

**The Expectations of Australian and Asian International Business Students: Moving
beyond a prescriptive view of culture**

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Abstract

Much of the research undertaken into the expectations of international fee paying students studying in Australia takes a prescriptive view of culture, learning behaviour and teaching expectations. The assumption is often made that international students, particularly those from high power-distance, collectivist cultures, are culturally bound and it is the University teacher alone who must adapt to meet the needs of this student cohort. This study explores the expectations of Australian students (a low power distance, individualist culture) and Asian students from countries identified as having high power distance, collectivist cultures. Similarities and differences in expectations of group activities, group assignments, mandatory class attendance, class informality availability of the university teacher, questioning grades and debating the university teacher in class are discussed in terms of individualist-collectivist and power distance dimensions of culture. Conclusions are drawn that highlight the importance of moving beyond stereotypical, prescriptive descriptions of student expectations and behaviours.

Introduction

In Australia, the term *international student* is used to describe full fee paying students from abroad studying at Australian Universities. As the vast majority of these students are from countries in East and South-east Asia, frequently the term is used to describe that student cohort alone. As the term international student is used also used in this in the educational literature reviewed, we have also chosen to use this term. However, we note that many of the stereotypical descriptions of international students revolve around the assumption that the students come from countries that would be described by Hofstede (1980) as having high power distance, collectivist cultures. This assumption is flawed, given the range of power distance and individualist-collectivists scores that exist in South-east Asian and East Asian countries.

In the empirical work included in this paper, we have specifically selected Asian students from countries described as having high power distance, collectivist cultures. Our other group of students, are self described as Australian, a country with low power distance, individualistic culture. As our paper seeks to test whether culture bound predictions about the educational expectations of International and Australian students, this country based-cultural prediction is sufficient. If the predictions do not hold, further research will be needed to identify what factors influence the change in predictions.

Student Expectations

For an individual student, the importance of matching teaching and learning styles and the role cultural and intellectual factors play in influencing this relationship is well documented

(e.g. Liesch & Fairfield, 1992). The failure to meet expectations can impact on student learning, absence, and withdrawal (Croninger, 1991; Good, 1993), and compromise student-teacher relationships (Kolb, Osland & Rubin, 1995; Feldman & Thiess, 1982).

The literature on the expectations of international students in Australia has tended to focus on students' social and communication issues, (Ti, 1997, Volet & Ang, 1998; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000), lifestyle issues (Ti, 1997) and the application of culture shock theory to the university environment (Marx, 2001; Burke, 2001) or to produce broad classroom culture recommendations based on qualitative research (e.g. Treloar, McCall, Rolfe, Pearson, Garvey & Heathcote, 2000). Further, the differing learning styles, and associated expectations, of international and Australian students are often described in a generalized, non-empirical manner. (e.g. Phillips, 1990; Ballard and Clanchy, 1991) or by using descriptive statistics based on small samples (Lovejoy, 2001). In part, this paper seeks to redress this balance.

There is also evidence that most university teachers are ill equipped to understand the cultural differences in students and, because of this, they do not meet the expectations of their students (Shank, Walker & Hayes, 1996). This lack of understanding is attributed to the reliance on anecdotal or stereotypical descriptions (Ramburuth, 2001) or the possession of differing expectations by students and teachers of the roles of each other (e.g. Cortazzi and Jin 1997).

Given the increasing use of student evaluations of teaching in the performance management systems of universities, this has direct implications for the career paths of university teachers as well.

At the level of the university as an organisation, quality assurance, the focus on reputation and image management as part of the university marketing process, and the trend to see students

as client or customers, means that the need to meet student expectations is becoming more important. In addition, international students provide a significant amount of ‘above-grant’ income to universities. Meeting expectations can therefore have an impact on financial performance and, by extension, program viability. It is timely, therefore to examine the teaching and learning expectations of domestic and international students studying in Australia.

Student expectations and culture

There is a broad body of research that suggest that the cultural background of students may influence their teaching and learning expectations (Niehoff, Turnley, Yen & Sheu, 2001; Rhodes, 1998; Yamauchi, 1998).

Niehoff et al (2001) tested a number of propositions related to the individualism and collectivism and power distance dimensions of culture (Hofstede, 1980). Their study was based on a sample of two groups of students, one group studying in The United States of America, and the other group studying in Taiwan. They found support for the proposition that Taiwanese students, when compared to U.S. students, were more likely to expect the teacher to use group assignments and require mandatory attendance and less likely to expect the teacher to be available for consultation, use group activities and to teach in an informal manner.

In this study we replicate and extend their research. We have made two changes to their hypotheses. Firstly, we have substituted the term International students for Taiwanese

students, and Australian for US students. Niehoff et al (2001) argued that they were comparing a collectivist, high power distance cultural group with an individualist, low power distance cultural group. As noted earlier the international students selected all come from Asian countries that have high power distance, collectivist cultures, and Australian students from an individualist and low power distance is consistent with their study. Secondly, where they had a hypothesis that included more than one dependent variable, for example group activities and group assignments, we have split that hypothesis into separate hypotheses.

The first two propositions are based on the collectivist-individualist dimension. Hofstede (1980) identified that for those countries with individualistic culture, individuals tends to take care of themselves and of their immediate families only. But in collectivist culture, individuals will integrate themselves into groups, collective interests and achievements is preferred. Hofstede (1980) found countries such as Australia and the United States of America, to be a very individualistic and most countries in Asia to be more collectivistic. Neihoff et al (2001) suggest that in a university setting students who are from a collectivist culture will be more likely to expect group activities and assignments than students from and individualist culture. In replicating and extending their study, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: International Students, compared with Australian Students, will expect university teachers to use more group assignments.

Hypothesis 1b: International Students, compared with Australian Students, will expect university teachers to use more group activities.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 are based on the power distance dimension. Power distance refers to the degree to which unequal power distribution in organizations and society is accepted. In societies with large power distance, people tend to accept a high level of hierarchical structure and centralization in organization. However, in societies with small power distance, people tend to oppose power inequality. Subordinate consultation may be more important in a small power distance society. Hofstede (1980) identified Australia and the United States of America as having smaller power distance than the cultures in Asian countries. In replicating and extending Neihoff et al's (2001) study we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: International students, compared with Australian students, will expect a stronger policy of mandatory class attendance.

Hypothesis 2b: Australian students will expect more informality in the classroom than international students.

Hypothesis 2c: Australian students will expect more teacher availability than international students.

Hypothesis 3a: The questioning of course grades will be more acceptable for Australian students than international students.

Hypothesis 3b: Debating the teacher in class will be more acceptable for Australian students than for international students.

Method

Sample and procedures

For our study we used data gathered from 235 undergraduate business students enrolled at an Australian University. Our sample includes 171 Australian Students and 64 International Students, all from Asian countries that have high power distance, collectivist cultures.

Survey and Measures

The survey included a series of statements on teacher obligations and student obligations. Students were asked to rate each of these items on a seven point Likert scale. These statements and rating system were identical to that used in Neihoff et al (2001). In addition, they were asked to indicate if they were an Australian or International student, their nationality, their ethnicity, and their level of study.

Our measures were also identical to the measures used by Neihoff et al (2001). For teacher obligations, three variables, *group activities*, *group assignment* and *mandatory attendance*, were measured by single items. *Teacher availability* (5 items) included demonstrating respect for student opinions, allowing students to contact them at home, availability in and out of posted office hours, and being friendly and approachable. *Class informality* (4 items) included telling jokes, teaching interesting information, walking around the room and keeping the class entertaining.

It is noted that while scale reliability for the multi-item scales in the original article were at acceptable levels (teacher availability, $\alpha = 0.76$; class informality, $\alpha = 0.80$), in our study the alpha levels were lower (teacher availability, $\alpha = 0.54$; class informality, $\alpha = 0.61$). Removing items did not greatly increase scale reliability. As such, to be consistent in this aspect of our replication, we elected to use all items in the scales. This reliability level needs to be taken into account when interpreting the implications of our statistical results.

Data Analysis

Moderate levels of skewness and kurtosis were evident in some of the data. However, these were within acceptable parameters of normality as suggested by Tabachnick & Fidell (1996), and as such no transformations were conducted.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

Hypotheses 1a and 1b: No difference was found between two groups of students in relation to group activities in class and group assignments. It indicated that both international and Australian students expected a moderate degree of the use of group activities in class and group assignments (for expectation of group activities, mean = 4.59 and 4.56 for international and Australian students respectively; and for group assignment, mean = 4.26 and 4.49 for international and Australian students respectively). The result is inconsistent with Neihoff et al's. (2001) finding. In contrast to the argument presented by Neihoff et al's (2001) it seems unlikely that the cultural dimension of individualism and collectivism would have a

significant impact on students' expectations on class activities and group work in the context of our sample.

Hypothesis 2a: There was a significant difference between the two groups of students regarding their expectation of mandatory class attendance. International students showed a preference for mandatory class attendance (mean = 4.77) while the Australian students showed slightly disagreement to this policy (mean = 3.96). The result is consistent with Niehoff et al's (2001) finding.

Hypothesis 2b: This hypothesis tests students' expectation about classroom informality. In contrast to (2001) et al's finding, no significant difference was revealed between international and Australian students. However, both groups of students indicated their strong preference for class informality (mean = 5.37 and 5.57 for international and Australian students respectively).

Hypothesis 2c: This hypothesis is related to student's expectation about teacher availability. The result showed a significant difference in the expectation between the two groups of students. Compared to Niehoff et al's (2001) results that showed U.S students had a greater preference for teacher availability than Taiwanese students, the reverse was found in this study. International students indicated a stronger expectation for teacher availability than the Australian students (mean = 5.58 and 5.32 for international and Australian students respectively).

Hypotheses 3a and 3b: A significant difference was found between the international students and the Australian students regarding expectation towards questioning of course grades and

debating the teacher in class. While both groups of students disagreed that students should never question the grades or debate teacher in class, the extent of disagreement was found to be stronger for Australian students than for international students (for questioning grades, mean = 3.00 and 2.18 for international and Australian students respectively; and for debating teacher, mean = 3.08 and 2.17 for international and Australian students respectively). The results for hypothesis 3a, rather than 3b, are consistent with Niehoff et al's (2001) finding.

Discussion

Neither hypothesis relating to individualism-collectivism was supported. It is noted that in the original research the hypothesis relating to individualism-collectivism was only partially supported. A possible explanation for this relates to the study pathway that students may have followed prior to entry into University. It could be expected that many international students will have completed English for Academic Purposes or Foundations programs. In these programs skills in studying in the Australian university context are emphasised, and both individual and group related study skills are developed. Similarly, with the emphasis on competency-based learning, Australian students are likely to undertake collaborative and group activities at high school. These pathway experiences could lead to a convergence of expectations about teaching and learning methods, based on the possession, by both groups, of knowledge and skills in a range of teaching and learning methods. Further research would need to be undertaken to test this proposition.

The cultural dimension of power distance only partially explains the differences in students' expectations. There was a difference in expected teacher availability, but not in the direction predicted. International students expected more availability than their Australian counterparts.

An explanation could relate to parental expectation. Wang (1992:28) notes that Asian-American parents set high goals, while Niles (1995:380-381) identifies social approval from the family as a strong motivator for Asian students. Smith and Smith (1999:67) indicated that Asian students, as compared with Australian students, had a higher self expectation of performance, and, as such, would be more demanding of teacher support during their studies. In addition, expecting greater university teacher availability would be consistent with the conclusion by Phillips (1990: 772) that Asian students were inclined to seek clarification. These factors could decrease the likelihood of the power distance related behaviour postulated.

There was also no difference in the expectation of teacher informality between international and Australian students. Again, this could be due to the pathway that international students follow prior to entering an Australian university. If, international students are exposed to informal class settings in their preparatory studies, they may expect this style of teaching to continue at university. Further, as both groups of students rated this expectation highly, there are implications regarding the assumptions university teachers make about the style of teaching delivery to both international and domestic students.

The finding that international students placed more importance on mandatory class attendance is consistent with the Niehoff et al's (2001) power distance hypothesis and also the arguments related to motivation and self expectation outlined above. Additional research could clarify the contribution of power distance and self-expectation and motivation to the expectation of mandatory class attendance.

Both hypotheses relating to student obligations were supported. These addressed the issues of questioning grades and debating the university teacher. In each case Australian students were more likely to expect this behaviour. However, both international and Australian students indicated, on average that questioning grades and debating the teacher was acceptable. Again, this may be a function of the study pathways that students follow prior to entering university.

Conclusion

Our study replicates and extends the 2001 study by Niehoff et al. Our results differ from the Niehoff et al (2001) study in the following areas: firstly, we find no significant differences between the two student groups in relation to group activities and group assignments. Additionally, we find no significant differences between student expectations about class informality. The Niehoff et al (2001) study to the contrary found significant differences in these areas. We also find the opposite result to the Niehoff et al (2001) study in the student expectations about teacher availability. Our study found that the international students have a stronger expectation for teacher availability outside class. To our knowledge, it is the first study of its kind which uses Australian data to assess student's expectations of classroom practices. Future research could consider the pathways that International students take prior to commencing their university studies. Further research could also be undertaken into within national group difference related to these items, based on, for example, ethnicity, gender, educational pathway and age.

TABLE 1**Analysis of variance results international and Australian students**

	International Students		Australian Students		F
	M	SD	M	SD	
Teacher obligation					
Group activities	4.59	1.36	4.56	1.48	1.51
Group assignments	4.26	1.60	4.49	4.68	1.986
Mandatory Attendance	4.77	1.61	3.96	1.78	1.068*
Class informality	5.37	0.90	5.57	0.84	0.00
Teacher availability	5.58	0.71	5.32	0.72	0.42*
Student obligations					
Never question grades	3.00	1.71	2.18	1.28	10.10**
Never debate teacher	3.10	1.67	2.17	1.21	10.90**

*p< 05. **p< .001

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