

Student success: Bridging the gap for Chinese students in collaborative learning

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International research is positive about the educational benefits of working in diverse groups but there has been little New Zealand research in this area. This paper investigates how students are prepared for collaborative learning in three New Zealand tertiary institutes and identifies the particular problems experienced by Chinese students when the preparation in multi cultural classes is not carried out adequately and does not address cultural issues.

An initial research project by Clark and Baker (2006) involved a survey of staff and students at two Wellington tertiary institutes. The results indicated that students were often inadequately prepared for working in groups and, although they usually valued informal collaborative learning, they did not achieve the desired outcome of learning to work together constructively and cooperatively in assessed collaborative assignments.

This paper, which reports on a follow up research project, presents findings from focus groups with Chinese international students and with New Zealand tertiary lecturers who use collaborative learning techniques in their teaching. The findings from these focus groups indicate that there is a strong cultural conflict in the conceptualisation of collaborative learning between Chinese students with little prior experience of collaborative learning and New Zealand lecturers who are often not fully prepared to help Chinese students to bridge the gaps. The majority of Chinese students value lecturers' programme content delivery and the achievement of high marks over the development of interpersonal skills; this is contrary to the lecturers' belief that the development of team skills is the most important outcome from collaborative learning. This cognitive dissonance reinforces the importance of understanding cultural differences and their impact on student patterns of classroom behaviour.

To bridge the gaps, this paper recommends that Chinese students be prepared more effectively to understand the reasons for the use of collaborative learning in New Zealand tertiary classrooms and that lecturers be trained in designing assessment programmes that are pedagogically sound and culturally accommodating.