



Working with large classes online

When class sizes get large, an important role for the teacher is to ensure that each student still feels connected to the group. On campus, we generally divide large groups into smaller ones and assign a tutor, so that students can get to know a teacher and a manageable subset of the cohort to support their learning. In addition to this, there are often peer mentoring or buddy systems employed for large courses that have more intimate group sizes, with these student-to-student meetings taking place outside of the classroom. The aim of these strategies is the same: to get more individual feedback to students from teachers and their peers so they can improve their learning.

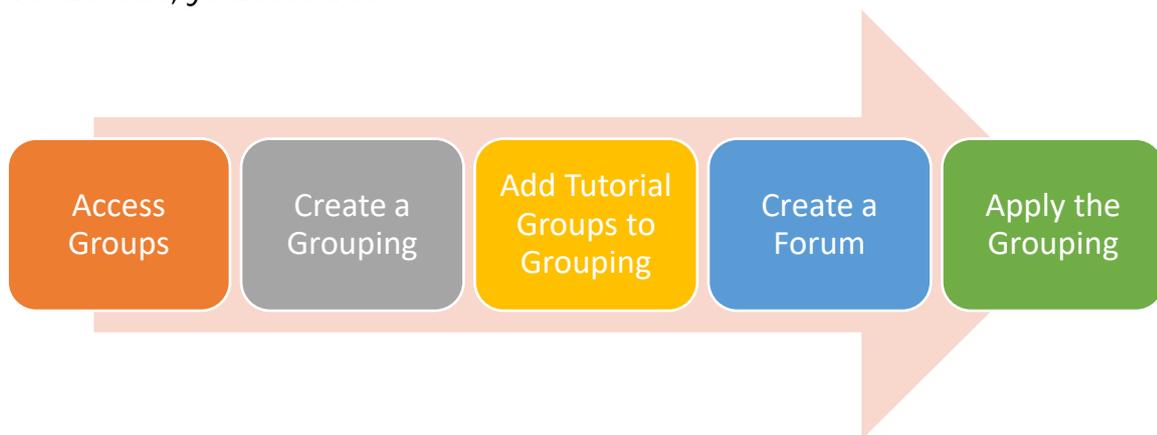
When online classes get large, similar adjustments need to be made or students will be overwhelmed with the number of forum posts and feel distanced from their teacher and their peers, which can result in declining student satisfaction and higher attrition (HESP, 2017). The good news is that the online environment can allow students to learn in groups of various sizes online; both with teachers and with peers. In addition, the online environment allows students to work individually, receiving automatic feedback through a range of interactive tools that can replace some of the key learning conversations that would normally happen in a course.

In this *Guide*, we explore ways that large cohorts can be restructured and supported to allow students to feel well-connected to their peers and the teaching team. In a subsequent *Guide*, we will look at automating feedback to support autonomous and self-regulated learning.

Tutorial Groups

Tutorial groups are automatically made as part of any face to face course when students select their preferred tutorial times. These groups were probably used by you recently to run the Zoom sessions for online tutorials. In addition, you may want to set up a **forum** for only these tutorial group members to discuss the content with **just their tutor and the other members of the tutorial group**. This strategy keeps the number of messages that students need to read and engage with within forums to a manageable level.

To do this, you need to:



Let's start by accessing the Groups area of your course website. To do this, in learnonline, go to the **Administration block > Users > Groups**, in UniSA Online, it's **Administration Cogs > More > Users > Groups**.

- Learnonline help – [Groups and Groupings](#)

The example below is from the Groups page of an on-campus course, showing a large class of 366 which has tutorial groups created via student enrolment information. Only four of the 12 tutorial groups associated with this course are shown. The number at the beginning of each line is the class number.



21847 – City West Campus (Lecture) (366)
21848 – City West Campus (Lecture) (0)
21850 – City West Campus (Tutorial) (30)
21851 – City West Campus (Tutorial) (32)
22826 – City West Campus (Tutorial) (26)
22827 – City West Campus (Tutorial) (25)

To create a grouping for these tutorial groups, we would go to the **Groupings** tab > **Create Grouping** > **Grouping name = Tutorial Groups** > **Save changes**.

- Learnonline help – [Create a Grouping](#)

To add Tutorial groups to this newly created Grouping you need to go to the Edit area and select the people icon on the right.

Grouping	Groups	Activities	Edit
Tutorial Groups	None	<input type="radio"/>	  

Then select and highlight all the Tutorial groups (hold down the shift button while you click on all the Tutorial groups) and add them to the grouping by selecting the < **Add** button.

- Learnonline help – [Add or Remove Groups from a Grouping](#)

Next, you need to go to the course website and select an appropriate location to add the forum that is just for the tutorial groups. Add a standard Forum (use a name such as **Tutorial group forum**), but in the Common module settings area of the forum, select the **Group Mode** to be **Separate groups** and the **Grouping** to be **Tutorial Groups**.

- Learnonline help – [Forum](#)
- Learnonline help – [Common Module Settings](#)

Now students in each tutorial group will only see one forum, called **Tutorial group forum**, but the teachers will see a selector which will



allow them to move between the forum for each of the tutorial groups. The teacher presence in Tutorial group forums would be high to improve student participation and success ([Stone, 2017](#)).

Smaller Groups

Breaking up a larger cohort into even smaller working groups (3-5 students) can provide learning environments where students can collaborate on assessment. This could be setting up project groups, which we discussed in an earlier *Guide*. Ideally, students should be given agency and allowed to select their own groups using the Group selector tool and provided with a private forum, wiki and access to Zoom. The teacher presence in this type of group would be low, with students provided a mechanism to contact a teacher if there are issues, such as Dialogue or email.

- OTL Guide - [Supporting group work online](#)
- Learnonline help - [Dialogue](#)

Study Groups

Study groups of students provide an opportunity to improve inter-student relationships, with the aim of increased participation, engagement and feedback. These smaller groups are ideally led by students and only supported by a tutor who can be called on when issues arise. Therefore, the teaching presence in peer groups is ideally nil, however, teachers need to work at the beginning of the course to encourage students to form these groups.

Use the Group self-selector for students to form their own study groups to ensure only those who want this level of support join a group.

- Learnonline help – [Group Self-Selection Activity](#)

Provide additional online infrastructure for students to use in their study groups, using the Common module settings to make these spaces



private. Consider a **private wiki** where a peer mentor could provide their contact details and record meeting times, a **private forum** to share notes asynchronously, as well as a **link to zoom** (unisa.zoom.us) so they can have their own real-time meetings. It's important to appreciate that students have a wide range of other social networks for collaboration and some of these tools will be preferred. For this reason, it is probably best not to be too prescriptive as to how the study group will work, but provide the basic tools and encourage students to form these groups - perhaps with some testimonies from previous students as to how peer study groups have helped them with their study motivation and success.

In conclusion, when your course size is large, it doesn't mean that your students have to feel either lost in the herd and overwhelmed by other student voices. By using a range of different groups and group settings, it is possible to create online spaces for students where they can work with you, your tutors and their peers.

If you would like to ask online teaching and learning questions related to your course, you can look through our [FAQs](#), write to TIU@unisa.edu.au, have an online [consultation with a member of the TIU](#) or complete the online modules as part of [Introduction to Engaging Learners Online](#).

References

Stone C 2017, Opportunity through online learning: improving student access, participation and success in higher education, Report, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, March 2017, <<https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017-03/apo-nid94591.pdf>>, Accessed 2 July 2020.

Higher Education Standards Panel 2017, Improving retention, completion and success in higher education, Discussion paper, June 2017 <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/final_discussion_paper.pdf> Accessed 2 July 2020.