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STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TEAMWORK BASED ACTIVITIES IN ENHANCING THE LEARNING PROCESS

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Abstract

In recent years, many organizations have begun to embrace the teamwork-based work culture in most aspects of their operations. Hence, employers are increasingly stressing on the need for fresh graduates to demonstrate the willingness and ability to work in a teamwork-based environment, before recruiting them. This in turn has placed tremendous pressure on academics to incorporate elements of teamwork-based activities in the teaching as well as assessment processes, in order to better equip their students to face the working world. Over the years much research has been done on various aspects of teamwork-based activities from the educators' perspective. However, there is a lack of literature of the effectiveness of teamwork-based activities from the students' perspective. This research attempts to explore the students' perception on the effectiveness of teamwork-based activities in enhancing the learning process. A sample size of 70 students is randomly selected from a group of students in their First Year of the Diploma in Business Studies (Accounting) program. These students are asked to complete a questionnaire to gauge their responses related to various aspects of teamwork-based activities. The data obtained will be analyzed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The results and implications derived from this research would be extremely beneficial to academics in helping them to understand the students' point of view regarding teamwork-based activities. This would enable them to formulate more effective and constructive teamwork-based teaching strategies as well as assessment methods. In addition, the results of this research would also be valuable to employers in having a glimpse on what future graduates think and feel about teamwork-based activities, which are a crucial part of today's working culture.

Keywords: Teamwork, Teamwork-Based Activities, Students' Perception, Learning Process

1. Introduction

Team work refers to a group of individuals working together in a cooperative environment to achieve common goals by sharing knowledge and skills (Luca and Tarricone, 2002). Today's business community views the term 'team work' as one of the most coveted mantras that could catapult an organization to greater heights. Businesses rely on teams to increase quality and efficiency, reengineer systems, design and launch products, determine strategy and govern the firm (Guzzo and Dickson, 1996). Hence, modern day organizations are placing tremendous emphasis on recruiting new employees who are capable of and comfortable with working in teams. Almost all employers are looking out for fresh graduates who are team players.

This in turn has placed a tremendous responsibility on academics, in ensuring that these future graduates are indeed team players who are well equipped to work in teams locally as well as globally. Universities are expected to respond to the need to prepare graduates for the 21st century workplace where team work skills are extremely valued (Harvey *et al.* 1997). Therefore, academics are striving to include elements of team work in the teaching, learning as well as assessment processes. Hence, team work based activities are being increasingly incorporated in the classroom as well as in the coursework components of most courses.

There has been a lot of literature on various aspects of team work based activities. Academics and students, particularly at tertiary level should be able to accommodate each other's expectations and preferences in order to arrive at the best teaching methods and strategies. Most researches so far, tend to focus on the teacher's perception of team work based activities as well as the advantages and disadvantages of team work based activities. On the other hand, this research attempts to study the less travelled road that deals with the perceptions of students about the effectiveness of team work based activities.

2. Team Work: Good or Bad

Team work based activities has always been hailed as an effective learning strategy because it provides students with opportunities to negotiate meaning and manipulate ideas with others as well as to reflect upon their learning (Fraser and Deane, 1997). University lecturers generally agree that students need to be assisted in developing their teamwork values. Sorbral (1997) found that students working in teams achieved a higher grade point average compared to students working individually, in a controlled setting. It has also been found that team based learning is an effective way of incorporating interactive teaching and inculcating enthusiasm for learning (Parmelee, 2007). Students who are placed in teams tend to obtain good academic success through strengthened social interaction as well as cooperation skills (Baloche, 1994). Further, studies have shown that team based learning increased a learner's engagement and preparedness, improved problem solving, communication and team work skills as well as knowledge outcomes (Thompson *et al.* 2007). It was also found that teams appear to be capable of moving beyond the upper limit of the most knowledgeable member of the team thus facilitating more informed and better decision making (Michaelsen *et al.* 1989). Research has also shown that the more expert students in a team may and/or will provide assistance and explanations to the weaker students to achieve overall positive benefits (Cortese, 2005).

However, there are also many downsides to team work based activities. Conflicts may arise with regards to competition for high grades (Imel, 1991) as well as coping with the difficulties of group dynamics (Gatfield, 1999). According to McCorckle *et al.* (1999), students still prefer working alone when the goal is to achieve good performance. Bolton (1999) found that 91% of professors were satisfied with the outcomes of team based class projects while only 64% of students expressed satisfaction for the outcomes of the same projects. Another interesting observation was made by Peslak (2005) who found that team emotions at the start of the project were more positive but gradually turned negative towards the end of the project. Some students also have negative attitudes towards teamwork and refuse to work in teams as they perceive teamwork as inequity at work that gives rise to tension, conflict and de-motivation (Guerin, 2003).

3. The Research

A questionnaire was developed and distributed randomly to 35 male and 35 female students from the first year of the Diploma in Business Studies (Accounting) program at Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman, Penang. The questionnaire had a blend of both close ended as well as open ended questions. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of 8 close ended questions utilizing the Likert scale format (1=Strongly agree, 2=Agree, 3=Disagree and 4=Strongly disagree).

Table 1. Responses obtained from the 35 male and 35 female students for each question on Part 1 of the survey

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total number of students	
Team work based activities are an important part of my learning process	14	18	3	0	35	Male
	9	24	2	0	35	Female
Team work based activities help me to enhance my learning process	11	18	6	0	35	Male
	6	25	4	0	35	Female
Team work based activities can help me to perform better academically	11	15	7	2	35	Male
	9	18	8	0	35	Female
Team work based activities will be very useful to me when I start working in the future	18	16	1	0	35	Male
	11	18	6	0	35	Female
Team work based activities can help mould me into a better and more wholesome person	8	24	3	0	35	Male
	9	17	8	1	35	Female
I like to participate in team work based activities as part of my learning process	13	19	1	2	35	Male
	5	21	9	0	35	Female
I prefer to have team work based activities instead of individual based activities in class	9	21	3	2	35	Male
	16	11	7	1	35	Female
Team work based activities have helped me improve on my soft skills	17	15	3	0	35	Male
	7	23	4	1	35	Female

The 8 questions tested students' responses about the importance and effectiveness of team work based activities on their learning process as well as the relevance of team work based activities to their personal and working life. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of questions that were intended to explore students' perceptions about when and how team work based activities should be carried out in the classroom. Finally, the third part of the questionnaire had open ended questions on the students' perception about the advantages and disadvantages of team work based activities.

Table 1 summarizes the responses obtained from each respondent for each question on the first part of the questionnaire. It was found that the majority of students, 91.43% of the male respondents and 94.29% of the female respondents, agreed that team work based activities are an important part of their learning process. Both male and female respondents (82.85% and 88.57% respectively) also collectively concurred that team work based activities help them to enhance their learning process. Along the same lines, 74.29% of male respondents as well as 77.14% of female respondents agreed that team work based activities

can help them perform better academically. The majority of respondents (97.15% of males and 83.86% of females) also acceded that team work based activities will be very useful to them when they start working in the future.

Team work based activities are also capable of molding a student into a better and more wholesome person as indicated by 91.43% of male respondents and 74.29% of female respondents. The general consensus among the students is that they like to participate in team work based activities as evidenced by 91.43% of males and 74.29% of females. Also, 85.71% of males and 77.14% of females have indicated that they prefer to have team work based activities instead of individual based activities in the classroom. The connotation that team work based activities may and can help a student improve his/her soft skills is also supported by 91.43% of the male respondents as well as 85.71% of the female students.

However, it is interesting to note that a proportion of female respondents tend to disagree to a larger extent compared to their male counterparts with regards to the benefits of team work based activities. A number of female respondents feel that team work based activities are not useful to them in their working life as well as will not help mould them into a more wholesome person. Some female respondents have also indicated that they dislike team work based activities and would prefer to work individually.

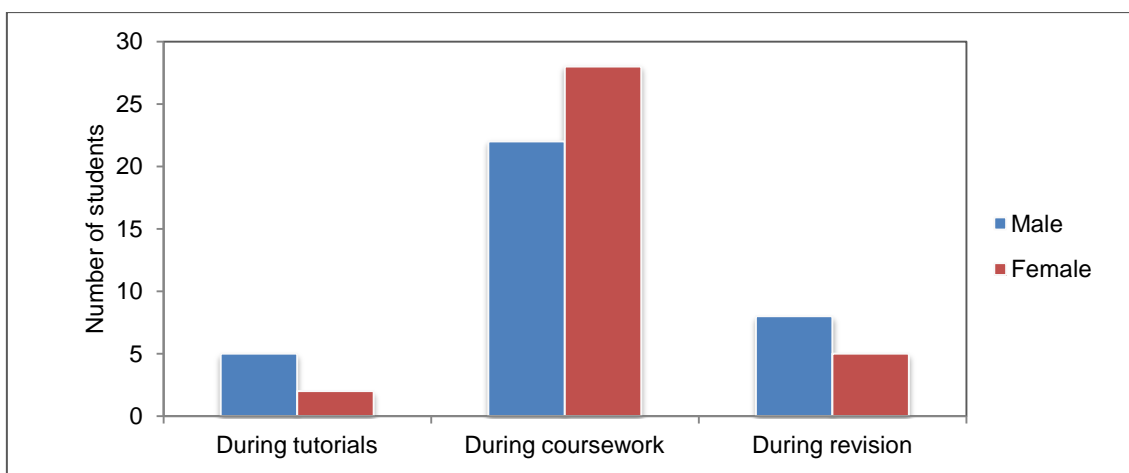


Figure 1. Aspects of the learning process when students would like to engage in team work based activities

Figure 1 shows that the majority of students (62.86% of males and 80% females) prefer to engage in team work based activities when doing their coursework (assignments and projects). A smaller number of students (22.86% of males and 14.29% of females) indicated that they would like to engage in team work based activities during their revision (study groups and exam revision sessions). Many students felt that team work based activities would not be suitable during tutorials.

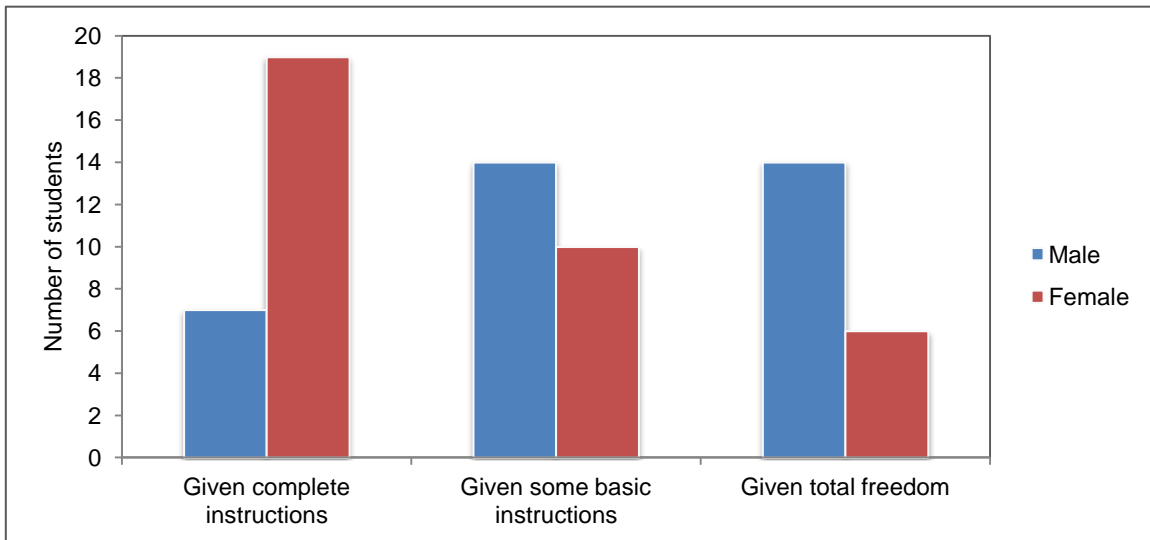


Figure 2. Students' expectations pertaining to amount of instructions from the lecturer/tutor prior to commencement of the team work based activities

A large number of female respondents (19 out of 35), indicated that they would like to be given complete instructions from their lecturers/tutors before commencing the team work based activities, as evidenced in Figure 2. However 14 out of 35 male respondents indicated that they would prefer to be given basic instructions before being allowed to commence the team work based activity while another 14 out of 35 male respondents prefer to be given complete freedom to commence their team work based activity. Another interesting observation is that the most of the female respondents either expect complete or at least basic instructions from their lecturers/tutors before commencing their team work based activity.

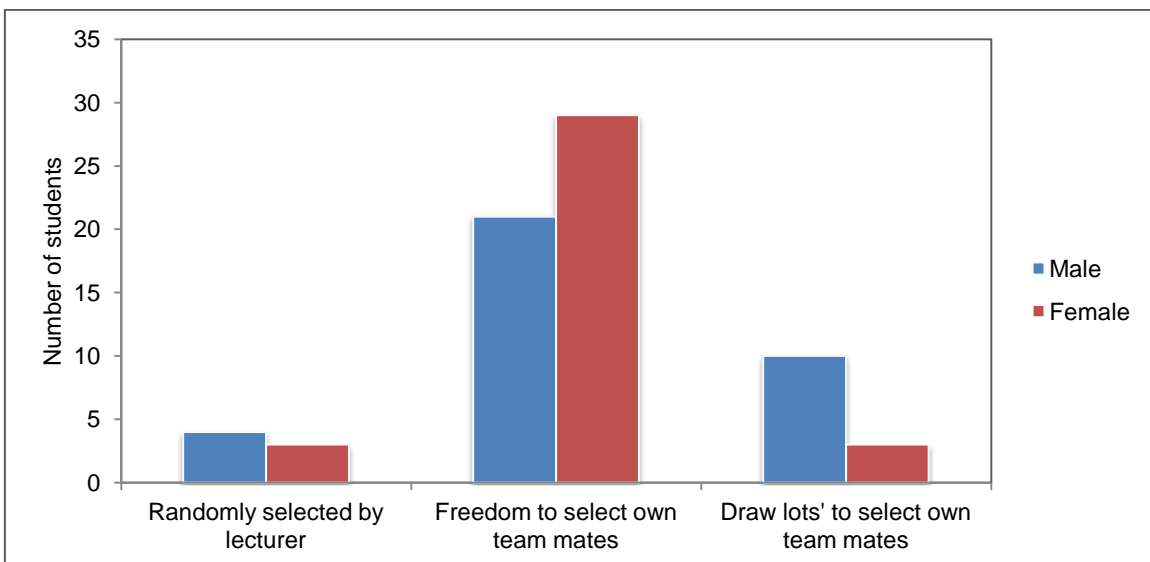


Figure 3. The method in which students would like to choose their team mates for a given team work based activity

In Figure 3, it can be seen that 60% of male respondents as well as 82.86% of female respondents indicated that they would like to have the freedom to choose their own team mates as opposed to only 11.43% of males and 8.57% of females who would like to have team mates randomly selected for them by the lecturer. The 'drawing lots' method of choosing team mates is preferred by more male respondents compared to female respondents.

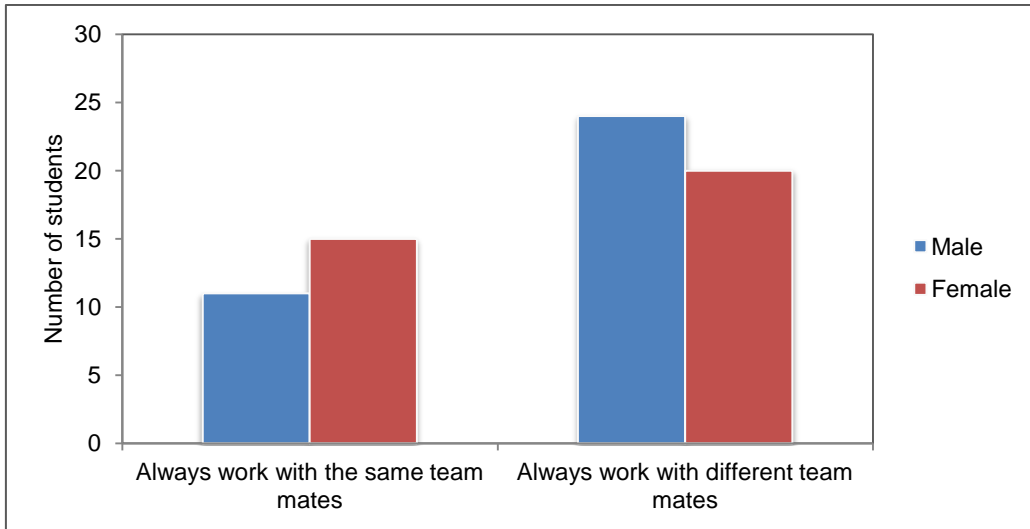


Figure 4. The types of team that students prefer working with for each team work based activity

As shown in Figure 4, a larger number of students (68.57% of males and 57.14% of females) prefer to work with new and different team mates for each team work based activity. Fewer students opted to work with the same team mates for each team work based activity.

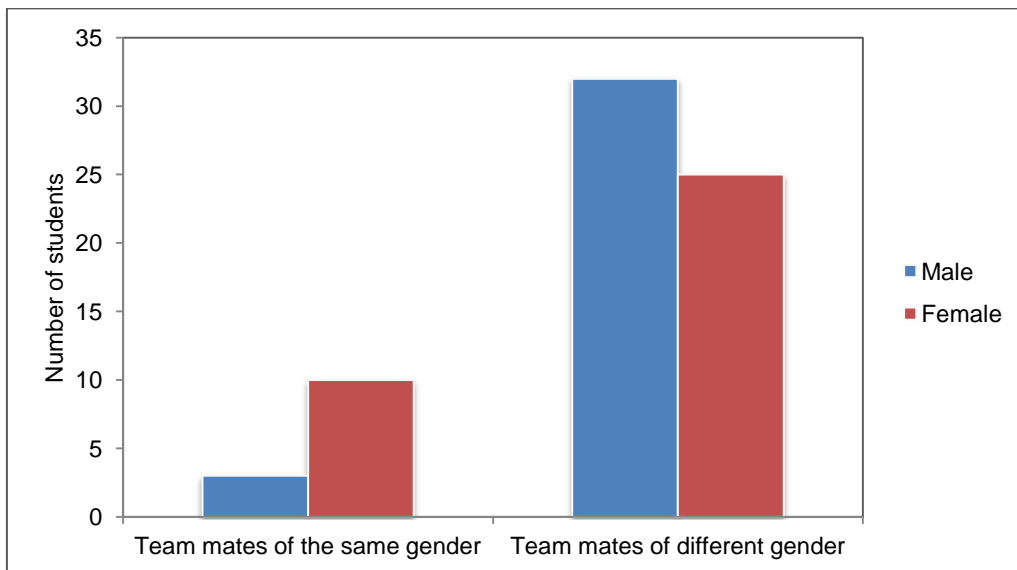


Figure 5. Students' preference with regards to gender of team mates for each team work based activity

A very glaring observation was that the majority of students chose to have team mates of different gender (91.43% of males and 71.43% of females) as opposed to working with team mates of the same gender (Figure 5).

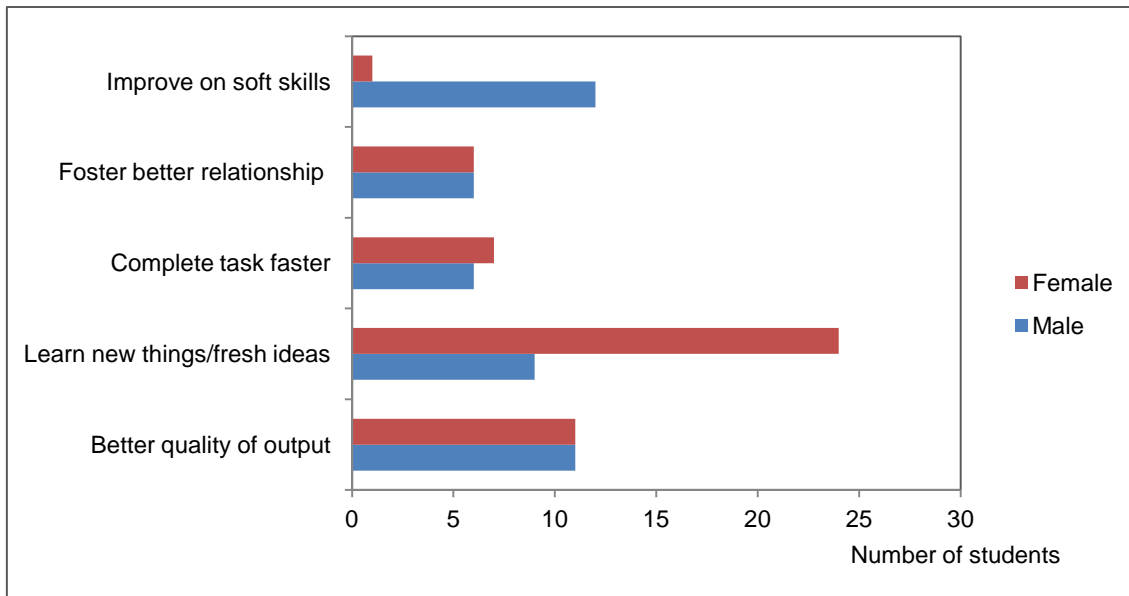


Figure 6. Students' responses regarding the advantages of engaging in team work based activities

Figure 6 summarizes students' responses regarding the advantages of engaging in team work based activities. The majority of female respondents (68.57%) cited 'learning new things' and 'getting fresh ideas' as the most important advantages of engaging in team work based activities. This is followed by 'better quality of output' (31.43%), 'can complete tasks faster' (20%), 'foster better relationships' (17.14%). Only 1 student cited 'improve soft skills' as an advantage of team work based activities.

The majority of male respondents (34.29%) felt that 'improving on soft skills' was the major advantage of engaging in team work based activities. 31.43% of them also felt that team work based activities would help them produce 'better quality output' while 25.71% of male respondents felt that they would be able to 'learn new things/get fresh ideas'. Only 6 out of 35 respondents (17.14%) felt that team work based activities can help them 'complete the task faster' and 'foster better relationships'.

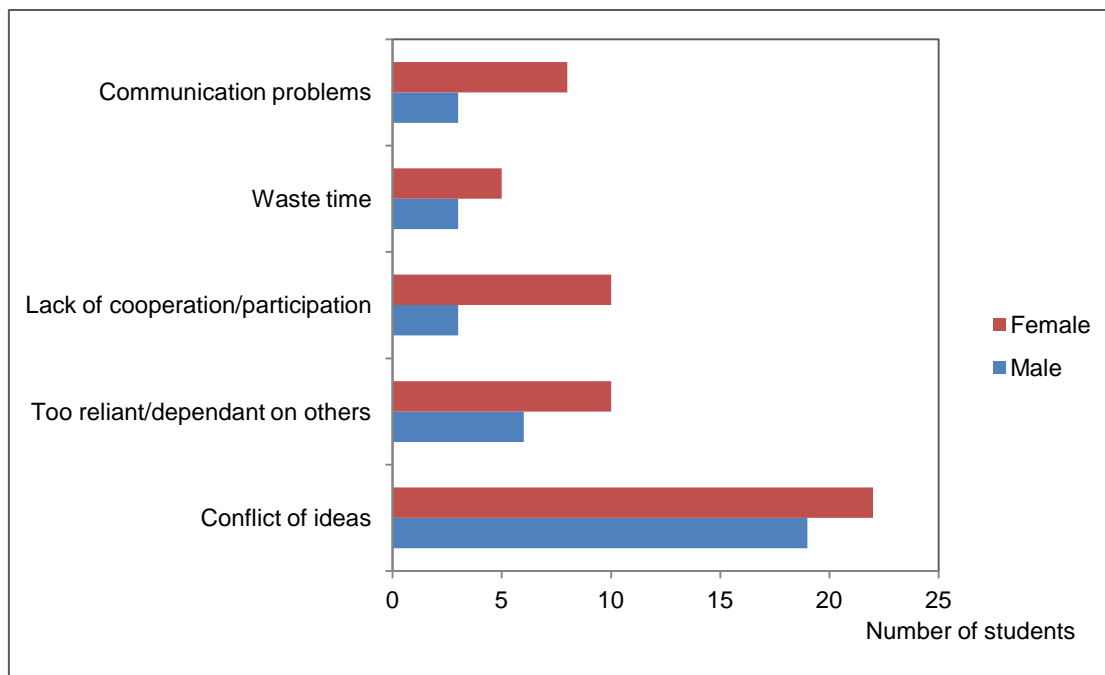


Figure 7. Students' responses regarding the disadvantages of engaging in team work based activities

Figure 7 outlines the disadvantages of engaging in team work based activities, from the perspective of students. The majority of respondents (54.29% of males and 62.86% of females) cited 'conflict of ideas' as the main obstacle of working in teams. This was followed by 17.14% of males and 28.57% of females who felt that team work based activities made students 'too reliant on each other'. An equal number of female students also felt that team members tend to 'lack co-operation and participation' while only 8.57% of male respondents agreed to that opinion. A small proportion of respondents (both males and females) also felt that team work based activities were a 'waste of time' and creates 'communication problems'.

4. Conclusion

The results of the study show that students, both males and females agree that team work based activities are beneficial towards their learning process and helps enhance their learning process. Students also collectively agree that team work based activities can help them perform better academically and provide benefits for their working life as well as their personal life. Students also agree that team work based activities can help improve their soft skills. These results show that team work based activities are perceived as beneficial by the students and should therefore be continued.

This research found that team work activities should be conducted for assessment purposes as opposed to during the teaching and learning process. Female students prefer to receive complete instructions from their lecturers as opposed to male students who prefer more freedom in completing their team work based activity. Students also prefer to choose their own team mates as well as to work with different team mates each time. In addition, students also indicated that they prefer working with team mates comprising of different gender, each time. These results have shed more light on students' perception of team work based activities.

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