

# **Cultural Diversity in the Modern Tertiary Environment: The Role of Assessment and Learning Approaches**

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## **Abstract**

It is imperative that University educators are aware of the implications of cultural diversity in the tertiary learning environment. The primary objective of this study to the explore students' perceptions of and attitudes toward learning approaches and assessment practices in an environment of cultural diversity. This paper presents a conceptual model that will drive the exploratory research proposed exploring the relationship between culturally diversity on perceptions of assessment alternatives and assessment effectiveness. While diversity is important it is clear that it does not operate in a vacuum and other factors may help explore the drivers of assessment perceptions and effectiveness. The aim of this proposed study is to explore how educators can enhance students' competence in their own abilities, exercise self-control over personal learning outcomes and to continue to be motivated to achieve positive outcomes.

**Keywords:** Cultural diversity, perceptions of learning environment, effective assessment practices, conceptual paper

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## Introduction

A critical challenge for today's tertiary education sector is to develop and implement assessment and learning practices that foster and nurture student competencies that are reflective of the complexities and tasks relevant to industries operating in a global environment (Nijhuis, Segers, & Gijssels, 2005; Tynjälä, 1999). Tertiary institutions are expected to provide students with a skill base which allows them to learn, retain and disseminate information more efficiently and effectively through critical thinking, problem-solving, analysis, synthesis of ideas and the drawing of inferences and conclusions (Kember, Charlesworth, Davies, McKay, & Stott, 1997; Segers, Dochy, & Cascallar, 2003; Tynjälä, 1999). Adding to the complexity of implementing effective learning approaches and assessment practices is the increase in the number of international students enrolled in tertiary institutions Australia-wide. In 2008, there were 182,770 international students enrolled at Australian higher education institutions (Australian Education International, 2009). Given the tertiary sector relies heavily on export income from international students, this leads to further complications, namely, the integration of cultural diversity into learning approaches and assessment practices. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to shed light on the complexities that a culturally diverse student cohort plays in the development of curriculum and ensure that it is effective in providing students with the necessary learning outcomes to ensure a smooth transition from tertiary studies to the employment phase of their lifecycle.

## Literature Review

### Learning approaches

A consideration of learning approaches is fundamental in the development of effective assessment practices. It is important to understand "... how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment" (Keefe, 1979, p.4). It has been argued that learning strategies are dependent upon the learning situation (Veenman, Prins, & Verheij, 2003), the context, the content, and the demands of the learning task (Richardson, Eysenck, & Warren-Piper, 1987). Students interpret the demands of different types of assessment tasks either in a conscious or subconscious manner depending on their different learning approaches (Nijhuis, Segers, & Gijssels, 2005) and are motivated by the relevance of the syllabus to meeting personal needs and interests (Fransson, 1977). Empirical research on learning in the higher education sector suggests that students have three distinct learning approaches - deep, surface and strategic.

The *deep approach* focuses on conceptual and theoretical meaning and understanding in the learning material and assessment task (J. Biggs, 1979) in an endeavour to achieve high quality outcomes (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Laurillard, 1979) which are personally relevant to students' own learning experiences. Students who actively engage in deep learning approaches seek to integrate new concepts and principles with previous knowledge and actively seek to thoroughly analyse the logic of different conclusions and arguments (Richardson, 1994). On the other hand, the *surface approach* essentially reflects recall, reproduction and memorisation (J. Biggs, 1979; Marton & Säljö, 1976; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005). Students adopting this approach to learning have little personal engagement with the assessment task and often view the completion of the task

as a necessary imposition in the achievement of other goals or objectives such as meeting assessment requirements (J. Biggs, 1979; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Richardson, 1994). In essence the surface approach to learning emphasises a means to an end and focuses on students' use of minimal cognitive effort (J. B. Biggs, 1999) and the inability to integrate principles into purposeful meaning (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Richardson, 1994) often resulting in fragmented outcomes (J. B. Biggs, 1999). Fundamentally, emphasis is placed on factual answers and passive thinking through the use of low cognitive strategies with limited personal engagement (Entwistle & Entwistle, 1991; Laurillard, 1979; Pearson & Beasley, 1996).

A *strategic* or *achieving approach* focuses on self-esteem and excellence as the underlying principle driving the motivation to achieve the highest possible outcomes (J. Biggs, 1979) by using a structured, systematic study regime (Struyven, et al., 2005) which is fostered through, for example, the use of past examination papers and essay-type assessment (Entwistle & Entwistle, 1991; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). Consequently, students who adopt a strategic or achieving approach organise their time effectively to maximise the best outcomes (Richardson, 1994). Students are increasingly taking a strategic approach to the completion of their assessment tasks in terms of what Miller and Partlett (1974) identified as being 'cue conscious'. Cue consciousness is a key attribute used in the strategic approach to learning, by using cues to determine what is expected by the educator, for example, picking up hints about exam topics and noticing which topics the lecturer favours (Gibbs, 1999; Miller & Partlett, 1974). It must be noted that the 'strategic' approach to learning may be combined with both a 'deep' strategy (the integration of new concepts and principles with previous knowledge) and a 'surface' strategy (reproduction).

There have been a number of studies which have addressed the relationship between the different learning approaches and subsequent outcomes (Gijbels & Dochy, 2006; Marton & Säljö, 1976; Minbashian, Huon, & Bird, 2004; Scouller, 1996). In a seminal paper by Marton and Säljö (1976), they suggested that students who demonstrated a better conceptual and theoretical understanding of material were more likely to possess a deep approach to learning because they had the ability to draw inferences and conclusions. Scouller (1996) revealed the assessment method strongly influenced the learning approach undertaken by students. Students were more likely to use surface strategies when preparing for the short answer-style examinations and deep learning approaches when writing essay-style assessment. These findings can be attributed to the level of cognitive activity and intellectual ability being higher when undertaking the essay task compared to the short answer assessment (Scouller, 1996). Therefore, it could be argued that students use a mixed approach when undertaking assessment tasks which Kember (1996, p. 347) refers to as the 'intermediate position', when the strategic component of learning approach is integrated into the equation. This intermediate approach may highlight the necessity for students to use deep, surface and strategic approaches when completing assessment tasks. Consequently, it is evident that there is a need to ensure that assessment tasks reflect the different learning approaches as the different approaches require a different type of skill set. However, learning approaches do not exist in isolation and we introduce the importance of including cultural diversity to the research agenda.

### **Cultural Diversity**

There have been numerous academic studies which have addressed multiculturalism in the learning environment. Kolb and Fry (1975), Hayes and Allinson (1988) and Hofstede (1986)

have argued that cultural traits and the country-of-origin of students are powerful 'socialisation agents' (e.g., family, school) that transmit cultural values and, as a consequence, influence and shape a student's learning approach. These cultural factors also have implications for assessment practices within and across homogenous and heterogeneous cultures. Given the diversity of students' backgrounds it is becoming increasingly important to understand the implications of students' cultural backgrounds on the perception and implementation of assessment practices. As a result, cultural distance between learning approaches is very much dependent upon the student's cultural value set and background (Yamazaki, 2005). For example, the cultural typology of high and low context cultures developed by Hall (1976) is based on the premise of communication frameworks and cultural orientation which is appropriate in a higher education context. *High context cultures* (e.g., eastern cultures) focus on the importance of relationships among people where a structure of social hierarchy exists. More importantly, a culture where the inner feelings are kept under self-control and information is widely shared through simple messages with deep meaning (Kim, Pan, & Park, 1998) and communications tend to be indirect, implicit and reserved. On the other hand a *low context culture* (e.g., western cultures) is one in which people are highly individualised and prefer direct, explicit, and unambiguous communication (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996).

Students from high context cultures often find the western education system as characterised by independent learning and less interaction and guidance from teachers or lecturers (Andrews, Dekkers, & Solas, 1998; Ballard & Clanchy, 1997) difficult to adjust to. This is due to the perception that students from high context cultures tend to implement a surface approach to learning and have a tendency to require all learning materials to be provided with rigid parameters for all assessment tasks with the focus being on recall rather than understanding. In addition, the relationship between the teacher and the student is outcome focussed with the student relying heavily on the teacher's knowledge rather than confronting academic content and participating in active learning (Morse, 2003). Yet, Biggs (2003), Kember and Gow (1991), Marton, Dall'Alba and Kun (1996), Kember (1996) and Hess and Azuma (1991) have challenged these generalisations and stereotypical characterisations of students from high context cultures and the use of surface learning practices. For example, they argue that Asian students use a systematic, step-by-step approach to their learning which encompasses both the surface and deep learning approaches when completing assessment tasks. At the opposite end of the continuum, it has been suggested that students from low context cultures adopt deep learning approaches by placing emphasis on continual lifelong learning. This is achieved through robust discussion and the educator acting as a facilitator to the learning process (Morse, 2003). This traditional viewpoint may be overstated given the changing landscape of tertiary education to the extent that students from low context cultures may also exhibit surface learning approaches due to the necessity to find a balance between careers, family and education commitments (Bunn, 2001).

### **Core Graduate Business Skills**

Learning styles and students' cultural backgrounds need to be explored in regard to students' core business skills. Graduate employability is one central mission of contemporary higher education (Treleaven & Voola, 2008) and is concerned with enhancing the capacity of an individual student to have the core business and generic skills to be able to obtain employment after graduation (Harvey, 2001). From the perspective of Australian tertiary institutions, one of the strategies that these institutions mandate is for their teaching service delivery to enable students to develop not only academic credentials, but also skills that allow them to obtain employment in the global marketplace. From an organisational viewpoint,

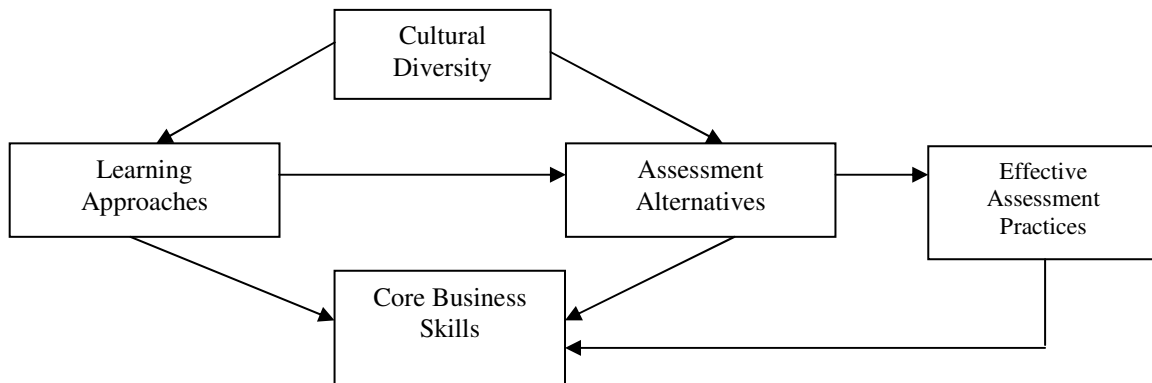
management has been decreeing the need for highly educated and skilled graduates if their organisations are to be successful in a rapidly evolving, and competitive global environment (Harvey, 2001). On completion of their business degrees, graduates should possess an appropriate level of skills and attributes and, more importantly, the ability to apply these skills effectively (Nabi, 2003). It is no longer possible to gain employment based purely on the attainment of a degree, students are now required to possess and demonstrate a diverse skill set (Harvey, 2001). There have been numerous studies undertaken which address the skill-base requirements of business graduates. A current trend is to employ graduates with a diverse skill base rather than being discipline-specific (with the exception of disciplines such as finance and accounting). As a result, employers are less concerned with the field of study or discipline undertaken during students' tertiary education or skills which are related to the core business of the organisation (Harvey, 2001). Generic business skills are recognised as being important for individuals, organisations and industry alike (Hase, 1998).

There is a common theme in the literature regarding the type of generic business skills industries require when employing graduates. These skills include effective communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills (McCorkle, Alexander, Reardon, & Kling, 2003; McCorkle, et al., 1999). Bath, Smith, Stein, and Swann (2004) suggested that graduates should ideally possess critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, the ability to solve problems, independent thought, ethical practices, communication skills, creativity and integrity. Sheckley, Lamdin, and Keeton (1992) emphasised basic verbal and numeric literacy skills, interpersonal and team-work skills, adaptive skills, cognitive skills and lifelong learning skills as necessary pre-requisites for graduates to establish and maintain employability. In the context of undergraduate marketing programmes, it has been argued that marketing graduates possess good knowledge of the theoretical foundations of the discipline but are lacking in the application of these theories (Diamond, Koernig, & Iqbal, 2008). Other studies have emphasised the lack of strategic thinking and problem solving abilities of recent marketing graduates and, as a result, criticise universities for their lack of industry training or reflective learning capabilities within their curricula (Barr & McNeilly, 2002). A number of studies have addressed the skill base requirements of marketing graduates with an emphasis on generic business skills including critical thinking and critical reflection capabilities, personal and intellectual autonomy and research and analysis capabilities (Peltier, Hay, & Drago, 2006). Pertinent skills required by marketing graduates included the ability to detect and effectively identify research problems, gather and analyse data, interpret results and make recommendations to solve problems which are consistent with the skills emphasised in the marketing research discipline-related employment (Floyd & Gordon, 1998).

### **Proposed Research**

The proposed problem definition for the research is: *What are students' perceptions of and attitudes toward learning approaches and assessment practices in an environment of cultural diversity while learning core business skills?* The research will provide insight into students' perceptions of and attitudes toward different assessment tasks and, as a consequence, different learning approaches from the perspective of different cultural backgrounds. Indirectly, the research will also attempt to ascertain whether learning approaches and assessment practices undertaken during the early stages of tertiary education provide students with requisite skills to enter the global marketplace. The proposed conceptual model is graphically depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**



Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a qualitative research method has been proposed. For the empirical stage of the study, focus groups will be conducted in order to collect the data. This was chosen as the primary method of data collection as the subject matter that is being discussed may offer many different opinions, and therefore the opportunity for group interaction and conflicting arguments are sought. It is anticipated that there will be six focus groups undertaken involving a total of 72 people. Participation in this project will involve voluntary participation by undergraduate, local and international students at an Australian university in a focus group. Cultural diversity will be assessed utilising Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions of power distance and uncertainty avoidance and Hall's (1976) high context/low context typology. In an education context, there is a premise that different countries can be grouped according to their homogeneity and heterogeneity in teaching and learning cultures (Wierstra, Kanselaar, van der Linden, Lodewijks, & Vermunt, 2003). During the focus group, participants will be asked to reflect on University assessment they have experienced and discuss types of assessment, using examples of assessment tasks to encourage discussion and insights regarding what is required in the current assessment regime to improve students' employability. In the future, the study will be extended to incorporate the viewpoints of recent graduates and prospective employers of business graduates.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Assessment outcomes are one of the defining features of students' approaches to learning, and can be seen as a powerful motivator for success (Drew, 2001). This examination of student perceptions of assessment and learning approaches thus helps address the need for efficiencies in teaching approaches and the possible role of assessment in motivating domestic and international students. It is therefore, important for academics to understand the power of assessment and teaching approaches to be strategic in helping students learn and build their skill and knowledge base in the short, medium and long term. University educators need to be aware of the implications of cultural diversity in the tertiary learning environment. The opportunity to enhance students' perceptions of competence in their own abilities, exercise control over their learning outcomes and continue to be motivated to achieve, will support not only positive outcomes but also foster an environment of cooperation and collaboration (Fazey & Fazey, 2001). The opportunity for students to practise effective communication skills, teamwork and interpersonal skills (McCorkle, et al., 2003), critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, independent thought, ethical practices, creativity and integrity (Bath, et al., 2004) in an educational setting will support students' awareness of the congruence between the motive of the assessment task (J. B. Biggs, 1978) and the attainment of core business and generic skills necessary to compete in a global marketplace.

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