

NEW ZEALAND STUDENTS' INTERNATIONAL COMPETENCIES AND CO- AND CROSS-ETHNIC INTERACTIONS

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Abstract

It is hypothesised that internationalisation of the tertiary education sector offers social, psychological and academic opportunities for both local and international students. Additionally, it provides future benefits to business through the development of graduates who are oriented internationally with intercultural competencies. However, research has shown that having a large international student body present on campus is insufficient to promote cross-cultural interactions; the amount of interaction between student groups is low. It is argued that without such exchanges, host national students may not develop the intercultural skills and knowledge sought in the global marketplace and, international students may be disappointed with their experience with poor socio-cultural adjustment.

The present study examines the intercultural skills of, and interactions between local and international students enrolled in a business faculty at a New Zealand tertiary institution. As expected, respondents rated themselves significantly lower on all measures of social interaction with people from different ethnic groups compared to interactions with people from their own ethnic group. International students reported a tendency to take a more passive approach in social situations. Furthermore, international students rated themselves as less confident in handling situations with members from other ethnic groups than did the local students. The findings from this study suggest that the low levels of interaction between students are related to social self-efficacy in a cross-cultural context. Thus through intervention strategies, tertiary institutions may be able to empower students in their interactions with cross-nationals. Future research examining the benefits of such intervention programs should be conducted.

Introduction

In 2000, there were more than 1.8 million students annually studying in countries other than their own (Bohm, Davis, Meares & Pearce, 2002). Similarly, one of the industry's newcomers, New Zealand, has experienced significant growth over the last ten years. Indeed, between 1993 and 2000 the number of international students enrolled in New Zealand tertiary institutions increased by 191% (Ministry of Education, 2002). Education is one of the country's biggest export earners. In 2003, the contribution of the whole export education industry to GDP was 3.6% with a value of over NZ\$2.2b (Education New Zealand, 2004; Statistics New Zealand, 2004).

Beaver and Tuck (1998) propose that one key reason for overseas-born students attending New Zealand tertiary institutions is to build business and social contacts amongst locals. Yet the literature consistently shows that regardless of the country in which the study is conducted, the amount of interaction between host nationals and international students is generally low. As such, international students report that their most regular contact is with co-nationals. In 1990, Burke found that only 15% of overseas students at an Australian university counted local students among their closest friends and this pattern continued a decade later with Smart, Volet and Ang (2000) noting that none of the eight international students interviewed in their study had Australian friends. Comparable findings were reported by Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) in their investigation of friendship patterns of overseas-born students at the University of Hawaii, and Bochner, Hutnik and Furnham's (1985) research in the United Kingdom. Between 17 and 70% of participants in these two studies indicated that they did not have friends from the host-cultural group.

International students in New Zealand also proclaim a preference for co-national friendships. For example, in their survey of Asian students at two universities Chen and Chieng (n.d cited in Ward, 2003) found that 23% of respondents had no local friends and that they were more likely to approach co-nationals for study and social support. Somewhat surprisingly, Butcher's (2002) study of the impact of international students on North Shore City revealed that almost one in every four international students had never socialised with a New Zealander.

Historically most research in this field has been conducted from the perspective of the international student. However in a recent study, Brown and Daly (2004) examined this issue from the viewpoint of both local and international students though surveying 88 undergraduates at a New Zealand tertiary institution. Confirming previous findings, Brown and Daly identified that both student groups reported that they have more close friends with co-nationals and, that they spent more time socialising and studying with members of their own cultural groups than people from other ethnic backgrounds. When students did engage in cross-national interactions it tended to be for academic rather than social reasons.

When Asian students travel to New Zealand to engage in tertiary education they have high expectations in relation to their interactions with the locals. Ward (2002) found that 91% of Asia-born students surveyed expected to form friendships with domestic students; 82% anticipated that they would enjoy socialising with host nationals; and, 72% believed that they would be accepted by New Zealanders. Unfortunately in her study, Ward notes that there was a large gap between expectations and experiences. Forty-one percent of international students formed friendships with the local students; 52% enjoyed socializing and only 37% felt that they were accepted by New Zealanders. This expectation-experience difference results in disappointment for the international students, and indeed may affect their psycho-social adjustment to the host culture.

Ward (2003, p7) argues that there is strong evidence that greater interaction between international and domestic students is associated with 'psychological, social and academic adaptation' of international students. In particular, studies have shown the benefits include lower stress levels (Redman & Bunyi, 1993); greater life satisfaction (Searle & Ward, 1990); and, greater communication abilities including confidence in the second language (Barker, 1990). Moreover, there are advantages for domestic students through interacting with those from other cultures and being exposed to different perspectives (Eng & Manthei, 1984; Ministry of Education, 2001). Through effective cross-cultural interactions New Zealand-born students are able to develop skills and knowledge to succeed in cross-cultural contexts. Such competencies are highly sought after in the global marketplace (Australian International Education Foundation, 1998; Industry task force on leadership and management skills, 1995; Webb, Mayer, Pioche & Allen, 1999). Additionally, the presence of international students in New Zealand can assist in the building of interpersonal links with people from other countries, and in familiarising New Zealanders with their Asia-Pacific neighbours (Asia2000 Foundation, 2003).

Several reasons for limited cross-national relationships and interactions have been identified. Firstly, perceived proficiency in the host-culture's language influences the friendship networks international students seek to establish (Barker, Child, Jones, Gallois & Callan, 1991). Secondly, the level of cultural distance shapes the intercultural contact between students. As shown by Kim (1998) and Ward and Kennedy (1993), the greater the perceived cultural distance, the greater the preference for co-national interactions. In New Zealand a high proportion of international students originate from Asian countries (Ministry of Education, 2003), which have a high level of cultural distance from the New Zealand culture (Hofstede, 1984). Consequently, international students in New Zealand may derive less satisfaction from contact with host-nationals and seek out contact with those from their own ethnic group.

As discussed earlier, international students have high expectations of socialising with and being accepted by local students. Certainly, there is strong evidence to suggest that

international students do desire greater contact (Ward, Berno & Kennedy, 2000), however Asia-born international students tend to report less confidence and more social difficulties when interacting with host nationals compared to locally-born students (Mak, 2000). Furthermore, recent research has shown that domestic students are disinterested in intercultural relations (Mills, 1997; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000). Rather as Beaver and Tuck (1998) conclude, New Zealand domestic students are focused on gaining their qualifications and are less likely to seek contact with their overseas-born classmates.

It is in the context of continuing growth of international students at New Zealand tertiary institutions that the present research was conducted. As identified, previous studies have examined student experiences only from the perspective of the international student. Therefore this paper aims to investigate the issue from all stakeholders. Specifically, this exploratory study aimed to measure the intercultural competencies of domestic and international students enrolled in a business faculty at a New Zealand tertiary institution, as moderating factors of the interactions between these two groups.

Methodology

Participants

This study involved two samples of students from a New Zealand tertiary institution; 39 domestic students and 49 international students. For the sake of this study, domestic students are defined as those with New Zealand citizenship or permanent residence. International students comprise full-fee paying students.

Domestic students

The majority of domestic participants reported New Zealand nationality (N=25), with almost one quarter of respondents (N=9) indicating that they were born in Australia. Three other students reported that they were from other English speaking countries (e.g. Canada and the United Kingdom), one student originated from Iraq and another from Zambia. The mean length of time since the overseas-born students immigrated to New Zealand was 12.13 years (SD = 8.77), ranging from two to 24 years. Most respondents (N=34) spoke only one language, with three students reporting that they were bilingual, and one stating that they spoke three languages. Sixty-two percent of respondents (N = 24) were female; fifteen respondents were male. The age of these students varied between 17 and 40 years (M = 23.78, SD = 7.57). Over half of the domestic participants (N = 21) lived at home, ten share a house with another domestic students and seven live on their own.

International students

Eighty-one percent (N=39) of the international students reported that they were born in China, with six percent (N=3) of students from Taiwan. Two students reported that they were from

Japan, and one student was from each of Indonesia, Malaysia and South Korea. The mean length of time since the overseas-born students arrived to New Zealand to study was 2.82 (SD = 3.42), ranging from one to 21 years. Eight-one percent (N=39) of all respondents spoke two languages, with nine students reporting that they spoke three or more languages. Twenty-seven respondents (N = 27) were female and 21 males also completed the survey. The age of these students varied between 19 and 38 years (M = 23.62, SD = 3.52). Half of the international participants reported that are living in share accommodation with other international students, with another quarter of respondents (N=13) indicating that they are living with a homestay family. Five students stated that they live with New Zealanders, three students are with their family and two are on their own.

Questionnaire

The survey consisted of four sections including one set of questions which gathered demographic data. In the first section, students were required to complete the 40-item Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) that describe 'concrete behaviours or tendencies' (van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002, p684) across five dimensions: Cultural Empathy, Open-mindedness, Social Initiative, Flexibility and, Emotional Stability. The scale for Cultural Empathy measures an individual's ability to empathize with people from different cultural backgrounds. The scale contains items such as "understands other people's feelings". The second dimension is Open-mindedness, which measures the openness of the respondent's attitude towards different cultures, for example: "Is fascinated by other people's opinions". A high score on the Social Initiative dimension indicates a tendency to take an active approach in social situations, for example: "makes contacts easily". The Flexibility measure refers to an ability to adjust one's behaviour in foreign situations and cultures. An example of an item in this scale is "changes easily from one activity to another". The final scale of Emotional Stability measures an individual's tendency to remain calm when in stressful situations, for example: "takes it for granted that things will turn out right".

The second and third sections of the questionnaire examined respondent's co-ethnic and cross-ethnic friendships and their social self-efficacy in dealing with those from the same culture and those from a different culture. The 13-item social self-efficacy scale was adopted from Fan and Mak (1988). It includes questions such as "*I am confident in my language skills*" and "*It is difficult for me to express a different opinion*". A seven-point Likert scale was used to examine students' perceived abilities in interacting with students from their same and different ethnic groups. Additionally students were asked to indicate the number of friends they have from their own ethnic group and from other ethnic groups. Responses options included 'none', 'one', 'a few', 'some', 'many'.

Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations and scale intercorrelations for self-ratings on the social self-efficacy and MPQ measures. Students reported moderate levels of social self-efficacy. As van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee (2002) found all scale means for the MPQ were above the midpoint and in particular the mean for cultural empathy was quite high. This result indicates “a possible susceptibility of this scale to social desirability bias” (van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002, p686).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and scale intercorrelations for Self-efficacy and MPQ Dimensions

		M	SD	2	3	4	5	6
1	Social self-efficacy	3.79	.65	.36*	.25**	.25	.52	.16
2	Cultural empathy	3.73	.70		.38*	.19	.48	.12
3	Open-mindedness	3.55	.43			.18	.13	.27**
4	Social initiative	3.32	.50				.37*	.23*
5	Emotional stability	3.05	.51					.33*
6	Flexibility	2.98	.52					

p<0.01

**p<0.05

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for the MPQ scores for each group. A series of independent sample t-tests showed that there were significant differences between the international and domestic students on the dimension of Social Initiative ($p<.01$). Domestic students reported that they have a greater tendency to take an active approach in social situations than international students, while the means on the other scales were similar for both student groups.

Table 2. MPQ results for International (N=49) and Domestic students (N=39)

	International students		Domestic students	
	M	SD	M	SD
Cultural empathy	3.76	0.85	3.68	0.43
Open-mindedness	3.60	0.36	3.50	0.50
Social initiative	3.17	0.41	3.50	0.55
Emotional stability	3.00	0.43	3.12	0.60
Flexibility	2.97	0.49	2.99	0.56

Both international and domestic students reported more close friends with co-nationals than with members of other ethnic groups ($p<.01$). Overall, the median response in relation to the number of co-national friendships was ‘some’ with 89.8% of respondents (N=79) indicating that they have between ‘few’ and ‘many’ friends. On the other hand, the median response from cross-national friendships was ‘a few’, with over one quarter of participants (N=24) reporting that they have no friends from other ethnic groups. Domestic students stated more friends from their own cultural group than did international students ($p<.05$), but both groups reported a similar number of cross-national friends.

Overall the sample as a whole rated themselves significantly lower on all measures of social interaction with people from different ethnic groups compared to interactions with people from their own cultural group ($p<.01$). Compared to their own ethnic group, students reported that with members of other ethnic groups they were less likely to initiate friendships. Additionally

respondents indicated that they felt less confident and were more reserved; had less common interests and felt it was more difficult to express ideas and get information with members from a different cultural group. All respondents were similar in terms of their perception of their commonality of topics with those from different ethnic backgrounds.

Despite finding it harder to make new friends from other ethnic groups, international students were just as likely to persist with attempts at friendship in the face of an initial lack of interest. Similarly, they reported that it was no more difficult getting either information from or a date with members of other ethnic groups than it was within their own ethnic group. In contrast domestic students rated themselves as significantly better able to handle themselves in social situations with their own and other ethnic groups than did international students ($p < .01$).

Stepwise multiple regression was used to determine whether the subscales of the MPQ would predict social self-efficacy scores and the number of cross-national friendships. Social Initiative ($t = 2.76$, $p < .01$) and Open-Mindedness ($t = 2.31$, $p < .05$) were the two subscale scores found to predict the mean score for interactions with members of different ethnic groups. Scores on these two subscales accounted for 17.9% of the variance in the interaction score.

Discussion

As reported in the current literature, both international and domestic students have more close friends with co-nationals than with members of other ethnic groups. The present study confirms the poor levels of intercultural contact between local and foreign-fee paying students as found by Butcher (2002) and Chen and Chiang (n.d cited in Ward, 2003). Both student groups reported a similar number of cross-national friends; on average they have 'a few' friends from other ethnic groups. Although one quarter of students reported that they have no intercultural relationships, it is encouraging that 17% of respondents stated that they have 'some' close friends from other ethnic groups. Future research should examine friendships more specifically such as the precise number of friends and diversity of ethnicity of cross-national friendships, and the factors influencing the formation of these friendships.

International students have greater openness to other cultures than local students. Several authors (Arthur & Bennett, 1995; Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991; Kealey, 1990) argue that open-mindedness aids in-country adjustment and promotes a satisfactory sojourn. On the other hand, international students scored lower on social initiative than domestic students, which means that they take a more passive approach in social situations. Searle and Ward (1990) argue that social support is a major predictor in psychological adjustment. When moving into a new culture the sojourner needs to be able to approach the social situations in an active way and to take initiative for this interaction. Thus, the experiences of foreign fee paying students may not be as successful due to problems with psycho-social adjustment.

Yet it is worthwhile exercising caution with these findings as the domestic students also rated themselves as better able to handle themselves in social situations with their own ethnic groups than did international students. Supporting Fan and Mak's (1998) findings, overall international students' perceive that their social self-efficacy is low, regardless of the ethnicity of the other person with whom they are interacting.

Brown and Daly (2004) found that the attitudes and perceptions of both student groups regarding each other were generally positive, suggesting the lack of cross-cultural interaction is not attitudinally based. Yet, this may require further consideration. Several authors (e.g. Mills, 1997; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000) have proposed that local students are apathetic in relation to establishing friendships with foreign students. Certainly, the domestic students reported lower levels of cultural empathy, open-mindedness and flexibility. As such it may be hypothesised that local students have a more closed attitude, are less able to empathise with people from different cultural backgrounds and, are not as able to adjust their behaviour in foreign situations and cultures. These findings seem somewhat in contradiction to the social self-efficacy scores reported by domestic students. The social self-efficacy scale measures respondents' perceived abilities, while the MPQ examines participants' tendencies in behaviour. As such, these findings suggest there is discrepancy between the actual behaviour of domestic students and their perceived skills in intercultural interactions.

Both international and domestic students indicated that they are less likely to initiate cross-cultural friendships. The findings of the current research reveal that one of the key reasons for limited cross-national relationships and interactions is students' moderately low social self-efficacy in interaction with people from ethnic groups different from their own. Specifically, participants reported lower confidence and expressed the belief that they have less common ground with members from a different cultural group.

Respondents also noted that it was more difficult to express ideas and get information during intercultural interactions. As identified by Barker and her colleagues (1991), communication competence is a moderating factor influencing the friendship networks established between the two student groups. However as opposed to language proficiency, intercultural competence and confidence is related to the knowledge of the host country's cultural code and social rules (Barker, 1993). As such, intervention strategies should be aimed at enhancing intercultural knowledge and skills.

Ward (2003, p19) argues that 'the presence of international students, even in large numbers, is insufficient... to promote intercultural interactions, to develop intercultural friendships and to result in international understanding'. Intervention strategies include peer-pairing or "buddy" systems and specific programs whose objective is to develop intercultural skills and assist adjustment to the host culture. Abe, Talbot and Geelhoed (1998) found that international

students who participated in peer programs were better adjusted socially than those who did not. Domestic students also benefit from buddy systems as it allows for increasing cultural awareness and sensitivity, and more importantly, establishing friendships (Ward, 2003). The Excell (Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership) program devised by Mak, Westwood, Barker, and Ishiyama (1999) can be implemented to assist international students to develop social confidence and skills in the host culture. The Excell program has been successfully applied to mixed groups of overseas- and local-born students and shown to be beneficial for both groups, including a potential for improving inter-racial relations (Mak & Barker, 2000).

The present research responded to the gap in the literature by exploring the multicultural competencies and social self-efficacy of both international and domestic students. If New Zealand is to manage the growth of its export education market effectively, there is a strong need to maximise the experiences for both international and domestic students. Indeed, there are many opportunities available to institutions to promote intercultural relations through personal development of students. Future investigations should examine the change in students' intercultural skill and knowledge resultant from interventionist strategies.

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