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C.U.L.T.U.R.E.: marketing education in the age of cultural diversity

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Abstract:

Purpose
– The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role Australian University marketing students’ cultural backgrounds play in their learning and their perceptions of assessment and explores whether current assessments appropriately address the differing needs of a culturally diverse student population.

Design/methodology/approach
– The paper adopts a qualitative approach utilising five focus groups, each comprised of 12 students.

Findings
– Results indicate learning environments, learning and assessment approaches and assessment tasks each bring their own benefits, constraints and challenges to studying in a culturally diverse environment. Principles are presented for adoption by marketing educators in order to foster a vibrant, inclusive learning environment which meets the educational needs and wants of a culturally diverse student cohort.
Research limitations/implications

– The number of students representing different global regions or countries limited this study. With the exception of students from Australia and the Asian region, there were minimal students representing other cultural backgrounds despite every attempt being made to be culturally inclusive across global regions.

Practical implications

– The paper presents the principles of C.U.L.T.U.R.E. and recommends their integration into learning approaches and assessment practices across Schools and Faculties at the tertiary level.

Originality/value

– This paper fulfils an identified need to study a culturally diverse student cohort's perceptions and attitudes towards learning approaches and assessment practices and their perceived relevance to the provision of core graduate business and generic skills necessary for employability in the global marketplace.

Introduction

It is essential for marketing educators in Universities to prepare students with the core competencies required to compete in the global marketplace (Ackerman et al., 2003; Davis et al., 2002; Kelley and Bridges, 2005; Walker et al., 2009). Marketing educators are expected to provide students with a skill base which, beyond specific disciplinary expertise, allows them to learn, retain and disseminate information more efficiently and effectively. This is achieved through critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, synthesis of ideas and the drawing of inferences and conclusions (Ackerman et al., 2003; Davis et al., 2002; Gapp and Fisher, 2012; Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Kelley and Bridges, 2005; Walker et al., 2009). Compounding the modern educational challenge is the dramatic increase in education globalisation, as evidenced by the increase in the number of ethnically and linguistically diverse University marketing students in Australia and other western countries (Pennycook, 2005; Singh and Doherty, 2004; Teo et al., 2012).

The diversity of cultural backgrounds amongst the student cohort in terms of norms, values, beliefs and expectations has implications for marketing education as it is these student perspectives that multiply with diversity, rendering it difficult to develop assessment tools and strategies that fairly and informatively evaluate student learning and progress. The underlying premise of this study is to investigate the role Australian University marketing students’ cultural backgrounds play on their learning and their perceptions of assessment, drawing on Hofstede's (1980, 1986) cultural dimensions of power distance and uncertainty avoidance and Hall's (1976) high and low context theories. Hofstede's (1980, 1986) initial investigations dealt with 40 countries including USA, Nordic countries and some within Europe. Further research such as Hofstede and Bond (1988), Spencer-Oatey (1997), Fernandez et al. (1997), Begley et al. (2002) and Farh, Hackett and Liang (2007) have progressed these concepts to encompass Confucian Heritage countries such as China, Korea and Japan. The current study advances this research within the context of higher education thereby providing guidance in a challenging environment.
Further, this study aims to explore whether current assessment appropriately addresses the differing needs of a culturally diverse student population. It is important for marketing educators to consider the different learning approach and assessment practice alternatives, to ensure they cater to the needs and expectations of a culturally diverse student cohort. This is necessary to produce graduates that are adequately prepared with the requisite skill base to enable those graduates to compete in the global marketplace. A qualitative, exploratory investigation utilising focus groups was conducted to address the research aims. The paper concludes with clear strategic guidelines, under the acronym C.U.L.T.U.R.E., through which marketing educators are advised to develop effective learning and assessment practices amongst their culturally diverse student populations.

**Literature review**

**Learning approach**

It has been argued that students’ utilisation of learning strategies is dependent upon the learning situation (Veenman et al., 2003), the context, the content and the demands of the learning task (Laughton and Ottewill, 2000; Richardson et al., 1987). Students interpret their various assessment tasks, either in a conscious or subconscious manner (Nijhuis et al., 2005), and enact specific learning approaches based on their perceived requirements (Kember, 1996). The principles behind the different student learning approaches revolve around the intention or absence of intention to process and cognitively understand assessment tasks (Biggs, 1979; Entwistle and Entwistle, 1991; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). Most commonly referred to as “deep-level” and “surface-level” processing (Marton and Säljö, 1976) or, alternatively, as “strategic” or “achieving” (Biggs, 1979; Entwistle et al., 2000).

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between different learning approaches and learning outcomes (Gijbels and Dochy, 2006; Marton and Säljö, 1976; Minbashian et al., 2004; Scouller, 1998). Marton and Säljö (1976) found that students who demonstrated a better conceptual and theoretical understanding of material were more likely to possess a deep approach. Scouller (1998) revealed that the assessment method strongly influenced the learning approach undertaken by students. As explained by Cheong and Loong (1999), students are more likely to use surface strategies when preparing for primarily content-based, short-answer type examinations. These assessment tasks emphasise aspects of rote learning. Deep learning approaches are utilised when writing problem-solving, essay-style assessments which emphasise critical and creative thinking requiring a much more active approach from the student. These findings can be attributed to the higher level of cognitive activity and intellectual ability required for an essay task compared to short-answer tasks (Scouller, 1998). 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”. This intermediate approach may highlight the necessity for students to use deep, surface and strategic approaches when completing assessment tasks.

The rise in the numbers of international students in Australian University Business Schools, particularly students from the Asia-Pacific region (Freeman et al., 2009; Teo et al., 2012), has created an even more challenging environment for marketing educators. Teo et al. (2012) identified that the perceived differences in international students’ critical and analytical skills, combined with perceived lower levels of English language proficiency and class participation have challenged Australian Business School University learning environments. This is because the needs, expectations and
attitudes of these international students towards their marketing education may be quite different from those of the traditional domestic student. Therefore, marketing educators within Business Schools will need to consider the different learning approach and assessment practice alternatives to ensure they cater to the needs and expectations of this culturally diverse student cohort.

_Assessment_

Educators and students alike view the purpose of assessment as a means of ranking or evaluating students, which they understand to be an important criterion to establish students’ levels of achievement (Macelllan, 2001). Formal assessments are considered a fundamental driver of student learning, with the acquisition of knowledge being an important criterion (MacKinnon and Manathunga, 2003). This is reiterated by Boud (2000) who argued that the specific role of assessment tasks is to contribute positively to the development of knowledge and skills during University education and beyond. An interrelated concept is the notion of providing a foundation for lifelong learning. Boud and Falchikov (2006), Boud (2000), Candy (2000) and Cheong and Loong (1999) state that higher education is a means of providing students with the fundamental skills to progress through life by fostering “sustainable assessment” for future careers and opportunities for lifelong learning. Consequently, there is a need to ensure that assessment tasks reflect different learning approaches in order to develop the core business and marketing skills that students require for professional practice. This acquisition of core business and marketing competencies may, in fact, suggest there needs to be a balance in the type of assessment tasks developed to meet the learning needs of the current, culturally diverse student cohort.

_Cultural diversity_

Marketing educators need to be aware of the implications of cultural diversity in the University learning environment (Jackson and Chapman, 2012). 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 and Fazey, 2001). There have been numerous academic studies carried out within a Business School context, which have addressed multiculturalism in the learning environment. Hayes and Allinson (1988) argued that culture and the country-of-origin of students are powerful “socialisation agents” (e.g. family, school) that transmit cultural values and, as a consequence, influence a student’s learning approach. This notion is reiterated by Hofstede (1986) and Hofstede and Bond (1988) who argued that culture shapes its peoples’ preferred modes of learning through their socialisation experiences. Cultural factors will have implications for learning approaches and assessment practices within homogenous cultures.

Given the diversity of students’ backgrounds within Business Schools in Universities it is becoming increasingly important to understand the implications of students’ cultural backgrounds on their perceptions of assessment practices, as a clear link has been identified between students’ national culture and their expectations and behaviours (Gruber et al., 2011). This is illustrated by the work of Jackson and Chapman (2012) and Hearns et al. (2007) who call for further understanding of cultural diversity within education curricula. They urge investigation of student perception and the advancement of pedagogical strategies based on student country-of-origin.
Cultural distance

Cultural distance, the degree to which the cultural norms of one country are different from those of another (Kogut and Singh, 1988), is very much dependent on an individual's cultural value set and background (Yamazaki, 2005). Cultural distance has received a great deal of attention in international business literature (Dow, 2000; Evans and Malvando, 2002; Kogut and Singh, 1988; O'Grady and Henry, 1996). When applied to marketing education, the premise is that different countries can be grouped according to the homogeneity and heterogeneity in their teaching and learning culture (Wierstra et al., 2003), with Hofstede's cultural dimensions providing a relevant framework for cross-cultural research in marketing education (Hofstede, 1986; Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Laughton and Ottewill, 2000; Maehr et al., 1999; Zhang et al., 2008). Of Hofstede's (1986) four cultural dimensions (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity), two distinct teaching culture dimensions can be distinguished – power distance and uncertainty avoidance.

Power distance defines the extent to which people less powerful in a society accept power inequality. This is important for marketing educators as, in large power distance cultures (e.g. Confucian Heritage cultures), the University education system tends to be teacher-centred with students depending on teachers to initiate class discussions thus relying on educators to transfer their personal wisdom (Hofstede, 1986). Further, the relationship between student and teacher is much more formal in such large power distance cultures when compared to those within small power distance cultures (Haller et al., 2007). In contrast, within small power distance cultures (e.g. western cultures such as Australia) the University education system tends to be student-centred, where students are treated as equals with the marketing educators, students initiate communication in classrooms, marketing educators stress impersonal truths and the effectiveness of learning is related to the extent of two-way communication in the classroom (Hofstede, 1986). There is a much lower level of formality between students and teachers in these environs (Haller et al., 2007).

Uncertainty avoidance defines the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which are perceived as being unstructured, unclear or unpredictable (Hofstede, 1986). Again, this is important for marketing educators as there are two distinct positions. In weak uncertainty avoidance cultures (e.g. western cultures such as Australia), there is a perception that students feel comfortable in an unstructured learning environment, thereby affording the students a greater level of autonomy. Wierstra et al. (2003) suggest that in weak uncertainty avoidance cultures, students generally prefer a learning environment that is less reproduction oriented. These environments have a stronger emphasis on active learning where students are rewarded for innovative and creative problem-solving outcomes. In these situations marketing educators foster constructive discussions in the classroom. In strong uncertainty avoidance cultures (e.g. Confucian Heritage cultures), students are perceived as preferring a more structured assessment regime. In these cultures, marketing educators are expected to give detailed instructions and provide solutions with students not questioning the marketing educator's knowledge as this would be seen to be disloyal (Cheong and Loong, 1999; Hofstede, 1986).

Based on these perspectives, it is argued that large power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance may affect the learning environment in such a way that students expect the teacher to take all initiatives, resulting in less student-oriented and more reproduction-oriented learning environments (Gruber et al., 2011; Wierstra et al., 2003). This is consistent with the surface approach to learning. However, others have argued that the learning environment preference adopted by students can, in part, be determined by personal student characteristics, and to this end, as literature suggests (see e.g.
Wierstra et al., 2003), a change of learning environment could lead to a change of learning approaches.

A complementary theoretical foundation to Hofstede's cultural dimensions is the cultural typology of high and low context cultures (Hall, 1976) which is based on the premise of communication frameworks and cultural orientations. A high context culture (e.g. Confucian cultures) focuses on the importance of relationships among people where a structure of social hierarchy exists. More importantly, it is a culture where the inner feelings are kept under strong self-control and information is widely shared through simple messages with deep meaning (Kim et al., 1998). On the other hand a low context culture (e.g. western cultures such as Australia) is one in which people are highly individualised and, to a certain extent, alienated and fragmented with limited involvement with others (Kim et al., 1998). Therefore, from a learning approach perspective, individualistic cultures (low context) prefer direct, explicit and unambiguous communication while collectivist cultures (high context) tend to favour subtext, subtlety and reticence when communicating with others (Gudykunst and Matsumoto, 1996). Generally, students from high context cultures have difficulty adjusting to educational environments that are characterised by independent learning and less interaction and guidance from teachers (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997; Haller et al., 2007). It has been suggested that students from high context cultures tend to implement a surface approach to learning. There is an expectation that all learning materials to be provided along 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-focused with the student relying heavily on the teacher's knowledge rather than confronting academic content and participating in active learning (Morse, 2003).

A more insightful cultural diversity investigation calls for clarification of the differences international students perceive when comparing their home country to the host country they study in. Such an extension of existing literature concerned with the behaviour and attitudes of international students will assist in improving marketing educators’ understanding of cultural diversity within education curricula and the development of effective learning and assessment practices amongst this culturally diverse student population. The methodology utilised in this study is presented next.

**Research methodology and procedures**

**Context**

Australia provides a unique research setting to investigate culturally diverse student cohorts. In 2010, there were 227,230 international students enrolled at Australian higher education institutions, a growth rate of over 7 per cent (Hare, 2011). Of this number, the largest cohorts of students were from China and India, accounting for 41.50 per cent of all higher education enrolments. Further, approximately 50 per cent of all international students were enrolled in management/commerce degrees (Carroll, 2009). The importance of the activities of international education to the Australian economy cannot be understated as education services are Australia's largest services export industry and generated $18.3 billion in export income to the Australian economy in 2010 (Australian Education International, 2011).
Method

Qualitative research provides insight into the processing of meanings, interpretations, motivations, associations and emotions (de Ruyter and Scholl, 1998; Spiggle, 1994). With the research goal being to secure individuals’ rich descriptions of their points of view within the constraints of everyday life, qualitative research was considered most appropriate for this study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). This enabled the researchers to gain insight into the meanings the culturally diverse student cohort assigns to their learning and assessment practices whilst undertaking their undergraduate marketing studies. The current study was undertaken within the context of a second-year undergraduate marketing class at a large, metropolitan, Australian University. Focus groups were chosen as the primary method of data collection as this research deals with emotive topics such as personal learning approaches and perspectives. The researchers believed such a group setting would provide better encouragement for international students to discuss their opinions and attitudes. While the groups enabled the trained facilitators to strategically focus interview prompts based on themes generated within the discussion. This also ensured no one, single voice dominated the discussions and that every participant had a voice in the group (Gapp and Fisher, 2012; Kamerelis and Dimitriadis, 2011). Students were invited to participate by requesting volunteers through in-class and online announcements (through the University's online learning management system), with a total of five focus groups, each comprised of 12 students, completed.

Students participating in the focus groups were from diverse cultural backgrounds, were a mix of both male and female students and were from four different Faculties within the University (Business and Law, Arts and Education, Health, and Science and Technology). This diversity ensured students with quite varied learning and assessment experiences and expectations participated in the focus groups, enabling very rich and varied data to be collected. The cultural profile of participants in this study was based on Hall's (1976) low-context/high context cultural typology which focuses on the perceived importance of social interaction and communication frameworks in a cultural context (Hall, 1976; Manrai and Manrai, 1995). Domestic Australian students were considered to be from a low context culture, that is, an individualistic culture that focuses on individual successes and personal goals, where meaning is often more explicit and literal (Kim et al., 1998; Wang, 2007). On the other hand, the international students possessed traits from high context cultures (e.g. Germany, Malaysia, Japan, China), where collectivism is viewed positively, group success is valued and meaning is derived from the communication context (Kim et al., 1998; Wang, 2007). From the perspective of Hofstede's (1986) and Hofstede and Bond's (1988) cultural dimensions of power distance and uncertainty avoidance, Table I depicts the position of the nationality of each student who participated in the focus groups across the two dimensions.

The focus group protocol involved discussion within three “grand tour” question areas (Leech, 2002; McCracken, 1988; Spradley, 1979). Initially, the cultural background of participants and general perceptions of tertiary assessment were explored. The second area addressed their understanding of the assessment used by the University. Third, participants were asked about the types of assessment tasks they had undertaken during their tertiary studies to date; their most and least preferred assessment format; their perceived “ideal” assessment task to fulfil their educational needs; and, why this was the case. By inference, it was possible to ascertain the students’ preferred learning approaches and assessment practices and the level of core business skills and attributes acquired during their learning experience within a culturally diverse student cohort.
Two interviewers were present for the focus groups, which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts prior to analysis. Conceptual ordering (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was conducted whereby the data were organised into discrete categories according to their properties and dimensions and then description was used to clarify those categories. Employing the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), data were collected, coded and analysed concurrently for similarities, differences, general patterns and relationships. Utilising traditional qualitative methods, the data were initially coded and analysed by an independent qualitative researcher who was not present during the focus groups, then reviewed by an additional two researchers. This ensured credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability of analysis and reporting of results (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Omar et al., 2011). Through this analysis the key issues were identified.

Results and discussion

After focus groups were compared and contrasted it was evident that students generally agree that assessment practices at tertiary institutions bring their own benefits, constraints and challenges to studying in a culturally diverse environment. By applying Hall's (1976) low-context/high context cultural typology and Hofstede's (1986) cultural dimensions as a lens for exploring similarities and differences between students, themes encompassing learning environment, learning approaches, assessment tasks and their effectiveness emerged.

Learning environment

Students from strong uncertainty avoidance cultures preferred the less formal and more flexible learning approaches prevalent in weak uncertainty avoidance cultures. In terms of student learning environment and engagement, it was felt the ability to discuss theories and concepts in the classroom was a positive experience for international students as opposed to the learning approaches advocated in the home country classrooms of strong uncertainty avoidance cultures:

[In Malaysia] tutorials will focus on the questions [and content] of what they teach in the lectures […] In Malaysia you do the questions before the class and they will just give the answers [in tutorials] and here they will be discuss things […] So I prefer to study here [in Australia] (F3, International student, Male).

Regarding the student-educator relationship, the strategies used in small power distance cultures that advocated student-centred learning where students are treated as equals with the educators, were important criteria for an effective learning environment for international students:

The first thing that is really different from Germany is how you behave toward the lecturers and teachers because in Germany everything is kind of formal and here [in Australia] […] they speak to you on one level with the lecturers and teachers. This is really important (F3, International student, Male).
Overall, students from high context cultures preferred classroom interaction as it fostered cooperative and collaborative learning. The concept of active learning was a positive outcome of the Australian tertiary education system:

The differences in the students here [Australia] are more active [classroom interaction] […] In [Australia] […] if you don’t understand then you ask then you get a clearer message …and greater understanding (F2, International student, Female).

Understanding students’ expectations in relation to the role of the educator in the learning experience is important, particularly within culturally diverse student cohorts. Previous research has recognised that students from high context cultures are more likely to view educators as an authority, someone who transfers personal knowledge. Students from high context cultures show respect for their teachers and maintain a formal relationship with them (Haller et al., 2007). Students from low context cultures, perceive educators as facilitators of learning who encourage students to develop independence, critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1986). The opportunity to provide students with the freedom to discuss theories and concepts within a multicultural classroom setting provides students with the ability to take control of their learning experience. This dynamic change in the student-educator relationship, from one dominated by the educator controlling the students’ learning experiences, to an environment emphasising student interaction, autonomy and cooperation with peers (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1986; Slavin, 1980, 1990) is consistent with “equity pedagogy” (McGee-Banks and Banks, 1995).

**Learning approaches and assessment tasks**

Initially, it appeared that international students from large power distance, strong uncertainty-avoidance cultures preferred multiple-choice tests (surface approach) as a form of assessment:

I like multiple choice tests better because we start to learn the chapter and we are not wasting our time so in the final exam at least we have read the chapter before (F4, International student, Female).

There are options. You can just choose one of the answers and it is much easier than writing an essay. You can still learn from online tests because you have to search for the answers (F5, International student, Female).

However, based on the above indicative reflections, the learning approach would be best labeled as “integrated” (or mixed). It is evident that a combination of conceptual understanding and memorisation was used by international students to complete the multiple-choice tests. Zeidner (1987) and Ballard and Clanchy (1997) argued that multiple-choice assessment tasks and the surface approach to learning is the preferred method of learning approach used by Asian students. This was attributed to their perceived predominant use of rote learning and low levels of cognition. However, it has emerged in this research (and in others) that there is a misconception in the stereotyping of Asian students as being “rote learners” (Cheong and Loong, 1999; Watkins and Briggs, 1996). This viewpoint is reiterated by researchers including Biggs (2003), Chan (1999) and Kember and Gow (1991), who have challenged some of the generalisations and stereotypical characterisations of Asian students regarding their use of surface learning approaches. Chan (1999) explains that the learning
approach used by Asian students is, in fact, a systematic, step-by-step approach aimed at attaching meaning to the materials learned in order to better recall the information when needed. Further, as explained by Haller et al. (2007), Confucian Heritage students are aware of the limitations of rote learning when it comes to deep understanding. Students use this technique to help make connections between ideas and concepts to ensure their deep understanding of the material concerned. It can be concluded that Asian students who adopt this perceived “rote/repetitive learning” approach are, in essence, shifting between surface and deep learning approaches (Haller et al., 2007; Ramsden, 1979), and this has been confirmed in the current study.

The deep approach to learning was preferred by students from small power distance, weak uncertainty-avoidance cultures with an emphasis on the application of concepts and the ability to contribute to their own learning outcomes:

You are basically in a situation where you just have to work out what they want to hear and then tell them what they want to hear. That doesn’t achieve anything. You need something that is relevant where you can apply what you learnt – that is what makes a good assignment (F1, Domestic student, Male).

Being able to explore, put some of your own experience into the assignment as well – to apply practical learning [being able to personalise] is very important (F1, Domestic student, Female).

Conversely, students from large power distance, strong uncertainty-avoidance cultures appeared to be averse to essays and reports due to language difficulties, the research effort and the formality of structure required:

I don’t like essays because it takes ages to write. You have to do some research and then write it in a formal way which is very difficult [for international students], especially the grammar […] the problem is to find the references and write them in the right way to reference in the assignment. [In Australia] you have to prove your idea, so it is difficult (F5, International student, Female).

Students using either deep or strategic approaches to learning appear to demonstrate their conceptual and theoretical understanding more effectively (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Trigwell and Prosser, 1991) due to the intrinsic motivation of the student (Marton and Säljö, 1976). To be effective, the assessment task must be relevant to the individual by adding value to the learning experience. This is achieved through developing generic business skills such as problem solving, analytic skills, fostering collaborative and autonomous learning, and enhancing their knowledge-base (Lizzio et al., 2002). Further, the need to place emphasis on the importance of knowledge sustainability (Warburton, 2003) over time is a key factor in the success of deep and strategic approaches to learning. It is important for students to be provided with the opportunity to use prior knowledge from their previous learning and personal experience. The findings have also uncovered the implicit assumption that, increasingly, students appear to be taking a strategic approach to the completion of their assessment tasks by using cues (Kember, 1996; Miller and Partlett, 1974) identified during lectures and tutorials relevant to the assessment task in an aim to attain the highest possible grades.
Effective assessment tasks

Students clearly preferred assessment tasks to have clear guidelines. The results suggest that students value transparency in knowing how their learning and their skills were to be assessed:

I think the lecturer can talk about the assessment during the lecture or during the tutorial to make sure everyone knows what they [the lecturer] want (F5, International student, Female).

[The lecturer] could provide examples, sometimes you know what to do but you don’t know how to do it [step-by-step] (F5, Domestic student, Male).

Students from high context cultures stated the inclusion of domestic students in team-based assessment tasks was an asset to their learning outcomes especially in the development of their language proficiency:

I have some ideas but I always need someone to elaborate and make it more understandable because I can’t do it well [due to English language problems] (F4, International student, Male).

I think group work is still good if your group has domestic people [involved] […] I am good at searching for information, so I do the research, and the others are good at writing [especially in] English language (F5, International student, Female).

Although, a number of students were also well aware that the lack of English language proficiency skills was a major impediment to the completion of oral and written communication assessment tasks:

I don’t like essays because you have to write in another language which is harder (F4, International student, Male).

For me English is quite poor for me. If you use oral assessment, I don’t think I can get a good mark (F3, International student, Male).

Conversely, domestic (Australian) students appeared to prefer to work in groups that were culturally homogenous, that is, all domestic students. Although not explicitly stated, it was felt that domestic students preferred not to form groups with students from culturally different backgrounds where English was not their first language:

If you are placed in groups with students with poor writing and communication skills [in English] other members of the group end up doing all the work (F1, Domestic student, Female).
Overall, it was very clear that students preferred assessment tasks that provided them with the core business and generic skills which they believed would enhance their employability:

How many business men are going to write essays? Reports get written on a daily basis so they are more representative (practical) of what you will be doing in the future, Universities are supposed to train you for the real world (F1, Domestic student, Male).

I find application [assessment tasks] like applying it to real life situations help me a lot because it's just like it helps me kind of understand real life examples and puts kind of theory to perspective. It's definitely my favourite (F1, Domestic student, Female).

Insights from the focus groups in relation to what constitutes effective assessment practices were consistent with the pedagogical approaches suggested by Palmer (2004). He suggested, effective assessment should include: clear aims and objectives; authenticity and value in the assessment task that develops core graduate skills relevant to professional practice; and, equity and fairness across a diversity of assessment tasks with less weighting allocated to the formal examination.

This research proposes a set of guidelines to support a proactive, inclusive learning environment and the implementation of effective assessment practices pertinent to our culturally diverse education environment. These guidelines will foster a dynamic and inclusive learning environment for all students and, ultimately, the provision of core graduate business and generic skills necessary for employability in the global marketplace.

**Recommendations and conclusion**

Based on the findings presented, it is proposed that clear guidelines be adopted in order to implement effective assessment practices and foster a vibrant, inclusive learning environment which meets the educational needs and wants of a culturally diverse student cohort. It is recommended that the principle of C.U.L.T.U.R.E. be integrated into learning approaches and assessment practices across Universities at the tertiary level:

- Clear aims and objectives of assessment tasks. Assessment instructions should qualify aims, objectives and expectations.

- Understanding of cultural diversity when designing assessment tasks. Greater sensitivity towards a culturally diverse curriculum leads to richer educational outcomes including: bridging cultural differences on campus and in society as a whole; challenging students to think in more complex ways about identity and diversity and thus avoid stereotyping; and, providing students with better core business skills valued by the global marketplace.
Learning environment that fosters inclusion, cooperative and collaborative learning strategies and encourages student engagement in the classroom. Greater instruction should be provided on how to collaborate effectively with peers from different cultural backgrounds.

Task diversity to cater for variation in learning approaches. It is fundamental for assessment tasks to challenge students as they progress through their tertiary education and offer opportunities to achieve success.

Unified learning practices with assessment tasks reflecting surface, deep and strategic learning approaches. It is clear that a flexible learning approach is required which, at the same time, puts the responsibility on educators to ensure that the learning environment is conducive to the use of a mixed approach to meet the expectations of a culturally diverse student cohort.

Reflective learning assessment tasks, which integrate core business attributes and competencies required in a global workforce. It is the role of educators to develop innovative and up-to-date learning and assessment practices that teach and enhance core business skill development that is reflective of industry practice.

Equitable, fair and transparent assessment practices. Students value transparency in the manner in which their knowledge and skills are assessed.

The study sample consisted of undergraduate University students undertaking a second-year, marketing class. Attempts were made to ensure a cross-section of students from different cultural backgrounds was included. However, it was recognised that the lack of representation of students from a wider scope of different cultural backgrounds might be a potential bias. The number of students representing different global regions or countries limited this study. With the exception of students from Australia and the Asian region, there were minimal students from African and European countries. No students from North and South America or the Pacific region were represented in the study. Although every attempt was made to be culturally inclusive across global regions, it was dependent on the number of students who consented to participate in this study. Further, future investigations may utilise individual, in-depth interviews with respondents as the primary data collection method, rather than focus groups, to enable greater depth to be garnered without the need to control groups with different power dynamics (Marshall and Rossman, 2011).

This study provides further insights into how tertiary students from culturally diverse backgrounds perceive different assessment practices. The inferences drawn from the focus groups suggest that examination-based assessment fostered and encouraged rote-learning and memorisation which is consistent with the surface learning approach. A preference for this method of learning appears not to be isolated to students from high context cultures such as students from Confucian Heritage cultures. It was also revealed that there was a misconception regarding the extent of student engagement in certain assessment tasks. It has been thought that students from strong uncertainty-avoidance cultures prefer assessment tasks which reflect the surface approach to learning (e.g. multiple-choice tests). However, this study revealed that when completing multiple-choice tests, students use both deep
(conceptual understanding) and surface (memorisation) approaches. This important finding goes against stereotypical views of these students’ preferences.

It is recommended that alternative assessment practices that foster deep and strategic learning approaches such as varied writing tasks, oral presentations, group projects and the use of case studies, offer an opportunity to make assessment tasks a valuable learning experience (Birenbaum and Feldman, 1998) for students from different cultural backgrounds. Given the current competitive climate in the global marketplace, the use of diverse assessment tasks that focus on “real-life” activities are perceived by students as adding value to their learning experience. As a result, this will equip students from culturally diverse backgrounds with the core graduate competencies to enhance their employability in their chosen disciplines. Essentially, tertiary educators should utilise the pedagogy/andragogy of assessment for learning, rather than assessment of learning, through the overarching principles provided by C.U.L.T.U.R.E., as guided by this study.

Finally, this study has highlighted the need for further investigation into learning approaches and University assessment practices that recognise both commonality and differences across global cultures. As explained by Charlesworth (2008), it is evident that there continues to be a rise in students choosing to study outside their home country. This indicates that educators who have an understanding of similarities and differences between these cultures will be better suited to fulfilling student needs. Even with the findings presented in the current study, there is a continued need for research into the relationship between University assessment practices, diverse learning approaches, and the importance of knowledge and business skill acquisition by graduates. This will ensure the relevancy of University education and learning practices. Heeding the calls of Jackson and Chapman (2012), Cambra-Fierro and Cambra-Berdun (2007) and Hearns et al. (2007), to name but a few, to develop an “all for all” approach devoted to inclusivity in learning, confronting culture with C.U.L.T.U.R.E. represents a vital move in that direction.
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<th>Small power distance, Weak uncertainty avoidance</th>
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<td>Germany</td>
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<td>Japan, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka</td>
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**Note:** "The base country, that is, all countries have been compared against Australia in terms of cultural values"
References


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