

Enhancing classroom success for international students through the Excell Intercultural Skills Program

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Abstract

Numerous studies have highlighted that the most pronounced differences between international and domestic students are with classroom participation and intercultural relationships. In Ward's (2003) report for the New Zealand Ministry of Education, she identified a pressing need for research to evaluate intervention strategies. In response, this study investigated the effect of an intervention program entitled Excellence in Experiential Learning and Leadership (Excell) Intercultural Skills Program. While the Excell program has been successfully implemented in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and The Netherlands, this is the first-time it has been utilised in the New Zealand context. Twenty-five students enrolled at a New Zealand institution completed the six-week Excell program. There were significant changes between the pre- and post- intervention scores for open-mindedness, social initiative and emotional stability. Furthermore students reported increased confidence and friendships both in the classroom and in the wider community. While this study has shown the immediate effectiveness of the Excell program, it is recommended that further investigation of the long-term impact of such an intervention strategy be conducted.

Keywords

International students, intercultural competencies, classroom success

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.

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 psychosocial 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 building 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.

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 through 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. Interestingly, both student groups 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. Daly and Brown (2004) supported Ward's (2003) position that future research examining the benefits of such intervention programs should be conducted.

Therefore this study investigated the effect of an intervention program entitled Excellence in Experiential Learning and Leadership (ExcelL) Intercultural Skills Program, which won first place in the 2003 Australian Awards for University Teaching in the category of support programs for students. The ExcelL program is an evidence-based best practice program used to assist newcomers with adjusting to a culture. In addition, evaluation studies have shown that the program helps to achieve increased cultural understanding between local and international students on campus.

The research questions underpinning this project include:

- What is the current level of sociocultural competencies of international students, domestic students and lecturers?
- How confident do these parties feel interacting with individuals from a different cultural background?
- What change in level of sociocultural competencies occurs from participation in the ExcelL program?
- What change in self-efficacy occurs from participation in the ExcelL program?

Method

This study comprised two stages: pre- and post-intervention. Two groups of respondents were involved in each stage; firstly the students and staff participating in the ExcelL program and secondly the non-ExcelL participants.

ExcelL Participants

Twenty-seven students and two staff members volunteered to participate in the ExcelL program. There were nine males and 20 females and their ages ranged from 18 to 40 years old with a median age of 23 years (s.d. = 5.17). There was a diverse range of country of origin reported. Twenty-two of the participants indicated that they were from Southeast Asia, with China being the most prevalent country (N=20). Four participants reported that they were New Zealanders. One student was from Thailand and another from Vietnam. The remaining participant was from South Africa. The mean length of time in New Zealand for those participants who were born overseas was 2.55 years. Over half of those participants (N=15) indicated they had been in New Zealand between one to three years. A further three respondents indicated they had been in the country for over three years, and the remaining two participants had been in New Zealand for only one month as part of a student exchange program. Nine students did not state their country of origin.

Twenty-five students and two staff members completed the ExcelL program. The students who withdrew were both female; one from China and the other a Danish exchange student. The median age of the ExcelL graduates was 23 (s.d. = 5.24) and the mean length of time in New Zealand for those participants who were born overseas was 2.44 years.

Control Group

The control group comprised twenty-six students enrolled in a first year course. There were 13 females and 11 males. Two respondents did not state their gender. The age range was 19 to 46 years old, with the median age of 21.5 years (s.d. = 5.32). Twenty-one students in this cohort indicated that they were Chinese. Two New Zealanders completed the survey along with one South African, one Taiwanese and one Egyptian. The mean length of time in New Zealand for those participants who were born overseas was 2.29 years. Seventy-nine percent (N=19) of overseas-born students in the control group reported that they have been in New

Zealand for between one to three years. A further two students indicated that they had been in New Zealand for eight years, and three had arrived in the country only two months prior to completing the survey.

Procedure

Participants of the Excell program were presented with a questionnaire in the first session. They completed this survey before the start of the program and returned it to the researchers. Surveys also were distributed to students enrolled in a first year subject to form the control group.

One week after completing the six-week Excell program, participants completed the post-intervention questionnaire. At that time, the control group of students also completed the same survey.

Instrument

The students' questionnaire comprised three sections, including the 40-item MPQ (van Oudenhoven & van der Zee), and a Social Self-efficacy scale (Fan & Mak). The MPQ is comprised of items 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 empathise with people from different cultural backgrounds. 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 the 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 for the student control group and Excell participants, examined respondent's co-ethnic and cross-ethnic friendships and their social self-efficacy in dealing with people from the same culture and those from a different culture. The 13-item social self-efficacy scale adopted from Fan and Mak (1988) 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 people 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.

In the post-intervention questionnaire, the Excell participants were asked to describe the personal effects of completing the program.

Findings

Pre-intervention Stage

As detailed in Table 1, scale means were computed for the MPQ scores of the total Excell participants group. As van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee (2002) found, all scale means were above the midpoint. Of particular interest in this phase of the study was the difference between the international and domestic students on the MPQ scales. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the MPQ score for each group. A series of independent sample t-tests showed that there were no significant differences between the international and domestic participants on any of the five dimensions. Levene's test for inequality of variance was applied because of the difference between group sizes, but no significant differences were found.

Table 1. Excell participants' pre-intervention MPQ results

Dimensions	Whole group (N=29)		International participants (N=24)		Domestic participants (N=5)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Cultural empathy	3.73	.40	3.71	.44	3.77	.16
Open-mindedness	3.50	.50	3.51	.53	3.49	.36
Social initiative	3.29	.50	3.23	.51	3.63	.28
Emotional stability	3.15	.41	3.18	.39	3.00	.55
Flexibility	3.06	.36	3.09	.34	2.90	.44

Table 2 shows scale means for the MPQ scores for the total of the control group. There was a significant difference between the Excell participant group and the control group in relation to Cultural Empathy ($p < .05$); before participating in the intervention program the Excell participants tend to be more able to empathise with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Table 2. Control group pre-intervention MPQ results (N=26)

Dimensions	M	SD
Cultural empathy	3.51**	.40
Open-mindedness	3.42	.50
Social initiative	3.22	.47
Emotional stability	3.02	.37
Flexibility	3.06	.44

** $p < .05$

Before commencing the intervention program, overall the Excell participants 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, participants reported that with members of other ethnic groups they were less likely to initiate friendship; felt less confident and more reserved; believed they had less common ground and felt it was more difficult to express ideas and to get information. The students indicated that they lacked confidence in asking questions in class and they did not feel confident talking to and asking questions of lecturers and administration staff of a different ethnic background to their own. The students in the control group also 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 ($p < .01$).

Students in both the Excell group and the control group reported significant difficulties in making friends with individuals from different ethnic groups ($p < .01$). Respondents stated that they have more 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 seven, while the average number of cross-cultural friendships was two. While all students reported that they spent more time socialising and studying with members of their own cultural group than with people of other ethnic backgrounds, this result was not significant.

Post-intervention Stage

Table 3 shows the MPQ scores for the Excell student group prior to and following the intervention program. Repeated measures t-tests showed that there were significant changes between the pre- and post- intervention scores for open-mindedness, social initiative and emotional stability. Surprisingly the post-intervention score for Flexibility was significantly decreased.

Table 3. Excell participants' pre- and post-intervention MPQ results

Dimensions	Pre-intervention (N=29)		Post-intervention (N=26)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Cultural empathy	3.73	.40	3.79	.41
Open-mindedness	3.50	.50	3.77*	.46
Social initiative	3.29	.50	3.48*	.49
Emotional stability	3.15	.41	3.29*	.38
Flexibility	3.06	.36	2.90**	.39

* p<.01

** p<.05

Overall there was no significant improvement with participants' measures of social interaction with people from different ethnic groups compared to interactions with people from their own cultural group. However, repeated measures t-tests revealed that after participating in the Excell program, students felt that had more common ground with people from different ethnic groups (p<.01). Moreover respondents indicated that they experienced less difficulties participating in class and felt more confident talking to lecturers (p <.05).

After the Excell program, participants reported that they had significantly more friends with individuals from different ethnic groups (p<.05). Interestingly the median number of cross-ethnic friendships was reported as four. Students also reported that they spent significantly more time studying and socialising with cross-ethnic peers (p<.05).

Overwhelmingly, Excell participants reported benefits to their cross-cultural communication skills and more importantly to their confidence in such intercultural interactions. Comments included:

I became confident because I have learnt some skills about how to communicate with others

I make new friends. I learn a lot of skills about how to communicate with people in New Zealand

Through the Excell program we can make friends more easily with Kiwis

The class gave me chances to learn how to get along with other people who are from different cultures. It also gave me confidence and skills to make better relationships with my lecturers, my friends in my life

Of great note are the comments made by students identifying a connection between completing the Excell program and future employment benefits:

This skills is quite useful in my future work in Kiwi company

I also think the skills and confidence I have got from the class, which is very helpful for me to find a job in the future

Table 4 shows the repeated measures MPQ scores for the control group of students. Paired sample t-tests revealed no significant changes during the seven-week period of the research project.

Table 4. Control group repeated measures for MPQ results (N=26)

Dimensions	Pre-intervention stage (N=26)		Post-intervention stage (N=26)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Cultural empathy	3.51	.40	3.53	.47
Open-mindedness	3.42	.50	3.49	.57
Social initiative	3.22	.47	3.25	.45
Emotional stability	3.02	.37	3.13	.48
Flexibility	3.06	.44	3.05	.47

Conclusions

This study determined the level of sociocultural competencies of students before and after participating in an intervention program. Overall there were moderately high scores across the five dimensions of the MPQ suggesting that all parties possess appropriate levels of skills for engaging in intercultural interactions. Contradicting Daly and Brown's (2004) findings there were no significant differences between international and domestic students. Interestingly, before participating in the ExcelL participants were more able to empathise with people from different cultural backgrounds.

It was hypothesised that there would be a change in level of sociocultural competencies subsequent to participation in the ExcelL program. There was no significant change in the MPQ scores of students in the control group. In contrast, following the intervention program it was noted that the scores of the ExcelL participants' for open-mindedness, social initiative and emotional stability had increased. Through the program, participants developed intercultural competencies to assist them with interacting within both the multicultural classroom and the wider community. Specifically, participants developed a more open attitude towards different cultures and a greater tendency to remain calm in stressful situations, such as cross-cultural interactions. Furthermore as a result of participating in the ExcelL course, participants reported that they take a more active 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.

At the pre-intervention stage, both groups reported less confidence in cross-cultural classroom interactions and social gatherings with students being less likely to initiate friendships. Brown and Daly (2004) found that the attitudes and perceptions of both domestic and international students regarding each other were generally positive, suggesting the lack of interaction is not attitudinally based. Rather the difficulties appear to revolve around communication and social self-efficacy. 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.

After completing the ExcelL program, there was significant improvement with students' measures of social self-efficacy and social interaction with people from different ethnic groups. This is a key objective of the ExcelL program (Mak, Westwood, Barker & Ishiyama, 1999). It is encouraging to note that the students' gains relate to an improvement with confidence and skill in participating in class with those from other cultural groups. Students' comments confirm these findings. Overall they expressed a feeling of greater confidence and they had more friends with people from different cultures. Before completing the ExcelL program, respondents indicated that they had significant difficulties in making friends with cross-nationals and had more co-national friendships. Accordingly, they spent more time socialising and studying with members from their own cultural group. Subsequent to the ExcelL program, participants reported that they had more cross-ethnic friendships and the time spent studying and socialising with cross-ethnic peers was significantly greater. No changes in social self-efficacy or social interaction were reported for the control group.

The present research responded to the gap in the literature by exploring the intercultural competencies and social self-efficacy of both international and domestic students, and examining the impact of an intervention program, ExcelL. Certainly the ExcelL program has been shown to be effective in increasing students' intercultural competencies and social self-efficacy, and thus enhancing classroom success. While gains were noted for the ExcelL participants, it is worthwhile examining the long-term benefits of the program. Moreover, comparisons of other intervention strategies and the combination of various programs such as ExcelL and a peer-paring system would be beneficial. 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 between students.

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