

A study in study groups: to what extent are the Social Policy study groups practical?

Nandita Mulay, LSE Change Makers 2022-23

Background

Defined as an instructional strategy utilizing small groups of students working to achieve a common goal, cooperative learning strategies are increasingly being used in classrooms (Rybczynski & Schussler, 2011). Independently formed study groups come under the classification of informal groups; although they are long-term and consist of the same members meeting as a learning support group, they are formed voluntarily and often spontaneously (Rybczynski & Schussler, 2011). Previous studies have shown that group work outside the classroom has been shown to increase academic achievement and develop a positive attitude towards the course being studied (Light, 2001; Springer et al., 1999). The Department of Social Policy forms peer groups for first year cohorts, but these have not been used by most students of the department. This project aims to compare the effectiveness of peer groups and the student-led initiatives of study groups through gaining data on students' experiences.

Methodology

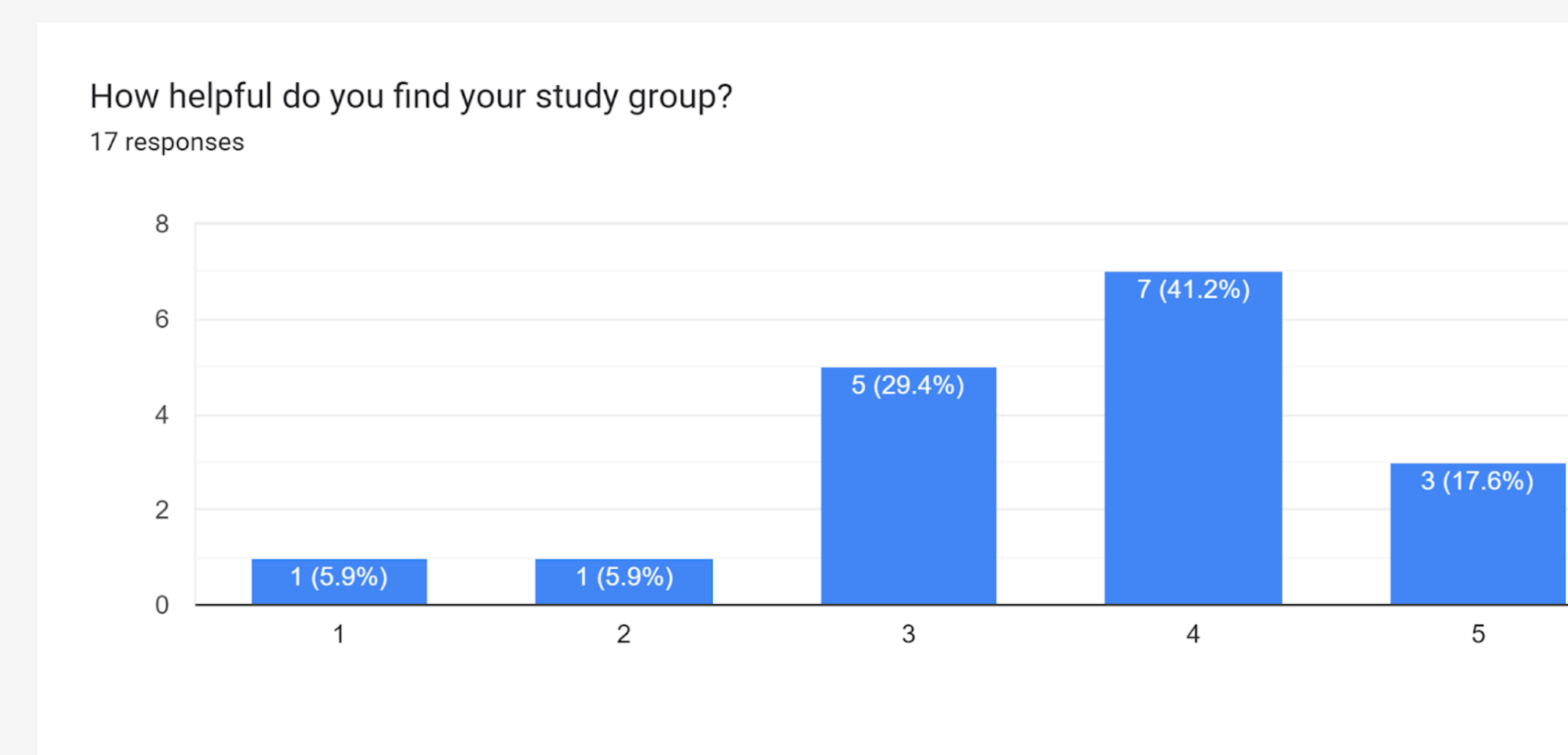
Out of the two broad data collection approaches, namely, quantitative and qualitative research, this study uses mixed methods, namely survey (quantitative) and focus groups (qualitative). Quantitative research allowed for the numerical representation of observations to explain how students experienced study groups as compared to peer groups (Sukamolson, 2007). Students filling out the survey had to be undergraduate students in the Department of Social Policy. At the end of the survey, the students who had volunteered for a focus group were then contacted separately.

Qualitative results are valuable as they provide a rich and detailed description of complex phenomena, and their perspective from the views of the participants (Sofaer, 1999). Since qualitative questioning and their analysis is not a completely linear process, the phases of sampling and data collection overlapped; questions were adapted based on respondents' previous responses. A thorough ethics review form was submitted before conducting any focus group, to make sure it met the ethical criteria set out by the LSE Ethics Committee. Out of these, one of the central requirements was the need to obtain informed consent from any prospective participants (Ciesielska et al., 2019). Participants were given a form outlining the details and purposes of the study and were given the choice to sign the form, hence agreeing that they accepted to partake. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask any follow-up questions before deciding to sign the form. Emphasis was given to the fact that participants could revoke their consent at any time during the study, even after their focus group was conducted. Quotes used throughout this poster have been chosen such that the participants cannot be identified based on the information they convey.

Findings

64.7% of survey participants were made aware of departmentally-assigned peer groups through Welcome Week of their first year, and over half of them had their first peer group meeting within the first two weeks. Although most students attended their meetings, only the Meet the Researcher task was discussed - "we had a task to complete about our academic mentor, so we discussed how to go about that". 94.1% of the participants stated that there were no subsequent attempts made to meet as a group once the Meet the Researcher task was completed. 64.7% of the participants also said that the Academic Mentor made no efforts to get the peer group together and 76.5% said that lecturers or class convenors made no use of these groups to assign discussion tasks.

This lack of efforts to utilize the departmental-formed peer groups in coursework led to no meetings between groups. 41.2% of the participants stated that they mostly only spoke to one person from the peer group, and 35.3% said they do not talk to most of them - "since it's inorganic I guess a low success rate is to be expected".



Most participants were of the opinion that peer groups were nice in theory but due to individual preferences students in their groups and courses, they do not prove to be very useful - "most of them aren't in my classes and to be honest I don't even remember everyone in my group." In fact, some even found it "stressful as people did not take it seriously". Hence, 64.7% of students formed their own study group through friends or other students they shared classes with. Events during Welcome Week and trips organized by the department also played a role in developing such groups. A notable point is that they were not really formed as an intention but as friends become closer and helped each other during exam season, they formed a group by default. Students had generally positive reviews about their study groups. They felt more confident about the course as they were able to get new perspectives from peers and felt better talking to people going through the same difficulties they were. As there are strong friendship ties involved, academic motivation and support is also provided.

International students found that their study groups comprised of other international and multicultural students. Having advice from someone who was not a teacher also made it easier to talk to. A large majority stated they felt more confident with the course material after having discussed it with their study group. Some ways students engaged with study groups was by discussing readings right before class, sharing notes and brainstorming ideas, explaining how concepts linked, and having essays proofread. Students also looked forward to classes where they would sit together with members of their study group. Although a few study groups meet weekly, an overwhelming majority meet during exam time to revise. Students also prefer to keep their study group to their close circle,

52.9% of participants stating they had 2-3 members in their groups.

Most of the students found their study groups helpful (41.2%) or extremely helpful (17.6%). This is a stark contrast from their responses when asked about peer groups.

Recommendations

Incentives - more projects or icebreaker activities in the beginning of the year would allow students to make friends quicker.

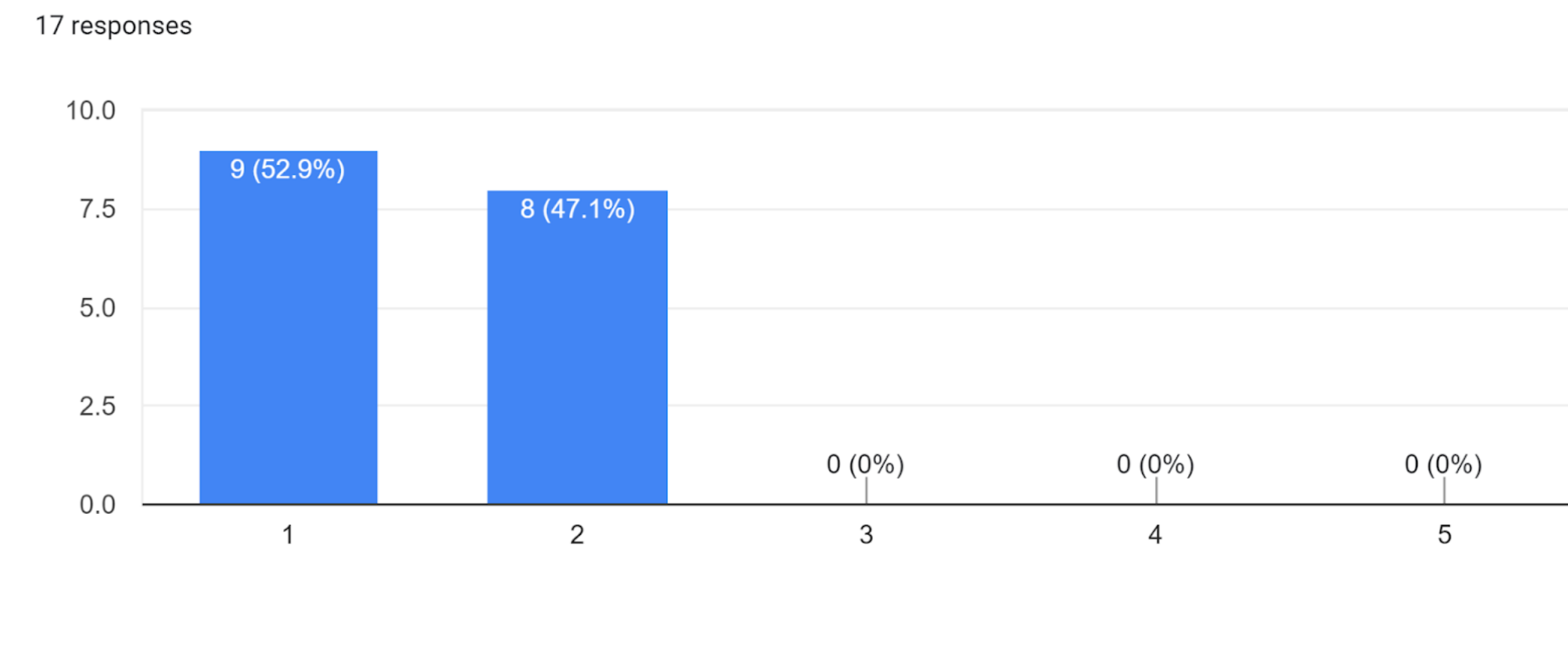
Similar classes - "If all my peers had similar classes with me, it would have been much easier to study together and get to know each other".

If provided with a useful model of how study groups are to be conducted, students would overcome preconceived notions and utilize them in a more organized manner (Rybczynski & Schussler, 2011).

A greater coordination amongst the department, involving constant check-ins and the usage of groups across years will allow students to feel more comfortable utilizing such groups for their class activities, instead of just for revisions.

Although there was a good balance of first, second, and third-year students answering the survey questions, a larger number of participants would have made the sample more representative.

How useful have peer groups been in your university years so far?



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