

## Introduction

The purpose of this document is to give guidance on the formation and operation of Study Groups set up to help students prepare themselves for the IRSE Examination. More information about the examination is available on the IRSE website ([www.irse.org](http://www.irse.org)), including information for students, suggested reading material, and details of existing Study Groups.

## Why Study Groups are useful

The IRSE Examination is challenging, and it requires students to possess considerable depth and breadth of knowledge. Students therefore need as much help as possible in order to perform well, and although it is possible to prepare for the exam by studying alone, experience shows that students are aided greatly by having the opportunity to spend time learning together. This enables students to share knowledge and understanding, hear from experts on specific topics, discuss how best to answer past exam questions, and focus on issues that they are having difficulty with.

The formation of a Study Group is regarded as one of the best ways of achieving this “learning together”, and the IRSE therefore encourages students, other IRSE members and employers, to support the formation of groups in order to enable students to perform well in the examination.

That said, students should remember that attending a Study Group is an important supplement to studying on their own, but it is not a substitute for personal preparation. The most effective Study Groups involve the participants in discussing a specific topic or past exam question for which they have done their own preparation ahead of each meeting of the group.

## Forming a Study Group

If you are considering forming a Study Group, you should begin preparations for it as soon as you know who is considering taking the examination in your geographical area and therefore may be interested in being a member of the group. It is sensible to try to determine this as soon as the previous year’s examination results are known. An introductory session could be held in January to decide the composition and aims of the group. A serious start can then be made about the time that the IRSE Exam Review meeting is held (this takes place annually, in the UK), taking account of the previous October’s papers and results.

This timescale permits some 6 months of basic topic learning to be achieved, prior to the need to concentrate on revision and the finer points of examination technique in the period immediately prior to the exam (the exam is usually held on the Saturday of the first week in October). All this assumes, of course, that students attending the Study Group are taking the exam in the same year. However, this need not be the case and students may wish to participate in a group the year before the one in which they are taking the exam.

A minimum of 4 participants is recommended in order to form a study group, although if that is not achievable, even as little as two people working together is better than nothing. It is important to choose a leader and deputy for ‘Study Group’ administration and management

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purposes. These two people could be students, or they could be other IRSE members who have more experience of the examination subject matter and are willing to lead the group.

A minimum of one two hour session per module every two weeks is recommended. If participants are able and willing to commit more time, then covering multiple modules within the same year becomes practicable. The members of a group might wish to meet more frequently in the weeks immediately preceding the examination.

You will need to identify a location to meet which is suitable for all the members. You might be able to find a railway industry company willing to provide the venue (meeting room) free of charge. You will need, as a minimum, a whiteboard, projector, flip chart etc. When considering questions and answers in Module 2 of the exam it is helpful to have a longer desk for viewing and working on scheme plans and other drawings.

A technical library associated with your Study Group which the members can easily access will be very useful. It may contain relevant textbooks, papers and other study materials (note that a lot of material is also available on the IRSE website).

### **Planning your Study Group's activities**

The following factors should be considered when planning the study group's activities:

- a) How many students/participants are committed to attending the Study Group?
- b) What level of knowledge and experience do the participants have? Do any of them have experience of taking a module already?
- c) Which modules are to be covered this year in the Study Group sessions? Do not be too ambitious by trying to cover too many modules; typically 2 or at the most 3 should be attempted by any one group in a year. In deciding which modules to cover, take into account those modules that the participants have already studied, and their existing knowledge and experience. You will need to balance their individual ambitions regarding which modules to cover against the need to give maximum benefit to the group as a whole.
- d) If the students are taking different modules and/or have significantly different capabilities and experience, can they be split into sub-groups for the purposes of studying some topics areas (and is there sufficient leadership for this to be done)?
- e) Can you identify a pool of expert professionals in your geographical area, who can be approached to support the study group by giving presentations and advice at the meetings?

### **Duties of the Study Group Leader/Deputy**

- a) Find suitably equipped venue(s). A group may decide use a single venue, or to circulate its meetings between various sites. The latter might be done to suit the work locations of its members, or to take advantage of particular training/educational facilities available at specific locations.
- b) Prepare a list of contact details/email address of all participants.
- c) Agree with the venue host and the students the dates/times at which the group will meet.

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- d) Make sure that senior managers in your company and the participants' companies know of the study group's existence. Actively seek their support, for instance by providing experts to impart their knowledge, allowing adequate time for students to meet, provision of meeting facilities, or help with forming the technical library.
- e) Make sure the 'Study Group' is listed on the IRSE website.
- f) Agree in advance with the participants the topics to be discussed, to give them adequate time for preparation.
- g) Share responsibilities between attendees to prepare/research the topics areas and share their knowledge with other members.
- h) Contact suitable professional experts, enlist their help, and agree with them the topics areas they are able to cover in study group presentations and discussions with the candidates. When inviting experts to assist, remember that these are self-help groups, not lecture sessions, and the emphasis should be on discussion and learning together.
- i) Make sure all attendees get the opportunity to participate in the discussions.
- j) Organise site visits if appropriate and relevant to the modules.
- k) Get advice, teaching material and support from other Study Groups who are dealing with similar modules (and be prepared to support them as well).
- l) Prepare and maintain "issues lists" of topics that candidates need more help on, and seek an expert's advice if necessary.
- m) If the students in the Study Group are not members of the IRSE, check that they have applied for membership (candidates must be IRSE members in order to take the exam).
- n) An Examination Centre can be created in your area if there are significant numbers of candidates available to take the exam. Contact the IRSE for advice about this.

### **Basic agenda and content for a typical study group session**

Each study group should decide how it wants to operate, and how to cover the material for the modules being addressed by the group. The basic agenda below is offered to give study groups an idea of how each session might be structured.

1. Review how students answered the past exam question set as homework after the last session (see 4 below). This should be done by the group members critiquing each other's answers, and by expert input from people who are knowledgeable on the subject matter.
2. Nominated member or expert introduces/presents this week's discussion topic. Make sure that all the group members participate in the discussion, focussed on increasing their understanding of the topic.
3. Deal with queries from students on specific issues that they need help with or are unclear about (preferably advised to the leader ahead of the meeting). These might relate to the discussion topic (in 2, above), or might be on other subject matter that is relevant to the exam module under consideration.
4. Plan for the next session, including agreeing a past exam question that students will attempt as homework before the next session and informing students about any other preparations they need to make, and any work or materials they will need to bring.

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