

Asian students in university clubs: case studies in leadership and integration

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Abstract

Student clubs available at the universities are an obvious site for students, especially Asian international students to learn and develop leadership skills through real life experience. However, it is still uncertain how Asian international students learn and develop the skills through participating in the clubs.

This paper describes a qualitative study which explored a perception of Asian international students on club participation and how leadership ability was developed. The study also explored relationship between national and leadership development experience. Data was collected through sixteen interviews, observation, and documentation to create two case studies, the Wellington Malaysian Student Organisation (WMSO) and the Thai Student Association (TSA).

Empirical findings showed that club participation not only help Asian students to learn and developed leadership experience but also facilitates their social integration during their study in New Zealand. The study also found a national background of Asian students shaped their club participation experience. To maximise benefits of club participation activity, support and assistance from university administrators were found importance in order to maximise their leadership development and social integration during club participation. Recommendations were outlined.

Keywords

International students; Malaysian students; Thai students; Asian students; New Zealand; Social Integration, Leadership Development, Cross-cultural; Qualitative research.

Introduction

This paper investigates the leadership development of Asian international students in student cultural clubs in New Zealand. We argue that student club participation not only helps develop leadership, but facilitates social integration. In two case studies, a student researcher explored the perceptions of Asian international students about their club participation, and their ideas about how leadership ability was developed. The study also explored the relationships between national and the leadership development experience. The two case qualitative studies were carried out with the participation two cultural clubs for international students- the Thai Student Association (TSA) and the Wellington Malaysian Student Organisation (WMSO) at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW),

The overall research question of the study asked: To what extent do students learn and develop leadership skills from participating in a cultural club at a university? For this paper we focus more specifically on the cultural issues for international students, and the connections between club participation and social integration. . As well

as contributing to the academic literature of student leadership development, especially in a cross-cultural context, the study aimed to have practical effects. In this paper we spell out key recommendations for university administrators and advisors, developed from the study.

The paper begins with an outline of issues for Asian International students in New Zealand. We go on to locate the study academically by briefly reviewing the literature on leadership development, with an emphasis on university students. We then explain the research design. The majority of the paper discusses our findings, and we have chosen here to highlight the international student issues, and to make connections with issues of social integration. Lastly, we explain our key recommendations to university administrators and advisors.

Asian International Students in New Zealand: An Overview

New Zealand's eight universities provide a range of learning programmes, from foundation skills to doctoral studies (NZMOE, 2006). Total government spending on tertiary education, including operating and capital expenditure, was NZ\$ 2,641 million in 2006 (NZMOE, 2006). With approximately 4 million people, New Zealand has been seen as having an advantage as an education destination for international students because of its relatively lower cost of living and closer geographical location to Asia than any other English-speaking country (Ward & Masgoret, 2004).

There is a large number of Asian students enrolled at New Zealand tertiary institutions, and several recent studies have reported a challenge to Asian students on their ability to adapt and integrate into New Zealand society (e.g., Asia 2000, 2003; Bennett, 1998; Beaver and Tuck, 1999; Berno & Ward, 2003; Ward, 2001). The attitudes of students and of the hosts is reported as a significant factor preventing these students from successfully integrating into the country. From the survey conducted by NZMOE (2007), results showed that international students believed that it was too difficult to befriend the locals. They believed that the locals do not desire a closer relationship with them. Negative perceptions of New Zealanders towards Asian students was reported in some major cities in New Zealand (Cooper & Ho, 2005). Butcher and McGrath (2004) also found that trust and connectedness are a primary concern for Asian students. The study reported that a significant portion of Asian students in New Zealand feel ambivalent about their relationship with their host nation. This increases the difficulties that Asian students have in interacting with the local people.

Very few researchers have paid attention to Asian students and their activities *outside* the class-room among their own group. Studies of friendship models of international students have found that the primary network, consisting of their conational friends, was of primary importance (Bochner, McLeod and Lin, 1977; Furnham and Naznin, 1985). Such networks are available to international students through cultural clubs based on national identity, such as the two studied here. This study sets out to explore this issue, which we argue has potential relevance internationally.

Students, leadership, and participation

In the global context, several studies have indicated that campus activity involvement among university students is a key factor contributing to greater skill development (e.g., Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1995, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Among these studies, the Theory of Student Involvement has been developed by Astin (1977; 1999) to model the student participation in university life. The core aspect of involvement is the degree of motivation and effort individual students put into activities which increase their learning capacity and skill development, but which go beyond specific academic activities.

Other studies have supported relationships between non-academic activities and student leadership skills (e.g. Dugan, 2006; Kuh, 1995; McKinney et al, 2004; Terenzini, Pascarella & Bliming, 1999). Dugan (2006) for example identified an influence from involvement in activities (e.g., community services and student organizations) on leadership constructs (such as congruence, commitment, collaboration). Greater leadership skill development associated with some activities - for example, student club activity contributed to greater skills learning than did academic activity. Kuh (1995) also found that outside-classroom experiences have the potential to contribute to the leadership competency of students.

There are also indications that ethnic and culture makes a difference in the relationships between academic and non-academic involvement, and leadership development. For instance, Hernandez et al. (1999) argued that the theory of involvement may not be consistently applicable for ethnic and minority students, since they notice that most research used a small sample of students who were mainly Caucasian. A non-Caucasian student may have a different style of involvement, differing amongst various groups of students. Future research should, therefore

consider non-Western students as a subject being studied. In this study we discuss the involvement of two non-Western ethnic groups – Thai and Malaysian – in student clubs.

Carrying out the case studies

The study topic was triggered by the personal experiences and interests of the student researcher, who was an international student from Thailand. This experience enabled access to cultural clubs and empathy with student reach subjects, and was complemented by strategies employed to ensure the credibility and authenticity of the data throughout the study.

Two cultural clubs - the Thai Student Association (TSA) and the Wellington Malaysian Student Organisation (WMSO) - were selected as case studies to qualitatively explore the club dynamics, and how students in these clubs foster and learned leadership skills. Both clubs were affiliated with the Victoria University Student Association under the title 'cultural club' (VUWSA, 2006). The researcher was Vice President for the TSA, and a member of the WMSO. The TSA club was small and relatively immature in its operation; studying the WMSO as well enriched the data collection process since it had more members and was bigger in its operation.

Sixteen students, eight from each club, were invited and participated in the research. A snowballing strategy was used as a method of recruiting participants. A qualitative interview, using semi-structured open-ended questions was employed to collect qualitative data. All interviews lasted approximately one hour and a quarter and were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and sent to each of the research participants for double checking .

Participant observation was also employed over the period of five months. It included attending activities, organizing clubs, meetings, social gatherings, etc. Each observation was recorded using a developed semi-structured observation guide, as well as a narrative description at each observation. Seven descriptions were made during observation and were sent to each research participant for their feedback.

The researcher also collected information through official documents from each club, website information, e-newsletters, and email correspondents. These secondary sources assisted background understanding of each club and how it operated. These documents allowed the researcher to gain a better sense of the club, and how members communicated. Documentation also enhances the authenticity of other sources of data gained.

A content analysis was conducted for each single case before using a comparative analysis across cases. A script from each case was read several times to understand qualitative data. The first reading was to search for repeating major and minor themes and patterns. The second reading was to ensure that there was no new theme in each data. A category development framework developed by Constat (1992) was employed to evaluate and to explain how the key themes were identified. The researcher compared and contrasted main themes across the cases, to identify commonalities and differences of leadership learning through club participation. This level of analysis helps increase the credibility of the findings (Merriam, 1998).

Overview of Findings

In this overview we map the general findings, going on to discuss some in more detail. In particular we highlight the cultural issues for international students. The study showed that patterns of students' leadership learning experiences and club cultures were intertwined and closely interrelated. Asian international students' perceptions of leadership development and club participation were centred around a collective orientation. While Teamwork, Social Networking and Learning Process were common themes identified as aspects of leadership development in student clubs, the researcher found that a Cultural theme centrally underpins how students perceived club participation and understood leadership.

Figure 1 describes the researcher's understanding of leadership development in the student clubs across the two cases. This figure represents a holistic view of club participation and leadership development among Asian international students.

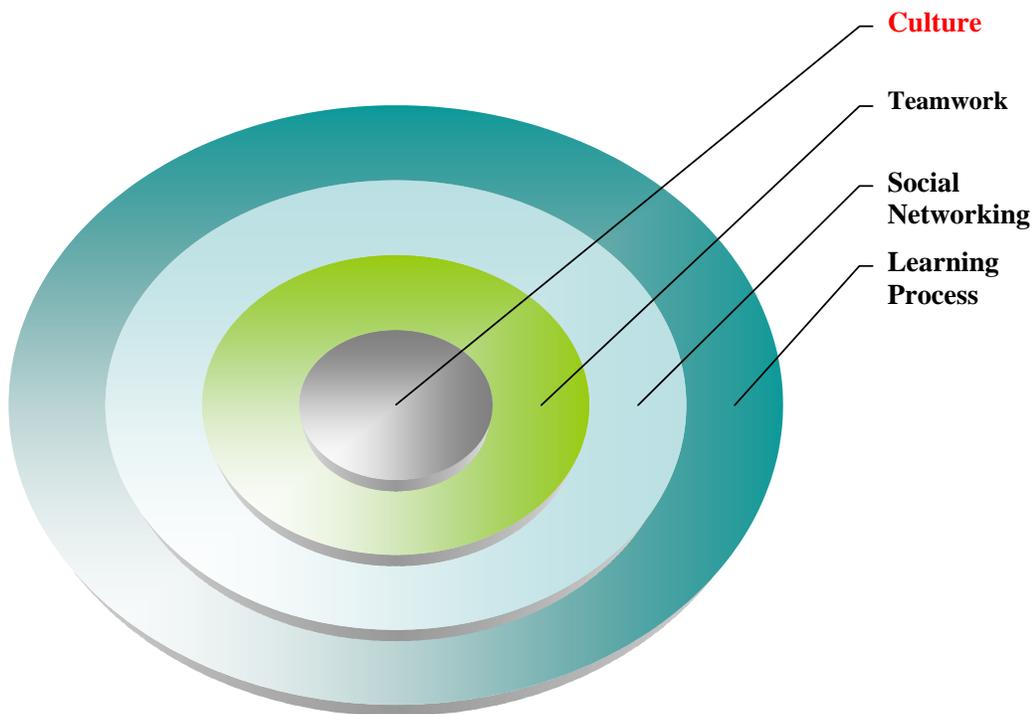


Figure 1: A holistic view of leadership development in student cultural club context

The findings showed that students perceived their club experience as a learning process. They believed that they learned various practical skills including leadership from their participation. This is especially so when they organized club activities. One student commented:

A lot of activity and if you like to do that [sport games], it needs a lot of work and then you need to deal with a lot of people, really different people, especially in term of money. It is really hard to get a sponsorship here. Howe to persuade people in order to get money and sometimes it is so frustrating.

Learning Process was placed in the outer circle in the diagram, as an important factor contributing to leadership development in the clubs.

Secondly, Social Networking was interpreted as a factor both enabling and encouraging individual team members in the club to work together. In both cases, students believed that club participation was an opportunity to establish their networks with people from their own community. For example, when asking them for a reason to join the club, the common answer from the WMSO members was “it is because I am a Malaysian student that is why I joined the club”. This was a similar answer to the TSA members where they believed that networking with other Thais would be beneficial.

However, the term ‘networking’ among these students had a much deeper meaning than its general use, and was more prominent among committee members than general members in both clubs. Students believed that social networking was interpreted as a friendship-making and relationship-building process where they can get to know each other at a personal level. One student said:

We worked together as friends... So it is more like equal... All of them in the team are my friends especially from the main committee. Some of them I didn’t really know to begin with but I took time to get to know them what they like, may be going to their house. We got to learn to know each other.

Third, the researcher found that Teamwork was seen as central to club participation and leadership understandings. Students perceived their club participation as an activity which required a team effort and shared responsibilities among members. This is especially mentioned in relation to organizing specific club activities as one student commented:

If they don't want to do it [the work], then we have to be sensible with them. There was no way we could do this all alone and we needed to be realistic and flexible... we have to know that our colleagues are busy with their studies. I think we need to be sensible with their time.

The researcher placed the teamwork next to the Social Networking circle as it is a common theme found in leadership learning.

Finally, the researcher believed that national cultures played a fundamental role in shaping leadership development in student clubs. Students saw the formation of their club cultures as shaped by national identity, which influenced their leadership learning. For example, in the TSA, the 'sabuy-sabuy' theme - which means 'relax' in Thai - was identified as an attitude of Thai people that impeded effective leadership learning in this club. In the WMSO club, the issue was more complex, because it include two ethnic groups – the dominant Malay group and the minority Chinese group. This proportion reflects the home population. Malay students were in a better position to exercise their leadership skills since they made up the majority of the club, and were believed to have more power than non-Malay members. When looking across two cases, the researcher believes that the national culture of the club moderated their leadership learning experience. If this is the case, the club culture may not maximise their leadership opportunities in the TSA, but the WMSO culture appeared to cultivate leadership learning among the team committee.

The findings also showed that other factors moderated their leadership learning experience, and how they perceived club participation. These factors include the backgrounds of the students, positions held in the clubs, and their motivation for joining the clubs. For example, in the TSA and WMSO, students who are committee members believed that they learned substantial skills from operating the club, more than students who are a general member. The latter believed that they did not learn practical skills from joining the club. We go on now to discuss some more specific issues.

Discussion

(a) Perceptions of Club Participation

While leadership learning was perceived as an outcome of club participation, the stronger underlying reasons for these students to join the club was their need to build a social network to gain support for their emotional difficulties from people from their own culture. Asian students placed importance on the connectedness and embeddedness of the group as part of their leadership learning. This research finding is supported by Higgins and Jackson (2003), who argued that overseas students need to build their support network with people from their own culture. This is a key argument about Asian students and their social integration. If Asian international students need to build their own cultural support network, cultural club participation would be highly beneficial.

The position students took in the club, their ethnicity, and their motivations, moderated their perceptions about leadership development. While the committee members perceived leadership responsibilities as instigating their cognitive and emotional ability to manage the club, the non-committee members perceived their club participation differently. The former group believed that they gained a greater benefit from club participation than the latter. This finding is supported by a study (McKinney et al., 2004), suggesting that not all students can benefit from extra-curricular activities. Other factors, such as the type of involvement and degrees of involvement, have to be considered.

Second, how students perceived their club participation also depended upon their ethnicity. This is especially so in the case of the WMSO, where the issues of ethnic diversity (Malay-Chinese) was salient. Students who shared a commonality, such as belonging to the same ethnic group, and the same language, were more likely to form their own groups and felt comfortable in participating. Hernandez and his team (1999) have addressed similar findings. They found that students from ethnic minorities may have their preferred style of participating in social activities. As such, when involving themselves in social activities where the majority of students have different ethnicities and backgrounds, they took a passive role or avoided such participation. Research

conducted by Butcher and McGrath (2004) suggests that Asian students are ambivalent about such interaction where an issue of trust and connectedness was unclear.

Third, the researcher's findings show a relationship between the motivation of students, their perception about club participation, and effective leadership learning. Students who were enthusiastic about club participation, have a positive experience, whereas students who were less interested in the activity did not find themselves learning to the same extent. Motivation issues have been widely addressed in the literature. It is a core element in successful student involvement, contributing to a greater skill learning and development (Astin, 1977). It has also been addressed as a necessary factor required in leadership development and as the initial condition for individuals to gain effective leadership learning (Roberts, 2006).

(b) How Leadership Development Emerges in Student Clubs

The findings suggest that students learned and developed leadership skills by organising club activities, running projects, and managing their clubs through teamwork. Teamwork required the students' abilities to effectively interact with their group and to learn consistently throughout their club participation. Once applying this finding into a theoretical context, leadership development can be endorsed through the action of learning, emphasising an ongoing learning process during their club participation. This form of leadership training is an interactive approach where students learn hands-on leadership on site (Fulmer, 1997). In fact, how students develop leadership skills in a student club can be described through the leadership developmental framework developed by McCauley & Velsor (2004), which consists of motivation, social interaction, organisational context, and learning experience.

If this is the case, the researcher found that that the proposed theory of outside-classroom activities which enhances student learning (Astin, 1977), may provide too simple an explanation about international student involvement and learning development. The model needs to be modified to fit a context involving Asian students whose social networking requires an emotional attachment among its members based on shared national culture in a 'foreign' context. A process of social interaction requires a place where deep and meaningful relationships can grow and develop (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005; Freeman, 2004). It enhances a willingness to learn and participate in the club.

(c) National Culture and its Implications for Student Leadership Development

Students' perceptions of leadership development were an outcome of the cultural issues as interpreted by students in the club. Club culture distinguishes how leadership has been fostered from one club to another. This cultural formation has been addressed within the multiple culture perspective (Sackmann & Phillips, 2004) which argues that members of a culture can negotiate what should be included and left out during a cultural formulation process. Students interpreted the role of culture as a way of doing things in their clubs which was influenced by both (a) the ethnic background of individual students, and (b) the club culture based on national identity.

First, students interpreted their values and beliefs as being shaped by their ethnic background, which is derived from their national culture and religious ideology. The findings suggested that their countries' norms still very much existed in their club, and were ingrained in their way of thinking about culture. If the national culture is believed to be the factor influencing leadership development in these clubs, Hofstede's cultural dimension (1980) of collective and individual societies could help to describe students' values and beliefs. The members of such collective societies placed value on loyalty to the group and gave priority to the group's need rather than their own needs. Thailand and Malaysia are identified as collective societies and if this is the case, it provides an explanation why they attributed to success of the club in collective effort and perceived embedding and connectedness as an important part of leadership learning.

However, Hofstede's model may not be adequate to explain the situation in this study where all Asian students were 'international' – i.e. located in a different cultural setting. The New Zealand environment - categorised as an individualistic society - was the location where the club operated. As such, collective values were believed to be compromised. As a result, interpretation of the term 'culture' among these students was diverse, and can be seen as the result of cross-cultural 'negotiation' (Brannen & Salk, 2000). They perceived the club culture as an outcome of both their national culture and New Zealand environment. Also, due to the club being a voluntary activity, it influenced how students perceived club participation. It impeded a level of leadership development in the club since they interpreted the word 'voluntary' as a freedom of choice, as such club participation was an option.

Comment [j1]: [the students? or the researcher?]

It could be asserted that the role of national culture was a fundamental factor influencing leadership development in student clubs. It simultaneously shaped how students perceived, interpreted and learned

leadership in the club in two possible ways. First, it influenced individual motivation and perception and, as a result, shaped how students interpreted leadership development. Second, it blended the dynamics of the club which has also moderated how leadership learning emerges in each of the clubs.

Recommendations

From the study, club participation is an emotional support network which gives an opportunity to Asian international students to learn various skills in a familiar atmosphere. It is a platform where they develop trust, share cultural understanding and difficulties without feeling ambivalent during their overseas stay.

Despite positive outcomes associated with club participation, not all students could gain benefit from the activity. Other factors including students' motivation, the position students held in the club, and their cultural background moderated the level of their club participation and leadership learning opportunities. If not all students take advantage of club participation, then we have two questions: what would the alternative be for other students who are not part of the committee, and wanting to take advantage of this type of activity?; and, what could be done to improve club participation? These challenging questions require support and guidance from the university to ensure Asian international students will gain maximum benefit from participating in cultural clubs. In particular, staff responsible for supporting international students could become more actively involved.

First, club participation among Asian International students should be developed and promoted as complementary learning activities, along with academic involvement. Student perceptions and motivations can be changed if the university can enhance club participation as part of its key activities during their university years. Strategies may include extensive information about clubs and how it benefits their stay in New Zealand. Messages could emphasise chance to meet with fellow students. In fact, this strategy will not only attract the attention of new Asian students who are not part of the club, but it will also stimulate the existing club members to be more active.

Second, the university could ensure that the clubs will be systematically run and supported by experienced club officers and wider staff communities, once the club culture has been created. This can be implemented by organising workshops for Asian International students in the club, being regularly supervised through meeting the students, and providing adequate feedback and support. This support system will not only allow Asian international students to learn practical skills but also allow them to interact and get to know with local staff.

Third, Asian international students should be provided with leadership development as part of academic activities. From the findings, effective leadership development has a reciprocal relationship with meta-cognitive development and gaining confidence in constructing knowledge. The university should be responsible in arming students with these abilities. It could be done as part of academic assignments, or research projects in which their meta-cognitive thinking is constantly exercised.

Fourth, introducing new Asian International students to the clubs, as part of elective papers, will ensure they are aware of existing activities at the university. Since this research found that international students need emotional support networks, this would not only link them with existing students from the same nationalities, but it also provides opportunities to explore diverse learning methods. This could be implemented as part of an orientation programme. However, there are some factors worth considering. First, if club participation is to be credited as part of the university degree, it has to take systematic action to ensure that the club is run and operated effectively and, as a result, provide a greater outcome for students. Second, support programmes such as student advisors or workshop for club participation for students should be organised, as we argue above. This is to ensure that their learning is taking place effectively.

Comment [j2]: do you mean as related to assignments or..?

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