to develop a song with three verses. • The song performed in front of the entire class, followed by a prize giving ceremony.	Possibly an attempt to develop interdependence and to fast-track the group forming process by introducing a group goal. Limited link to cooperative learning elements.

Group dynamics programme content (Wits Business School 2009a)	Extent to which cooperative learning principles were addressed
Self-management, teamwork and class dynamics • Self-management focused on time management, building positive energy and taking time out. • Teamwork focused on the characteristics of cohesive teams, the behaviour of trusting teams, sources of conflict and how to hold people accountable. • Class dynamics covered preparation for lectures, the importance of punctuality and the benefit of participation in class discussion.	• Self-management is by definition not a cooperative activity. • Teamwork content shows some link to cooperative learning principles, but remained on an instructional level i.e. the characteristics of cohesive teams, as opposed to activities which generate foundational levels of trust amongst team members. Sources of conflict show some alignment to achieving individual accountability, but should have focused on empowering students with conflict management skills. • Class dynamics showed no link to cooperative learning elements.
Presentation skills • Techniques for developing and delivering effective presentations.	No link to cooperative learning elements.

Unfortunately, the content of this orientation programme did not sufficiently address the factors which Johnson and Johnson (1989, 1999) and Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) highlight as essential to the cooperative nature of syndicates. In some areas, the cooperative elements are not mentioned at all.

It is clear from Table 2 that whilst there was an attempt to develop individual time management and group interaction skills, a greater emphasis was needed on developing the type of skills and behaviour needed to enable cooperative learning such as building trust, managing conflict, creating shared goals and decision-making amongst others. This sentiment is supported by Zhou and Yang (2010) who found that planning and operational analysis or development within teams does not compensate for the lack of improved team processes or a similar teamwork mental model. This research may assist the coordinator of the Group Dynamics Programme to restructure the programme so that it actually prepares students for their time spent in syndicate groups by providing the necessary process skills and exposure.

Consequently, MBA students should also benefit from this research as it helps them to identify the type of skills they should develop to work effectively within syndicates groups. This is likely to create a positive perception about group work amongst students and will ultimately result in an overall positive experience of the MBA programme.

1.5. Delimitations of the study

1.5.1. This research focused specifically on MBA students who are currently enrolled at the WBS. It did not include students from other programmes at the school even though they too participate in syndicate group activities. This was done to focus the on learning and outcomes of the MBA programme.

1.5.2. This research does not provide a group theory analysis of the functioning of syndicate groups. Instead, it focused on the elements driving cooperative learning and its impact on study group formation.

1.5.3. The research was limited to a qualitative analysis of the research problem. Basic descriptive statistics were used to highlight interesting findings.

1.6. Definition of terms

1.6.1. **Cooperative learning:** The instructional use of small groups enabling students to work together towards the maximisation of their own and other's learning (Shimazoe and Aldrich 2010).

1.6.2. **Cooperative learning group:** Group in which students work together to accomplish shared goals, and seeks outcomes beneficial to all (Johnson and Johnson 1999).

1.6.3. **High-performance cooperative learning group:** Share the basics of a cooperative learning group, but outperform in all aspects of teamwork. Display greater commitment, loyalty, and

motivation towards the success of the group. Few groups reach this level of functioning, according to Laszlo, Laszlo and Johnsen (2009).

1.6.4. **MBA:** Master of Business Administration.

1.6.5. **Self-managing work teams:** Groups of interdependent individuals that are able to self-regulate their behaviour concerning relatively complete tasks (Kuipers and Stoker 2009).

1.6.6. **Study groups:** Groups comprising students with similar goals, aspirations and work ethics, aimed at improving the educational and social experience of the MBA programme (Sclafani 2011).

1.7. Assumptions

1.7.1. This research assumes that syndicate groups as applied at the WBS are a form of cooperative learning group, and as such are subject to assessment against the elements of cooperative activity. This is a reasonable assumption as the intention behind a syndicate group aligns with the description offered by Johnson and Johnson (1999).

1.7.2. It is assumed the first syndicate to which a student is allocated forms the base value of a syndicate. This is a reasonable assumption as the first syndicate group is a lesson in team dynamics for most MBA students. Positive experiences create a positive expectation for the next syndicate group to which the MBA student is assigned, with the converse for negative experiences. If this assumption does not hold true, the research is unlikely to be greatly affected.

1.7.3. Syndicate groups are intended to serve as the primary study forum for students at the WBS. This is a reasonable assumption as most business schools use the terms syndicate/study group interchangeably.

1.7.4. Multiple study groups are already prevalent in the MBA part-time 2009/2012 class. Evidence for this appeared prior to examinations when groups of students were seen preparing for the exam, often not with their current or previous syndicate group members.

1.7.5. It is assumed that all participants have provided honest responses about their experiences in syndicate groups. Incorrect or false responses will undermine the validity and reliability of the findings.

1.7.6. The total number of syndicate groups and willing participants were sufficient to gather adequate data. If this assumption is untrue, the completion date of the research will be negatively affected.

1.7.7. That syndicate groups are intended to function as learning groups.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The main problem of this study is to determine how cooperative learning amongst MBA students in South Africa can be enhanced. The rationale behind the problem was borne out of the author's experience of various syndicate groups whilst enrolled in the MBA programme at WBS. Syndicate group allocations were changed after two semesters, resulting in a membership of five different syndicate groups over a three year period. During this time, various issues relating to a variety of underlying problems emerged. These related to how the group developed relationships, how the group allocated workload, roles within groups amongst others. Consequently, various theorem could be identified as a contributor to the success of a syndicate group. These include cooperative learning group theory, team / group theory, and adult learning theory as demonstrated in Figure 1.

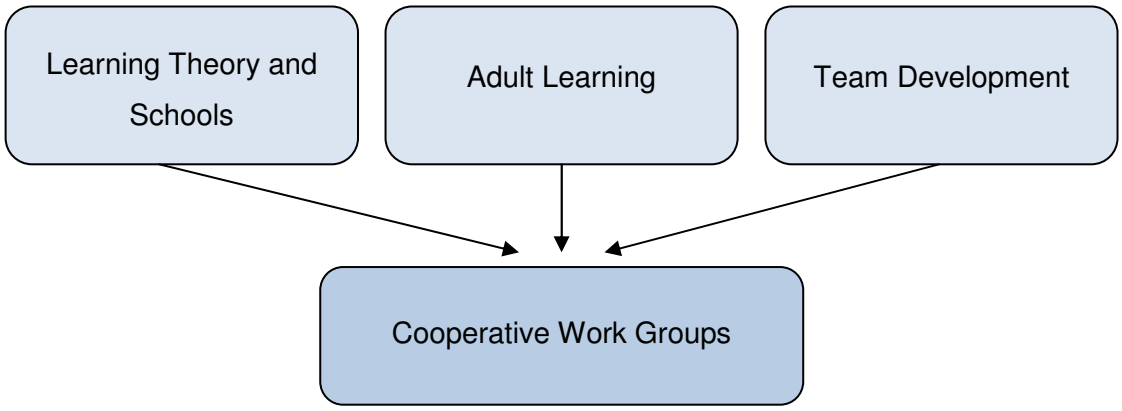


Figure 1: Components of the literature review

This literature review therefore focuses on these topics in seeking to analyse existing literature relating to the research question.

2.2. Cooperative learning through syndicates and study groups amongst MBA students in South Africa

The practice of allocating students to syndicate groups at Wits Business School (WBS) dates back to 1968, when the first executive development programme was offered according to Raeburn (1991:54), who further states that “from the schools point of view it is important that groups be of roughly equivalent strength, with the best possible distribution of expertise. Initially, when staff are also unfamiliar with students, allocation is done on the basis of subject backgrounds with the aim of achieving the best mix...”. In addition, feedback provided to students at the MBA Orientation Programme (Wits Business School 2009b) confirmed this practice is still in use.

2.3. Learning theory

Definitions for learning vary and are typically influenced by the psychological paradigm of the theorist. As indicated by Smith (1999) and Behlol and Dad (2010), early definitions of learning were characterised by a ‘stimulus-response’ mechanism, where learning was perceived as a replication activity. There was no reference to learning as an intellectual process.

Säljö (1979) was one of the earlier contributors to the definition of learning as an intellectual process, wherein it was suggested that:

1. Learning as a quantitative increase in knowledge: Learning is acquiring information or ‘knowing a lot’.
2. Learning as memorising: Learning is storing information that can be reproduced.
3. Learning as acquiring: Learning encompasses the acquisition of fact, skills and methods that can be retained and used as necessary.

4. Learning as sense-making: Learning is about making sense of or abstracting meaning from information, and involves relating parts of the subject matter to each other and to the real world.
5. Learning as interpreting and understanding reality in a different way: Learning involves comprehending the world by reinterpreting knowledge.

More recent research into the realm of learning (Merriam 2001; Marquardt and Waddill 2004; Kolb and Kolb 2005; Bergsteiner, Avery and Neumann 2010) support Säljö (1979) in the move away from 'stimulus-response' towards one of mental processing and internal sense-making.

Marquardt and Waddill (2004) offer definitions focused on the purpose and outcome of learning i.e. that the purpose is to fill curiosity and make sense of the outside world; and the outcome is a process of continuous change in human performance or potential. Kolb and Kolb (2005) offer a sequenced model which allows knowledge to be constructed in response to situational demands. The detail of these models is presented below.

2.3.1. Learning schools

According to Marquardt and Waddill (2004), a number of learning schools or orientations have emerged in the past century, each with a distinct approach to learning. These schools were originally classified by Merriam and Caffarella (1991) and have found general acceptance by other scholars.

The five schools as summarised by Marquardt and Waddill (2004) are described below:

2.3.1.1. Cognitivists

Cognitivists focus on how humans learn and understand using internal processes of acquiring, understanding and retaining knowledge. This is based on the belief that humans are capable of insight, perception, and attributing

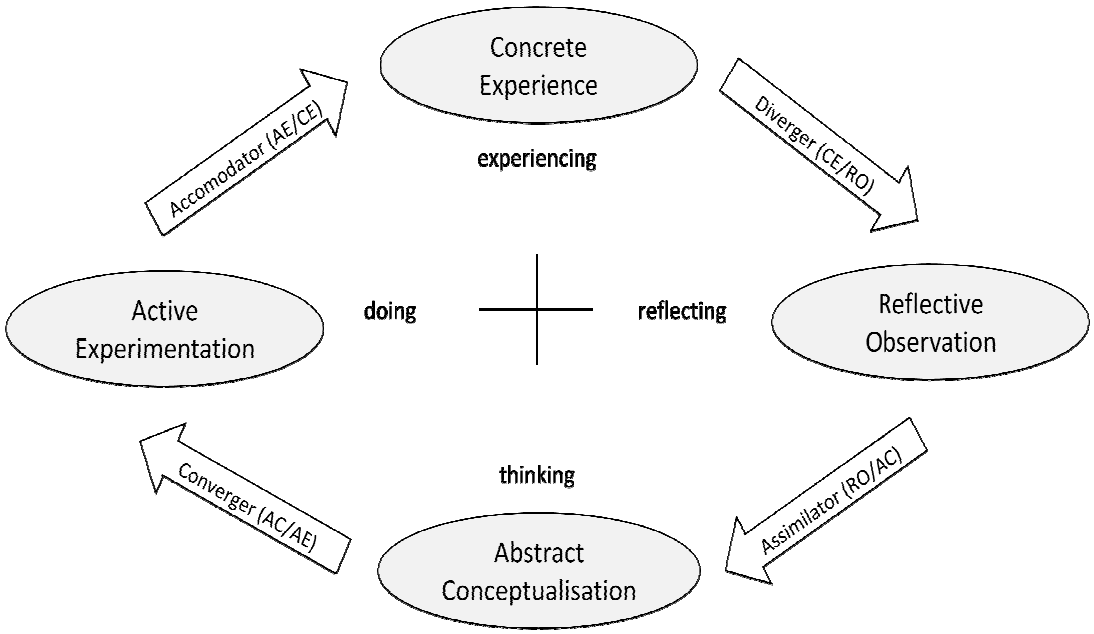
meaning. Cognitivists posit that learning occurs when humans re-organise experiences, thereby making sense of input from the environment (Marquardt and Waddill 2004).

According to Kolb and Kolb (2005), cognitivist theory is built on six propositions:

1. Learning is a process, not an outcome. To improve learning in higher education, the primary focus should be on engaging students in a process that best enhances their learning, a process that includes feedback on the effectiveness of their learning efforts.
2. All learning is relearning and can best be facilitated by a process built on the students' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be re-examined, re-tested, and re-integrated.
3. Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between opposing modes of adaptation to the world. Learning is fuelled by conflict, differences and disagreement, which the individual must move between using reflection, action, feeling and thinking.
4. Learning is a holistic process and does not solely entail cognition. It requires the integrated functioning of the person, i.e. thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving.
5. Learning results from active engagement between the person and the environment whereby new experiences are interpreted in relation to existing concepts and experiences.
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge whereby social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner. Learning is thus unlike the transmission models where pre-existing fixed ideas are transmitted to the learner.

i. Kolb's Experiential Learning Model

At the centre of the cognitivist approach is the concept of experiential learning (Kolb 1976; Kolb and Kolb 2005) and is defined as a process whereby knowledge is constructed arising from the tension created by four learning modes that are responsive to situational demands. The experiential learning model offered by Kolb (1976) is depicted in Figure 2.



(Kolb 1976)

Figure 2: Kolb's experiential learning model

The learner, according to Kolb (1976), needs four different kinds of abilities if they are to be effective:

1. *Concrete Experience* (CE) – the ability to engage fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences (CE).
2. *Reflective Observation* (RO) – the ability to reflect on and observe experiences from many perspectives (RO).
3. *Abstract Conceptualisation* (AC) – the ability to create concepts that integrate observations into logically sound theories (AC).

4. *Active Experimentation* (AE) - the ability to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems (AE).

Kolb (1976) further suggests that through this process, the learner progresses through all aspects of the experiential cycle, namely, experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting. As per the cycle, concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections, which are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new meanings and actions are drawn. These meanings and implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences, thereby completing the cycle of knowledge creation. This notion is supported by Taylor (2006).

These abilities define the learner's learning style, which according to Bergsteiner, Avery and Neumann (2010) are the generalised differences in learning orientation based on the degree to which people emphasise either of the four modes of the learning process.

2.3.1.2. Constructivists

According to Ramsden (1992), there are many different types of constructivism, the most popular of which are cognitive, critical, radical and social. Irrespective of the different nuances, each variation retains the same foundational belief that learners construct knowledge. This view is supported by Marquardt and Waddill (2004), who suggest that knowledge is formed when the individual applies experiences to create meaning. The individual thus internally constructs reality in the process of creating knowledge.

The ability to change oneself and one's environment is another key aspect of the constructivist school, and this can only be achieved through self-reflection (Marquardt and Waddill 2004). Reflective thinking as operationally described by Hay, Peltier and Drago (2004), is the active and careful consideration of any belief or form of knowledge used to make sense of current or future experiences. The same authors continue by adding a reflective dimension to

learning thereby suggesting that knowledge construction implies active participation in the learning process. In a literal sense, learners construct or find meaning in their subjective experiences and this result becomes knowledge.

Boghossain (2006) highlights that for the constructivist, each person's subjective experience is just as valid as anyone else's, and no one has a more knowledgeable or privileged viewpoint. Consequently, there are no objective criteria for what constitutes knowledge. Thus, what is knowledge to one individual may not be knowledge to someone else, because no two people necessarily have the same constructions. The same author further states that the difference between constructivist and behaviourist learning theories is that there is no shared reality as the human mind does not copy reality from outside, rather, it constructs reality.

From an educational perspective, constructivism replaces the teacher with the learner where the objective teacher is replaced by the subjective learner. Each learning experience will thus have a special and unique meaning with both the learning experience and the perception of the experience have educational value (Ramsden 1992).

2.3.1.3. Behaviourists

According to Marquardt and Waddill (2004), behaviourists concentrate on learning through control of the external environment and place emphasis on altering behaviour through processes such as operant conditioning. Behaviourists believe that learning is built on three assumptions:

1. Changed behaviour indicates learning.
2. Learning is determined by elements in the environment.
3. Repetition and re-enforcement of learning behaviours assists in the learning process.

Behlol and Dad (2010) and Tennyson (2010) summarise earlier research which suggests that the process of learning depends upon the relationship between stimulus and response; that learning occurs not by reflecting on possible actions or using insight, but by a mechanical development of actions through trial and error which is originally made by chance.

Behaviourists, according to Ramsden (1992), believe that learning is a permanent change in behaviour as a result of experience, though not all changes in behaviour result from experience involve learning. This author further states that changed behaviour could be invisible and includes changes to the way people understand, experience or conceptualise the world around them.

In the traditional behaviourist model, learners undergo some form of conditioning (Boghossian 2006) which seeks to produce a behavioural result. This author further suggests that behaviourists view the student as an unreflective responder who is engaged in the educational process only in that the student displays the appropriate behaviour, for example, the correct verbal answer to a question, and are conditioned by the allocation of a good grade.

2.3.1.4. Humanists

Merriam (2001) suggests that proponents of humanism strongly believe that individuals are capable of making important personal decisions and choices within the limits imposed by heredity, personal history, and the environment. Humanism is linked with beliefs about the freedom and autonomy of man, and emphasise the development of the whole person. According to Marquardt and Waddill (2004) and Behlol and Dad (2010), this orientation views individuals as being capable of determining their own learning, i.e. self-directed learning is embraced by supporters of this school.

The major assumptions underlying the humanism school as reported by Behlol and Dad (2010) are:

1. Human nature is inherently good.
2. Individuals are free and autonomous and are thus capable of making major personal choices.
3. Human potential for growth and development is virtually unlimited.
4. The self-concept plays an important role in growth and development.
5. Individuals have an urge toward self-actualisation.
6. Reality is defined by each person.
7. Individuals have a responsibility to both themselves and to others.

Humanists are of the opinion that learning should focus on practical problem-solving in which past experiences can be utilised to address new challenges (Behlol and Dad 2010). Furthermore, they specify that the learning environment should allow the learner to proceed at a pace best suited to the individual's mental capacities and interests. The learner, they argue, must have the opportunity to continuously assess self-progress and have access to feedback as part of the learning process.

2.3.1.5. Social Learning

Social learning theory, also known as social cognitive theory, focuses on the social context in which people learn, i.e. through interaction and observation of others (Smith 1999). According to Goel, Johnson, Junglas and Ives (2010), social cognitive theory and its incarnation social learning theory, argues that social interaction exposes individuals to others' experiences and to alternate points of view thereby influencing their existing mental models and facilitating learning.

Derfer (1995) described mental models or schema as mental structures through which the individual stores information about the environment. Worchel, Cooper and Goethels (1998) suggest that a schema provides individuals with expectations or preconceptions about how people will behave or how events will unfold. Consequently, individuals will easily notice information that is consistent

with a schema (an exact match); interpret information that is ambiguous in relation to a schema (to find a relationship or match); and finally, recall information related to a schema better than they would unrelated information. Individuals thus utilise schemata to guide their responses to new experiences.

Research conducted by De Dea Roglio and Light (2009) supports this perspective and demonstrates that through sharing experiences and hearing stories about different mental models and perspectives helps individuals to deal with the same or similar questions.

Lave and Wagner (1991) have offered an alternative view of social learning called situated learning, in which the acquisition of knowledge occurs in certain forms of relationships or when individuals participate in groups. They argue that learners do not acquire structures or models to understand the world, but rather, they participate in situations that have structure.

2.3.2. Learning schools and perspectives on groups

Marquardt and Waddill (2004) provide a concise summation of how each of the schools of learning view participation in a group. Table 3 provides a summary of their perspective.

Table 3: Syndicate groups and learning schools

School	Perspective
Cognitivist	Group diversity and different perspectives provide input and opportunity for the thinking process, which results in individual and team learning. Individual behaviours within a group reflect a shared understanding of activities or tasks.
Behaviourist	Group context is an essential part of the learning environment. Conditioning occurs when the group works together. Listening, learning and acting are conditioned behaviours. Team members are an active part of the learning environment.
Humanist	An increase in individual value and self-esteem occurs as contribution to the group occurs. Caring and support is reflective of the human element in the learning process. Freedom, openness and strong support enable the

School	Perspective
	development of greater self-confidence and rapport within the group.
Social	Learning thrives when a group works together on a problem as the varying levels of familiarity to the problem generates social learning. Learning requires social interaction, collaboration and participation.
Constructivist	The group constructs its own norms that are needed for self maintenance. Social construction is enabled by the creation of a shared understanding of the problem. Action arises from questioning amongst group members and from the storytelling which may occur when the problem is explained.

(Marquardt and Waddill 2004)

The manner in which each of these learning schools perceives participation in a group is merely an extension of the principles of the school itself. Cognitivists therefore place an emphasis on the thinking processes which arise due to the diverse nature of perspectives in a group. Similarly, constructivists view team participation as an opportunity to construct meaning. The same principle applies to the other schools.

2.4. Adult learning

Adult learning has made a significant shift away from traditional learning theory, with the popularisation of andragogy (Knowles 1975) representing the shift away from viewing adult learners in the same light as child learners (Daloisio and Firestone 1983; Mitchell and Courtney 2005; De Dea Roglio and Light 2009). Additional adult learning theories have also been presented by Kiely, Sandmann and Truluck (2004) and Trotter (2006). This literaure review captures the essence of these theories given the further educational environment in which this research will be performed.

2.4.1. Theories of adult learning

2.4.1.1. The four lens model

Kiely *et al*. (2004) have developed a theoretical model which underpins adult learning which they refer to as the four lens model of adult learning. They argue that the four lenses combined provide a holistic perspective of how adults learn and what must be done contextually to facilitate such learning. If used on its own, each individual lens will provide insight into the specific component of the adult learning process. The four lenses are:

1. Learner: This lens focuses on participation and motivation patterns, the characteristics of adult learners, learning styles, self-direction, the role of experience and andragogy amongst others. This positions the learner as an active participant, which must be engaged with to facilitate learning.
2. Process: Refers to the 'how' of adult learning. Is it instructional versus interactive, what is the role of dialogue, why is reflection important and how can experiential learning drive adult learning?
3. Educator: The role of the educator is highlighted here with educator orientation, beliefs and style cited as a key determinant in the success of the knowledge acquisition by the adult learner. The educator is positioned as an enabler and facilitator, and not a teacher.
4. Context: The authors argue that learning is not an individual process but rather a social process, based on interaction, socialisation and dialogue. The physical context is also an important factor as it influences how the individual responds to a changing environment.

The four lens model presented by Kiely *et al.* (2004) provides an overarching view of the various components which must be addressed to enable adult learning. The role of the adult is defined as an active learner participant to the process, whilst the role educator is reinforced as an enabler and not a teacher is highlighted.

2.4.1.2. Age and Stage Theories

Trotter (2006) presents an overview of various adult learning theories including Age, Stage, Functional and Cognitive theory as summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Adult learning theories

Theory	Description
Age	Focuses on the problems and personal issues that affected adults at certain ages. Age theorists assert that the issues adults face in life changes with chronological age and influence their orientation to learning. The late thirties and early forties represent a transition period where adults reflect upon and evaluate life, a time when 'wholeness' becomes more important than the "ideal of perfection" (Trotter 2006:9). Individuals are believed to think more about their context and culture, leading to a greater sense of community membership. The mid forties and early fifties finds adults focusing on building new structures for the rest of their lives.
Stage	Posits that adults pass through distinct stages in the way they constructed childhood experiences. Intelligence is not a fixed condition, but something which has potential to evolve as adults try to make sense of the world. Stages which adults move through are 1) the pre-conventional stage focusing on survival; 2) the conventional stage focusing on fitting in, being accepted and conforming and 3) the final post-conventional stage focusing on reflection as opposed to survival or conformance.
Cognitive Development	Refers to the levels of abstractness and interpersonal maturity in adult cognition. Comprises four developmental levels; 1) the low conceptual level which is concrete and focused on personal need, 2) the reliance on judgment, the acceptance of rules, and the reliance on external standards, 3) awareness of alternatives and sensitivity to personal feelings, and 4) a reliance on internal rather than external standards, working with others, and seeing events from multiple view points.
Functional	Views the adult learners experience as paramount in the learning situation, i.e. the learner must be the focus instead of teachers or textbooks. Experience is the adult learners' textbook and education should be measured by whether or not it creates a desire for the learner to continue to grow. Distinguishing traits identified include the autonomy of direction of learning and the use of experience as a resource, with self-directedness a general focus of adult learners. Adults prefer to plan their own educational paths, and most generally chose educational topics and subjects that they could directly apply in their own contexts.

(Adapted from Trotter (2006))

The Age and Functional theories presented by Trotter (2006) are particularly poignant in that they are based on elements which are easily identifiable with namely age and need, thereby allowing for a near instantaneous interpretation and understanding of the theory. The age theory in particular seems to carry 'wisdom' as it depicts how age acts as the influencer and determinant in the type of knowledge an individual prefers to acquire. The functional theory too, escalates the importance of the individual and their experiences in the learning process, both of which appear as the central tenets of adult learning.

2.4.1.3. Andragogy

As a theory, andragogy has become a prominent perspective in adult education (Daloisio and Firestone 1983; Mitchell and Courtney 2005; De Dea Roglio and Light 2009; Gom 2009; Chavkin 2010). It is presented separately from Table 4 primarily due to the wealth of information available on the topic and its relevance to the question under discussion.

Soney (2003:17) describes the adult learner as *"They're not just big kids"*, referring to the incorrect application of the term pedagogy to adult learning, and proceeds to highlight why education aimed at adults must adapt to cater for adult learning styles. Andragogy is the term used to describe the adult learning process and was popularised Malcolm Knowles (Knowles 1975; Mitchell and Courtney 2005).

Knowles (1975:85) defines adult learning in its broadest sense as "self-directed learning", which refers to the process in which individuals take initiative for their own learning, i.e. they diagnose their needs, formulate learning goals, identify appropriate resources, implement appropriate learning strategies and evaluate learning outcomes. More importantly, the definition extends to state that self-directed learning usually occurs in association with "helpers, such as teachers, tutors, masters and peers" (Knowles 1975:87). Knowles (1984) proceeded to identify the conditions which must be met when seeking to successfully educate adults. These conditions are:

1. Learners must feel a need to learn.
2. The learning environment must be characterised by mutual trust and respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences.
3. The learners must perceive the goals of the learning experience to be their goals.
4. The learners must accept a share of the responsibility for planning and operating a learning experience and therefore have a feeling of commitment toward it.
5. The learners must actively participate in the learning process.
6. The learning process must be related to and make use of the learner's experience.
7. The learners must develop a sense of progress towards their goals.

Knowles (1975) suggests that adults have a psychological need to be self-directing, that their richest source of learning occurs through analysis of their own experience and that their readiness to learn increases when they are faced with tasks which requires resolution. A similar sentiment is provided by Daloisio and Firestone (1983), Gom (2009) and Illeris (2009) who suggest that adult learning is selective and self-directed. Adults thus:

1. Learn what they want to learn and what is meaningful for them to learn.
2. Draw on the resources they already have in their learning.
3. Take as much responsibility for their learning as they want to take (if they are allowed to).
4. Are not very inclined to learn something they are not interested in, or in which they cannot see the meaning or importance.

Consequently, as stated by Illeris (2009), adults will always go through some form of internal self-dialogue, during which they question the reasons behind

the purpose of the knowledge transfer, the usability of the knowledge, and how the knowledge fits into the individual's life perspectives. Outside influences therefore, irrespective of the forms in which they transpire with conversation, guidance, persuasion, pressure or compulsion, always received in the light of the adult's own experience and perspectives. Thus, these authors conclude that if adults are to be convinced to acquire knowledge, they must accept the task on a psychological level and they must see the meaning and application of the education programme for themselves and their situation. This idea is supported by Gom (2009).

The key learning from andragogy is that adults learn in a different manner to children, and unless the learning environment is adapted to this end, adults will not feel inclined to learn. These characteristics indirectly suggest to educators how they need to adapt their style when engaging with adults. Adults are not expecting teachers, they are expecting knowledge facilitators.

2.4.1.4. Adult motivation

Traditional motivation theory has also been posited as explaining adult willingness to engage in education (Ahl 2006). On its highest level, Gom (2009) argues that adults are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors include a desire to learn simply because the individual enjoys the intellectual activity involved in gaining new knowledge and skills whilst students who are intrinsically motivated will spend enormous amounts of time and effort on a task and go through deep learning. Extrinsic factors are typically the factors associated with promotion, receiving a higher salary, acquiring a higher qualification, or transferring out of a current job and venturing into a new domain that is anticipated to give greater rewards or better conditions (Herzberg 2003; Akdemir et al. 2010).

Muchinsky (1977) and Ahl (2006) refer to the expectancy-valence motivational model whereby expectancy relates to the different expectations and levels of confidence adults have about what they are capable of doing. Valence on the

other hand refers to the emotional orientation people hold with respect to rewards such as the intensity of desire for either the extrinsic (qualification, promotion) or intrinsic (satisfaction) reward.

Gom (2009) also ventures into the realm of andragogy by suggesting that intrinsic motivation generally applies to adults who have high 'self-esteem', with the task of learning representing a joyful and exciting experience. People with intrinsic motivation are more likely to be independent learners and less reliant on the teacher for further help than people who are motivated to learn by extrinsic factors.

Adult motivation suggests that there are numerous theories which explain adult behaviour. Traditional motivation theory refers to intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, which may change as the adult progresses through life. In the context of this research, motivation theory contributes by helping to understand individual motivations for enrolling into the MBA programme, and possibly to explain some of the choices they make.

2.4.2. Summary of learning theories

Theories of adult learning have clearly captured the difference between adult and child learning, with greater emphasis placed on the ability of the adult to receive, process, interpret and then apply what has been learnt. Common to these theories are the role of experience and the mental imagery which the adult applies in the interpretation of new information, without which, the adult may not be inclined to participate.

2.5. Team theory

2.5.1. Overview

In the context of this study, team development is an important aspect which contributes to the understanding of the functioning of the cooperative work

group. Team development, team processes and team / individual assessments are included in this discussion.

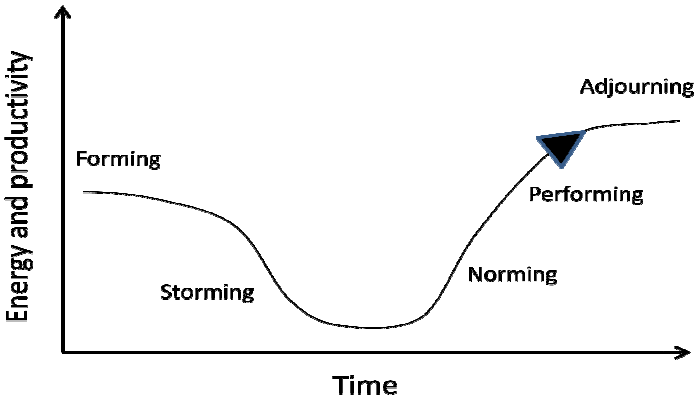
2.5.2. Team development frameworks

For the purposes of this paper, three team development frameworks are presented, based on the author's view of their relevance to the problem statement under investigation. The models to be utilised are: Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) team development model, the TEAM model as presented by Morgan Jr., Salas and Glickman (1993) and the systems thinking model (1997). The first model is selected due to its widespread popularity and ease of application to the team context. The second model is preferred as it encompasses both team work and task work skills, with task work often overlooked by teams seeking increased performance. Evidence for this is offered by Ammeter and Dukerich (2002) who suggest that team-building efforts show no correlation to increased team performance, and that other factors including managerial style, job design and task allocation showing a stronger link. The third is included owing to its simplicity to understand.

2.5.2.1. Tuckman and Jensen's model of team development

Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) model of team development presented in Figure 3. The model suggests that teams move through five stages, with the aim of the team geared towards reaching the performing stage. The team then disbands or adjourns, when the task has been completed.

This model emphasises the stages involved in group development, with high-levels of energy and productivity visible in the early stages of team formation. The team then go through a phase of intense questioning, disagreement and jostling for power and position which impacts negatively on team performance. As this stage passes, energy and productivity levels settle with the team progressing towards high performance (Tuckman and Jensen 1977).



Tuckman & Jensen (1977)

Figure 3: Tuckman and Jensen's Team Development Stages

However, some authors have opted to use Tuckman's model as a basis to suggest additional factors which may indeed influence team development. Staggers, Garcia and Nagelhout (2008) have integrated Cog's Ladder (which also outlines five stages that groups must pass through on their way to successfully meeting the goals set before them), with Tuckman's as a basis for preparing students for working successfully as teams. Cogs ladder is introduced here as the descriptors provided for each of the stages of the ladder offers a more meaningful understanding of each of the stages e.g. polite stage as opposed to forming. This is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Cogs ladder vs. Tuckman and Jensen's stages

Cog's Ladder	Tuckman's Stage
1. Polite stage	1. Forming
2. Why we're here	2. Storming
3. Bid for power	3. Norming
4. Constructive	4. Performing
5. Espirit	5. Adjourn

(Staggers et al. 2008)

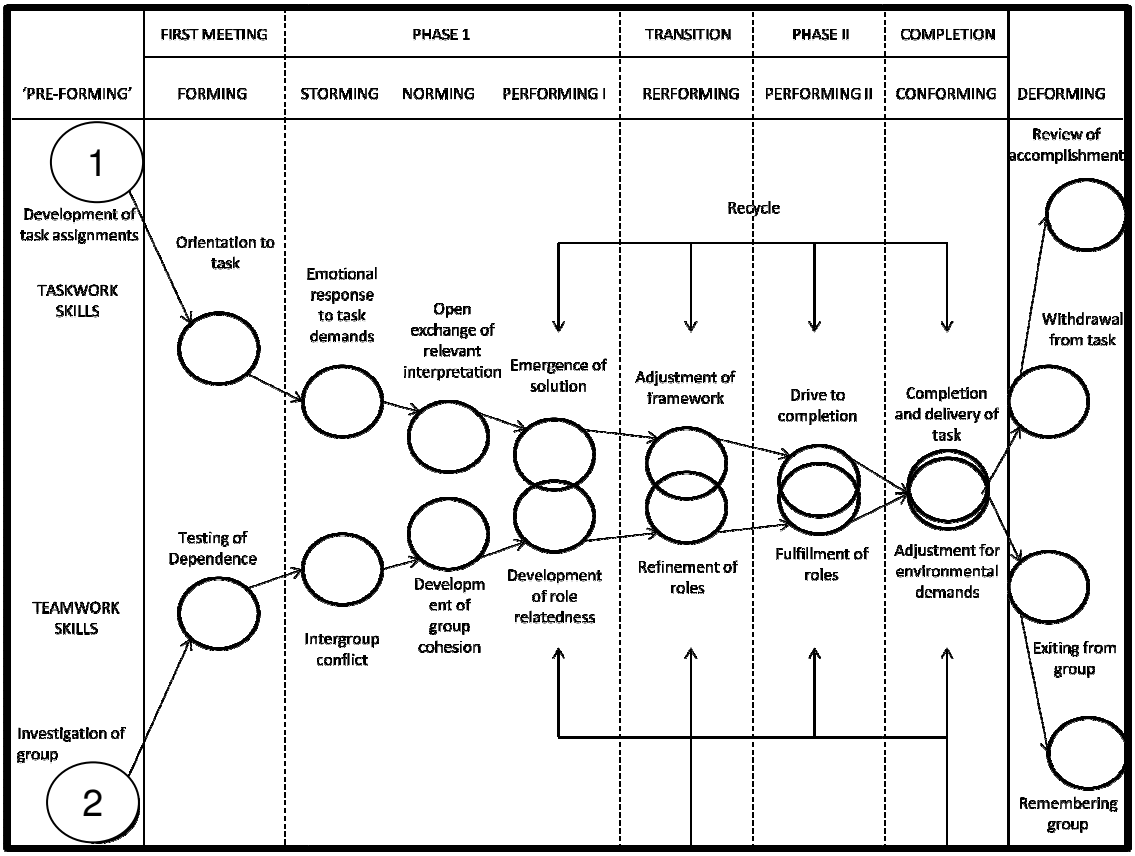
2.5.2.2. Developmental models: Morgan, Salas and Glickman's TEAM model

Morgan, Salas and Glickman (1993) have also developed a model which incorporates that of Tuckman and Jensen (1977). Known as the TEAM model, it identities nine stages, four of which overlap with Tuckman and Jensen's stages.

The value in this model lies in its combined approach to task skills and teamwork skills, against a backdrop of Tuckman's four stage team development model. This model acknowledges that team performance is not only a function of team skills, with task skills fulfilling and equally important role (Morgan Jr et al. 1993). The TEAM model is presented in Figure 4.

The key aspect of this model is the existence of the two activity tracks viz. task work skills and team work skills which cross all the stages. Track 1 refers to the task work skills, which include activities and interactions with team members involved with tools and machines, the technical aspects of the job (e.g., procedures, policies, etc.). Track 2 of activities is devoted to enhancing the quality of the interactions, interdependencies, relationships, affects, cooperation, and coordination of teams (Morgan Jr et al. 1993). Both these tracks must be equally progressed for a team to achieve task completion.

The seven central stages begin with a pre-formation stage where individuals are in the process of seeking out potential group members. The formation of the team during its first meeting (forming) becomes a process of validation and testing of group members, and depending on the intensity of team conflict, will result in a cohesive group with clear understanding of individual roles. It then moves through the members' initial, and sometimes unstable, exploration of the situation (storming), initial efforts toward accommodation and the formation and acceptance of roles (norming), and performance leading toward occasional inefficient patterns of performance (performing).



(Morgan Jr et al. 1993)

Figure 4: Morgan, Salas and Glickman's TEAM model

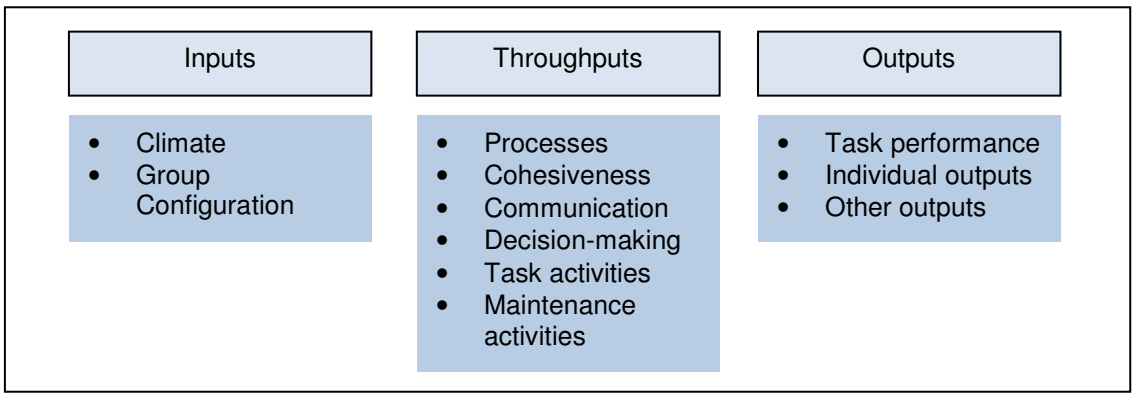
A similar pattern emerges for the task work track where the development of task assignments in the pre-forming stage, progresses to a task orientation when the group first forms. How the group deals with this influences the speed with which a solution appears. A process of role refinement and task adjustment ultimately leads to the completion of the task.

This model is preferred as most groups default to team interventions in times of tension of dysfunctional behaviour, when in reality, the issue may be a task work one. This model assists in the identification of such issues.

2.5.2.3. Systems thinkers

Other prominent models within the domain of team development and team building include the systems thinkers (Gladstein 1984; Ingram, Teare, Scheuing and Armistead 1997; Sundstrom, Mclntyre, Halfhill and Richards 2000; Kozlowski and Ilgen 2006).

In principle, each of these systems thinkers offer holistic views of the scope and characteristics of effective teams which they claim is useful to understand the complexity of the team as demonstrated in Figure 5.



(Ingram, 1997)

Figure 5: Systems Model

Systems models as indicated in Figure 5, comprise inputs, throughputs and outputs (with varying descriptors across authors), and in principle place emphasis on the internal processes within a team as the differentiating factor that drives or inhibits team performance.

2.5.2.4. Belbin's team roles

According to Aritzeta (2007), a role can be defined as the behaviour expected from an individual occupying a specific position such that the cognition and expected behaviour associated with the position are fundamentally important to

success in the role. This author cites research which proposed one of the first models that accounted for this individual context adjustment, suggesting that individuals and job environments can be classified into six different types: realistic, conventional, entrepreneur, social, artistic and intellectual. Each role type is associated with specific activities and abilities.

The eight role models were introduced and were defined as a pattern of behaviour required from team members to facilitate the progress of the team as a whole (Henry and Stevens 1999). An overview of the roles as described by Belbin Associates (2012) is provided in Table 6.

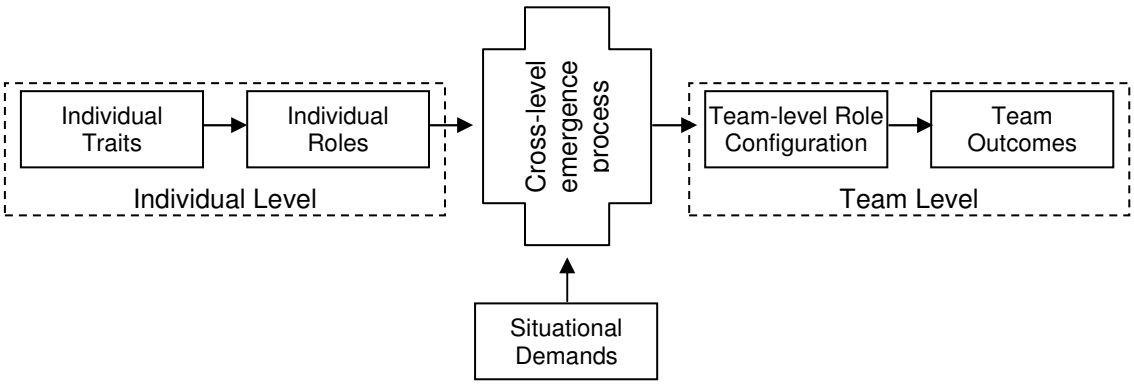
Table 6: Belbin roles

Role	Description
Completer-Finisher	Adaptive cognitive style; Tries to avoid conflict; Low emotional intelligence; High moral values
Implementer	Adaptive cognitive style; Tries to avoid conflict; Low Machiavellianism; Cohesion; Low intellectual orientation; High moral values
Team Worker	Bridge/Adaptive cognitive style; Tries to avoid conflict; Low Machiavellianism; Cohesion
Specialist	Adaptive cognitive style; In conflicts tries to dominate or use avoiding behaviour
Monitor Evaluator	Bridge/Adaptive cognitive style
Co-ordinator	Bridge; Attempts to control; In conflicts tries to find a compromise; Low Machiavellian; High emotional intelligence; Cohesion
Resource Investigator	Innovative cognitive style; Attempts to control; In conflicts tries to find a compromise; High emotional intelligence; Low conflict
Plant	Innovative cognitive style; In conflicts tries to dominate; Shows Machiavellian behaviour; Low Cohesion; Intellectual orientation
Shaper	Innovative cognitive style; Attempts to control; In conflicts tries to dominate; Shows Machiavellian behaviour; Achievement orientation; Low emotional intelligence; Conflict

(Belbin Associates 2012)

According to Aritzeta (2007), Belbin defends the idea that high performing teams need to have a balanced representation of all team roles. The team role balance hypothesis assumes that if all team roles are present in a team then it will perform better than other teams without the balance.

Belbin's model also considers that the team role concept must be distinguished from the functional role which refers to the technical skills and operational knowledge relevant to the job. Consequently, several people may have the same functional role but vary greatly in their natural team role(s). This is illustrated by Stewart, Fulmer, Barrick and Hollenbeck (2005) in Figure 6.



(Stewart et al. 2005)

Figure 6: The cross-over between functional and natural team roles

According to Stewart *et al*. (2005) the individual must learn to balance the affinity to a particular role preference with the role that may be required of them by the team. This may require different roles to be fulfilled by the same individual at the same time or different roles at different times, the difference appearing between the functional requirements of the group and the natural predisposition of the individual.

Both Henry and Stevens (1999) and Aritzeta *et al.* (2007) emphasise the link between the stages of a team's development and the need for different team roles to dominate at different stages. Six different stages of development are

proposed by these authors that include: (1) identifying needs; (2) finding ideas; (3) formulating plans; (4) making ideas; (5) establishing team organisation; and (6) following through. In the early stages team roles like Shaper and Co-ordinator will be most needed, whereas in the later stages Completer-Finishers and Implementers make higher contributions.

2.5.2.5. Team mental models

Langan-Fox, Anglim and Wilson (2004) argue that mental models, i.e. the mental imagery which we create through experiences and which form the basis of how we interpret events and experiences, could become the common factor when seeking to align people to tasks and jobs. They further argue that in most circumstances people construct and employ several mental models, which could create misalignment in thought and behaviour within teams.

This mental model concept applied to teams is shared by Kozlowski and Ilgen (2006) where they cite research which suggested that these cognitive common representations held by team members might enable team members to anticipate needs and actions and thereby 'implicitly' coordinate their behaviour and improve team effectiveness.

Zhou and Wang (2010) have also investigated the effect of shared mental models on team performance and found a direct relationship between the presence of a shared mental model and the level of team performance. The positive relationship between two variables they argue is stronger than the relationship between team performance and other team processes.

2.5.3. Other team characteristics

2.5.3.1. Team synergy

Allen and Hecht (2004) present an alternative view of the value of teamwork, citing numerous studies which have either failed to demonstrate how team

performance is better than individual performance, or which fail to replicate findings of positive team performance. These authors postulate that there is a strong belief by managers in organisations, as well as in the general public at large, that teamwork is very effective, fuelled by sentiment such as 'the whole is better than the sum of the parts' or '1+1=3' (Allen and Hecht 2004:441).

These authors cite studies conducted in both laboratory settings and in the field, the outcome of which confirm that group performance often, although not always, exceeds that of individuals. Overall there appears to be only minimal evidence that group activity offers performance advantages compared with combining the performance of the same number of individuals working alone, or even by a single talented individual. Yandrick (2001) referred to a team dimension called potency, as an indispensable element of a successful team whereby the team actually believes it can be effective. Without this belief, team effectiveness is compromised. In a similar vein, Allen and Hecht (2004) concur with the potency / faith suggestion.

2.5.3.2. Impact of diversity on team performance

Poovan, Du Toit and Engelbrecht (2006) investigated the role of social values of *ubuntu* on team effectiveness and found that these values were aligned to general theory relating to ethical behaviour, and more importantly, placed emphasis on collaboration and collectivism. Diversity in social values was thus concluded to contribute to team effectiveness.

Rasmussen and Jeppesen (2006) investigated the effect of attitudinal, behavioural and psychological variable diversity on team effectiveness and found that the presence of these variables contributed to team cohesion, interdependence, and commitment. In instances where these variables were limited, there was a direct link to a lack of team cohesion and increased reporting of value differences amongst team members.

Kearney *et al*. (2009) sought to establish whether diversity, defined in this context as either surface level demographic attributes such as gender, age, race etc.; or task-related informational or cognitive diversity; has an impact on team performance. They acknowledge that the diverse assortment of knowledge, skills and perspectives in the group should in theory enhance team performance, even though a large body of literature has indicated that people prefer to work with similar rather than dissimilar individuals. It is the dissimilarities among team members which are argued to give rise to adverse social categorisation processes that impair team functioning.

Kearney *et al*. (2009) further investigated the need for cognition within teams and found that when the need for cognition was high, both types of diversity viz. task and cognitive; were significantly and positively related to team performance. The need for cognition had less of an effect in homogeneous teams, as it is likely that when members of similar backgrounds and values interact, they tend to focus on shared rather than unshared knowledge, and discussions driven by a high need for cognition may sometimes be unnecessary or even counterproductive.

2.5.3.3. Impact of team turnover and good interpersonal relations on team performance

Cohen and Bailey (1997) have highlighted that effective team performance is not the natural outcome of bringing together a team to accomplish interdependent tasks. They argue that it is not sufficient that each individual optimally performs his/her own tasks, but it is fundamental that each individual adjusts to complement the other.

Montanari, Silvestri and Gallo (2008) investigated the effect of relational patterns amongst team members on team performance in *Serie A*, Italy's premier football league. The authors claim this population represented the ideal grouping as it is characterised by a high levels of interdependence and coordination and where it is critical for team performance that each player

adjusts and coordinates their play to other team members' actions. Their study sought to define the role that stability and shared cumulative experience might play in determining team performance, thereby obtaining insight into the determinants of success for a team. Their findings suggest that when teams are characterised by low turnover, team members are able to interact with each other over time and construct the stable patterns of behaviour required for successful mutual adjustment. They refer to other studies which found similar themes of team members being able to draw upon the experience of its members to operate in a harmonious fashion. Their findings indicate:

1. Player turnover has a significant negative effect on team performance and thus it is not conducive to continually change large numbers of resources in a team.
2. Strong ties develop among players in a team which have a positive impact on team performance, and that developing the team will prove beneficial.
3. Strong relationships between team members did not result in diminishing returns.

These results demonstrate the relevance of team stability for effective performance by showing that team performance is affected by the structure of relationships among team members. In other words, the presence of close and long-lasting ties among team members seems to positively affect team performance, without diminishing returns over time. This suggests that teams characterised by low levels of turnover and comprised of people who have played together extensively in the past, achieve on average better performances than teams that implement major changes in their rosters every year.

2.5.3.4. Creating evolutionary learning communities

Laszlo, Laszlo and Johnsen (2009) conducted research by studying groups considered high-performing, with a view to contextualising such groups within

an evolutionary learning community framework. Their aim was not to compile a list of characteristics of what constitutes high-performing teams, but rather to understand how such teams are initially created and the action required to sustain them, thus being able to formulate a view of how these teams could be replicated.

One of the key realisations from their study was that both control and autonomy can co-exist in a healthy organisational culture. Guidelines, rules and behaviours provide parameters within which a team or organisational unit can self-organise and align their specific functions, and individuals were allowed the freedom to act freely within these boundaries. They mention the existence of an 'invisible hierarchy' (Laszlo et al. 2009:31), which team members knew existed and respected accordingly. If a team member were to shirk on their responsibilities it would create dissonance with the organisational culture and appropriate remedial processes would be instigated.

Laszlo *et al.* (2009) proceeded to define the initial characteristics which underpinned the high-performing team, with these initial characteristics resulting in the emergence of consequential characteristics. These are:

1. A high rate of autonomy exists amongst team members in the execution of their jobs.
2. A democratic consensual process for selecting new members of the team.
3. The communication of a shared vision.

Regarding these initial characteristics, they found that autonomy resulted in happier team members, who felt empowered in the positions they occupied. Similarly, the ability to influence the selection of new team members resulted in people with similar values, aspirations and ethics being inducted into the team. This latter point formed the basis of strong trusting relationships where the well-being of the team became a primary priority.

Of the emergent characteristics, Laszlo *et al*. (2009) found that stable working relationships were crucial for sustaining the level of performance in the team. In particular, the low rate of voluntary team member turnover resulted in the formation of strong team bonds and friendships, underpinned by trust and commitment. This, they argued, would not be possible in teams with a high turnover.

2.6. Cooperative learning groups

According to Felder and Brent (1994), cooperative learning is not a synonym for working in a group. To be classified as a cooperative group, the five characteristics identified by Johnson and Johnson (1993) must be present. Felder and Brent (1994) further propose that cooperative learning is not limited to formal environments and may occur in social and other informal settings.

2.6.1. Controversy and cooperative work groups

Smith, Johnson and Johnson (1984) define controversy as the situation which arises when two individuals ideas, conclusions or theories are incompatible and the two individuals seek to reach agreement. Concurrence on the other hand exists when members of a group inhibit discussion to avoid disagreement or arguments or to emphasise agreement. Research by Shu-Cheng, Chiung-Yi and Artemis (2010) distinguishes between relational and task conflict where relational conflict is defined as members' experiences of negative emotions due to their differences in beliefs and values. Task conflict refers to disagreements about procedures, policies, or resource allocations. These authors found that relational conflict had a detrimental effect on team performance.

2.6.2. Impact of cooperative study groups on high-ability learners

(Laszlo et al. 2009) queried the value of cooperative work groups to high-ability individuals, particularly in instances when the groups also comprised individuals

with medium and low abilities. They cite studies which indicate that high ability individuals are hindered by others on complex tasks and they are consequently exploited in such groups. Consequently, they sought to validate the effect that cooperative work group settings have on the self-esteem and performance of high-ability individuals. The results of their study showed that individuals achieved more in the cooperative group setting than the individualistic learning setting, as the cooperation and challenge within the group promoted a higher level of reasoning.

2.6.3. Social support and cooperative learning groups

Cooperative learning groups have also been positioned as a source of social support for learners, according to research by Johnson, Johnson, Buckman and Richards (1985). These authors postulate that one of the biggest influencers on classroom climate is the perception of social support, i.e. someone who the learner can rely upon for assistance, support or care. Social support, they argue, is particularly relevant in the classroom, with pressures from lessons, assignments, examinations and other activities creating a need for a support structure. In addition, they suggest that social support can be obtained from two sources in the classroom; instructors or fellow learners. Their research thus sought to determine if cooperative learning experiences are related to social support in the classroom.

2.7. Individual expectations and disappointment

Arksey, Snape and Watt (2007) suggest that unaligned expectations could lead to a misunderstanding about the roles within a team, which have negative consequences on team functioning and effectiveness. They elaborate by stating that this misunderstanding often results in confusion and conflict regarding individual roles especially in instances where roles are multi-functional; and it blurs the boundaries between what may be considered essential and non-essential within the group.

Rainey, Yost and Larsen (2011) explain expectation theory as the situation when individuals develop an expectation in an environment where the outcome is uncertain. This expectation they suggest results in disappointment if actual outcome is worse than the outcome expected by the individual. Their research suggests that where expectations about an outcome are high, non-achievement of the outcome, either by themselves or others, will result in a higher level of disappointment.

2.8. Conclusion of the literature review

The literature review presented here encapsulates the key perspectives which are believed to underpin the research question under investigation. Learning theory provides a base from which to understand how knowledge is created and acquired. In the context of this study, it is anticipated that the perspectives of learning as an intellectual process will prove to be more relevant.

A more pragmatic view needs to be adopted when seeking to apply the literature on learning schools, as typically, one would expect MBA programmes to question existing knowledge, determine relevance of information feeds, and where required, to create knowledge for application to specific problem situations. As such, this contextual requirement overlaps a number of schools, for example, the constructivists, humanists, and cognitivists. The social learning school may also be applicable when working within syndicate groups.

Team theory is likely to be at the heart of this research question, specifically regarding the formation and dynamics within syndicate groups and study groups. The literature provided on teams / groups has demonstrated that teams are not always the ideal environment for effective performance, and that where teams are to be used, the ability of a team to self-direct is likely to have a significant impact on its success. Team member stability also has a role in investigating the research question at hand.

Disappointment occurs when expectations are not met, the higher the level of the expectation, the higher the sense of disappointment experienced. Misaligned expectations result in role clarity issues and team task priority issues, thereby contributing to interpersonal conflict.

The available literature on cooperative work groups highlights the specific application of such groups, with emphasis on the key processes which should be implemented to enable the group to become high-performing. Cooperative work groups are not just formed, they are nurtured, and this must be assessed when evaluating syndicate groups in the MBA programme.

2.9. Research question

The above literature review therefore led to the following research question. How, through the adoption of cooperative learning group principles; from a perspective of learning theory, adult learning, team development and the theory underlying cooperative learning groups; can learning amongst MBA students in South Africa be enhanced?

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section provides an overview of the qualitative methodology utilised in this research. It begins with an overview of qualitative research which aims to demonstrate the perceived fit between this methodology and the research problem.

Reliability and validity are discussed, with indications provided as to how these have been improved in this study. The procedure for data collection and analysis is also discussed.

3.1. Research methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach as it was considered to be the most appropriate match of methodology to address the research question.

According to Creswell (2003), the qualitative approach is typically used when the researcher seeks to establish meaning from the perspective of research participants. Whitley and Crawford (2005:109) suggest that qualitative research is used to understand a phenomenon from a "native" point of view that above all emphasises subjective meaning and experience. There seems to be a general consensus amongst researchers (Tuckman and Jensen 1977; McReynolds, Koch and Rumrill 2001; Whitley and Crawford 2005; Arnold and Lane 2011), that qualitative research is used to build a comprehensive account of the phenomenon under investigation, thereby enriching understanding. Whitley and Crawford (2005:109) further their view by suggesting that qualitative research attempts to document the “complexity and multiplicity of experience” which can then be used to construct theory.

The research question under investigation lends itself to qualitative research as it can only be answered through an understanding of the experiences and reflections of the intended target population. This research is exploratory in nature given the limited amount of research available on this topic. Creswell

(2003:18) points out that when using a qualitative approach, the researcher seeks to create knowledge or describe phenomena based on “multiple meanings of individual experiences”. This is precisely what this research hopes to achieve.

3.2. Research design

Information was gathered via semi-structured interviews of approximately one and a half hours each, scheduled with each identified participant at their leisure. Participants were briefed about the interview and where applicable, guided on any preparation they could undergo. The rapport-building process varied based on the specific respondent as the researcher had the benefit of being a student as well and had already formed relationships with members of the sample. At the appropriate time, permission to record the interview was obtained from each participant, who were advised that the records were completely confidential and all data analysed would be reported anonymously.

Potential opening questions were constructed and tested outside the scope of the investigation to determine whether the question would in fact yield relevant information. Questions were initially open-ended to allow the respondent to speak and to share their experiences. The goal was not to bias the data. Questions were kept to a minimum and used to ensure a greater understanding of particular phenomena. This is an important aspect as the planned research sought to draw meaning from the views and experiences of the subjects.

Kalaf, Dab and Dietz (2008) suggest that an advantage of using open ended questions is the need for a smaller sample size (when compared to quantitative approaches) owing to the complexity of post-interview analysis. The underlying interview mechanism allows the researcher to clarify responses, or to delve deeper into particular points of interest. Most importantly, once the interview is completed and all questions answered, the researcher has access to the data. In addition, there is no waiting period associated with the process Willig (2008).

According to Kalaf *et al.* (2008), the primary disadvantages of face-to-face open ended interviews are the time and cost implications, while an added difficulty associated with analysing answers to open-ended questions lies in the comparison and quantification responses. This concern was minimised through the careful definition of interview questions, and the use of reflection techniques to summarise responses. This enabled easier quantification and comparison of responses.

In addition, the interviewee could feel threatened or exposed in a face-to-face setting, which could influence how they respond to questions. Questions of a sensitive nature may create discomfort especially given the face-to-face setting. Willig (2008) highlights linguistic variability, suggesting that the same term may not have the same meaning to different respondents, as a potential disadvantage of this approach. This was managed by ensuring that standardised descriptive examples were readily available for most questions, and where interpretational differences were possible in relation to specific theoretical models for example, copies of actual models were shown to respondents. Questions of a sensitive nature were not asked.

Willig (2008) highlights researcher subjectivity as a disadvantage of this approach, with researcher bias influencing the questioning and analysis of the data. In addition, this author suggests that it is difficult to deduce cause and effect in the qualitative setting.

3.3. Population and sample

3.3.1. Population

The population for this research were MBA students who were enrolled at business schools in South Africa. MBA students in distance education were excluded from this population.

3.3.2. Sample and sampling method

A purposive random sample was utilised for this research, as the research aimed to investigate the characteristic associated with a specific population, namely MBA students. The benefit of this method is that within this target population, each member of the population could still have an equal chance of being selected (Esterburg 2002). This method also has the added benefit of contributing to internal validity (Kalaf et al. 2008).

In setting the sample size for this research, the following logic applied:

1. As this was not quantitative research, there is some consensus by theorists (Esterburg 2002; Creswell 2003; Whitley and Crawford 2005) that a smaller sample would suffice given the complexity associated with analysing open-ended question survey data.
2. A sample of 13 respondents was interviewed, without limiting the number of respondents once saturation was achieved. This sentiment is supported by both Whitley and Crawford (2005) and Jansen (2010).

Once the sample group was selected, a process of engagement was implemented to request their participation in the research. Respondents were contacted telephonically by the researcher, the purpose of the call explained and a request made for the individual's participation. The time and venue for the interview was at the respondent's convenience. Where respondents agreed to participate, a follow-up email was sent to the individual to re-confirm the purpose and logistical arrangements for the interview.

3.4. The research instrument

This research made use of a face-to-face interview, using a semi-structured, open-ended question approach. Questions were prepared and responses captured to ensure all questions were asked. The question list is presented as Appendix A.

A pilot was implemented whereby the interview questions and process were tested and validated. Further face-to-face interviews proceeded thereafter.

The interview was considered the most ideal 'instrument' for this research as the research question is in many respects exploratory. The objective of the research is to unearth respondents' subjective experiences in cooperative learning groups and study groups. In doing so, the researcher hoped to elicit honest and truthful responses. This depth of information can only be achieved through purposeful discussions with respondents.

The one shortcoming experienced using this instrument entailed respondents using the flexibility of the open-ended question to stray from the key messages being communicated.

Face-to-face interviews can take their toll on a researcher, especially if scheduled in close succession. This leads to researcher fatigue which could affect the validity of the research. Interviewer / researcher bias, although a common factor across all interviews, cannot be excluded from the interpretation of results and must be guarded against. This was mitigated by ensuring sufficient rest time for the researcher between interviews. Recording the interviews also allowed the researcher to focus energy on the discussion instead of on detailed note-taking thereby reducing levels of self-fatigue. Recording the interviews did enable for better engagement with the respondent but also necessitated that recordings be transcribed. This proved to be a time-consuming activity.

3.5. Procedure for data collection

Data was gathered through face-to-face interviews, using an open-ended question approach, and an interview guide. Interviews were recorded enabling the researcher to focus on the respondent and to listen to responses. Post-interview, recordings were transcribed, thereby signalling the beginning of the data analysis phase.

3.6. Data analysis and interpretation

Whitley and Crawford (2005:112) describe the analysis phase of qualitative research as engaging in a “grand analysis”, which aims to synthesise all the data into a “thick description”. The aim is thus to use the thick description to test the hypothesis or research question. These authors further describe content analysis as the "systematic examination of text (field notes) by identifying and grouping themes and coding, classifying, and developing categories". As such, this involves systematically processing raw data into a sensible description, without losing the complexity of the original response. This is a process also referred to as ‘mapping’.

Jansen (2010) proposes a multi-level approach to the analysis of qualitative data, with the first step represented by a uni-dimensional description of the data. This step entails separating the data (object) into the obvious categories or dimensions which can be identified. This coding exercise can either be performed downward (indicating diversity in the data) or upward (indicating commonality with other objects). This form of coding, according to Jansen (2010), may require several cycles before a refined outcome is achieved. The second level, says Jansen (2010), is multi-dimensional description in which relationships between the dimensions identified are analysed. This could be performed using techniques such as Truth Tables to analyse the data. The final level is explanation, during which the causal relationship may be included.

In the context of this study, responses were initially mapped into the dimensions referred to by Jansen (2010). These dimensions were validated against the research question to determine their relevance, even if at a superficial level. A second level of analysis was then performed on these dimensions to look for underlying relationships.

3.7. Limitations of the study

Limitations to this research include the following:

1. This research was dependent on the availability of respondents and their willingness to participate in a face-to-face interview.
2. The findings of this study have limited generalisability, primarily regarding MBA / post-graduate students and business schools which offer programmes with integrated syndicate group work.
3. Not all extraneous variables were mitigated or accounted for.
4. The interview process assumed respondents provided honest responses to questions.
5. Common understanding of key concepts may have varied amongst respondents and may need to be defined up front.
6. Social desirability on the part of responses may be induced by participation in the interview process.

3.8. Validity and reliability

According to Kalaf *et al.* (2008:157), validity is concerned with "goodness of fit" between the details of the research, the data collected, and the conclusions drawn by researchers. The two types of validity are discussed below.

3.8.1. External validity

External validity refers to the ability to generalise findings from a study to a wider population (Kalaf et al. 2008). In this context, the population and sample of MBA students (as the participants in cooperative learning) is purposive in nature, implying that the results of this study can only be generalised to this population. The use of syndicate groups in this study this limits the external validity of the findings.

3.8.2. Internal validity

According to Kalaf *et al.* (2008) internal validity means that a study draws reasonable conclusions from the data that has been collected and interpreted, and can only be realised if the researcher or research instrument measures what the theory describes. Internal validity can also be lost when causal inferences are incorrectly drawn, or when randomisation is not possible.

The internal validity of this research was enhanced through improving randomisation in the selection of respondents. Within the context of Wits Business School, MBA students were randomly selected from class lists and asked to participate in the research. Whitley and Crawford (2005), Kalaf *et al.* (2008) and Arnold and Lane (2011) have all identified randomisation as the key to internal validity.

3.8.3. Reliability

Reliability is an indicator that consistent findings are delivered each time the research is replicated, (Kalaf et al. 2008). To this end, the same author suggest the use of multiple questions on the same subject, aimed at the respondent. Thereafter, these multiple sources are integrated into an overall measure. The reliability of this research was enhanced through the following interventions:

1. Para-phrasing of responses was adopted to confirm the researchers understanding of the responses. This served to confirm previous answers.
2. A list of questions was prepared as a back-up to ensure all participants were asked the same questions, even if the study is replicated later.
3. Research process reviews between the researcher and supervisor were adopted. The researcher performed content analysis and validated these interpretations with the supervisor, who quality-assured the interviews and a sample of the transcripts.

4. An audit trail was prepared which included the actual recorded interviews, specific transcribed interviews and other necessary information.
5. Only one interviewer was used to gather data.
6. Interviews were kept to a maximum of two interviews per day to minimise interviewer fatigue.
7. A uniform process was utilised to analyse the data collected.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1. Introduction

This research focused on the behavioural dynamics, team processes, and learning styles which transpired within MBA syndicate groups throughout the three year part-time MBA programme. The following broad levels of data were collected:

1. General and rapport building questions, which included expectations of syndicate group work and the experiences of syndicate group work.

2. Team dynamic-related questions, which included perspectives on team development models, roles within groups and general team dynamic-related characteristics which influenced individual behaviour.

3. Learning theory, from the individuals own learning style to the individuals' perception of syndicate group learning styles. Information relating to adult learning principles was also obtained.

4. The presence of elements which characterise cooperative learning in all types of group work.

5. Recommendations regarding how the syndicate group process can be improved or replaced.

To facilitate the meaningful presentation of results and discussion thereof, Table 7 provides the structure of the various high-level categories of data collected across the different groups as practiced by students in the MBA programme. Various sub-categories have been analysed and are indicated as such.

Table 7: Structure of findings and discussion

General and rapport building questions • Expectations of syndicate group work • Experiences of syndicate group work • Positive and negative themes arising from syndicate group work
Team dynamics • Team development models as experienced in syndicate groups • Role theory applied to syndicate groups • Conflict in syndicate groups • Impact of diversity on syndicate group effectiveness
Learning Theory • Definitions of learning linked to learning schools • Perceptions of how syndicate members viewed learning • Learning in the first syndicate group
Cooperative Learning in syndicate groups • Positive Interdependence • Individual accountability • Face-to-face promotive action • Social skills • Group processing • A cooperative environment?
Closure and recommendations • Recommendations to improve syndicate group effectiveness • Alternatives to syndicate group work
Additional findings • Impact on behaviour change • Formation and dynamics of study groups

4.2. Demographic profile of respondents

4.2.1. Gender profile

The sample consisted of 13 respondents, comprising ten males and three females. This is depicted in Table 8.

Table 8: Gender profile

Gender profile	
	Frequency
Male	10
Female	3

4.2.2. Racial profile

All South African racial groupings were presented in the sample. There were seven White, one Coloured, four Indian and one Black respondent. This summary is provided in Table 9.

Table 9: Racial profile

Racial profile	
	Frequency
Black	1
White	7
Indian	4
Coloured	1

4.3. Results pertaining to the research question

4.3.1. General and rapport building questions

The introductory questions of the interview served primarily to create an atmosphere where in the respondent felt comfortable, and possibly even nostalgic, about the interview questions. These questions not only created the desired atmosphere, it also unearthed rich and insightful data which contributed to answering the research question.

These questions included:

1. *Once accepted into the MBA programme, what were your expectations regarding work in syndicate groups?*
2. *In general, how would you describe the syndicate group experience?*
3. *Let's talk about the first syndicate group. Please describe the experience?*
4. *What challenges did you encounter in this first syndicate group?*

4.3.1.1. Expectations of syndicate group work

Respondents were asked to share their expectations and pre-conceptions of syndicate groups once they had been accepted into the MBA programme. The purpose of this question was to determine if there was a common understanding of the role and purpose of the syndicate group in the programme. A high level analysis of responses is presented in Table 10.

Table 10: Expectations of syndicate group work

	Expectation		
	Positive	Negative	Ambivalent
No. of responses	4	4	5

i. Respondents with positive expectations

Respondents who expressed a positive expectation typically focused on their belief that the role of a syndicate group is a medium of learning, achieved through constructive debate and interaction with syndicate group members from diverse backgrounds. One respondent offered a very passionate response*, "To be quite honest, I had high expectations of the role that syndicate groups would play in the MBA programme. I expected these groups to be the medium whereby interaction would occur and through debate and challenge, learning*

would actually take place. I believe it to be the core of the MBA programme and clearly expected it to be so".

Other respondents placed emphasis on the syndicate group in relation to the lecture-based nature of the programme, whereby the syndicate group was expected to become an extension of the foundational knowledge shared in the lecture room. This sentiment was expressed in some manner by all respondents with positive anticipation, and was also entrenched by WBS during the MBA orientation workshop, as recalled by a respondent, *"When we walked into the MBA, one of the first things they told us is that the syndicate group is there for you to study, and to learn so that you would go into class and have a much bigger environment from which to learn from people as they throw around ideas in a class of 60-odd. However, to really absorb that, you then go into a smaller group where you are able to discuss that with seven or eight people from different contexts"*

The third aspect which emanated from the group related to the role of the syndicate group as a support mechanism which would contribute to the achievement of individual aspirations related to the programme. This was eloquently expressed by one respondent*, "I was expecting the group to provide support. To be honest with you, I was going for a first. Then I thought that if I were in a syndicate group, that could make it easier. That was one of my expectations."*

ii. Respondents with negative expectations

Of the four respondents who expressed negative expectations, two of the respondents had previously been involved in some type of syndicate group, and the experience in those instances had resulted in their having negative expectations of the MBA syndicate group mechanism. Both these respondents had prior involvement with the Business School. One of these respondents expressed his contempt for the process, *"I wasn't keen, I certainly wasn't pleased and I wasn't happy at the idea. It was part of the programme and I had*

to accept it. I wasn't looking forward to it. I already had huge criticisms of it in my mind, and had many pre-emptive negative thoughts even before it started. I must admit, by going into the first syndicate group, I immediately felt the tension as expected".

The remaining two respondents in this group shared the same outlook, but their concern originated from the likely clash of personalities and egos, particularly when one considers the type of person who would typically apply for entry to the MBA programme, *"I expected a difficult working group. And the fact that it would be made up of a number of people that I did not know, probably a lot of A-type personalities, all doing the MBA, all thinking that they are smart, it was probably going to be a difficult environment to work in".*

iii. Respondents who were ambivalent

This group of respondents had either been through the syndicate group process before or had engaged with friends and colleagues who had previously completed the MBA degree, and based on their feedback had formed an opinion*, "I knew that working in syndicate groups was a mixed bag. If you were lucky, you would have ended up with people who shared the same work ethic. If this were the case, I would have been happy that I would not have had to carry people".*

Another respondent referred to an incident whereby a syndicate group had instituted disciplinary procedures against a member of a syndicate group. Apart from the need for invoking such disciplinary action, WBSs response to the request had surprised him. The syndicate group in question were informed by the WBS that a name was not going to be removed from the assignment, and that the syndicate needed to resolve the problem. Eventually, the lecturer allocated the group mark to the individual concerned, *"Of the other five people that I have spoken to, all had mentioned that there were 2-3 people in the group which they had to carry. Don't expect anything from them, and it's just not worth the battle, to try to have a name taken off the assignments. The reason for this,*

the lecturers will fight you on that. So, I had some feeling it was going to be an interesting experience". Respondents who were undecided often veered towards some positive or negative aspect which they have heard about from others, and chose a 'wait and see' approach.

iv. Summary of expectations of syndicate group work

Responses to these questions yielded a variety of expectations about syndicate group work, including positive, negative and uncertain responses. This variety of response, whilst expected given the diverse environment from which students originate, raises a further question namely, why is it that there was no commonly expressed expectation about participation in a syndicate group?

The lack of a common expectation aligns with Arksey *et al.* (2007) who highlight that unaligned expectations will result in team confusion and conflict. The lack of a common expectation is important for a second reason namely as it suggests that even though business schools emphasise the centrality of syndicate group interaction in their MBA programmes (University of Stellenbosch 2009; GIBS 2011; MBA.co.za 2011), these efforts are not successful in creating common mental models about work in syndicate groups. Edwards, Day, Arthur and Bell (2006) and Rainey et al. (2011) have highlighted the importance of a shared mental model in terms of the positive effect it has on group functioning, without which no further developmental intervention are unlikely to be successful.

Further analysis of responses led to the identification of a number of faulty assumptions, on the part of academics, curriculum planners, and lecturers/ assessors, and students, which contribute to understanding the issues experienced in syndicates.

Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors include:

1. There is common understanding about the purpose, intention and expectations of syndicate group work.
2. Existing communication channels and orientation processes adequately conveys the desired messages about the MBA programme.
3. Existing communication and engagement with the marketplace contributes to the creation the desired common mental model regarding syndicate group functioning.
4. Students will not experience disappointment when their expectations of syndicate groups are met.

Faulty assumptions from students include:

1. The syndicate group is primarily a vehicle for content learning.
2. All MBA students will have a common expectation of work in syndicate groups.

4.3.1.2. Experiences of syndicate group work

Having clarified respondent expectations of syndicate group work, an attempt was made to determine if these expectations materialised in the first syndicate group specifically as it is likely that the nature of experience would impact how the respondent engaged with subsequent syndicate groups. Respondents were also asked to share positive and negative experiences of their interaction with the first syndicate group to which they were allocated. Key learnings from the first syndicate group were also recorded and are presented below. Individual experiences represent the second component of disappointment theory (Zhou and Wang 2010; Rainey et al. 2011) that disappointment results when expectations are not met. In this context, the nature of syndicate group interaction either contributes to or eliminates the sense of disappointment.

Responses to this question i.e. *"Did your expectations of syndicate groups materialise when you engaged with your first syndicate group?"* are grouped according to the nature of the initial expressed expectation. Thus, respondents who expressed a positive expectation are grouped together and the nature of the first syndicate group experience is compared to the initial expectation. The same comparison has been performed on those respondents who expressed negative expectations or who were undecided.

i. Positive expectations and the first syndicate group experience

Of the four respondents who expressed a positive expectation, two had their expectations materialise in the first syndicate group, whilst two were resigned to being let down. This is summarised in Table 11.

Table 11: Positive expectations and the first syndicate group

	Total	**Expectation met in first syndicate group**
Positive expectations	4	Yes - 2
		No - 2

The two respondents with positive expectations of syndicate groups were pleased to find these expectations were comfortably met in the first syndicate group, which according to Zhou and Wang (2010) and Rainey *et al.* (2011) would not lead to disappointment. As for the remaining two respondents in this category, high expectations resulted in high levels of disappointment.

Of the two respondents whose expectations were not met, one was linked to the magnitude of group work, and the other to a group of people who showed little initiative and drive to get their very first task done. The level of alignment between expectation and the first instance of syndicate group reality highlighted a variety of reasons for the perceived gaps. One respondent expected

syndicate group work to be a small component of the programme, with a greater reliance on self-study to be successful. The reality proved very different, *"The first thing that struck me was how much I would have to rely on other people. That was the initial thing, and that came from having to put that song together for the syndicate, so that was something that struck me. The second thing that struck me was that there would need to be a lot of, again, a lot more reliance on others and this would form a core part of the course, in terms of the group work counting for 25% of your entire mark, which is actually quite large"*.

Another respondent expected the syndicate group to provide support in his quest for a *cum laude*, and had hoped that the syndicate group would provide a medium for learning and growth. The two-day orientation was the first point at which he realised this expectation might not be met, *"I stepped up to the group, decided what the song was going to be, went to the car, got the CD, and practically forced people to start rehearsing because they were too shy. That was already an eye-opener for me when I realised that the group that I was in, and that the support I thought I would get, was not there".*

v. Negative expectations and the first syndicate group experience

Of the four respondents who expressed negative expectations, all found support for their negative outlook in their first syndicate group experience. Table 12 summarises these results. The expected personality and power struggle behaviour which three respondents anticipated, materialised. For the remaining respondent, the experience was a sobering realisation that he could actually not rely on his syndicate group.

Table 12: Negative expectations and the first syndicate group

	Total	Expectation met in first syndicate group
Negative expectations	4	Yes - 4

The common expectation between three respondents stemmed from the prospective issues which may arise when similar personalities, all with a perceived motivation to success, all of whom are in relatively senior positions in their respective companies, are placed into one group and given a task. In addition, concern over job titles which suggested the power individuals wielded in their places of work, was part of this concern.

The remaining respondent on the other hand was more concerned about the level of competence and work ethic of syndicate group members, a fear which materialised almost immediately, *"...I think I realised very quickly that amongst the seven of us, probably four people would do the work. It was a combination of some people who were just not skilled enough in writing, or on the topic. Some were terrible at it. The other half was made up of people who were just not interested to do well. I wanted to do well, and the other people were "just give me 50%"".*

It should be noted that of the thirteen respondents interviewed, three respondents declared that their intentions were purely to pass, with one respondent using as his opening statement, *"I must be honest with you, I was one of the slackers, I did what I had to do so that I could pass. That is all that I wanted, so maybe I am not the right person you should be speaking to..."*

vi. Ambivalence and the first syndicate group experience

This group of respondents began the MBA programme having received both positive and negative feedback regarding syndicate group work from friends

and colleagues. These respondents were asked if their time in their first syndicate group positively or negatively influenced their perceptions. Table 13 summarises their responses.

Table 13: Ambivalence and the first syndicate experience

	Total	Expectation met in first syndicate group
Undecided	3	Yes and no
	1	Converted to negative
	1	Experience was negative, but used it to create a positive

The results present all possible outcomes, with three of the five respondents indicating that the first syndicate group provided them with both positive and negative experiences. One respondent found herself in a syndicate group rife with emotional outbursts, with a wide gap between those who were willing to work and not willing to work, *"I think it very quickly came to show the differences in character, aspiration, work ethic, willingness to achieve"*. However, she also acknowledged that it was in this depth of despair where she found two individuals who shared similar goals and aspirations, with a complementary work ethic. These individuals formed the basis of a study group which held firm for the duration of the programme. This sentiment was shared by two other respondents.

The respondent who had the negative experience found himself in a syndicate group which spent lots of time arguing and debating often unnecessary information, *"There were a lot of uncertainty, lots of confusion, the different personalities also started coming across. People wanted to make their opinions count, or created the perception that they knew exactly what you do to get done. Nobody wanted to be seen as a person who didn't know what needed to get done. So there was lots of confusion".* In addition, he suggested that as the group was still in the very early stages of development, nobody really knew how

to deal with each other. This resulted in lengthy debate and tip-toeing until the group overcame this storming phase. This resulted in his expectations of syndicate groups to be swayed towards one of negative sentiment.

The final respondent in this group provided an interesting scenario where he acknowledged that his expectation regarding learning did not materialise, however, what he lost in content learning, he gained through the realisation that syndicate group work is not about the acquisition of content knowledge, rather its concerned with people engagement and other self development skills. He thus made a conscious effort to use the syndicate group as a tool for self development.

vii. Summary of experiences of syndicate groups

It could be argued that the extent to which individual expectations were met should not be over-emphasised, simply due to the fact that both the expectation and the perception of whether it was met or not are subjective. However, this subjectivity represented reality for the individual as they engaged in their first syndicate group and for this reason alone is worthy of discussion.

Four respondents came into the programme with negative expectations and all these materialised in their first syndicate group. Four respondents carried positive expectations and only two found that these materialised. Five respondents were uncertain about what to expect and this group yielded a very mixed bag of first experiences, three of which were both positive and negative. In each instance of the 'positive and negative' responses, the identification of a couple or a few people who the respondent could rely upon was the reason for the positive comment.

It thus appears that the perceived time wastage as the group tip-toed in the early stages, different levels of work ethic amongst group members, different aspirations and unexpected levels of individual competence, may have

contributed to the general negative experience of the first syndicate group. The appearance of these are also based on the presence of faulty assumptions.

Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors include:

1. Students allocated to groups will know how to identify and manage team development processes.
2. The MBA programme must cater for all competency levels, not only high-achievers.
3. Syndicate group members will want to assist others.

Faulty assumptions from students include:

1. That their initial expectations are correct, which in the absence of clear and concise information is plausible.

4.3.1.3. Themes from the first syndicate group experience

The themes in Table 14 summarise the positive and negative themes which emerged from respondent experiences in their first syndicate group.

Table 14: Themes arising from the first syndicate group experience

Positive	Negative
1. Identification of processes and practices that didn't work, and fixing those. 2. Similar aspirations and personality types leading to the formation of a study group. 3. Learning to manage poor performers. 4. Improving ones interpersonal skills.	1. Levels of trust within the syndicate group decreased substantially. 2. Skills and subject matter competence not spread across all syndicate groups. 3. Conscious time-wasting due to team development processes. 4. Presence of "shirkers", "excess baggage" and "leechers". 5. Conflict in the group.

i. Positive Themes

Depending on the theme, evidence in support of the experience was provided very explicitly or thinly veiled. Learning from the experience is a case in point whereby, as pointed out by one respondent, *"I think the syndicate group was meant to teach us how to work in a group of people with different roles and ability. I suppose it does that. I think I almost had to get through the resentment first to a degree, and then realised am I going to use this as an opportunity to learn that skill. You don't consciously realise that that is what you're supposed to do, and you miss it. It becomes terribly frustrating"*. The key message in this viewpoint being that the purpose of the syndicate group was not explicit, and if one did not battle through the resentment and frustration that came with the group dynamics, it would be very easy to miss the learning opportunity which the syndicate group presented.

The nature of the learning acquired varied too, with some respondents indicating how they improved task allocation and other group interaction processes. However, two respondents saw an opportunity to use their somewhat dysfunctional syndicate group to begin a process of self-development. In one instance, it provided an ideal platform to learn to be more vocal and assertive in a group setting, and in the other, it provided and opportunity to learn to relinquish leadership and control when working in group settings.

The formation of a study group was also viewed as a positive experience that flowed from the syndicate group experience, as it functioned as a vehicle for learning and in some instances, social support. One respondent described this as, *"The main positive that came out of the first group was, whether by trail of fire or luck or the stars being aligned, was being able to find a group of people with whom I worked well together and that was something I was able to take forward through the entire degree and that group really formed the core of the MBA".*

The detailed characteristics of study groups, the learning patterns and processes, the team development processes to name a few characteristics, are presented and discussed in greater detail later in the report.

ii. Negative themes

In just about all instances where respondent experiences of the first syndicate group had been negative, the originator variable was in some way linked to the assumption of competence and trust. Unfortunately, this proved an incorrect assumption for many. As stated by one respondent, *“Fundamental to that, is trust. If people are expected to do something, and they don't participate to the degree where they are not contributing, it’s a problem. People will not always contribute equally, but it has to be a baseline of contribution, that defines your participation in a team. If you are doing less than that, you should not be part of a team. You should be doing enough to help the team forward. Then you are contributing. And the moment the sense is created where some members are not contributing, the trust relationship is broken”.* A similar sentiment was offered by another respondent wherein it was indicated that the first syndicate group experience had *“made me a helluva lot more distrusting and weary of syndicate groups”*.

Arguably, the one issue mentioned by all respondents related to the presence of individuals who were keen to contribute as little as possible to the syndicate group, often refusing to attend syndicate group meetings and when they did attend, found reason to leave early. These individuals were labelled “free-loaders”, “shirkers”, “excess baggage” and “leechers”. The impact of having these individuals was significant as it meant that the remaining syndicate group members had to carry an extra burden, as summarised by this respondent, *“Syndicate work was probably the worst experience in my life, I have never in my life spent so much time working such late hours, doing other people's work, reviewing other people's "drivel"”.* This response adds support to findings by Sonnentag and Volmer (2010) which highlighted the negative impact of the lack

of a common goal amongst team members which is very much aligned to the experiences mentioned here.

Respondents' views regarding such behaviour were also questioned in order to understand this behaviour, and a number of possible reasons were offered, including *"some people are forced to be here by their employers so they just don't care",* or *"for X, the MBA is just a means to an end, to get the promotion he wants. It's about the alphabets behind his name"*.

At least three respondents raised an issue relating to the variety of skills available to them in their respective syndicate groups, in the form of syndicate group members. They questioned the rationale and process which the WBS uses to select students into the programme, as well as the subsequent allocation of these students to syndicate groups. These respondents had an expectation that the syndicate group would have members from a diverse professional background, and allocated to syndicate groups in a manner which would result in each syndicate having access to a subject matter specialist for the courses being studied each semester. For example, *"if you don't have 10 accountants, and 10 HR managers, 10 operations managers, already the groups are at a disadvantage and are likely to fail because you are trying to learn about work and you have nobody in the environment to guide you*". Comparisons were drawn to the MAP program where respondent experiences suggested such allocations were indeed possible and that the WBS had possibly overlooked a very important aspect of how the MBA syndicate groups should function.

iii. Summary of positive and negative themes

The expectations of syndicate groups by respondents varied, with positive, negative and undecided expectations appearing. These expectations could be equated to a 'can opener', and once the syndicate groups interacted, the proverbial 'can of worms' emerged.

Learning, or the lack thereof, was a key factor in the group dynamics which occurred. However, a narrow definition of learning may have robbed many of an ideal opportunity for self growth and development. Learning as a positive outcome from the first syndicate group seemed to occur only for those who were able to realise that there was something to be learnt, and that they should have differentiated between content and process learning much sooner in the MBA programme. Where this differentiation was not made, the learning opportunity was lost.

The allocation of individuals to syndicate groups is the other aspect that requires consideration, with one respondent summarising this sentiment very aptly, *"If you look at the way the groups have been split, there are sufficiently enough people in the group so that in your first year you should actually never be in the same group with another person. In my first year, I had shared syndicate groups with a number of the same people, which raises the question about how people are being allocated".*

Academics, curriculum planners, assessors / lecturers should review two key aspects of the MBA programme namely; the type of person who is granted a seat on the programme, and how these individuals are allocated to syndicate groups. Applicants with senior titles should not be assumed to be competent, nor should it be assumed they have much to contribute to fellow MBA colleagues.

Academics, curriculum planners, assessors / lecturers should also consider evaluating the applicants' emotional intelligence or emotional maturity as a key component of the admission decision, and thereby, could prevent much of the arbitrary issues which plague syndicate groups.

The syndicate group must also exist to enable content learning, and without access to specific competencies, such learning will be limited. Based on this feedback, the following faulty assumptions have been identified.

Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors include:

1. Existing MBA selection criteria contribute to the establishment of an environment resembling that of a meritocracy.
2. Emotional intelligence or emotional maturity is not a pre-requisite for entrance into the MBA programme.

Faulty assumptions from students include:

1. Syndicate group members can be trusted to deliver and contribute to the syndicate group as expected.

4.3.2. Team dynamics

Specific aspects relating to team dynamics was investigated, these being:

1. Team development with respect to Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) team development model and the TEAM model offered by Morgan Jr *et al.* (1993).
2. Respondent roles within syndicate and other groups
3. Team characteristics such as diversity, access to resources, a high need for achievement etc.

To obtain this information, the following questions were asked:

1. *Respondents were shown a copy of Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) model, and the various stages were briefly explained. They were then asked if any of the stages were evident, and how these presented in the syndicate group.*
2. *Which would you say was more prevalent in your syndicate group: Team work (share the work, get along, and build momentum) or task work (divide and conquer, get the job done)?*
3. *Did you fulfil the same role in different syndicate groups?*

4. *Are there any positive or negative characteristics which you can think of which positively influenced the effectiveness of your syndicate groups? (examples include: a high need for achievement, a diversified group or not, good interpersonal relations, trusting relationships, access to resources, diversity of the group, too many type A personalities etc).*

4.3.2.1. Tuckman and Jensen's model of team development

Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) model of team development was chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, is a model which all respondents would have been familiar with as it was included in the curriculum of the MBA programme. Secondly, this model comprising the stages of forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning is generally understood and accepted as a fundamental model in team formation and development.

All respondents indicated that the stages of the model were apparent in their syndicate groups, to some extent, with subtle differences appearing related to specific stages.

i. Forming

Apart from three respondents, forming was generally 'excluded' from the discussion respondents felt that the syndicate groups were not self-forming, as indicated by a respondent, *"In syndicate one, we were put into a group and that was essentially the formation of the group"*. To these group members, the first phase of the model as experienced was that of storming. The summary of these perceptions is presented in Table 15.

Table 15: Perceptions regarding forming

	Forming stage absent	Forming stage forced
No. of responses	10	3

In the three instances where group forming was induced, respondents indicated that the group made a conscious to get to know each other*, "The main one that you would see is 'form' because everyone is meeting each other. Syndicate groups were interesting as it forced you to get to know people whom you have never met".*

Both these perspectives are interesting as in the former, 'there was no forming'. It appears that syndicate group members may not have realised that forming was still a necessary part of the team development process. It is also likely that their understanding of forming may have been limited solely to the coming together of the group, and the need to explore, to find common ground, to agree that objectives or similar were missed.

In the second perspective, it appears that the groups actively engaged in forming behaviour, at least in their first syndicate group. This level of tolerance and politeness as referred to by Staggers *et al.* (2008) decreased substantially as members progressed to their second syndicate group.

ii. Storming

The storming phase as per Tuckman and Jensen (1977) relates to the period after the joy and harmony of meeting new team members. The team begins to deal with the reasons for its existence and the individual personalities and aspirations begin to manifest in terms of how the team operate. Staggers *et al.* (2008) refer to this stage as the 'why we are here' phase.

Of all the stages in the model, this stage appears to have elicited the highest levels of emotive responses. Table 16 summarises responses to how storming was experienced in syndicate groups.

Table 16: Perceptions regarding storming

	Spent the entire block storming	Lots of storming	Some storming
No. of responses	1	5	7

The majority of descriptors relating to disagreements were regarding approaches to tasks and the interpretation and application of theories and concepts. These disagreements were also driven by power-plays within the group as some members of the group jostled for leadership of the group.

iii. Norming

The norming phase as per the definition offered by Tuckman and Jensen (1977) relates to the group beginning to find itself i.e. the sense that the group is beginning to function as it should. The group are positive and 'play-up' the benefit of group work.

Norming was not explicitly discussed by respondents and was inferred from their descriptions relating to how tasks were completed in the syndicate groups. All respondents indicated that at a point, the syndicate group had agreed on the goal, namely, assignment completion and the associated plan of action. They would also have agreed on which subgroup within the syndicate would complete the assignment and by when. This approach was generally accepted as the norm in most syndicates as confirmed by respondents.

iv. Performing

The definition of performing was an interesting anomaly across respondents, and hence syndicate groups. Some respondents defined syndicate group performance as the successful delivery of an assignment on its due date. Others defined performance as the submission of an assignment of a particularly high standard on the due date. The final definition that emerged

from groups was that performance of a syndicate extended beyond the submission of an assignment and included the extent to which a syndicate group had effectively learnt. As a consequence, one respondent suggested that she believed syndicate groups never reached the performing stage based on her definition of the syndicate group as a vehicle for learning. This distinction is captured in Table 16, and influenced how respondents perceived the model in their groups.

Table 17: Definitions of performing

	Syndicate performed i.e. assignments submitted	Syndicate never reached the point of performing
No. of responses	12	1

The definition of performing must be validated against the initial expectations that many respondents had of syndicate groups. Whilst there was no common expectation, four respondents expressed positive expectations of the syndicate groups whereby the syndicate group would be an opportunity for knowledge transfer and learning through interaction with a smaller group of people. Based on these expectations and first experiences, one would have expected at least four respondents to suggest that syndicate groups never truly performed.

In addition, the fact that 12 of the respondents suggested that performing is now linked to task completion highlights a negative shift in the achievement of expectations.

v. Adjourning

Adjourning was referred to by all respondents as the end of the semester, and the group disbanded. The six month syndicate group cycle had become normal to respondents, with no formal adjourning process to signify the end of the syndicate group reported by respondents.

vi. Summary of Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) team development model in syndicate groups

A number of interesting dynamics emerged from the discussion around Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) model of team development. Many respondents indicated that six months was not a sufficient time span for all of the stages to materialise, and that the continuous changing of the groups increased the levels of stress which they had to manage. This aligns with research by Cohen and Bailey (1997) and Montanari *et al.* (2008) relating to the impact of turnover in groups. In addition, there was a sense that the stages became less visible over time as syndicate groups had learned to 'play the system', that is, they worked out the equation between effort and grades, and realised that they did not need to meet as frequently to accomplish tasks. These syndicate groups consequently met only at the beginning and the end of a semester, to review the work of the sub-group allocated to the task before submission of the deliverable.

The most notable dynamic which arises from the analysis of this model of team development is the definition of performance, which based on initial expectations of syndicate groups especially related to learning, seems to have been negatively re-aligned. Performance in the syndicate group context became task focused. This also leads to questions regarding the school's expectations of syndicate groups.

Based on the experiences reported, the following faulty assumptions have been identified.

Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors include:

1. The objectives of working in syndicate groups are clearly understood by all.
2. Grades achieved on syndicate group assignments are a good

reflection of team performance.

3. Grade allocation to syndicate groups are a good reflection that groups have achieved the group objectives as expected by the Business School.
4. The MBA Orientation Programme provides sufficient background knowledge regarding team development.

Faulty assumptions from students include:

1. Teams can operate effectively without progressing through all the phases, even if superficially.
2. Syndicate group assignment submission is representative of successful team performance.

4.3.2.2. Morgan, Salas and Glickman's TEAM model

The TEAM model as presented by Morgan Jr *et al.* (1993) was used to ascertain the extent to which syndicate groups differentiated between the mix of team work and task work skills that were required to ensure task completion. As per the model, effective group performance comprises both teamwork and task work, and unless these are aligned, the team never reaches it maximum potential. Table 18 presents feedback from responses about the nature of interaction in the group as primarily team or task focused.

Table 18: Team work v/s task work in syndicate groups

	Team work	Task work
No. of responses	0	13

It was evident that all respondents indicated that they believed syndicate groups were task work orientated, *"Syndicates were more task focused. It was more about 'divide and conquer'".* The changing pattern of syndicate group interaction

whereby group interaction was limited to the beginning and end of the semester supports this response.

The perception of teamwork and task work as a focus in syndicate groups was clearly described by respondents. Syndicate group work was perceived to be task work orientated which supported by the definition of performing as defined by syndicate groups. Based on these responses, the following incorrect assumptions have been identified.

Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors include:

1. Grades allocated to syndicate group assignments drives team behaviour.
2. Syndicate group members will realise that group performance is enabled by a combination of team work and task work skills.

Faulty assumptions from students include:

1. Syndicate group work is about getting the job done.
2. Syndicate group work requires effective task work skills only.

4.3.2.3. Role theory

The adoption of roles within syndicates groups yielded varied themes. Common themes amongst respondents are presented in Table 19.

Table 19: Roles adopted in syndicate groups

	Role		
	Depended on syndicate make-up	Giving direction / leadership	Implementer
No. of responses	3	4	6

Within the category of 'implementer', responses to the types of role adopted included that of project manager, researcher, or coordinator. Two respondents explained how they used the allocation of roles within the syndicate group to learn to address their introverted nature such that they gradually assumed a project manager role for their respective syndicate group assignments. This role aligns with Belbin role inventory and is described as one which tries to avoid conflict, is generally low in desire to deceive or mislead and have an eagerness to implement as efficiently as possible (Belbin Associates 2012).

In the 'giving direction / leadership' group, respondents indicated that this was a natural role selection and was consistent with their personalities and professional roles. They further indicated that this leadership orientation remained consistent throughout the programme and was not impacted by their experiences in their first syndicate group. Respondents also referred to the presence of other strong personalities which may have influenced their natural affinity to the leadership role in subsequent syndicates.

The final theme 'depended on syndicate make-up' comprised respondents who were generally happy to let others volunteer for key accountability positions within the syndicate group. When asked about their orientation to role selection in later syndicate groups, they suggested that *"if the group had strong people, then I was happy to sit back because I knew that the leaders knew exactly what they wanted. If I had a group without the strong personalities and if we were not making progress, I would take on the leadership role"*.

If the definition of syndicate group success was the timeous submission of a group assignment, then many of the syndicate groups would consider themselves successful; and this success will have been achieved without having a balanced spread of team roles across the group as suggested by Aritzeta *et al.* (2007) and Belbin Associates (2012). Both these sources agree that teams need a balance of all Belbin roles to be able to facilitate the progress of the team.

Some respondents intentionally adopted roles which were aligned with their personalities or personal development needs. Others waited for the group to fill key roles which would then enable them to fulfil a supporting role. Where the group was unable to agree its structure and way ahead, the opportunity was created for natural leaders to try to take control of the group.

For fear of over-regulating syndicate group functioning, there may be value in considering the formal random appointment of people to the key functional roles within a syndicate group. This may help spread the workload, and through a feedback process, syndicate functioning could be assessed.

Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors include:

1. Students will proactively take on roles needed by the group to become successful.
2. MBA orientation programme content adequately addresses the true nature of roles within syndicate groups.

Faulty assumptions from students include:

1. None.

4.3.2.4. Conflict within the syndicate group

Except for three respondents, conflict in the first syndicate group was a common experience across the sample, and typically related to disagreements on the understanding of the scope of an assignment, or differing perspectives on the application of key concepts. The likelihood of conflict in the first semester was high particularly as most respondents felt that this was the period when many class members were trying to establish themselves, or as respondents put it, *"make their voices heard"*. People wanted to make an impression and

often, this meant not backing down from a point of view. The level of tension in most first syndicates was consequently high.

Based on responses, four levels of conflict were identified and are presented in Table 20.

Table 20 : Levels of conflict identified

Level	Description
1	Personality clashes. Disagreements about interpretation or the application of concepts or models.
2	Task-linked intervention. Forced control over syndicate group assignments to ensure timeous and 'quality submission. Marginalisation of team members. Formation of subgroups.
3	Perceived aggression, verbal or otherwise. Emotional strain, repeated episodes of emotional outbursts / crying. Breakdown in communication.
4	Slander or the potential defamation of character, or behaviour perceived as such. Business School disciplinary processes invoked. Breakdown in group structure. Group functioning negatively impacted.

In general, the level of conflict across the respondents was contained primarily at levels one and two as described in Table 20, which thus partially supports research by Smith *et al.* (1984) which found that controversy at a level of disagreement on ideas, information, conclusions or theories, actually contributes to team performance as the process the team must engage in to find solutions stimulates thought and reflection. This sentiment is also aligned with the task work definition of controversy proposed by (Shu-Cheng et al. 2010).

Evidence was found for each of the levels in Table 20, although an interesting divergence occurred whereby some respondents indicated they began to ignore team and task issues as it was simpler and less energy-consuming. On the other hand, a number of respondents found they became more irritable and less tolerant as time progressed. A respondent in the latter group used the words

"*...diplomacy fatigue*" to describe the onset of conflict on her part in a syndicate group.

Conflict at the higher levels was rife, with numerous examples offered by respondents. One instance of a threat to *"throw X off balcony"* was mentioned. In another, an individual had instituted legal action against a fellow group member if a public apology was not provided for comments passed about the other's perceived lack of contribution to the group assignment. This incident as it was related, *"...went all the way to the top".* These incidents align with research by Shu-Cheng et al. (2010) who identified that relational controversy in which disagreements occur due to different beliefs and values as per the conflict on the higher level of the scale, and are detrimental to the team.

The extent of controversy as perceived by respondents warrants additional questions to be asked of the business school and the processes in place to assist students to resolve the 'higher level' conflict issues. Respondents referred to the MBA orientation programme when the groups were informed of the option open to a syndicate group to have a group member's name removed from an assignment due to lack of contribution. However, respondents also related incidents where syndicate groups instituted this option and were advised by lecturers to ignore it and move on. In the end, all syndicate group members were allocated the same mark. What then is the point of having the name-removal process?

Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors include:

1. Existing MBA selection criteria contribute to the establishment or an environment resembling a meritocracy.
2. Emotional intelligence or emotional maturity is not a pre-requisite for a entrance into the MBA programme.
3. Conflict amongst team members is restricted to disagreements over

the application and interpretation of theories and concepts.

4. The lack of any form of syndicate group regulation is conducive to syndicate group functioning.

Faulty assumptions from students include:

1. Syndicate group members can be trusted to deliver and contribute as expected.
2. Business school disciplinary processes can be relied upon to manage poor performers within syndicate groups.

4.3.2.5. Diversity within syndicate groups

The diversity within a group was also investigated to determine if it influenced group dynamics or group performance. The definition offered by Kearney *et al.* (2009) was used as the operational definition and included both surface level demographic attributes such as gender, age, race etc; and task-related informational or cognitive diversity. Responses from the interviews are presented in Table 21.

Table 21: Impact of diversity on syndicate group performance

	Demographic factors		**Cognitive diversity**	
	Positive impact	Negative impact	Positive impact	Negative impact
No. of responses	13	0	8	5

In line with the research findings from Kearney *et al.* (2009), respondents in general agreed that diversity in terms of demographic attributes contributed to the effectiveness of syndicate groups. Diversity within the group created different perspectives which added value not only to the tasks at hand but also to personal growth.

Responses to cognitive diversity reinforced previously presented concerns regarding the spread of a skills, resources and experiences in the make-up of syndicate groups. As per Table 21, when respondents were asked if the cognitive diversity of the group influenced syndicate group performance, five respondents suggested that the impact was negative, explaining that the syndicate groups were not cognitively diverse enough. Some respondents indicated that through networking with the class, they were able to find people to whom they could turn when needed, though this was not ideal. This perceived lack of skilled resources was viewed as having a negative impact on the effectiveness of syndicate groups.

Diversity relating to demographic variables was generally welcomed with group members suggesting that cultural, age and other factors added a 'richness' to group interaction. This sentiment supported similar findings of Kearney *et al.* (2009).

Both types of diversity according to Kearney *et al.* (2009) are significantly and positively related to team performance especially where the need for cognition within a group is high. Based on the findings presented above, it appears that the business school should review two specific processes relating to the MBA programme. Firstly, the school must review the objective of its admissions process. Is it to enrol as many students as possible, or to enrol the correct mix of students, seats permitting? Agreement on this objective will then inform the second process namely the manner in which students are allocated to syndicate groups. Respondent perceptions of the ineffectiveness of this process has been highlighted earlier, and confirmed through their responses regarding cognitive diversity.

Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors include:

1. Post-graduate students have sufficient knowledge and experience to

adapt to the variety of content included in the course.

Faulty assumptions from students include:

1. That they can expect a variety of cognitively diverse members in their syndicate groups.

4.3.3. Learning theory

To further understand syndicate group functioning, respondents were questioned regarding their definition of learning, the process through which they learned, and the extent to which they believe they learned within the context of a syndicate group.

The questions asked of respondents included:

1. *How do you define learning?*
2. *How did you learn in the groups? How do you think others learnt?*
3. *Please describe the process you apply when learning (this question will help the interviewer to match learning styles to the learning schools theory)?*
4. *How would you describe the learning which occurred in your syndicate group?*
5. *If you purchased a new audio system, how do you go about setting it up?*

4.3.3.1. Definitions of learning linked to learning schools

Table 22 provides an overview of the key themes which emerged from respondent definitions of learning, and maps these themes to the applicable learning schools based on the characteristics of the learning school.

Table 22: Definitions of learning

	Emergent themes		
	Life stage	Is about perspective	Something you can process, store and retrieve
No. of responses	1	2	10
	Social	Humanist	Cognitivist
	Learning schools		

Three themes emerged from this analysis of responses to the questions around the personal definition of learning. These are presented here.

i. The Cognitivists

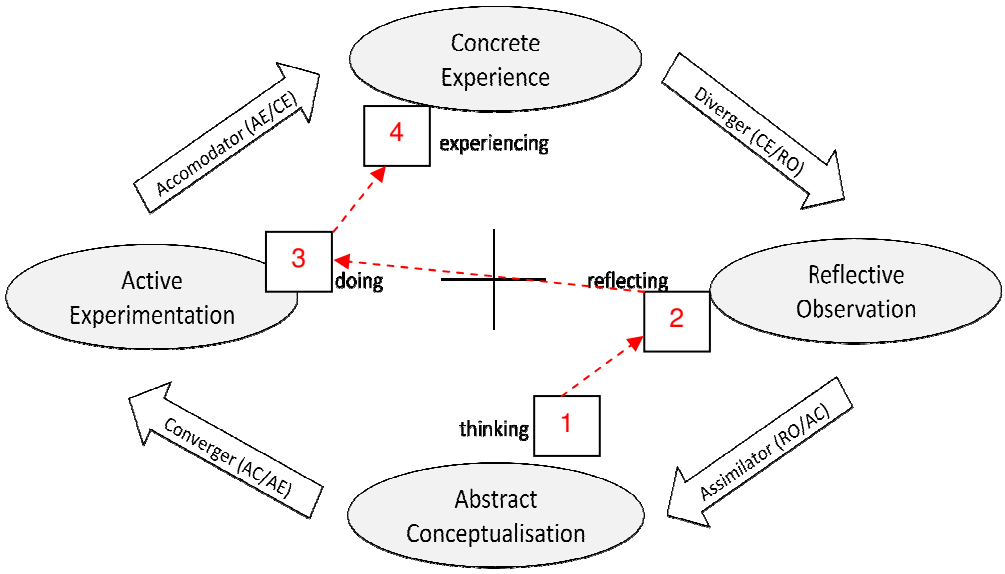
The theme with the most number of respondents namely ten respondents, indicated that learning included the ability to obtain something, process it, and then be able to store it for recall as and when needed. A key aspect here is the ability to apply the learning to different situations. This definition aligns closely with the cognitivist school of learning which posits that humans are capable of insight, perception and the attribution of meaning (Marquardt and Waddill 2004).

Kolb and Kolb (2005) has offered an experiential learning model which at the centre of the cognitivist school, demonstrates the process by which knowledge is created. This model was tested during the data collection using an analogy, whereby respondents were asked how they would proceed if they were installing a home theatre system or assembling a scale model car. It was anticipated that respondents would generally proceed as per the cycle. This anticipation was proven incorrect, with an interesting approach indicated by respondents from technical or engineering backgrounds.

A differentiation appeared between situations where the respondent had a mental model to call upon, and other situations that were entirely new. Where a mental model could be drawn upon, respondents indicated they would proceed

directly to the active experimentation stage, and the outcome thereof would dictate the next step, which was then most likely reflection, focusing on what could have been done incorrectly, followed by thinking about the next step.

Where no mental model could be called upon, respondents indicated they would generally begin by thinking about the task, which included the creation of a schematic on how the pieces of the task would actually fit together. Thereafter, they would take time out to reflect on whether their schematic actually made logical sense, after which they would act. This process is depicted in Figure 8.



(Kolb 1976)

Figure 7: Kolb's experiential learning model as adapted

ii. The Social school

The second theme concerns perspective and suggested that learning was about exposure to the experiences and perspectives of others. This enables one to access many different viewpoints regarding how theory and intervention may have been applied at different times. This perspective aligns closely with

the social learning school which suggests that people learn through interaction with and observation of others (Smith 1999; Goel et al. 2010).

In essence, respondents learn through accessing the mental models of others, which they subsequently use to guide their own responses to new experiences. This sentiment is supported by research conducted by De Dea Roglio and Light (2009) which demonstrated that exposure to others' mental models, perspectives and stories about specific situations encouraged senior managers to reflect on their own thoughts, decisions and actions.

iii. The Humanists

Only one respondent referred to their life stage when offering a definition of learning*, "If I look at myself and the stage of my career, I realise that is one matures, the level and type of learning that needs to occur in a person's life is no longer necessarily around content. If I wanted to learn something about a particular topic I could easily open up a book and I could read about it and I could acquire content knowledge. My realisation has been that as life progresses learning to work with people and for people is more important".* This definition of learning aligns with the humanist school which according to Merriam (2001) advocates, that individuals are capable of making important personal decisions and choices within the limits imposed by hereditary, personal history and the environmental factors.

The age theory of adult learning as suggested by Trotter (2006) may also explain this approach to learning whereby it is argued that the late thirties and early forties represent a transition period where adults reflect upon and evaluate life, a time when 'wholeness' becomes more important than the 'ideal of perfection'. It is also suggested by Trotter (2006) that individuals are believed to think more about their context leading to a greater sense of community membership.

The spread of these definitions should not come as a surprise given that the respondents are MBA students and are likely to have well developed cognitive capabilities. In the instances where learning was defined as 'Perspective', the one respondent is employed in a strategy development environment and the other has expressly used the MBA as a medium to learn about subject matter areas beyond her particular area of expertise.

The application of Kolb's (1976) experiential learning model provided interesting insight into how respondents construct knowledge. In the context of the MBA syndicate group, it appears that much more time possibly gets spent in the thinking and reflecting phases, consequently resulting in a small window for doing and experiencing.

4.3.3.2. Perception of how syndicate group members view learning

Respondents were asked to offer their perception of how they believed their syndicate group members defined learning. Based on the general negativity which permeated the experiences in their first syndicate group, it was anticipated that there would not be any alignment in the definition of learning across the syndicate group. Thus, responses to this question would hopefully provide insight into why others enrolled to the MBA programme, what they hoped to achieve and hopefully, to contribute to understanding why syndicate group members behaved in the manner the respondents said they did.

All of the respondents began their reply with, *"I can't be certain"*, with the majority thereafter offering their perceptions, which are summarised in Figure 9.

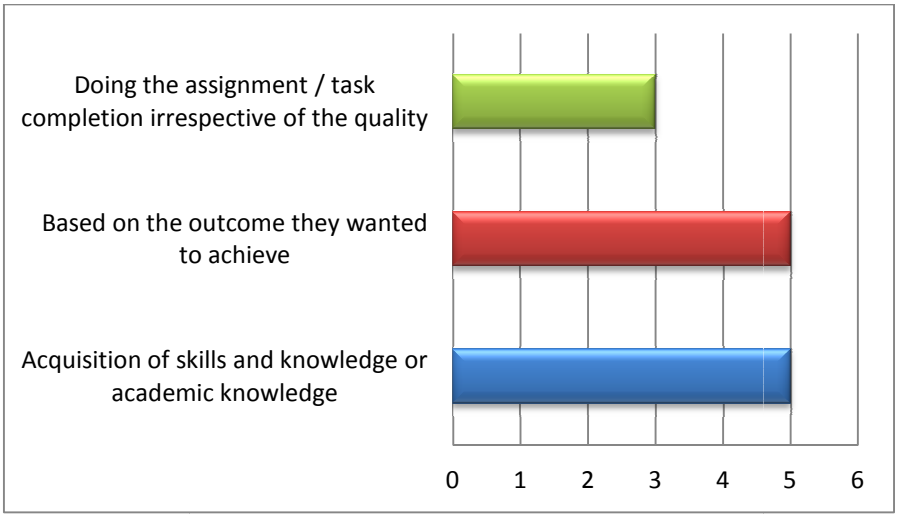


Figure 8: Perceptions of how syndicate members defined learning

In an ideal world, one would have expected the majority of responses to gravitate around the acquisition of skills and knowledge or academic knowledge category as this would be in line with knowledge acquisition in an educational setting. However, of the thirteen responses, five responses were in support of the academic goal. The respondents it seemed offered suggestions linked not to the typical intrinsic motivators as expressed by (Gom 2009), but rather the extrinsic motivators which hopefully deliver greater reward or better conditions, *"I believe the MBA what's seen as an achievement as opposed to a process. For them, they would be able to say "I have an MBA degree, make me the CEO!"* This link to extrinsic reward was pervasive across the sample.

Another aspect which may help understand this perception is provided by Knowles (1975) and which is supported by Daloisio and Firestone (1983), Gom (2009) and Illeris (2009) who argue that adults will learn what they want to learn and what is meaningful for them. They will take as much responsibility as they are allowed to and will not be inclined to learn something they are not interested in or in which they cannot see the meaning or importance. Is it possible that many of the syndicate group members referred to by the respondents are simply not inclined to learn as they are not interested in the content? Or possibly, the content is of no use to them in their current work/life situations? If

this explanation is valid, one can only wonder what motivation would explain these individuals enrolment for the MBA programme.

This lack of alignment between own and others' perceived definitions of learning is thus a contributor to the challenges which besets syndicate groups. A common definition of learning is not the desired outcome or the suggestion. However, the MBA programme is run through an academic institution and minimum perceived levels of contribution and learning must apply.

It must be noted that these were the subjective views of the respondents, and sought to unearth a possible cause which would explain syndicate group member behaviour and attitudes towards goal achievement.

Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors include:

1. Students will have a common understanding of learning.

Faulty assumptions from students include:

1. All MBA students share the same or similar learning goals and aspirations.

4.3.3.3. Learning in the first syndicate group

Using the definition of learning provided, respondents were then asked if learning had transpired in their first syndicate group, and in the event that it did not, to explain where they engaged in learning. This question is fundamental in determining if the syndicate group is the learning mechanism which the School presents it as.

An analysis of responses is provided in Figure 10, and suggests that learning in the context of the syndicate group should be separated into content and

process learning, the former referring to course subject matter and the latter to interpersonal and group dynamics.

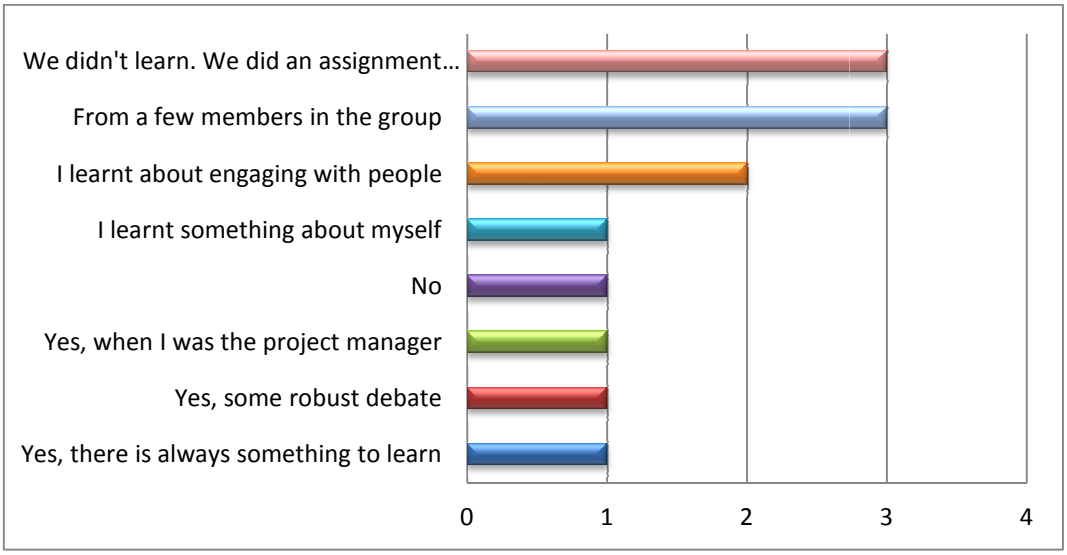


Figure 9: Learning in the first syndicate group

The response category 'We didn't learn, we did an assignment' was shared by three respondents of the thirteen in the sample, and seems to have begun in the very first syndicate group where initially, the objective of many syndicate groups was to achieve a decent grade on the syndicate group assignment. However, as the workload increased, many syndicate groups changed how they approached group tasks, *"I remember in our syndicate, we divided the assignments amongst different people in the group. I don't know what was in any of the other assignments, I may have proof-read them to check the language and spelling, but I did not get any real learning from it".* Two courses were completed each semester, with each course entailing one syndicate group assignment. It became standard practice for syndicate groups to split up into two sub-groups, with each sub-group taking responsibility for one assignment. Consequently, unless an individual volunteered to be part of an assignment or made a conscious effort to read the draft versions and question the writers, they would gain nothing except a grade.

Learning from specific members within the group also accounted for three people of the sample, and often progressed into the formation of study groups.

Two respondents of thirteen indicated that no subject matter learning occurred in their respective syndicate groups, they certainly learned about group and team dynamics, and how to relate to people. One respondent said, *"It would be unfair to say that I did not learn anything especially if I think about some of the feedback that I've been given through the years about myself",* again alluding to the interpersonal learning which transpired.

Subject matter learning was limited to instances where robust debate (one respondent) occurred or when the respondent took on the responsibility of project manager for the assignment (one respondent) as *"...by pulling everything together, I ended up having knowledge about everything even though it wasn't a deep knowledge".*

The other response category requiring mention is that of 'Yes, there is always something to learn', which was mentioned by just one respondent, *"Yes, because I come from a perspective where I believe everyone's perspective is valid, yes, I learned from every syndicate group".* This is the type of approach which one would have expected to be adopted by any individual, least of all those enrolled in the MBA programme.

Academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors should consider a review of two key aspects of the MBA programme particularly the type of person who is granted a seat on the programme, and how these individuals are allocated to syndicate groups. Applicants with senior titles should not be assumed to be competent, nor should it be assumed they have much to contribute to fellow MBA colleagues. The WBS should also consider evaluating the applicants' emotional intelligence or emotional maturity as a key component of the admission decision, and thereby, could prevent much of the arbitrary issues which plague syndicate teams. The allocation of individuals to syndicate groups is the other aspect, with one respondent summarising this sentiment

very aptly, *"If you look at the way the groups have been split, there are sufficiently enough people in the group so that in your first year you should actually never be in the same group with another person. In my first year, I had shared syndicate groups with a number of the same people, which raises the question about how people are being allocated".* The syndicate group must also exist to enable content learning, and without access to specific competencies, such learning will be limited.

The response, *"Yes, there is always something to learn"* has evolved into an epiphany. What was particularly enlightening about this response was the plausible sincerity with which it was said, at least two respondents who were interviewed before this individual, mentioned his name as someone *"who operated on a different level"* and *"who never lost his patience with the group even when he was flying here, and we were still on the ground".* The question which arises from this moment of enlightenment is: Does this student type represent the model syndicate group member, and the best definition of a syndicate group member should the WBS ever offer one? The individual is clearly intelligent having been on the Dean's List on two occasions, and has an approach to dealing with people and working in groups that is worthy of mention. In addition, the individual is respected by colleagues within the programme.

This 'model syndicate group member' thus represents another faulty assumption on the part of business schools, academic planners and lecturers/assessors i.e. which assumes that all students will adopt the same 'Yes, there is always something to learn' orientation to working with syndicate groups. In reality, not all students are the same and very few will sincerely adopt this approach. Syndicate group functioning and processes thus cannot be structured based on this faulty assumption.

Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors include:

1. All students bear the characteristics of the ideal syndicate group member.
2. The syndicate group model can be operationalised on the assumption that all students will sincerely believe that there is always something to learn.

Faulty assumptions from students include:

1. The syndicate group is the preferred group to drive learning
2. Inter-personal skills development is an event and is taught in Human Resources and Organisation Design and Development.
3. Given the perceived level of the programme, MBA students will naturally aspire towards selection for the Dean's List.

4.3.4. Cooperative learning elements

Using the five elements identified by Johnson and Johnson (1999), an analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which the behaviour and practice within syndicate groups align with these elements. The five elements essential for cooperative activity are Positive Interdependence, Individual Accountability, Face-to-Face Promotive Action, Social Skills and Group Processing. These are presented individually.

i. Positive Interdependence

A summarised definition of this element as defined by Johnson and Johnson (1999) and enhanced by Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) is the perception that we are linked to others in such a manner that we cannot succeed unless we help them to succeed, such that our actions benefit them and their actions benefit the self. Excluding responses relating to similar aspirations, an interesting perspective emerged relating to the need for a critical mass or coalition in the

group, if effecting positive change in behaviour was to be achieved. This comment from one respondent summarised this sentiment, *"Unfortunately we were in the minority and another quick learning was that unless you have a critical mass of people willing to work, there is no way the syndicate will achieve what intends to achieve. We never had a critical mass of people willing to do well and or who were willing to learn in my second, third, fourth or fifth syndicate"*. Unfortunately for this individual, he expressed his belief that the make-up of his syndicate groups, the general sense of apathy towards the programme, and their unwillingness to make an effort, had cheated him of the learning and growth he had expected from a programme such as the MBA. There was no interdependence amongst group members.

ii. Individual Accountability

There are two elements to the definition of individual accountability (Johnson and Johnson 1999; Bulut 2010; Shimazoe and Aldrich 2010). The first relates to group members being held individually accountable to perform their work and the second to sharing of performance and feedback with all group members. Syndicate group members seldom held team members accountable for non-performance as, "*it was often easier just to redo the work or get it done myself".* One respondent mentioned an instance where one syndicate group member gave another feedback on their level of contribution, only to be 'let down' by the team who, *"decided it was pointless to continue focusing on the issue and that we should rather look forward towards getting the next piece of work done".*

iii. Face-to-Face Promotive Action

The definition of face-to-face promotive action, namely, promoting others' success by helping, supporting encouraging and praising individual efforts, taking time to explain and discuss problems and issues and not a silent group member (Johnson and Johnson 1999). Based on the responses, it appears that syndicate groups were primarily focused on task completion, and that there was

little concern for individual aspirations, especially where these aspirations were high. One respondent commented, *“In the syndicate groups however, there were times when if you could get a B, they would make you get a B. The dynamic was one of opposite play. It was not about how I am going to help you, but rather it was about I will get my mark up at your expense”.* Another respondent commented, *“That team objective, that team role, never existed within the syndicate group”.*

From the above comments, it is apparent that syndicate groups did generally have a goal, even if it wasn’t shared by all members of the group. This goal, in instances where it did not entail learning or achieving high grades on assignments, essentially placed a larger burden on high achievers as they needed to compensate for the relative lack of support from the syndicate group.

iv. Social Skills

Johnson and Johnson (1999) and Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) argue that team members must be socially competent, notably, they must have the requisite leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication and conflict management skills if they are to contribute to the success of the group. Using this definition as the basis for assessment, it could be argued that the syndicate groups presented with a mixed bag of social skills.

Decision-making skills appeared to negatively impacted by the nature of group dynamics, where initially, respondents indicated, *“”So we often ended up having two hours of discussion, with no decision in sight, filled with high levels of tension. In the end, the general sense of "do what you want" prevailed”.* This sentiment prevailed in all syndicate groups, especially related to the early part of the MBA. Decisions were thus arrived at because of time pressures or because group members were frustrated at the duration of syndicate group meetings.

The level of relationship building skills amongst team members also seemed to vary between groups and specifically, amongst certain individuals. Most respondents reported to have found at least one person in the group with whom they "gelled', and often this relationship formed the basis of *"a coalition within the group to achieve some positive outcome".* In other instances, the interpersonal relationships between group members was strained due to a lack of basic interpersonal skills*, "In almost every meeting, somebody was being sworn at, or somebody had to be shut up. A number of people left the meetings in tears".*

v. Group Processing

Group processing refers to the ability of the team to reach a point where there is open discussion about goal achievement and team relationships, which ultimately enables the team to drive the type of behaviour it desires (Johnson and Johnson 1999; Beals 2010; Shimazoe and Aldrich 2010). A few respondents indicated that discussion of personal goals did occur in the first syndicate group, at that point nearest the completion of the MBA group dynamics programme, and never again featured as part of the groups' engagement. This lack of repetition was attributed to, *"learning from the first syndicate that having high goals and aspirations did not matter. I was never going to get their support to achieve my cum laude"*. More so, goal discussion should occur in the context of the group thereby enabling the creation of a common group goal, which in the context of the syndicate groups represented, generally absent.

Closely linked to open dialogue about relationships is the management of conflict within the group, which many respondents, if not all respondents indicated, was managed poorly within the group, with syndicate groups preferring to ignore non-performance and other issues and focus on getting the job done, *"We actively chose not to argue when people did not come prepared as often, the argument would take longer than just putting our heads down and*

getting the work done." The groups' propensity to avoid risk seems to rest on the importance some respondents placed on using the MBA to develop a network, and they feared that providing feedback would result in conflict which could impact on the value of the individual in ones network.

It would be fair to suggest that a number of respondents may have approached syndicate group work seeking to be cooperative in nature, even though they may not have realised that. The expressed behaviour of setting syndicate goals at the beginning, seeking to encourage interdependence through shared workload etc. are all in some way linked to the cooperative learning elements. However, the environment in which these respondents found themselves was neither prepared for, nor supportive of these gestures.

The defining question at this point is whether syndicate groups operated as cooperative learning groups. The answer is no.

4.3.6.1. A cooperative environment?

A high level analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which the environment within which syndicate groups operate is conducive to cooperative learning. After all, it would be unfair to suggest that syndicate group members are solely responsible for ensuring that cooperative learning is successful.

To this end, a model for the implementation of cooperative learning presented by Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) was used, which identifies three stages, each with specific steps, as instrumental towards implementing an environment conducive to cooperative learning. The steps are compared to feedback from respondents and presented in Table 23.

Table 23: Cooperative learning model: An assessment of the syndicate group

Stage	Assessment of Syndicate Group Environment
Stage 1: Design and Development Stage 1. Establishment of group goals and rewards. 2. Explanation of cooperative group learning process to students to create positive interdependencies. 3. Control group composition, e.g. determine optimal diversity and team size. 4. Develop students' social skills, e.g. via training before classroom activities actually begin.	1. Group goals not clearly understood. Reward system, assumed as the Dean's List, not a motivator to all students. 2. Group composition ineffective, possibly due to insufficient range of competencies or ineffective placement. 3. Orientation session covers too much in too short time space. Does not create skills to deal with relationship building, conflict management etc.
Stage 2: Operation Stage 1. Design tasks clearly, clarify expected outputs. 2. Establish transparent reward systems e.g. start with simple assignments. 3. Monitor group performance.	1. Tasks are in place. 2. Reward systems and outputs not clearly defined. Purpose of the syndicate group unclear. 3. Disciplinary processes exist but are not used and ineffective. 4. Monitoring processes not in place. Group assignment submission the only visible output.
Stage 3: Output and Disbanding Stage 1. Provide prompt feedback. 2. Take groups' outputs seriously. 3. Maintain consistency in the reward system.	Feedback in relation to the group assignment submitted is provided. 1. Grades allocated and some written feedback provided, usually after a few weeks, possibly even after syndicate groups have adjourned. 2. Reward practices across the programme to be re-evaluated.

Adapted from Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010).

From the analysis above, it is clear that the syndicate groups in their current form do not operate in an environment that is conducive to cooperative learning. For the syndicate group to be more effective, a more supportive cooperative learning environment is a necessity. Thus, enabling processes such as

improved goal setting, monitoring and feedback mechanisms and the role of lecturers as facilitators to the syndicate group must be enhanced.

4.3.5. Closure / Recommendations to improve syndicate group work

Based on respondent experiences of syndicate groups, it seemed appropriate to use the end of the interview to get their specific thoughts and insights on how they felt syndicate group functioning could be enhanced, irrespective of cooperative learning principles. Thus, the following questions were posed:

1. *What do you think can be done to improve the continued use of syndicate groups as part of the MBA programme?*
2. *What would you say are realistic alternatives to working in syndicate groups?*

4.3.5.1. Recommendations to improve the effectiveness syndicate groups

A range of suggestions and recommendations were offered. Some of these are presented verbatim, others summarised.

1. The business school should allow students to form their own syndicate groups.
2. Syndicate groups should be given the rights to 'select' and 'evict' group members, thereby enabling self-regulation of the group. If the business school wants to retain ownership over allocation to syndicate groups, then they should allow the syndicate group to evict non-performing members.
3. *"Don't say 'there is a disciplinary processes' and then not allow it to be implemented. If there are processes which will help the syndicate group, allow them to be applied without interference".*
4. Find a way to assess emotional maturity, and then ensure it becomes part of the selection criteria.

5. *"Why so many engineers? Syndicate groups struggle when there isn't a fair spread of skills in the group. The business school should consider accepting a wider spread of professions into the program"*.
6. The business school should consider placing students in groups for the first semester, after which students are allowed to form their own groups. This will encourage people who really want to achieve, achieving at extraordinary levels, and those who have not formed into groups could be allocated to syndicate groups in the manner the university has always applied.
7. The content and duration of the orientation programme must be enhanced such that it benefits students. *"Allow senior students to deliver the programme, set up mini-tasks in "Apprentice" style, so that we can learn quickly about other people"*.
8. Include aspects of the Organisation Design and Development module such as Team theory, in the orientation programme.
9. *"Lecturers should alternate the tasks given to the syndicate groups. The same story of individual assignment, syndicate assignment and presentation is boring and drives "beat the system' behaviour. The variety will stimulate student interest and remove the repetition of the same requirements".*

4.3.5.2. Alternatives to syndicate groups

Interestingly, just one respondent had concrete ideas on alternatives to syndicate group work. The remainder of respondents indicated that they believed the groups were necessary and would prefer to have the problems addressed.

The two suggestions as alternatives to syndicate group work were:

1. *"The Business School should consider the use of business simulations instead of typical syndicate group task work. This will not only stimulate working in a group but will contribute to the overall enjoyment and richness of the MBA programme".*

2. *"Students could be asked to take on social projects aligned to course content. In that way, there is some give-back to society from both students and the school, and society is a beneficiary".*

Given the volume of recommendations, it appears that many respondents have been actively considering ways to overcome the challenges and problems they have experienced in their syndicate groups. It is additionally encouraging that an overwhelming majority indicated they would not dispose of the syndicate group process as there is value in working with others. However, many of these recommendations are very transactional in nature and may address the explicit issues syndicate groups are facing. Unfortunately, there are only a few of these recommendations which allude to creating an environment which is conducive to cooperative learning leaving it to the business school to reflect on how cooperative learning could be operationalised.

The two alternatives to syndicate groups as presented must be given due consideration as in many ways, these are not really replacements. Rather, they are a format change to how people can learn and interact, and depending on the format, will include built-in monitoring and feedback mechanisms whereby individual performance in the group can be monitored. These suggestions resemble precisely what many of the respondents have been asking for.

4.4. Additional findings

4.4.1. Impact on behaviour

The incidence of behaviour change in respondents was brought about primarily in response to the experience in the first semester of the first block of the MBA programme, and has not been included in either the 'Positive' or 'Negative' because it straddles both. For some, the consequent behaviour change was a positive and proactive effort to avoid repeating an earlier experience. For

others, it was the forced downward realignment of personal expectations and aspirations, imposed by the dynamics within the syndicate group.

In the first instance, respondents indicated a conscious effort to change how they interacted with syndicate group members based on learning from the first semester. As a consequence, a greater emphasis was placed on process and structure in the group, for example, *"I think that one has to be very clear on that roles the different people will play within the group, and then ensure that you manage people to those roles"*. Another respondent placed greater emphasis on task allocation, *"We assigned work to people, we followed up on what people were doing".*

The use of feedback mechanisms also increased whereby some groups made a conscious effort to provide feedback to syndicate group members, to the point of reminding colleagues of disciplinary processes available to syndicate groups should syndicate members not perform as required, *"We even had little rules that we wrote up. We even had "bitching sessions" where we sat people down and had to tell them what we expected of them. It was very much deliver or face the highway, to a point when we were very close to approaching the faculty to have one or two names removed from the assignment".*

'Positive' behavioural changes were not always welcomed or entertained. One respondent recalled an incident in his syndicate group where the group sat down to review their performance in relation to an assignment which they had submitted. To his dismay, a syndicate group member retorted, "*"I did not come here to develop. I came here to do an assignment", pretty much in a way telling us to get lost. Where that was that attitude, we decided to manage them to that attitude".* The respondent continued by sharing his ambivalence that a professional person with such an attitude would even have been considered for a seat in the MBA programme.

The 'negative' incidences of behaviour change occurred when two ordinarily high performing and high achieving individuals were forced to lower their own

aspirations and expectations as they were the only persons in their respective who wanted to excel. Thus, individuals who would ordinarily consider a grade less than an A on an assignment as failure, were now settling for C's, *"I found myself in a group with individuals who simply were not motivated to do well. It became quite normal to submit assignments and get 60% which in my view is actually failure at MBA level, but we had no other option because that was the group. Unlike the first group, the dynamics here were focused more on doing the least amount of work, putting in the least amount of effort, and going for the basic pass".*

This respondent was challenged regarding his willingness to allow the syndicate group force this upon him, to which he replied, *"It was very difficult to adapt to the group. But I quickly realised that I needed to take stock of my situation in relation to the group. My kids were young, one was 2 the other 5, and my situation at work, and in terms of where I am in my career, and I had to weigh these off against the effort it would take to try to turn the group around. In the end my decision was a conscious one that I simply did not have the time, energy, capacity, willingness, to try to do that. It is just not worth it".* This instance of behaviour change is reflective of research by Bezrukova, Jehn, Zanutto and Thatcher (2009) which found that high performing individuals could be negatively impacted when asked to perform in group settings.

It would be easy to question the actions of the two respondents who chose to re-align their own aspirations instead of taking on the syndicate group. Moreso, given that each syndicate group assignment accounts for 25% of the semester mark, one can appreciate their initial efforts to 'rally the troops', before taking the decisions which they did.

The final example of behaviour change is not categorised as positive or negative, as it could really be interpreted as either. One respondent shared the experience of how he rescued three syndicate group assignments by stepping in at the end and together with a couple of other syndicate group members, did what needed to get done to submit the assignment on time. He then made an

active effort to not rescue the fourth assignment in the hope that the syndicate group would learn to be more expeditious in the future. The result was *"painful, to say the least. I let it burn, and it burned badly. I regretted doing that because it is impacted my long-term prospects. I was at the point where I realised that I could get a distinction for the MBA. That particular subject where we did poorly is actually now going to hurt me".* One wonders if the only way an individual can achieve excellent grades is by carrying the bulk of the workload in a syndicate group to ensure that the 25% contribution to final grade is maximised.

4.3.4.1. Summary of behavioural changes

The opportunity loss to high performing individuals by continuously being allocated to syndicate groups is immeasurable, and has been acknowledged by one of the respondents, *"I often sit there and look back the programme and wonder how different it could have been if I had been allocated to syndicate where there was a desire to want to learn and to want to grow".* In addition, the level of emotional maturity displayed by these individuals is also notable, *" At the end of the day, it is about the numbers, the Bell curve, and it was just unfortunate that I happened to be in each subsequent syndicate with people who fell into the largest part of the Bell curve".*

In addition, one can debate the paradoxical nature of not intervening in a dire situation in order to create a learning opportunity for others, only to have the entire episode come back to bite you at a later stage. It's pretty much a 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' scenario, which could have been avoided if the syndicate group functioned as one thinks it should have.

Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors include:

1. That syndicate group members want to assist others.
2. All syndicate group members benefit when academically stronger students assist academically weaker students.

Faulty assumptions from students include:

1. Syndicate group members, irrespective of their own aspirations will be a source of support and encouragement towards the achievement of others goals.
2. 'Slackers', 'leechers' and other non-performers will change their behaviour if they are not rescued by the 'coalition of the willing'.

4.4.2. Study group formation and dynamics

"Stated simply, it formed by excluding the people who were not willing to contribute and we continued with people all were contributing and who added value to the learning experience. That's the basics behind the formation of the study group. It was born out of people looking for common ground, common values, similar expectations, and found those characteristics in other individuals. It was born out of necessity".

The quote above provides a very honest view explaining the formation of the study group which the individual was a member of. The formation of study groups represents another key development in the syndicate group work process. These groups were self-forming, self-regulating, entry-controlled groups consisting of individuals who shared similar aspirations of the programme. Bezrukova *et al.* (2009:35) refers to the formation of such subgroups as "hypothetical dividing lines" which divide a group, based on specific or various attributes such as age, gender, or purpose amongst others.

Table 24 provides an indication of the study group participation levels across the respondents. Nine respondents were in some form of study group whilst two respondents had never participated in a study group and preferred to study

alone. The remaining two participated in study groups on an *ad hoc* basis, usually driven by the complexity of course subject matter.

Table 24: Study group participation levels

	No	Sometimes	Yes
No. of responses	2	2	9

4.4.2.1. Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) team development model applied to study groups

There was a common sentiment expressed by respondents who were members of study groups, regarding the relevance of these stages. Notably that as study groups were naturally formed, the initial 'getting to know you' of the forming stage enhanced the foundation of the group. Consequently, the storming phase in study groups was less about wanting to impress others with ones cognitive prowess or about personality issues, and more about the core objective of the group. By the time the study groups started storming, it appears there were strong working relationships established, with sufficient levels of mutual trust and respect to overcome some of the issues which may have arisen. This foundational strength of relationship amongst study group members is supported by Edwards *et al.* (2006),

The storming and norming phases within study groups were also devoid of power-play, with respondents from both study groups confirming this. These respondents also indicated that they believed their study groups performed well, with one respondent being somewhat more critical in her assessment, *"I think that within the study group, we reached the peak, if not very close to the peak of performing, which in my opinion is what you are trying to get out of the syndicates".*

The model appears to have been readily visible within study groups as well, with a greater emphasis placed on the forming stage given the natural manner

in which this would have occurred. A sentiment prevailed amongst respondents who were members of a study group that this was crucial to the development of the team, and prepared the team for the storming and norming phases.

4.4.2.2. Morgan, Salas and Glickman's TEAM model applied to study groups

Table 24 summarises the responses relating to the prevalence of team work and / or task work within study groups.

Table 25: Perspectives on team work and task work

	Team work	Task work
No. of responses	9	9

Responses from members of study groups provided support for the model presented by Morgan Jr *et al.* (1993), with a clear suggestion that study groups operated as a team, and within this team context, ensured effective task work. One respondent captured this simply as *"...main study group team work, supported by clever task work".* It is also likely the self-forming nature of the study groups contributed to team performance as the TEAM model posits that the forming phase is one where individuals are testing each other in terms of trust and dependability, without which the storming phase will be characterised by emotional responses to task demands and intragroup conflict.

What is clear is that in instances where a group made the distinction between the two streams of team work and task work, and adapted these as required, these groups claim to have benefitted and achieved more from the group.

4.4.2.3. Study group objectives

Some study groups formed with the primary objective of socialising and acting as a support mechanism to one another, and thus excluded achievement or personal development as its defining criteria. For example, *"For certain study groups, it was more for moral support. So, groups such as "the Indian group", they just wanted to be together so that they could say they had company, commonality that they belonged in some way. They were not there to learn. They were there just to be comfortable with each other, and that got them happy and calm before an exam. The mere fact that they met, is what worked for them".* Other study groups were more achievement and development orientated, with one respondent remarking*, "Strong characters, strong ideas, a strong work ethic. We even converted somebody in the group towards striving to get onto the Dean's list".* The objective of this study group was clearly understood by all members of the group i.e. to get as many team members as possible onto the Dean's List. The key factor here is that the groups benefited from having a shared purpose and a common goal (Sonnentag and Volmer 2010; Zhou and Wang 2010).

4.4.2.4. Differences between syndicate and study groups

Table 25 summarises the differences between syndicate groups and a typical high-performing study group.

Table 26: Differences between syndicate and study groups

Syndicate group	Study group
1. No control over membership. 2. Members with a variety of work ethic and aspiration for the MBA programme. 3. Seldom had a clear objective. 4. Where an objective was agreed, it tended to gravitate towards assignment submission.	1. Strict control over membership. 2. Members shared a similar work ethic and aspiration for the MBA programme. 3. Objectives were clear and understood by all in the group. 4. Objectives referred to personal and group development, inside and outside of

Syndicate group	Study group
5. Trust and competence had to be assumed. 6. Focus was on the individual within the group context. 7. Adjourned every six months. 8. Forced forming resulted in weaker foundation when storming and norming. 9. Performance was defined as handing in a good syndicate group assignment. 10. Conflict was seldom managed.	the MBA programme. 5. Trust and competence was guaranteed. 6. Focus was on the group. 7. Operated for the duration of the MBA programme, and beyond. 8. Self forming, with stronger base to leverage the storming and norming phases. 9. Performance was defined as getting as many members as possible onto the Dean's List. 10. Mutual respect to deal with issues and move on.

The differences listed in Table 26 are not exhaustive, and have been extracted from the various responses to questions relating to study group dynamics. It is possible that a syndicate group may have at some point displayed some of the characteristics listed in the study group column. The key difference is that these characteristics were experienced consistently by study group members throughout the MBA programme by respondents.

There is alignment between the study group characteristics summarised in Table 26 and the conditions which must be created to enable an adult to learn (Knowles 1984). These characteristics include an attitude that the learner must feel the need to learn, an environment of mutual respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression and acceptance of differences must exist, and the goals of the learning experience must be perceived as their own goals.

4.4.2.5. Roles fulfilled in study groups

As mentioned previously, two study groups were represented across all respondents. In terms of the adoption or allocation of roles within the study group, an interesting difference emerged between the two groups, with the nature of skills within the team becoming a predominant feature. Table 27 presents the responses.

Table 27: Roles adopted in study groups

	Role description		
	Leadership / Coordinator, and Specialist	Team member	Validation and Specialist
No. of responses	1	2	6

Two respondents from the first study both referred to themselves as team players within the group, to help lighten workload. The role expressed by these respondents is reflective of the team worker role in the Belbin role inventory (Henry and Stevens 1999; Aritzeta et al. 2007). This role encourages cohesion and is typically adopted by individuals low in Machiavellianism, essentially low in willingness to deceive or manipulate others. These individuals are keen to identify the work to be done and are willing to get it done. Of these two study group members, one had defined his role as providing some form of leadership / coordination, as a natural affiliation. His second role in the team was that of a specialist.

Members from the second study group were more intellectual in terms of how they expressed their roles, which aligned more closely with the 'intellectual' team role as presented in Aritzeta *et al.* (2007) in terms of the roles within a group. The common use of the descriptor 'validation' further demonstrated the perception of the individual role within the team and possibly the perceived sense of equality within the group. Each respondent within this study group highlighted the specialist role which each team member fulfilled at specific points in the life span of the group, which was directly linked to the core competencies and experience of the individual. The Belbin inventory makes reference this role as one characterised by a strong cognitive adaptive style and willing to share their in-depth cognitive knowledge and experience (Belbin Associates 2012).

The difference in how different study group members perceived their roles was unexpected, and is probably explained by two factors particularly the reality that

study groups may have different objectives which influences how they perceive their role within the group; and the nature of competencies available to the study group. It was clear from these two groups that their objectives were not the same with the first study group aiming to lessen the workload for all its members, and the second study group aiming to enable its members to get onto the Dean's List. These objectives would certainly have influenced how study group members viewed their roles. The first group's behaviour was thus characterised by all team members doing required the groundwork, and then a group effort to agree on how it fits together. The second study group clearly had access to a wider range of resources and it appears they inherently trusted each of these 'specialists'. This would have enabled study group members to sit back and be led by the specialist, whilst acting permanently as sounding boards or 'validators' as they referred to it. Their context allowed for this role.

The dual roles of 'validator' and 'specialist' as experienced by members of this study group is illustrative of the merging point where the individual roles integrate with the role required of the individual by the group (Stewart et al. 2005). In this specific context, the group required 'specialists' at specific times and 'validators' all the time.

4.4.2.6. Learning in study groups

Respondents were asked where they thought learning occurred. As expected, the responses mirrored the study group participation distribution. Nine respondents pointed to their study group as the primary source of learning, two said they preferred to learn by themselves, and the remaining two also preferred to learn by themselves but had access to a study group if required.

Within the sample, full-time members of two study groups were represented. The one study group was considered very ideal in its membership with this makeup referred to by at least five other respondents. This groups membership included a finance director, three operations managers, a marketing manager, a pricing specialist, an IT engineering consultant, and a HR specialist; *"People*

who were effectively experts in their roles or who had enough knowledge to fill the pseudo-leadership position through the course being studied". This particular study group has proceeded to leverage the variety of skills and experience within the team to form a business and are in the process of importing a number of products from China, having engaged with contact which was made when the business school study tour visited China in 2008.

It appears that most study groups operated in a similar manner, which is best summarised as a team effort, with effective task allocation. The difference between groups was around the intensity of the effort and the nature of the consequential relationships which formed. One respondent described the relationship between study group members as, *"We do try to make time for each other, and for example in December we all got together and went to a show with our partners. It is there, but it is dependent on work and what's happening in people's lives".* Another respondent described the strength of the bond that has developed between members of her study group as "*...Forged in titanium. People had babies, people bought cars, we became portions of each other's lives and this formed a massive portion of the support structure".* This sentiment of continuity is supported by Montanari *et al*. (2008) who argued that teams who are allowed to interact with each other over time, develop stable patterns required for mutual adjustment. Teams with a high turnover can disrupt the ability of the team to draw on the experience of its members and its ability to function in a harmonious fashion.

Upon reflection, study groups may best be explained as a means of creating a context within which adult learning can take place. Kiely *et al.* (2004) offers a Four Lens Model which they suggest facilitates such learning. The interpretation of their model is provided in Table 28.

Table 28: The Four Lens Model

Lens	Application to study group
Learner	Study group members display internal and external motivational patterns. A similar learning style of learning through engagement and interaction.
Process	Robust, intensive, interactive and light-hearted discourse. Opportunity is provided for reflection, and for the selection of the appropriate response.
Educator	Rotational leadership, based on the individual experience and competence of individuals within the group. The leader is not an educator, rather a facilitator. One persons experience is forms a mental model which all team members can access.
Context	The team is the focus, not the individual. Social interaction builds trust and contributes to developing tolerance and appreciation for individual contexts.

Adapted from Kiely (2004)

4.4.2.7. Study groups and cooperative learning

Using the five elements identified by Johnson and Johnson (1999) and interpretations thereof (Bulut 2010; Hsiung 2010; Chin-Min 2011), an analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which the behaviour and practice within study groups align with their definition of a cooperative group. The five elements essential for cooperative activity are positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive action, social skills and group processing. These are presented individually.

i. Positive interdependence

A summarised definition of this element as defined by Johnson and Johnson (1999) and enhanced by Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) is the perception that we are linked to others in such a manner that we cannot succeed unless we help them to succeed, such that our actions benefit them and their actions benefit the self. This element came through strongly from respondents who were

members of study groups, with statements such as*, "I think we learned very quickly that by leaning on each other, we created 10 times the result then three of us struggling individually".* Another common example shared by many respondents related to the sharing of the workload especially relating to course readings. Each member was allocated a handful of readings which they had to read, summarise and then share with the rest of the group. The reading summary became the primary source of information for the rest of the group. In this manner, everyone benefitted. In a similar vein, the behaviour of the study groups support findings by Sonnentag and Volmer (2010) who found that the presence of a team goal directly influenced the performance of members of a team.

ii. Individual accountability

There are two elements to the definition of individual accountability (Johnson and Johnson 1999; Bulut 2010; Shimazoe and Aldrich 2010) which relates to group members being held individually accountable to perform their work. In the context of the study group, this was clearly visible and expected, and may have been used synonymously with trust. Generally, if a member of the study group said they would deliver a piece of work, it was delivered. In exceptional circumstances, the team member may have asked for additional time, but the group always worked around the delay. The most likely reason for this was the underlying trusting relationships, which implied without doubt that the individual had a perfectly legitimate reason for not delivering as expected.

Individual performance was generally visible to all in the group, and perceptions regarding the level of individual contribution was highlighted as one of the primary contributors to perceived performance. Arguably the greatest anomaly in the functioning of study groups was found in this performance feedback domain, with most study group members preferring "not to rock the boat". A specific example was provided by a respondent who was a member of one of the study groups regarding the performance of two colleagues, *"What was*

particularly interesting for me in this group was that we had two people who probably contributed less to the group, yet we carried them. In essence, they didn't really contribute to the study group such that they probably got more benefit from it then we got from them. Yet we tolerated that". This respondent was questioned regarding the group's unwillingness to deal with the issue and could not explain the inaction. At best, he suggested that their behaviour had not caused harm to the group which made their membership of the group more palatable. This lack of action contradicts research by Laszlo *et al.* (2009) which found that team members who shirk their responsibilities result in dissonance being created in the team, which is closely followed by remedial action.

iii. Face-to-face promotive action

Respondents who were members of study groups provided numerous examples in support of the definition of face-to-face promotive action like promoting others' success by helping, supporting encouraging and praising individual efforts, taking time to explain and discuss problems and issues and not a silent group member (Beals 2010; Shimazoe and Aldrich 2010; Chin-Min 2011). One respondent commented, "*In my study group, we were in it for the team. If I wasn't on the Dean List, then I wanted one of my study group to be there. Knowing that I helped you get there, was a sense of pride".* This sentiment was echoed by many of the respondents who participated in syndicate groups.

Research conducted by Johnson *et al*. (1990), Johnson *et al.* (1993) and Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) has demonstrated that cooperative group processes has a positive impact on individual achievement within the group. In this regard, one respondent commented, *"To be honest, I didn't start this MBA thinking I could get a first class pass. At a point that has become a reality and it is not because of me. It is because of the people in that group were able to challenge me."* This sentiment of promoting others' success was clearly evident in study groups.

iv. Social Skills

Social skills amongst study group members were readily available, and was often referred to as the reason many people 'gelled'. Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) argue that team members must be socially competent, particularly they must have the requisite leadership, decision-making, trust building, communication and conflict management skills if they are to contribute to the success of the group.

Based on respondent feedback, dual forms of leadership were present within study groups. In the first form, natural leaders emerged which steered and kept the group together. The second form was a temporary form of leadership based on subject matter expertise. Both these forms appeared to be effective and were aligned with the role cross-over model presented by (Stewart et al. 2005) where roles are separated by preference and team need.

In the same manner, other social skills were present in abundance, except for conflict management. Respondents never referred to conflict within the study group, rather disagreements, which they indicated were usually settled by agreeing to disagree. As a consequence, there was never the need for conflict management skills. One respondent said something which in hindsight may explain the lack of conflict, "*I think that I got so much value from the group that I realised I may not feel comfortable actually fighting in the group. I knew that I was getting something out from the group, in fact probably getting more than I was giving. It was worth not rocking the boat"*. When asked to clarify this statement, the respondent referred to the application of a process of evaluation, to weigh-off the intended benefit to the group, in relation to the cost to the group.

v. Group Processing

Group processing is said to occur when there is open dialogue about goal achievement and team relationships within the team (Johnson and Johnson

1999; Beals 2010; Shimazoe and Aldrich 2010). This therefore results in the establishment of an environment whereby desirable behaviour is reinforced, undesirable behaviour is rebuked and more effective problem resolution is achieved.

Respondents who were members of the same study group continuously referred to the 'tip of the triangle', which was the groups own 'Dean's List', the objective of the triangle being to topple the person who happened to be at the tip of the triangle. Being positioned at the top of the triangle was not achieved solely through high grades on assignments. It was about how well the person was doing in their professional lives too whereby a promotion to a more senior position or having a child, earned the team member time at the tip of the triangle. If a team member was perceived to have expertise in a particular subject matter, their names were scribbled into the tip of the triangle. Thus, there was open dialogue about performance. One respondent had completed his thesis and acknowledged his study group using the words, "...*my MBA family"*. The positive nature of relationships in the team can be deduced from the above.

4.4.2.8. Diversity within study groups

The diversity within a group was also investigated to determine if it influenced group dynamics or group performance. The definition offered by Kearney *et al.* (2009) was used as the operational definition and included both surface level demographic attributes such as gender, age, race etc; and task-related informational or cognitive diversity. The findings are presented in Table 28.

Table 29: Perceived impact of diversity on syndicate group effectiveness

	Demographic factors		**Cognitive diversity**	
	Positive impact	Negative impact	Positive impact	Negative impact
No. of responses	9	0	7	2

In line with the research findings from Kearney *et al.* (2009), respondents in general agreed that diversity in terms of demographic attributes contributed to the effectiveness of the study group. Diversity within the group created different perspectives which added value not only to the tasks at hand but also to personal growth.

Responses to cognitive diversity in study groups mirrored previously presented concerns regarding the spread of a skills, resources and experiences in the make-up in study groups. However, an interesting difference emerged between respondents from the two study groups represented in the sample. The responses of these two groups is presented in Table 29.

Table 30: Cognitive diversity between two study groups in the sample

	Cognitive diversity	
	Positive impact	Negative impact
Study group 1	0	2
Study group 2	7	0

The two members of study group 1 both suggested that the lack of cognitive diversity negatively impacted on group performance. All respondents from study group 2 indicated that cognitive diversity positively impacted group performance as this group had access to a specialist for nearly each course in the MBA programme. This cognitive spread was noticed by respondents who were not members of study groups, with one respondent mentioning, *"I must admit, I used to envy your study group. You guys had all the right people! Why didn't you guys select me?"*

Diversity relating to demographic variables was welcomed by members of study groups, with group members suggesting that cultural, age and other factors added a 'richness' to group interaction. This sentiment supported the findings of Kearney *et al.* (2009) about the benefit of groups diversity.

Both types of diversity according to Kearney *et al.* (2009) are significantly and positively related to team performance especially where the need for cognition within a group is high. This may contribute to understanding how study group 2 selected its members particularly as the group which comprised the finance director, three operations managers, a marketing manager, a pricing specialist, an IT engineering consultant, and a HR specialist.

4.4.2.9. The downside of study groups

Study groups are not without pitfalls. By far, the biggest drawback of participating in a study group is the need to invest additional time and effort into an already challenging schedule. Respondents indicated that whilst their families or partners may have understood their need for the study group, it was an added source of pressure. Additional consternation lay in the belief that the syndicate group should in reality have fulfilled the role of the study group.

The formation of study groups seemed to be in response to the perceived lack of learning in the syndicate group, and without recognising the process-type learning which was prevalent even in completely dysfunctional syndicate groups, the study group members may have lost the opportunity to learn to work with poor performers, to learn to manage work around individuals with a poor work ethic, and to manage or engage teams with varying levels of aspiration etc.

According to Kearney *et al.* (2009), questions regarding the perceived value of the two groups will need to be addressed as the student will question the intrinsic or cognitive value obtained from participation in both a study and syndicate group. Support for this was found when one respondent indicated how he gradually withdrew from active participation in syndicate groups, whereby he did what was allocated to him and no more. His reason therefore was that he knew he was not gaining anything of value from the syndicate group, and would rather focus his efforts on the learning and support he knew existed in his study group.

4.3.6.1. Summary of study group formation and dynamics

There is clearly a dynamic at play, placebo or real, which encourages and drives the performance of members within study groups. Perhaps the belief that association with people of a similar achievement orientation, work ethic, personality type etc., provides the individual with a sense of association that there are others who also feel the stresses and strains which the MBA programme entails.

The behaviour within and perceived usefulness of study groups in the MBA programme does contradict research findings by Allen and Hecht (2004) that group performance is not better than individual performance. These authors argue that it is that faith in the value of team effort that may contribute to different levels of performance.

Are study groups necessary? Are they a more effective alternative to forced membership syndicate groups? The answer is yes, they are necessary, and they offer a effective alternative to current challenges experienced by syndicate groups.

Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors include:

1. Syndicate groups with forced membership create an environment for individual growth and development.
2. Self forming groups are ineffective at sourcing the appropriate individual members to achieve group goals.
3. Negative experiences in syndicate groups encourage group members to work harder towards making the syndicate group successful.
4. Students cannot learn by working with the same group of individuals over a number of semesters.
5. Students will continuously sit back and ingest the problems which beset syndicate groups, because they have to.

Faulty assumptions from students include:

1. Initially, the syndicate group is the vehicle for learning.
2. Thereafter, I will learn only from my study group.
3. That they can expect a variety of cognitively diverse members in their syndicate groups.

4.5. Summary of the results

To fully appreciate the nature of respondent experiences in syndicate and or study groups, all respondents were asked to first share the expectations which they had of syndicate groups before starting the MBA programme. Thereafter, they were asked a series of questions which was aimed specifically at their experiences in their first syndicate group. The purpose of this was to determine if the first syndicate group experience had any impact on the respondent, such as changes to behaviour in relation to the remainder of syndicate groups, and to the programme as a whole. Thereafter, experiences in subsequent syndicate groups and or study groups were discussed.

The general findings relating to experiences in syndicate groups is summarised and presented in Figure 10 and demonstrates that individuals came into the MBA programme with expectations, which either materialised or were disproved in the first syndicate group. For some, this led to a sense of disappointment as expectations were not met, and for others, comfort that syndicate groups could enhance learning. It appears that study group formation was triggered at this stage in the programme. As per respondent feedback, work in subsequent syndicate groups seldom improved, and students with high aspirations either changed their aspirations, or found individuals with whom they could work with towards achieving their goals.

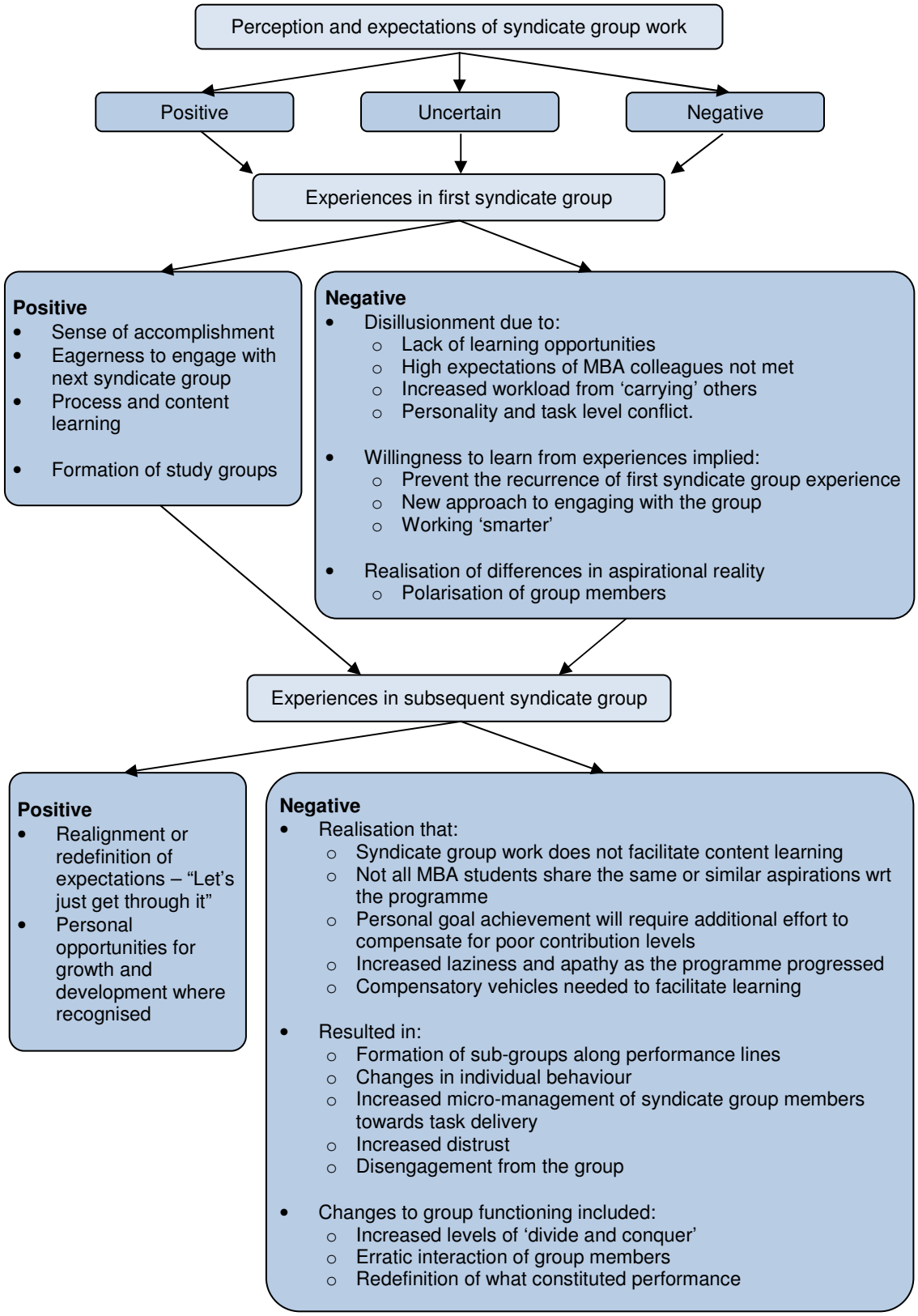


Figure 10: Summary of syndicate group experiences

The formation of study groups by students to compensate for, and in some instances, to 'replace' syndicate group work yields many potential lessons for academics, curriculum planners, lecturers / assessors in terms of how existing business school processes could be enhanced to benefit the student. The syndicate group experience is presented in Figure 11.

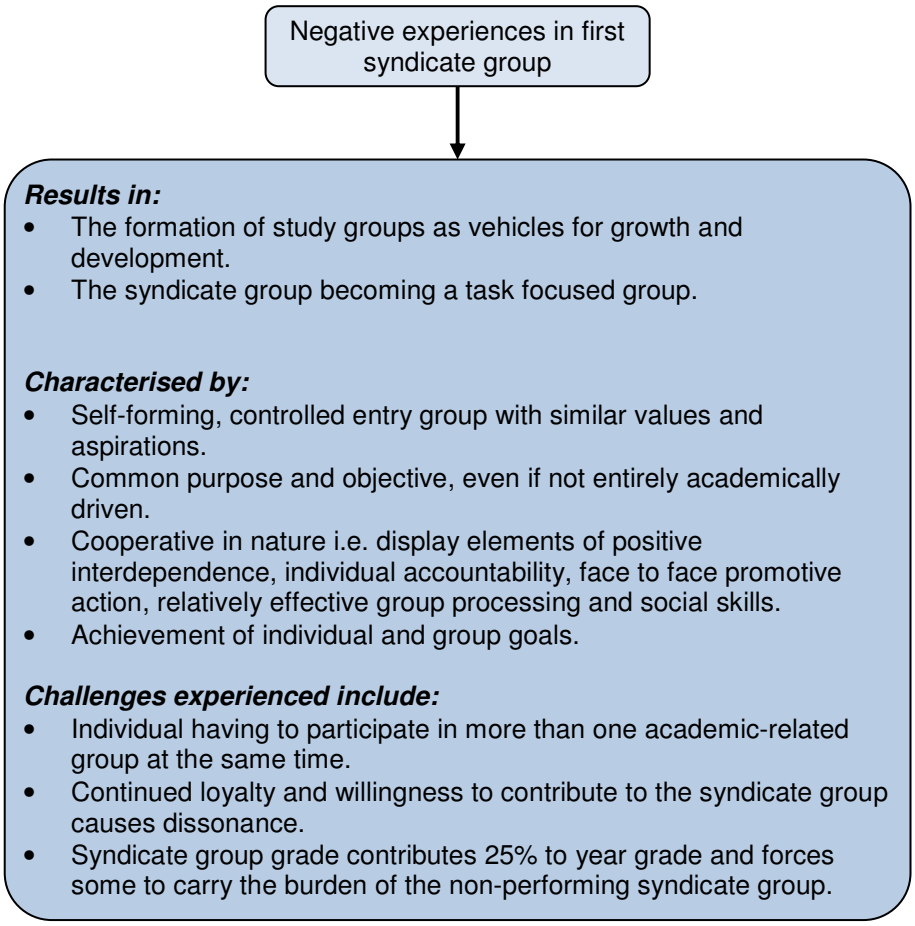


Figure 11: Summary of study group phenomenon

4.4.1. Faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors regarding syndicate groups

In total, twenty five faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners, lecturers / assessors have been identified, which contribute to the overall

ineffectiveness of syndicate groups within the MBA programme. These are presented in Table 30.

Table 31: Consolidated list of faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors relating to syndicate groups

Category	Faulty assumption
Expectations of syndicate group work	1. There is common understanding about the purpose, intention and expectations of syndicate group work. 2. Existing communication channels and orientation processes adequately conveys the desired messages about the MBA programme. 3. Existing communication and engagement with the marketplace contributes to the creation the desired common mental model regarding syndicate group functioning. 4. Students will not experience disappointment when their expectations of syndicate groups are met.
Experiences of syndicate group work	1. Students allocated to groups will know how to identify and manage team development processes. 2. The MBA programme must cater for all competency levels, not only high-achievers. 3. That syndicate group members will want to assist others.
Positive and negative themes arising from the first syndicate group experience	1. Existing MBA selection criteria contribute to the establishment or an environment resembling a meritocracy. 2. Emotional intelligence or emotional maturity is not a pre-requisite for entrance into the MBA programme.
Team dynamics	1. The objectives of working in syndicate groups are clearly understood by all. 2. Grades achieved on syndicate group assignments are a good reflection of team performance. 3. Grade allocation to syndicate groups are a good reflection that groups have achieved the group objectives as expected by the Business School. 4. The MBA Orientation Programme provides sufficient background knowledge regarding team development. 5. Grades allocated to syndicate group assignments drives team behaviour. 6. Syndicate group members will realise that group performance is enabled by a combination of team work and task work skills.

Category	Faulty assumption
Role theory	1. Students will proactively take on roles needed by the group to become successful. 2. MBA orientation programme content adequately addresses the true nature of roles within syndicate groups.
Team conflict	1. Existing MBA selection criteria contribute to the establishment or an environment resembling a meritocracy. 2. Emotional intelligence or emotional maturity is not a pre-requisite for a entrance into the MBA programme. 3. Conflict amongst team members is restricted to disagreements over the application and interpretation of theories and concepts. 4. The lack of any form of syndicate group regulation is conducive to syndicate group functioning.
Diversity	1. Post-graduate students have sufficient knowledge and experience to adapt to the variety of content included in the course.
Learning theory	1. Students will have a common understanding of learning. 2. All students bear the characteristics of the ideal syndicate group member. 3. The syndicate group model can be operationalised on the assumption that all students will sincerely believe that there is always something to learn.

The list of faulty assumptions can in most cases be directly linked to some of the processes linked to the MBA programme, for example, a lack of common understanding regarding the nature and purpose of a syndicate group could be linked directly to the WBS marketing and external communication process, as well as the internal communication and orientation programmes. These processes must be identified where appropriate, reviewed to ensure a better alignment with expected outcomes.

4.4.2. Faulty assumptions from students regarding syndicate groups

Faulty assumptions by students generally appear to emerge when there is little or no clarity about key processes, for example, students will assume by default that acceptance into the MBA programme implies that all students are high-

achievers as not just any person is accepted into the programme. Using logical reasoning, one would be hesitant to disagree with this assumption. Unfortunately, students are not aware of how the Business School implements its selection processes and criteria, which may impact the validity of a seemingly perfectly logical assumption. In the absence of clear and concise communication, such assumptions will flourish. Twelve such faulty assumptions on the part of students have been identified. These are presented in Table 31.

Table 32: Consolidated list of faulty assumptions from students regarding syndicate groups

Category	Faulty assumption
Expectations of syndicate group work	1. The syndicate group is primarily a vehicle for content learning. 2. All MBA students will have a common expectation of work in syndicate groups.
Experiences of syndicate group work	1. That their initial expectations are correct, which in the absence of clear and concise information is plausible.
Positive and negative themes arising from the first syndicate group experience	1. Syndicate group members can be trusted to deliver and contribute to the syndicate group as expected.
Team dynamics	1. Teams can operate effectively without progressing through all the phases, even if superficially. 2. Syndicate group assignment submission is representative of successful team performance. 3. Syndicate group work is about getting the job done. 4. Syndicate group work requires effective task work skills only.
Role theory	1. None.
Team conflict	1. Syndicate group members can be trusted to deliver and contribute as expected. 2. Business school disciplinary processes can be relied upon to manage poor performers within syndicate groups.
Diversity	1. That they can expect a variety of cognitively diverse members in their syndicate groups.
Learning theory	1. All MBA students share the same or similar learning goals and aspirations.

Category	Faulty assumption
	2. The syndicate group is the preferred group to drive learning 3. Inter-personal skills development is an event and is taught in Human Resources and Organisation Design and Development. 4. Given the perceived level of the programme, MBA students will naturally aspire towards selection for the Dean's List.

Another issue related to the faulty assumptions made by students is that trust in the competence of syndicate group members can be assumed given the pre-allocation of students to syndicate groups. Thus, in the absence of a pre-forming stage where potential team members are identified, assumed trust and assumed competence reigns supreme.

4.4.3. Formation of study groups

The formation of study groups poses a direct question to the WBS relating to its definition of the syndicate group. Is the syndicate group:

1. A task orientated group, driven by assignment completion?
2. A medium to develop interpersonal skills using a task such as an assignment?
3. A cooperative learning group?

Based on responses, and the majority definition of 'performing', it would appear that the syndicate group is perceived to be a task orientated group, driven by task completion. Given the global use of cooperative learning groups at business schools, another possibly faulty assumption needs to be made specifically that the syndicate group is intended to be a cooperative learning group. However, this is not necessarily correct as many of the elements required for a group to be cooperative are not present in the syndicate groups.

The analysis of study groups has demonstrated a closer alignment between the elements of cooperative learning and the operating mechanism of some study groups. Study groups have demonstrated high levels of positive

interdependence whereby the groups' success implies individual success; that members are held accountable for their work; that promoting the success of others is possible; that dialogue about team and individual goals is done in an open and transparent manner and lastly, that team members must be socially competent.

Lastly, if the syndicate is intended to be a cooperative learning group, it appears to not be functioning as a cooperative learning group should. Some investigation into these reasons must be conducted, along with a deeper analysis of the functioning of successful study groups.

4.4.4. Faulty assumptions by academics, curriculum planners, lecturers / assessors related to study groups

Table 33 captures the faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners, lecturers / assessors related to study groups.

Table 33: Consolidated list of faulty assumptions by academics, curriculum planners, lecturers / assessors related to study groups

Category	Faulty assumption
Study group formation	1. Syndicate groups with forced membership create an environment for individual growth and development. 2. Self forming groups are ineffective at sourcing the appropriate individual members to achieve group goals. 3. Negative experiences in syndicate groups encourage group members to work harder towards making the syndicate group successful. 4. Students cannot learn by working with the same group of individuals over a number of semesters. 5. Students will continuously sit back and ingest the problems which beset syndicate groups, because they have to.

4.4.5. Faulty assumptions from students relating to study groups

Table 34 summarises the faulty assumptions from students relating to study groups.

Table 34: Consolidated faulty assumptions from students relating to study groups

Category	Faulty assumption
Study group formation	1. Initially, the syndicate group is the vehicle for learning. 2. Thereafter, I will learn only from my study group. 3. That they can expect a variety of cognitively diverse members in their syndicate groups.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the context of this study, before presenting the key findings. Recommendations to address the faulty assumptions identified are then presented, as relevant to the previously identified stakeholders. Limitations of this study and possible areas for future research are also presented.

The study was borne from the author's anecdotal experiences of syndicate groups whist engaged in the MBA programme at WBS. During this time, several questions regarding the effectiveness of syndicate groups had developed, particularly, the extent to which it was intended to represent a form of cooperative learning group. Students were advised that the syndicate groups were created as a vehicle for interaction and debate, an opportunity for more detailed analysis and dissection of content presented in lectures, However, the formation of study groups by students added a new dimension to the experience as these study groups seemed to have become the preferred medium for student engagement and learning.

Upon investigation, it transpired that one of the primary reasons explaining the formation of study groups was the belief that syndicate groups were not effective at facilitating learning as not all members of the syndicate group shared the same goal of the programme. Compounding this reason was the uncertainty in syndicate groups about the purpose of the group, with many students initially perceiving this to be a vehicle to facilitate learning. This perception changed during the course of the programme to a focus on the achievement of the group task. At the end of the programme, being a member of a syndicate implied a brief meeting at the beginning of the semester to discuss the allocation of tasks, and a meeting near the submission date of the

assignment to combine individual contribution. The concept of learning within the syndicate group had eroded and the study group had taken its place. This experience thus raised a question regarding the use of a syndicate group as a learning group, and sought to understand the reasons for its perceived lack of effectiveness, especially in relation to the perceived effectiveness of the newly formed study groups.

The study therefore aimed to determine how cooperative learning amongst MBA students in South Africa could be enhanced. Thirteen MBA students currently enrolled at the business school were interviewed using semi-structured approach, to obtain their views and experiences of time spent within syndicate and or study groups. The instrument used was influenced by the literature review an included questions which covered team theory, learning theory, adult leaning and cooperative learning. A small element of interpersonal dynamics was also included, though this was not the primary focus area.

The findings reveal a number of faulty assumptions regarding the value of syndicate groups, on the part of both the WBS and students. On the part of the WBS, faulty assumptions tend to relate to specific processes at the school particularly admissions and selection, syndicate group allocation, student discipline etc. On the part of students, faulty assumptions seem to originate where clear communication and guidance is lacking, and at times through ignorance.

5.2. Conclusions of the study

Whilst there are numerous issues which have been raised by respondents, the aggregate conclusion is that the combination of faulty assumptions from academics, curriculum planners and assessors; and students regarding syndicate groups and their value is the key reason why syndicate groups enjoy minimal success.

5.2.1. Academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors

The implications for the academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors and by implication, the business school, depend on the perspective it chooses to apply. If syndicate groups are left to operate in this manner namely. without the necessary clarification around purpose, intention and expectation; without the appropriate level of individual social skills needed for effective group functioning; and without the necessary context to enable cooperative learning; it is likely that these same issues will be experienced by current and future syndicate groups. The consequence hereof is that a multitude of students will pass through the school, and when they are asked about their experiences, many are likely to share their general perceptions of the programme, and when asked about the role of syndicate groups will share their general negative experiences.

On the other hand, if academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors choose to acknowledge that there is an issue which could be corrected within some ease, the full potential of syndicate groups could be realised such that syndicate group work could become the reason potential students choose to study at the school.

Four primary processes need to be reviewed in relation to the MBA syndicate group process. These assume that syndicate groups are intended to be cooperative learning groups:

1. Marketing: to ensure that syndicate group work is correctly positioned and communicated to the marketplace, with clear guidelines about the expectations, intent of and purpose of syndicate group work. These communications must align with the adopted approach to syndicate groups i.e. are these intended to be cooperative learning groups and the benefits thereof.
2. Orientation processes: Orientation processes for all programmes to clearly communicate and reinforce the role and expectations of syndicate

groups. The interpersonal skills required to enable individual participation in cooperative learning groups must be identified and developed during the orientation programme. Cooperative learning must be clearly defined to all students. The role of lecturers in the cooperative learning group process must be co-constructed and adopted by all role players.

3. Admissions: The criteria for selecting MBA students must be reviewed to ensure that candidates have the requisite technical, emotional and interpersonal competence to withstand the rigours of the MBA programme. The variety of individual experience must also be reviewed to ensure that sufficient numbers of these skill sets are accepted into the programme to enable effective syndicate group functioning.
4. Academic Directorship particularly regarding process and administration: The manner in which syndicate group members are allocated to groups must ensure an even spread across all syndicate groups, thereby allowing skills to be shared and developed in each group. The role of grades within syndicate group work must be reviewed to determine if these adequately reflect group performance. Disciplinary processes which students have access to must be reviewed to enable the effective application thereof.

A number of specific recommendations are provided for review and consideration by the business school are provided later.

5.2.2. The students

The faulty assumptions from students largely appear to have been assumed in the absence of accurate and concise information. There are other instances where frustrations from working in syndicate groups may have blinded syndicate group members thereby leading to certain assumptions, particularly relating to the value to be extracted from syndicate groups.

Faulty assumptions on the part of students related primarily to:

1. Communication: Assumptions applied as a result of inadequate communication from academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors and the WBS regarding the expectations, intent of and purpose of syndicate group work.
2. Perceived quality of MBA colleagues: 'Quality' comprises a few dimensions in this context particularly emotional maturity, work ethic, general skills competence, and commitment to the MBA programme representing the primary dimensions. This may be a subjective perspective but in the experiences of the individuals concerned, this perception is reality.
3. Skills and knowledge acquisition: An assumption that skills and knowledge acquisition occurs in effective syndicate groups only, and that there is little to be learnt in dysfunctional syndicate groups. This sentiment must be corrected.
4. Access to a diverse group of experience and knowledge: Students expect a syndicate group to comprise a variety of skill and knowledge sets, and must be sensitised to the reality that this is not always possible. Indicating where and how they can access 'missing' skills may assist.

Thus, the nature of issues raised by respondents alludes to issues which can be resolved if a solution which benefits both the WBS and students is identified and implemented.

5.3. Limitations of this study

This research sought to determine how cooperative learning amongst MBA syndicate and study groups could be enhanced. The following limitations have been identified:

1. As this research was conducted exclusively with students from within WBS, the findings herein cannot be extrapolated to other business

schools or team contexts. As this is a qualitative analysis, researcher bias and preference may have influenced the findings.

2. Data provided by participants may be skewed due changes in behaviour as a consequence of the interview process.

5.4. Recommendations

Two sets of beneficiaries are addressed here. Academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors, and students.

5.4.1. Academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors

Academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors must firstly acknowledge that syndicate groups in their current format are not effective and are not representative of cooperative learning groups. If the intention is that these evolve into cooperative learning groups, they must acknowledge that neither the environment nor the level of lecturer involvement is appropriate, and requires corrective action. Thus, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Agree and communicate that the purpose of is syndicate group is to facilitate learning and growth through the application of cooperative learning principles.
2. Adopt a model of cooperative learning. Both Johnson and Johnson (1999) and Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) propose models for the establishment of cooperative learning groups. With some adaptation, either of these could be applied and implemented.
3. Engage course lecturers towards increasing their level of involvement with the cooperative learning groups. Their role of facilitator to the group must be clearly defined.
4. Ensure that enabling processes around the cooperative workgroups encourage collaboration.

Should academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors choose not to adopt cooperative learning groups as a methodology, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Acknowledge that the current format of syndicate groups is ineffective in facilitating learning, and that the operationalisation of the syndicate group process must change.
2. Academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors must review the performance and benefits achieved by students who have participated in study groups to determine how to learn from such cooperative groups. These include:
   2.1. Allowing students to form their own syndicate groups.
   2.2. Give students the rights to 'select' and 'evict' group members, thereby enabling self-regulation of the group.
3. Ensure that student administration and associated processes specifically regarding disciplinary processes that enable self-management.
4. In terms of student selection and subsequent allocation to syndicate groups:
   4.1. The emotional maturity of potential students must be taken into consideration before they are accepted to the programme.
   4.2. The current perceived selection bias towards engineers should be reviewed and a wider spread of professions accepted into the program. This will contribute towards effective syndicate group formation and functioning.
   4.3. Academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors should consider placing students in groups for the first semester, after which they should allow students to form their own groups. This will encourage people who really want to achieve, achieving at extraordinary levels, and those who have not formed into groups could be allocated to syndicate groups in the existing manner.
5. The content and duration of the orientation programme must be enhanced such that it:

5.1. Shares with students the experiences of other students, and the processes they have used to engage with their syndicate groups. This will assist students to build mental models regarding interaction within the group, and will re-affirm the objective of the group

5.2. Is used as an opportunity whereby students could be given multiple and mini tasks, thereby increasing the level of student interaction. This will allow students to form their own syndicate groups or better acquaint them with their potential syndicate group members thereby facilitating 'pre-formation" of the syndicate group.

5.3. Include aspects of the Organisation Design and Development module such as Team theory, in the orientation programme.

6. Curriculum planners should consider re-positioning the Organisation Design and Development course at the beginning of the programme, thereby acclimatising students to the team dynamics awaiting syndicate groups.

7. Regarding lecturer involvement:

7.1. Lecturers / assessors should take more time to interact with the group. They should seek to understand how the syndicate is progressing in terms of the tasks which have been set. This may also drive syndicate groups to meet regularly to work together towards task objectives.

7.2. Lecturers / assessors across courses must interact and validate the nature and timing of the work they have allocated to the class. For example, lecturers could agree to stagger the submission dates of assignments thereby enabling the syndicate group to focus its efforts as opposed to splitting tasks across the group.

7.3. Lecturers / assessors should alternate the tasks give to the syndicate groups. For example, one lecturer may request an assignment be submitted with a presentation, whilst the other could ask for a project be delivered, with the presentation / feedback provided by the beneficiary. The variety will stimulate student interest and remove the repetition of the same requirements.

8. In terms of syndicate groups:
    8.1. Decide on the objective of the syndicate group. Is it intended to facilitate content learning, process learning, or to encourage team achievement of a task? Once agreed, this intention should be communicated to students as a guide.
    8.2. The method by which syndicate groups are evaluated must be reviewed so that individual contribution can be managed.
    8.3. Lecturers / assessors should also consider monitoring the syndicates for at least the first 2 quarters to ensure that there is contribution and interaction i.e. that the group are not solely there is not simply task work focussed towards assignment submission.
9. Alternatives to syndicate groups:
    9.1. Academics, curriculum planners and lecturers / assessors should consider the use of business simulations instead of typical syndicate group task work. This will not only stimulate working in a group but will contribute to the overall enjoyment and richness of the MBA programme.
    9.2. Students could be asked to take on social projects aligned to course content. In that way, there is some give-'back to society from both students and the school, and society is a beneficiary.

5.4.2. Students

Students must recognise that the benefit of the MBA program is primarily a function of the effort that is invested in the programme. Thus, students must take every opportunity to find opportunities for learning. Recommendations to students include:

1. Where clarification on any issue is not provided, students must use available processes to obtain clarification.
2. Students must acknowledge that syndicate group members will not always be 'nice', or friendly, or the syndicate group may not function as a

team. However, this must not be allowed to stand between potential learning which is available even in such a context.

3. If study groups are formed to facilitate learning, these groups must not function at the expense of syndicate groups. Different types of learning will occur in both, and this opportunity must not be ignored.
4. In instances when some members of the syndicate group choose not to contribute, students must do all that can be done to get the grade they desire as they are likely to regret allowing the task to fail and then realising later in the programme that this action has resulted in the likely non-attainment of a distinction.
5. Irrespective of how groups are formed, students must take time to get to know syndicate group members. They must find commonalities and build relationships as these will prove beneficial when the group falters and will help the syndicate group to better manage conflict and other issues.

5.5. Suggestions for further research

This research provides an exploratory analysis of the specific dynamics particularly regarding team learning or cooperative learning within a MBA syndicate and study group. Key student activities and behaviours have been alluded to, leading to the possible identification of desirable behavioural characteristics of students in a syndicate group setting. In the same manner, specific actions on the part of the Business School, implemented or not, have also been identified for review and improvement; as a step towards improving the overall programme. This is but a small step in the process of achieving an in-depth understanding of this issue. Consequently, the following areas are suggested for follow-on research to further available knowledge of this topic:

1. A qualitative analysis which builds on this one, and possibly includes students and lecturers from other universities will assist to make this research topic more generalisable.

2. A quantitative approach towards determining the critical success factors of MBA student behaviour in syndicate or study groups, the output of which could assist business schools and students to aspire towards the development of the ideal characteristics.
3. An assessment to determine the effectiveness, validity and reliability of assessor ratings of syndicate group tasks.
4. An in-depth analysis of the impact of syndicate group work on individual and group learning.
5. A comparison across a number of business schools which assesses how syndicate groups function in different contexts. This could include a quantitative assessment on the extent to which the grades achieved across schools are actually different or not.

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APPENDIX A

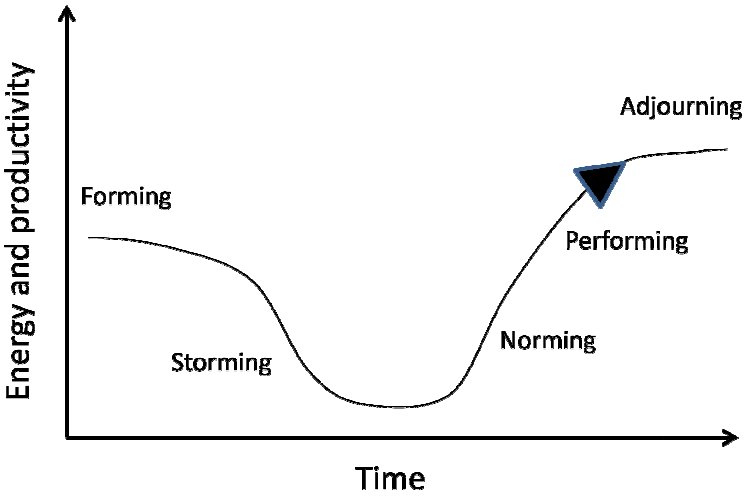
Actual Research Instrument.

General / Rapport Building Questions

1. *Once accepted into the MBA programme, what were your expectations regarding work in syndicate groups?*
2. *In general, how would you describe the syndicate group experience?*
3. *Let's talk about the first syndicate group. Please describe the experience?*
4. *What challenges did you encounter in this first syndicate group?*

Team Dynamics Questions

5. *Show and explain Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) model. Ask if any of the stages were evident, and how these presented in the groups.*

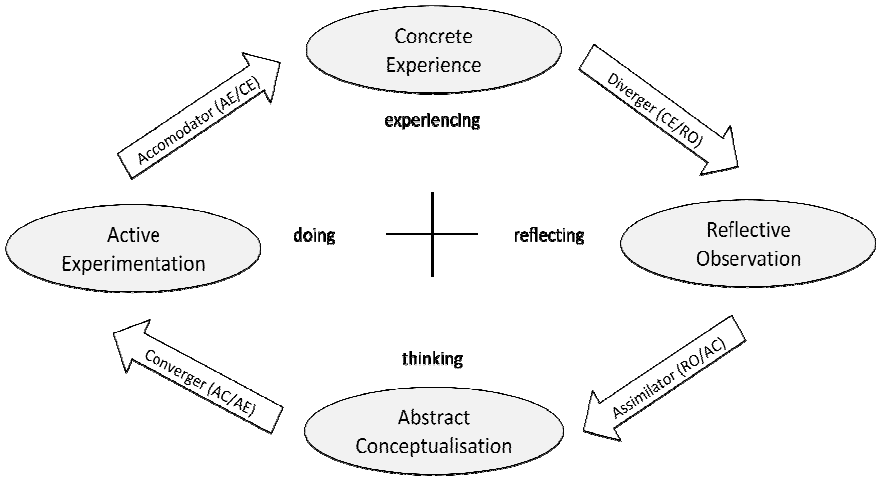


6. *Respondents were shown a copy of Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) model, and the various stages were briefly explained. They were then asked if any of the stages were evident, and how these presented in the syndicate group.*
7. *Which would you say was more prevalent in your syndicate group: Team work (share the work, get along, and build momentum) or task work (divide and conquer, get the job done)?*
8. *Did you fulfil the same role in different syndicate groups?*

9. *Are there any positive or negative characteristics which you can think of which positively influenced the effectiveness of your syndicate groups? (examples include: a high need for achievement, a diversified group or not, good interpersonal relations, trusting relationships, access to resources, diversity of the group, too many type A personalities etc).*

Learning Theory Questions

10. *How do you define learning?*
11. *How did you learn in the groups? How do you think others learnt?*
12. *Please describe the process you apply when learning (this question will help the interviewer to match learning styles to the learning schools theory)*
13. *How would you describe the learning which occurred in your syndicate group?*
14. *If you purchased a new audio system, how do you go about setting it up? (Used to test the application of Kolb's (1976) experiential learning model presented below.*



Cooperative Learning Groups

15. How would you describe the level of controversy (where ideas, information or conclusions were incompatible with others') in your syndicate groups?
    - How did the group manage such instances?

- What was the outcome of such instances? Positive or negative? Please elaborate.

16. Did you have a social support structure from within your syndicate group?
    - How did this structure develop?
    - How was it maintained?

Closure / Recommendations Questions

17. What do you think can be done to improve the continued use of syndicate groups as part of the MBA programme?
18. What would you say are realistic alternatives to working in syndicate groups?