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## Investigating the value of a peer-to-peer mentoring experience

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## ABSTRACT

Globalization of business skills has become critical as employers have a requirement for culturally adaptable marketing and business graduates who are “work ready” in either Australia or overseas. These students must have both discipline knowledge and soft skills including cultural competence. How students develop intercultural skills at university is discussed. Given that more than ninety percent of local university students do not participate in academic offshore experiences, a focus is on the internationalization-at-home activities that universities offer. This study looks at cross-cultural peer-to-peer mentoring. A paucity of research on the effect of these experiences further enhances the relevance of this topic. This research investigates whether Australian marketing and business students who undertake a cross-cultural peer-to-peer mentoring experience “at home” become more cross-culturally adaptable. A quasi experimental pre and post-test survey shows that this method of an “at home” cross-cultural experience has a significant effect on four of the cultural dimensions. They are Flexibility/Openness, Personal Autonomy, Perceptual Acuity and Fulfilment. This means that as a result of this study, the recommendation for future peer-to-peer mentoring experiences would be to specifically target these significant dimensions as part of the peer-to-peer mentoring agenda. The focus of their agenda on these dimensions would allow peer-to-peer mentors of different ethnicities and those mentors who are Australian born but who mentor students from different countries, to be confident that their work was directly attributable to increasing their mentees’ and their own cross-cultural adaptability. It shows that cross-cultural mentoring for marketing and other business students in an “at home” setting is an important part of preparing business and more specifically marketing students for the challenges of the global workplace.

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## 1. Introduction

Marketing graduates today are facing a demanding workplace where both discipline knowledge, soft skills and cultural competence (McArthur et al., 2017; Delpechitre and Baker, 2017; Deloitte Access Economics: *Soft skills for Business Success*, 2017) are expected as part of the work ready tool kit. In this global and competitive economy, graduates need to exhibit core competencies such as digital marketing capabilities and technical skills such as data analysis and interpretation, technological capability, strategic and integrative thinking, a global perspective and an ethical, socially responsible outlook (Finch et al., 2016). In addition, the demand for key soft skills has increased including creative problem solving, cross-cultural communication and collaboration (Delpechitre and Baker 2017), flexibility, adaptability to change, self-awareness and self-management, and the ability to work in

culturally diverse teams (Cooper et al., 2010; McArthur et al., 2017). Hunter (2004) agrees with these graduate competencies especially the need for them to possess global competence, which Hunter (2004, p. 79) defines as “having an open mind while actively seeking to understand cultural norms and expectations of others, leveraging this gained knowledge to interact, communicate and work effectively outside one’s environment”. More recently, Delpechitre and Baker (2017) defined cultural intelligence as the “ability to function and manage customer relationships in culturally diverse settings” identifying the need for graduates to be competent in a range of customer exchange and cultural settings.

In response to the globalisation of the business environment, universities must continually adapt and evolve to meet the demands of employers that graduates have more than just discipline specific skills by the time they join the workforce (Pefanis Schlee and Harich 2010; Greenacre et al., 2017). Businesses need employees who can work successfully across national boundaries, and across cultural regions and groups (Busteed 2015a; Finch et al., 2016; McMurray et al., 2016; Delpechitre and Baker 2017), so it is imperative that universities increase the relevance of higher edu-

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cation to employment (Dua, 2013; McMahan, Watson and Patton, 2014; Busteed, 2015a and b). Even if these students never work abroad, most will work in an increasingly multicultural domestic environment (Ismail et al., 2006) and will likely work for organisations with global or multicultural stakeholders, be they customers, suppliers, or co-workers. Employers will therefore be looking for employees who are capable of high levels of human interactions across cultural boundaries in responding to the needs of these stakeholders (Carnevale, 2008). The student of the future must be able to understand and communicate effectively with people of various cultural and national backgrounds (Hofstede, 1984). Therefore, the need for students to possess intercultural competence is essential to meet the demands of the business world (Yu, 2012).

Unfortunately, several studies reported that the business community is generally dissatisfied with the job that universities are doing in teaching these skills to graduates (McMurray et al., 2016). Busteed (2015b) reported findings of a survey conducted by Gallup and the World Innovation Summit for Educators that 1550 education experts from 149 countries expressed their dissatisfaction with the job that higher education institutions around the world were doing in educating students and preparing them for the global workforce.

To address these needs many universities are internationalising and globalising their curriculum (Knight, 2004; Scharoun, 2016; Castro et al., 2016). Excluding international academic mobility, efforts to internationalise the curriculum have included promoting national political and economic competitiveness, preserving languages and cultural heritages and facilitating critical and comparative thinking for life in a multicultural environment (Yershova et al., 2000, p. 67). Internationalisation is defined as “any systematic sustained effort aimed at making higher education more responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalisation of societies, economy and labour markets” (Kalvermark and van der Wende (1997, p. 19). Knight (2004, p.11) more specifically states that this process entails “integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education”.

In 2016 there were 1.3 million students enrolled in higher education in Australia, 520,000 of these were international students from 193 countries. (Australian Universities, 2018). There were 780,000 Australian students in higher education (Universities Australia, 2018). Of these only 30,000 (4%) of Australian students. Given only around 3% (<https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/Media-and-Events/media-releases/More-Australian-students-see-the-value-of-study-abroad#.WxN7E0iFO>) Universities Australia, 2018) of students enrol in a study abroad program such as exchange in another country for a semester or year, short term study tour or an intensive international internship, this study poses the research question: how do the more than 90% of Australian students who do not have an off-shore experience gain these cross-cultural skills that employers are looking for? The challenge for higher education is to connect inter-cultural learning and future careers for their students. This project aims to add to the literature on cross-cultural effects of a Peer-to-Peer (P2P) mentoring experience in a domestic/at home situation. This study will also enable universities to understand the effects of the cross-cultural interaction.

## 2. Marketing student employability

In a recent study of job advertisements for marketing graduate roles, the skills and knowledge required by employers and expected of graduates included digital marketing, project management, general marketing capabilities, and a range of relationship, interaction or sales capabilities (McArthur et al., 2017). In

addition, soft skills in demand included communication skills on all platforms and media, and interpersonal skills, combined with personal attributes such as motivation, time management and a can-do attitude (McArthur et al., 2017). Where marketing roles require well developed relationship management, interaction and sales capabilities, we see increased demand for cultural intelligence (Delpichtre and Baker, 2017). However, there is a strain between a curriculum that educates students and a curriculum that develops students who are educated and also job ready (Dua, 2013). Gow and McDonald (2000) identified four factors that contributed to employability. Cross cultural competence was seen as critical in order for future graduates to be able to take part in an increasingly globalised workforce (Gow and McDonald, 2000; Stier, 2009). The other factors identified by Gow and McDonald (2000) as connected to future employability are data management and analysis, problem solving, communication and an entrepreneurial spirit.

To take a step back from employability at the graduate level, we also need to examine how we can develop capabilities at the student level. Not all students will have access to the international mobility programs that have been identified as a major factor in developing cross cultural or intercultural capabilities (Clarke et al., 2009; Potts, 2015). Building learning and experiential opportunities into the university experience has been suggested as ways of developing relevant attributes and capabilities for students (Kurpis and Hunter 2016) as a precursor to employability.

Although there has been research on the development of cultural competence and employability skills, particularly through study abroad or exchange opportunities (Clarke et al., 2009), there is less research on the different ways intercultural capabilities can be developed for less mobile students. The research into the impact of study abroad on cross-cultural capabilities suggests that interaction with others from different cultures may be beneficial (Clarke et al., 2009; Potts, 2015). Preparing marketing students for the challenges of the global workforce should be at the forefront of curriculum in all business education (Glenn, 2002). Today's global workers should be aware of their cultural adaptability. They should be given sound instruction on these cross-cultural elements to be well equipped to interact and work in a culturally diverse workforce (Ferrel and Hirt, 2000; McPherson and Szul, 2008).

### 2.1. Cultural adaptability

The concept of culture is not new and has been examined in both the management and marketing literature (Hofstede, 1991; Samaha et al., 2014). Culture can be defined as the ‘collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from those of another (Hofstede et al., 2010) which are exhibited as enduring personality characteristics that are normalised or standardised across the group (Inkeles and Levinson, 1969) and appear as norms of behaviour in art, morals, laws, customs and traditions (Ghemawat, 2007). More importantly for this study is cultural adaptability, and our ability to function effectively, relying on our skills in responding to the expectations around us. Resonating with increased interest in future graduate employability, Brislin and Yoshida (1994) argue that culture can be defined as any framework of expectations, and cultural adaptability is our ability to function effectively in an environment using our skill in recognising and responding appropriately to the values and expectations of those around us. Kim (1991, p. 268) takes this one step further and contends that cultural adaptability is “*the individual's capacity to suspend or modify some of the old cultural ways, to learn and accommodate some of the new cultural ways, and to creatively find ways to manage the dynamics of cultural difference/unfamiliarity, intergroup posture, and the accompanying stress*”.

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