Facilitating intercultural interactions to enhance international students' psychosocial adjustment

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Rapid growth in international student enrolments in Australia, particularly in higher education, has seen international education become Australia's top export service industry, which brought in $19.1 billion in 2009-10 (Australian Education International, 2011a). In March 2011, there were 204,950 onshore international student enrolments in higher education alone (Australian Education International, 2011b), with 58.6 per cent of enrolments in all sectors coming from China, India, Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam.

Intercultural interactions impacting on international students

While the growth of Asian-born international student enrolments has necessitated increases in cross-cultural interactions in Australian tertiary institutions, Australian research has shown generally low levels of cross-cultural contact and friendships between international and domestic students, often below many international students' desired level of friendships with locals (Smart, Volet, & Ang, 2000). Limited quantity and poor quality of intercultural contact, along with intergroup anxiety, could be conducive to negative inter-racial attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Ward and Masgoret (2004) have found that in New Zealand greater amounts of contact between international students and local New Zealanders would enhance the former's academic, social and psychological adjustment.

 The social interaction difficulties that some international students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds experience are especially obvious when they are participating in tutorial or student group project discussion, and can impact on all students in the group. Cultural differences in expectations and practices in group work may hinder the effective participation of Asian-born students in tutorial discussion, even among those who are proficient in English and have come well prepared for classes (Paulus, Bichelmeyer, Malopinsky, & Rastogi, 2005). This often contributes to perceived and real issues in social integration in multicultural classrooms.

Optimising intercultural social adjustment

The adjustment of acculturating individuals is facilitated by cultural learning, including the acquisition of knowledge and ability to negotiate the local culture, and general behavioural competence effective for living in the new society (Ward, Bochner, & Furnhan, 2001). Cultural learning is developed through reflective cross-cultural experiences and is best understood within a social learning context.

The collaboration between four applied psychologists – Michelle Barker (Griffith University) and the author from Australia, and Marvin Westwood and Ishu Ishiyama (University of British Columbia) from Canada – has led to an intercultural social competency training program known as EXCELL (Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership). The

application of EXCELL as a learning support program for international students has been described by the co-developers in Mak, Westwood, Barker, and Ishiyama (1998). To date, the group program has been applied mostly in the international student sector to provide international students with the social competencies needed to cope with academic and personal challenges on a foreign campus.

The EXCELL Program

The EXCELL Program aims to provide optimal conditions for adult newcomers to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills for successful social interactions with host nationals, while maintaining their original cultural identity. The program is designed to be offered to groups of between eight and 20 participants who are:

- Students, immigrants, refugees or expatriates from diverse cultural backgrounds, and have been in the new country for long enough to have dealt with their initial 'survival' needs, or locals who wish to increase their cultural competence or social effectiveness
- Motivated to improve their intercultural social skills for attaining academic, professional, and personal goals.

STAGES OF TEACHING EXCELL SOCIOCULTURAL COMPETENCY
(Westwood, Mak, Barker, & Ishiyama, 2000)

Alliance building
This is established through validation of the participants' original culture and mobilising support from group members to encourage participants to share their experiences in intercultural social encounters, thus normalising the social difficulties and culture shock common to many cultural newcomers seeking educational, professional, and personal success.

Development of a cultural map
A schematic representation referred to as cultural mapping makes explicit the unwritten social rules for commonly occurring social scenarios that can be challenging to cultural newcomers. A cultural map provides a succinct description of an effective way of behaving in a specific social scenario using a sequence of observable verbal and non-verbal behaviours. For example, international students are given explanations of what micro behaviours will be appropriate for finding a gap and joining in a tutorial discussion, and the underlying values for such behaviours.

Demonstration, practice, feedback and coaching
Participants watch credible models perform desired behaviours corresponding to a specific cultural map, practise the micro actions through simulation, and receive corrective feedback and coaching from the facilitators.

Goal setting and contracting
The facilitator helps each group member to develop and commit to a realistic action plan to apply the learning in a specific situation in the following week.

Transfer of learning
At this stage learners apply their cultural maps and newly acquired behavioural skills to attaining their individual educational, work, or social goals. They are committed to completing a post-session form and to reporting back their experiences to the group in the following session, when facilitators will acknowledge the level of success that has been achieved, and determine if further assistance is needed.

EXCELL focuses on behavioural competence training involving observational learning and guided practice, while addressing various potential psychosocial barriers, such as threats to one's own cultural identity. The conceptual framework underlying EXCELL is described in Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama, and Barker (1999). The program comprises six two to three-hour sessions, offering systematic training in key sociocultural competencies that aim to enable newcomers to access the new culture (e.g., seeking help, making social contact and participation in a group) and negotiate with others (e.g., expressing disagreement and giving feedback). The five stages of teaching EXCELL sociocultural competency are outlined in the boxed information above.

EXCELL recommends the use of a co-facilitator model, with one facilitator who has successfully negotiated cross-cultural transition as a credible role model, and the other from the dominant cultural background to provide authentic explanation of the host cultural code. EXCELL facilitators who deliver the program must have successfully completed a three-day trainer course. The intensive course is suitable for psychologists, counsellors and teachers skilled in group facilitation and experienced with cross-cultural service delivery. At the time of writing, delegates from over 100 educational institutions have completed the Trainer Course in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK and the Netherlands.

EXCELL Program evaluation

An emphasis of the EXCELL intervention is to replace intercultural social anxiety with increasing amounts of social confidence developed through actual skills mastery. Ho, Holmes, and Cooper (2004)'s review of various EXCELL program evaluations conducted in tertiary institutions in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK found that EXCELL contributed to improved social interaction skills, greater intercultural social self-efficacy and less social avoidance tendency, and participants' continued to apply the competencies acquired to real life situations beyond the training period. The most common source of social self-efficacy came from mastery experiences of practising, learning and applying skills, as well as from physiological and affective states of feeling less anxious or stressful, and feeling good about themselves.

Moreover, local students have also reported benefits where the training has been embedded in communication curriculum and offered to culturally mixed groups (Mak & Buckingham, 2007). An optional EXCELL module was found to generate additional social interaction skills and intercultural social self-efficacy benefits to the completion of a general communication course at university, including more time spent with cross-ethnic friends.

Conclusion

In the past, where intercultural education was available to international students or part of the curriculum in multicultural classes, it was likely to be in the form of a cross-cultural awareness or sensitivity program, rather than a social competence training program more in line with the social learning approach.

It is exciting to note that an investment of 12 to 18 hours of skills-based, practice-focussed sociocultural competence training can increase international and domestic tertiary students' confidence and skills in intercultural interactions, and pave the way for more meaningful

intercultural friendships. Mastery of basic social competencies, such as seeking help, making social contact and participation in group discussion in a new culture, can enable international students to extend their range of social skills and friendship networks, and facilitate their cross-cultural adjustment.

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