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Chinese versus UK marketing students' perceptions of peer feedback and peer assessment



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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to explore UK and Chinese students' perceptions of peer feedback as well as assessment for coursework conducted in groups during the course of their studies at a large UK Business School. Elements of Hofstede's cultural dimensions were used to develop a theoretical framework for this study. An abductive approach was taken using systematic combining where interviews with UK and Chinese students were integrated with academic literature to ascertain general perceptions towards peer feedback and assessment. From these interviews four attitudinal issues were extracted – how comfortable students are with an assessment mode, how important they find the mode, fairness of the assessment mode, and how useful they find the mode. A survey was then distributed to final year marketing students and their perceptions of these issues were assessed. These results were subsequently presented to separate focus groups for their insights into the survey outcomes. The principal findings of the study are that there are cultural barriers to fair and consistent formal peer assessment of group work involving heterogeneous populations, particularly pertaining to collectivist/individualist backgrounds as exemplified in this study.

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Assessment as a verification of learning, as well as verifying learning outcomes for purposes of programme validation, remains a core issue for higher education. In particular, attention to group-based project work and assessment is driven by industry expectations and accrediting bodies like the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008; Bacon, 2011; Bicen & Laverie, 2009). However, problems arising from the movement toward group-based classwork and assessment have also been noted (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008; Freeman & Greenacre, 2011). One such problem which has not been extensively explored arises from group work in heterogeneous populations, notably the trend toward mixed international and cultural backgrounds in business and management education.

An increasingly competitive higher education sector is leading academics and professionals to invest in efforts to better understand students' expectations, perceptions and experiences (for example Bennett & Kottasz, 2006; Crumbley, 2011). A growing body of marketing literature is exploring the factors that influence student satisfaction (for example DeShields, Kara, & Kaynak, 2005; Douglas, McClelland, & Davies, 2008; Navarro, Iglesias, & Torres, 2005; Petruzzellis et al., 2006). Arambewela and Hall (2009) indicate student satisfaction levels associated with educational and non-educational services varies among nationality groups. A factor that appears to influence both international and domestic students' expectations and satisfaction levels is the type and quality of the assessment (formally marked) and feedback (formal or informal, but unmarked)

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mechanisms utilized by a particular University. In the UK the National Student Survey (NSS) assesses student perceptions of assessment feedback, but does not make comparisons between different international or cultural backgrounds. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that some students are frustrated with peer feedback as well as the peer assessment processes they sometimes encounter. The resulting negative impact on student satisfaction may have a harmful influence on NSS scores, business school rankings, and subsequent enrollment. Yang, Badger, and Yu (2006) suggests that even if peer feedback and/or peer assessment provides advantages, it should only be introduced if students find it acceptable.

Traditional forms of teacher based assessment and feedback are increasingly being replaced by peer assessment and feedback (Barron, Gourlay, & Gannon-Leary, 2010; Van Zundert, Sluijsmans, & Merriënboer, 2010). However, there is little academic work that explores international students' perceptions of peer assessment and/or peer feedback, or makes comparisons between domestic and international students' perceptions. It is commonly recognized that an increase in international student numbers is resulting in increasingly diverse student cohorts that can cause challenges for staff (Barron et al., 2010). Cultural and other differences between international and domestic students may have an impact on the effectiveness and practical applications of peer assessment and feedback. This study focuses on Chinese students studying in the UK and make comparisons between them and their domestic UK counterparts. There are over twice as many Chinese students studying in the UK as students from any other nationality including other EU member countries, with Chinese enrollments increasing by almost 20% between 2009 and 2010 (UKCISA, 2012).

The objective of this research is to explore UK and Chinese students' perceptions of peer feedback as well as peer assessment during the course of their studies at a large UK Business School. After reviewing the literature on peer feedback and assessment, a theoretical framework for this study is developed, before the three stage methodology employed to collect and analyze data is described. Next, the findings are presented, and conclusions and implications developed and described, before areas for further research are identified.

1. Literature review

Peer assessment is defined by Topping (1998) as '*an arrangement in which individuals consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality or success of the products or outcomes of learning of peers of similar status*'. It is a process where students evaluate, or are evaluated by, their peers (Van Zundert et al., 2010). In contrast, peer feedback can be thought of as a more informal process, where students learn from each other by means of receiving and giving feedback (Van Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2010). However, this feedback does not directly influence the grades students receive. In marketing and management education, a combination of the fact that team based assessment prepares students for the teamwork they are likely to encounter in the workplace and helps to reduce teacher's marking loads, mean that the use of peer assessment is likely to continue in the future (Willcoxin, 2006). However, many students and staff recognize that there are troubling, unresolved issues relating to peer assessment including free riders or social loafers in team work, and ensuring fair as well as accurate assessment methods (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008; Fellenz, 2006; Willcoxin, 2006). Topping's (2010) recent commentary on the methodological challenges associated with studying peer assessment highlights the challenges that exist when undertaking research relating to peer assessment.

Reviews of the literature on the effectiveness of peer assessment as well as peer feedback suggest that while the results of some studies have been positive, many remain inconclusive (Van Gennip et al., 2010). The outcomes of analysis of student perceptions of peer assessment have been varied and often resulted in significant variations in results, despite quite similar assessment schemes (Fellenz, 2006). Van Zundert et al. (2010) suggest that it is difficult to make claims about effectiveness of peer assessment due to the enormous variety in peer assessment methods and research techniques. Several studies report that feedback from teachers is more effective than feedback from peers and is more likely to result in changes or improvements in student work (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Paulus, 1999; Strijbos, Narciss, & Dunnebir, 2010; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Zhang, 1999). Many of these have focused on foreign students studying on intensive language courses where feedback from teachers is likely to be more useful than feedback from peers (Maio, Badger, & Zhen, 2006). In this context, culture has a significant impact on the effectiveness of peer feedback in groups (Allaei & Connor, 1990).

In the general marketing literature it is assumed that consumers are not homogenous and can be divided into segments that have similar preferences, attitudes or perceptions. However, much of the literature on peer assessment and feedback does not appear explicitly to recognize differences in student demographic, socio-economic, cultural and other factors. There is a lack of studies that explore the influence that such characteristics may have on students' perceptions of peer assessment as well as students' abilities to assimilate information and learn effectively based on feedback from peers. Exceptions include Langan et al. (2005) who examine a number of factors that may change the distribution of marks allocated through peer assessment including gender and higher education background. Gender differences have also been identified in a study by Van Zundert et al. (2010). In particular there appears to be a gap in the literature with regards to research that examines and assesses the influence that cultural factors, such as the country that a student has been brought up in, may have on their perceptions of peer assessment and/or peer feedback.

Research on peer assessment has mainly been conducted in western contexts (Bryant & Carless, 2010). However, peer assessment may not be practical for students where an examination culture is embedded such as in countries away from a western setting (Carless, 2005). Bryant and Carless (2010) suggest that overcoming the differences in assessment cultures is an obstacle to the adoption of peer assessment in some Asian cultures such as Hong Kong. Salili (1996) reports that students from collectivist cultures spend more effort in a peer cooperative process and perform better in such an

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