

Student Learning Preferences: International Students in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract: This paper examines the methods that students find most valuable for their learning by comparing home and international students. The quantitative data is derived from an online survey administered to undergraduate accounting students in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. There were 273 useable responses to this survey, conducted from October 2008–June 2009 together with qualitative discursive transcribed material from six focus groups, comprising two at each of the same universities. Analysis of the survey data indicated that both home and international students similarly ranked factors that they regarded as important in learning, regardless of ethnicity and the country in which they studied. Of the choices offered listening to the lecture, note taking and textbooks were most valuable. The focus groups also indicated that PowerPoints were unpopular as a learning medium, and that Asian students did not like group learning. These findings support current scholarship, which suggests revising the stereotypes of international learners. This study, therefore, contributes to building a clearer understanding of learning expectations and perceptions of the fast developing and ethnically-diverse international student cohort.

Keywords: Learning, International Students, Teaching Practices

Educational institutions appear to have very similar structures for teaching and instructing stage one students, apparently taking it as generally understood that they learn in similar ways. However, learning experiences for students who attend universities away from their country of origin are likely to be influenced by cultural and other differences. This study investigates the perceptions of students studying Accounting Stage One in three sites, one in each of United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, using both focus groups and answers to survey questions regarding their learning preferences¹. The focus groups probed the students' thoughts, opinions, stories and comments regarding their experiences of learning, and the survey questions asked the students' to identify their learning preferences. These complemented each other. The international nature of the students is a key variable in the analysis, and it is hoped that the conclusions gained can improve the quality of the learning experience, particularly for international students in business courses in the higher education sector.

¹ It is emphasized that in the use of the term 'Learning preferences' we are not invoking the commonly used VARK categories: visual learners; auditory learners; kinesthetic learners or tactile learners.

Background: Previous Studies Relevant to Student Learning Preference

This section reviews research about international students' views of their learning process. Literature that researches teacher qualities is also included, as learning preferences are related to perceived teacher characteristics.

Students' perceptions of their learning and teaching experience affect their attitude towards education and the qualities they expect in it (Ferreira & Santoso, 2008). Smith and Zhang (2009) suggest that students develop perceptions about learning from hearsay, personal experience, and written material such as brochures. There are many schools of thought on the teacher characteristics necessary for quality teaching and learning. Previous research on the issue of effective teaching has ranged from research on teacher personality, the teaching environment, pedagogical styles, and so on, most considering one or two relevant concepts. Jahangiri and Mucciolo (2008) describe teaching effectiveness as the teachers' ability to be useful in facilitating lasting learning through personal traits and instructional organization. Overall, they concluded that effective teaching is multifaceted and occurs when students are engaged at their varying levels of understanding.

Kember, Ho, and Hong (2008) interviewed 36 students from nine undergraduate degree programmes in Hong Kong about what aspects of the teaching and learning environment motivated them and found the following: establishing relevance and interest, allowing choice of courses, learning activities, teaching for understanding, assessment of learning activities, close teacher-student and student-student relationships (p. 43). A study involving the English language needs of students along with 45 professors and lecturers in business colleges in Hong Kong also found:

... a general consensus that first-year students, in particular, experienced difficulties in handling discourses from different disciplines, both in their writing tasks and in their readings. They suffered from a lack of understanding of disciplinary frames and were sometimes unsure of what was expected of them. (Jackson, 2005, p. 304)

Earlier studies show that Chinese learners differ in learning style and culture from domestic students (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). Domestic students are perceived as having an inquisitive and analytical way of learning and thinking, whereas traditionally Chinese learners perceive quality learning as involving memorisation (Chan, 1999). This demonstrates a clear difference between the system in which Chinese learners find themselves when they go overseas and the philosophical values in which they have been traditionally nurtured. A Confucian approach to life might also influence learning preferences and attitudes towards teachers (Cloverdale-Jones, 2006). Ballard and Clanchy (1991) quote Confucius: "I am not a man born wise. I favour what is ancient and strive to know it well" (p. 10). Jin and Cortazzi (1996) studying Chinese students in UK tertiary institutions found that despite coming from different regions of China three general features emerged: the likelihood of student passivity and teacher-centered learning; the link between Chinese ways of learning and Chinese societal values, and the emphasis on knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and student results. The survey groups in this study had a predominance of Chinese international students among the international student cohort at each institution.

After analysing interviews with both teachers and students at 13 Tertiaries in the United Kingdom, and 24 in China, Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) suggested that the main problem

Chinese students had in the UK was not so much with teaching styles, but with the struggle to adapt to the UK culture, and that through doing their studies there many Chinese students increased their self-responsibility and independence. Currie (2007) interviewing Chinese students in MBA programmes in the UK showed a wide range of attitudes towards the pedagogy: some embraced it enthusiastically, but others experienced some marginalisation. The study also drew attention to the loss of face experienced by some students when they were subject to criticism by other students (p. 545). The findings of these studies point to the complexity embodied in student learning away from home.

When Zepke and Leach (2007) asked what can New Zealand tertiary education institutions and their teachers do to their current processes and practices to improve retention, persistence, and completion by diverse students in their first year they found that most teachers did recognise and try to address issues of diversity but that some aspects, such as the condemnation of poor English, could be seen as hegemonic practices. Seemingly “[c]ultural differences can either be a source of creativity and enlarged perspectives, or they can be a source of difficulties and miscommunication” (Anbari, 2004, p. 273).

It would seem, therefore, that students studying away from their home country would have different learning preferences from home students. However, a study comparing learning preferences of Asian International and Australian students by Ramburuth and McCormick (2001) showed that clear cut differences in learning preferences between international and home students were overstated and that common stereotypes were probably mistaken. For example, Ladd and Ruby (1999) using the Canfield Learning Styles Inventory (Canfield, 1992) indicated that, although 80% of the students had learned through lectures in their home countries, they preferred to learn by direct experience. They suggest that instructors can help international students to be successful at US universities by determining, then explaining, their preferred learning styles and the same knowledge can also enable faculty to adjust their teaching styles to the students’ learning styles.

Zhu and Flaitz (2005) urge that future studies “provide insight into the nature of international students’ language needs by adopting a triangulated approach to investigation and by involving a large number of participants from a variety of disciplines and institutional settings” (p. 10).

The present study employed several parallel strategies to do so. The specific questions addressed were:

1. What do students find most valuable for their learning?
2. How do the preferences of students studying in their own country compare with those of students from overseas?

Focus Groups

Focus groups are interviews designed for small groups in which the group members come together with a moderator to discuss common experiences (Berg, 2004). They are about “information gathering” rather than reaching consensus (Kruger, p. 2) and participants constitute a “purposive” sample of the target population (Lederman, 1990). Compared with surveys and interviews, focus groups can provide richer and more in-depth information because they allow interaction both between the moderator and participants and between participants (Lederman, 1990; Field, 2000).

Therefore, as a setting where important ideas and themes can be shared in a conversational way, focus groups can provide a safe place to talk and draw out insights. Patton (2002) believes “feedback from focus groups is typically more specific, meaningful, and animated than what can be obtained from individually filled questionnaires and surveys” (p. 388). They also generate a considerable amount of data in less time than a series of individual interviews and, it might be argued, present a more natural environment as there are more interactions among group members (Litosseliti, 2003).

Method

A mixed method using both qualitative focus groups and quantitative closed ended survey questions addressed the two research questions. The survey and the focus group transcripts provide two different types of evidence that can strengthen each other and provide a form of validity as triangulation (Patton, 2002). The focus group analysis is presented first and the survey second.

Context

The study took place at three universities in three different countries, New Zealand, UK and Australia.² The cohort was students studying a first year accounting paper in the respective business schools. They were selected partly due to the home university of the researchers and because they incorporated a large number of international students for whom English is not their first language. The international students in the survey came from many different countries (particularly Asia and for the British cohort especially China). The focus groups took place at an onsite study room or café with lunch provided. Each was between one and a half and two hours in length.

Selection of Participants

Volunteers for both survey and focus groups were recruited via the Blackboard Learning Management System and email from the stage one Accounting cohort at each site. As the researchers were all teachers, participation in the survey was encouraged verbally or via the Web. There were no explicit incentives or rewards for survey participants (See Appendix A).

Data Analysis

Focus Groups

The “questioning route” within the focus group context began with broad, general questions around the idea of different learning experiences then became more specific and directed, and towards the end broadened out again before rounding-off the discussion (Krueger, 1994, p. 7). The interviews were digitally recorded and notes taken. Later, two researchers listened

² It was hoped that having three different international university settings strengthened our capacity to generalise and therefore has the potential to be more powerful in its conclusions and may allow us to better identify that aspects are country-specific or world-wide.

to the tapes using the “note-expansion” method (Betrand, Brown & Ward, 1992, p. 202) then compared significant points. This method minimised selective/biased perceptions (Zhu & Flaitz, 2005) and followed Krueger’s (1994) advice that the process be systematic, verifiable, sequential and continuous.

The researchers looked for common topics, deviations, how the participants’ past environments and experiences related to their behaviour and attitudes and what interesting stories emerged from the responses-bearing in mind all the time how these helped illuminate the central question/s (Berkowitz, 1997). Descriptive summaries were then written using quotes to illustrate key ideas in an unbiased way to represent the views of the participants, not the researchers’ interpretation of what they said (Krueger, 1994, p. 38). Validity for the focus groups is “face validity” and the transcripts provide a check on reliability (they are stored and obtainable for verification).

Survey

An anonymous on-line survey was answered by students in each of the three universities, comprising of 24 questions ranging across a number of topics relevant to teaching, learning and assessment. The survey items were constructed by the researchers specifically for this research, and are original. To gain some measure of validity they were piloted extensively and adjusted accordingly. The two questions analysed in this study (Q10 and Q14) pertain specifically to teaching and learning preferences and therefore this paper (see Appendix B). The data collection occurred through online survey software. For survey numbers and usable responses see Table 1 and Table 2 in Appendix B. The results of the two survey questions were not analysed statistically but presented in graph form and analysed descriptively.

Results

Focus groups

Key ideas that emerged from the analysis process described in the method section are presented for each of the three geographic contexts to take care to represent each group (Krueger, 1994).

SITE 1-UK

[There were two groups with eight and six participants respectively-a mixture of Home and International students]

PowerPoint slides came up a number of times. Students had varied responses to and opinions of their usefulness as a learning aid and suggested that the best lecturer was one who placed no reliance on slides. Lecturers who read Power Point slides word for word were described as really irritating and some said that if they were to be used at all they should be given out after the lecture.

J (home): I would rather quite frankly there were no slides and that you have more of... That you just completely get rid of that and just have the lecturer talking. It’s actually a lot better having an interesting lecturer that you keep listening and then you can

just write your own notes for that's better for your recall rather than just have somebody literally going over what you can see.

However, an international student added that she valued them in case there was something important she forgot to write down.

The comparative value of tutorials and lectures for learning varied. It very much depended on the tutor. Some could explain things better than the lecturers but overall most important was being prepared to help and consistency—"one learns best from the same person, for example, a tutor".

G (Home): But I've had some tutors in some subjects who just haven't helped at all, you just sit there and think what am I doing here and what's the point. But then one of my lecturers I didn't like very much but the tutor just explained everything and that's the reason why I did well in that, so it depends.

One factor noted by Home students in the UK was a tendency among international students to stay together in tutorial groups rather than mix with others causing problems for group work if there was a mixture of ethnicities:

G (Home): Yeah, I recently did like a group work project and I think were some international students there and...there was a language barrier...because there was two groups and I think we were kind of like put together and so it was more I don't know if there was a language barrier or not or we were the more dominant group,...it kind of created a bit of a barrier between us cause they just didn't do any work so didn't really help us integrate between the two so it's more work. And also like a lot of the people who are confident just don't talk, so you kind of hate being in a group with them.

C (European): To be quite honest, I think those group works are quite annoying, especially if you got...the ones that don't want to work. I mean it doesn't matter if they're International or not.

Another point common to both home and international students was that they learned from lecturers who are prepared to "go the second mile".

IG (Indian): it's one thing having that knowledge and being arrogant and not helping out a student a whole other thing to have that knowledge and be as humble as you can, and help out a student, I respect those kinds of lecturers a lot more.

Students had strong preferences for lecturers who were engaging and felt they made you want to learn about the subject.

IG: I used to hate statistics, I literally couldn't stand the subject and we had this lecturer Professor Bernard, he was a legend. He would walk in...he would dance in the lecture theatres, he would make jokes, he would help you, the way he would make us analyse things, like he would bring cuttings from the top newspapers in the World and show the mistakes they made and ...and we forget 'cause we're laughing.

You know even though you didn't understand one 10th or just a tad bit of statistics, you wanted to listen because he was so enthusiastic about the subject that you think ok if he's that enthusiastic, surely there must be something right in the subject and then later on, you actually start to recollect ok Bernard said you know, this is how you deal with it and you start to get it...And if it wasn't for him, I would still hate statistics...

I (home): like, K, he's a lecturer, he brought in creative accounting, it's absolutely amazing to see what numbers can do because changing one number can boost your profits significantly and K does that, but you know, he brings in real life cases...which makes it really interesting.

However, lecturing techniques and styles came under scrutiny. For example an English home student described a group discussion in the middle of a lecture as "rubbish".

Assessments affect learning and vice versa. When asked about their experiences and preferences for assessments students liked the anonymity of the internet, but described that because there was sometimes not enough specific feedback they would have to go to teachers and ask questions. Both internationals and home students said that, as an assessment and learning method, formal exams were poor, as they provided no feedback. "It would be good to get the written paper back and get feedback" but bureaucracy prevents it. One international student commented that the timetabling of exams was poor compared with her home country, for example, two exams in one day would never happen in her country.

Some did not use textbooks:

I: I tend not to use them [textbooks] because they just go on and on and on and on, it's like I've got the point, move on. I think things like the online resource is a lot better...The accounting websites are better, lecturers are better any day than a book, you know, no offence to all the authors in the world but all the resources aside from the text book, you know question by question papers plus exam papers are absolutely brilliant.

The international students explained that in their home country English was very highly valued and teachers very valued. An observation that emerged tangential to the research question was that both the International and home students in these UK focus groups were highly motivated to learn and work and score well.

SITE 2-Otago, New Zealand

[There were two groups with five and six participants respectively, the first a mixture of Home and International students, the second all Internationals]

The key ideas emerging from the focus groups here were similar but showed some differences.

In the first Otago group, language was seen as a problem in learning for all non home students. One student expressed it as "Not sure what is being asked so don't answer". Some students would use a dictionary after the lecture but because they could not use one in the exam that was a disadvantage. One student described the difference in terminology between the book and the lecture as confusing. Speed was also reported as posing a difficulty as it made it hard to keep up, and older lecturers were preferred to younger because they spoke more slowly.

L (New Guinea) But a problem...you know, taking notes when they speak fast. I think because English is being my third language. But the younger ones, particularly the tutorials...they speak fast and I can't catch up with them, and I don't participate a lot. I know...I could share experiences, but I'm not sure whether what they're asking is what I'm going to answer, so that keep me quiet or reserve...you know, keep to myself. That's for tutorials. And lectures, I think as I said they're quite older the lecturers. So maybe I understand...

Again, as with the UK group, writing was described as easier but talking was hard.

In tutorials the international students preferred just listening and tutorials were described as not very user-friendly. Issues of groups of the same culture staying and sitting together were reported and were not just based on cultural differences but also on age. A mature woman student [above] from New Guinea remarked that age plus being from a different country can compound to make tutorials lonely and of dubious value. Another experienced International raised the question of the purpose or objective of a tutorial. Was it to have a good social time or was it to teach new concepts? He was not interested in attending just for a social time and he questioned the benefit of tutorials over studying the textbook.

All in this focus group agreed with the home student in preferring an approachable lecturer, one who knew their names and with whom they felt comfortable enough to ask questions and tolerated cultural differences. And a passionate lecturer helped you to learn, Z (female international) said, "my favourite was Dr professor? yeah...cause he had a passion".

The use of email was discussed as a learning preference. The students liked the anonymity of the internet but lack of protocol made it sometimes hard to write an email, even though the availability of email contact with the lecturer was found to be helpful for the learning process.

The group had varied views of the role of assessment in learning although the internationals agreed that writing an essay in another language was difficult. In one situation the student asked to be allowed to submit an essay in her own language and had achieved a C- but when allowed to resubmit in her own language a B+ was given.

The role of textbooks was raised by a Persian student who would have preferred more use of textbooks. The same international student described the differing roles of tutorials and lectures in learning as follows:

Definitely you need the discussion...the debate...the thinking...but you can't actually impose that on people. They have to actually do it by themselves...and probably they can do it outside of the lecture as they are studying...you know...going through the material before their exam and so forth. And the lectures could be just a kind of ... kickstart for this to happen, or just promoting it to take place. But in the end of the day thinking is in the brain...it doesn't happen outside of it.

And the use of PowerPoint was criticized in this group in a similar way to the English focus group students.

K (home): So...I think if they...yeah, if they actually give you new information in the lectures, 'cause there's nothing worse than someone who just reads off their lecture slides. And it's sort of saying it's like their...you know, you might as well employ a

robot, or... You know, you could... you could get the cleaner to come in, and... I mean, any person can read off the lecture slides.

The second Otago group was composed entirely of Internationals (Malaysian and Chinese) and they preferred a lecturer who was “really helpful and clear” and also entertaining and humorous. This group did not like lecturers who singled them out and the overall consensus was that the best lecturer was the one who gave you the big picture. Being approachable helped but lecturers varied; some were not friendly and didn’t answer questions. One student said he sometimes did not go to lectures because they were boring and he could understand by himself: “I read by myself and can understand in ten minutes the lecture”. Several students said they learned best by studying by themselves and preferred exercises to sharpen their skills.

Working with others in a group situation was generally not favoured.

S (Malaysian): Ok, for me I learn best by my own I think, being in my room, in a familiar environment where it’s comfy and quiet. I cannot study in groups because I get easily distracted and for me attending tutorials are not that helpful

D (Chinese): Sometimes I feel also despondent doing the group work as well... because um, you cannot expect everyone in the group can contribute equally, some of them are just, do nothing.

Overall for this group, as with others, the tutorial was of dubious value for academic learning.

Ko (Malaysian): But for the tutorial, kind of, in tutorial you need to really communicate like, is it, it’s kind of a different approach for Asian student because we don’t tend to talk that much, like we are more based on exercises and tests and things, so that’s what, helpful like we kind of learn communication with people...

Interviewer: So you feel you’re actually learning a skill that’s not just the academic skill?

Ko: Yeah, yeah, yeah, sort of like social skills...but sometimes that might not be useful...

Again the group thought that PowerPoints were overused and sometimes did not make sense as they cut the notes up but could be good for revising.

They also suggested that the textbook was an effective way of learning and good but expensive. There was some support for Internet substitutes such as the on-line textbook. One student said she liked the Internet for learning and as a teaching method as it was fairer and gave you more time to prepare and you could find out by yourself. However, Blackboard was new to them and could get messy.

The assessments were much easier in New Zealand than their home country. And all said they liked the problem solving assignments. One male student said he hated multi-choice as an assessment “they mess my mind up”, and that exams were of limited learning value as an assessment format.

D (Chinese): I don't really like it, just like writing an essay or group work, I actually quite like when we can have like a commercial situation, problem...I think I can actually learn more from that than actually sitting the exam for three hours just in the room.

SITE 3-Australia

[This was a smaller group of four-a mixture of Home and International students and when we tried to schedule a second meeting it did not result in any other participants]

This small group had lots of interaction and discussion and was a good example of a learning community. There were varying approaches to learning within the group and they preferred exercises and a more problem solving approach to learning.

There were some positives about the usefulness of PowerPoint for learning.

K (Home): Definitely need Power Points. Yeah, because I can add to them and take them home, and you know, study from them...but I don't like where they just rely completely on the PowerPoints. I like them to have the main points and then elaborate, so, 'cause I can read the PowerPoints myself, obviously ... So I don't need them to actually read them in the lecture. Just kind of...um, touch on them and expand. And use examples, and that sort of thing.

They had more respect for teachers higher in their field and agreed, that although the friendliness of the teacher makes you feel comfortable, you do need some distance and it was seen as important that the lecturer maintained their role as expert.

A (Chinese): Um, he's um, an old hand professor. Probably of 60 years old. I thought he would be boring...but actually he's not 'cause he's making jokes all the time...And then he didn't just follow the PowerPoint, and he'd talk about it, but...he'd just forget about it...walk to the front, and actually, like, telling us about actual, not a, a story, but like that, just...telling you something. Trying to interact with students and then also he utilise a whiteboard...and he bought newspapers, sometimes.

K (home): Learn from lecturer I think I have definitely more respect for those that are, are higher in their field and...like real professors, like, um, 'cause I know they know their stuff, kinda thing who have the expertise and knowledge

An interaction about their learning preferences revealed individual variations in learning methods.

V (Hong Kong): I use mind maps and, dot points yes, stick it on the wall and then, as I go through chapters in the text book, I write it out, like the main words, so when I do revision I usually go to those map or dot points ... 'Cause you, when you read you pick up, ah, what's the most important...And you just write out those.

K (home): Yeah, 'cause I know we, at high school they gave us all...these different techniques. But it just, I think it depends on the individual. I like to write notes...And have like my set notes... especially with accounting subjects, and...like I try to do

lots of examples. Um, once I've got that, you know, the foundation notes....just lots of examples and practice before exams and stuff. Just to make sure I know my work....But I do take notes. Yeah. What about you?

A (Chinese): I don't have any notes to do revision, 'cause I don't take notes. I just...Ah, absorb... And then...when prepare for final exam or exams, I just read, ah, that lecture notes...and then do some exercise. That's enough. And maybe sometimes check my homework, previous homework.

Themes Across the Groups

Topics that emerged from the focus groups regarding learning preferences were the following: lecturers' styles, group work, textbooks and language issues. Several common points in relation to preferences stood out from the focus group discussions regardless of country of origin.

Students favoured the lecture as a learning place but only if the lecturer or professor was an expert, maybe funny, told stories, left the script, but was knowledgeable and conveyed the big picture. Most strongly disliked Power Points slides as teaching medium if just read out.

International students commonly mentioned the speed of the lecturer and tutor's talking as affecting learning, and that writing was easier than talking, apart from essay writing which was difficult.

Generally Internationals preferred textbooks but the British students, mentioning the limitation of price, countered that. On-line resources were referred to in a limited way as being sometimes helpful in the learning process.

Many students who were not from the home country and who were Asian in background did not like group work, and home students were critical of group work learning where the groups included internationals. The value of tutorials was mixed and very much less liked by the overseas students than home students. Most International students preferred learning through doing problems and worked examples primarily done individually, but also with the help of a teacher or a tutor.

Results

Survey

The following two charts have taken the top two preferences in answers to the questions on teaching styles and learning preferences, rather than using the means (averages) of responses; as early analysis indicated bi-modality that would be lost by using means.

Q. 10. Which of these methods have you found most valuable for your learning at university?

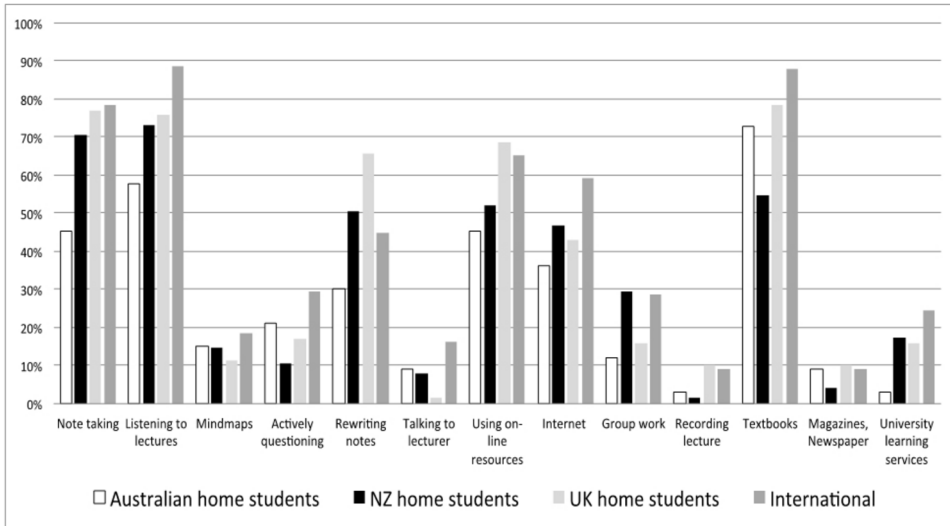


Fig 1a: Percentage of Respondents who Ranked this Learning Preference as Extremely or Very Important

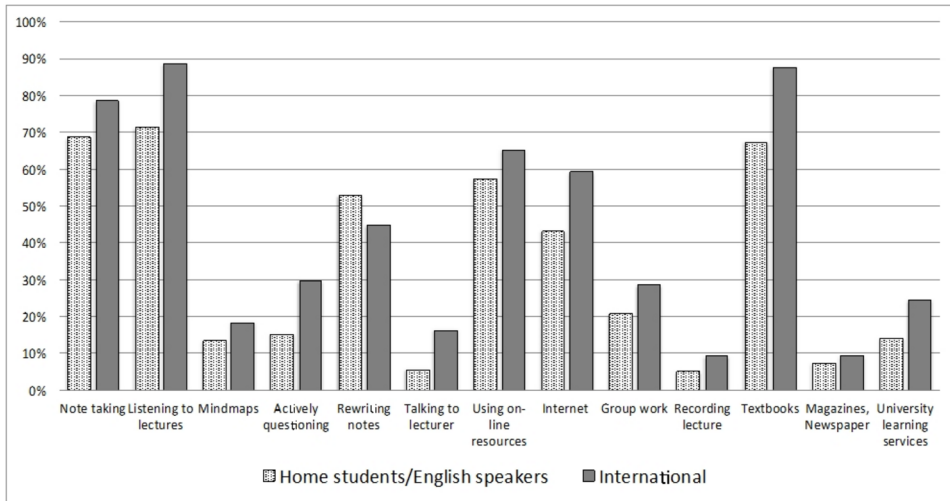


Fig1b: Percentage of Respondents who Ranked this Learning Preference as Extremely or Very Important

The figures show greater differences in the patterns of preferences across the three countries than between the International and Home students. Note taking, listening to lectures and textbooks were rated highest for learning. Using on-line resources was seen as quite valuable also. Recording the lecturer rated least valuable for all.

From eyeballing the graphs (see Appendix C) the responses to this question were in a similar pattern for Home and Internationals as can be seen from the figures. However, there were some surprises. For example, the UK students clearly considered active questioning to be less important than did Australian Home students; and UK Home students preferred writing out lecture notes than other groups. NZ and Internationals indicated more support for group study than Australian and British.

Q. 14. Which of the following would you describe as best teaching practices?

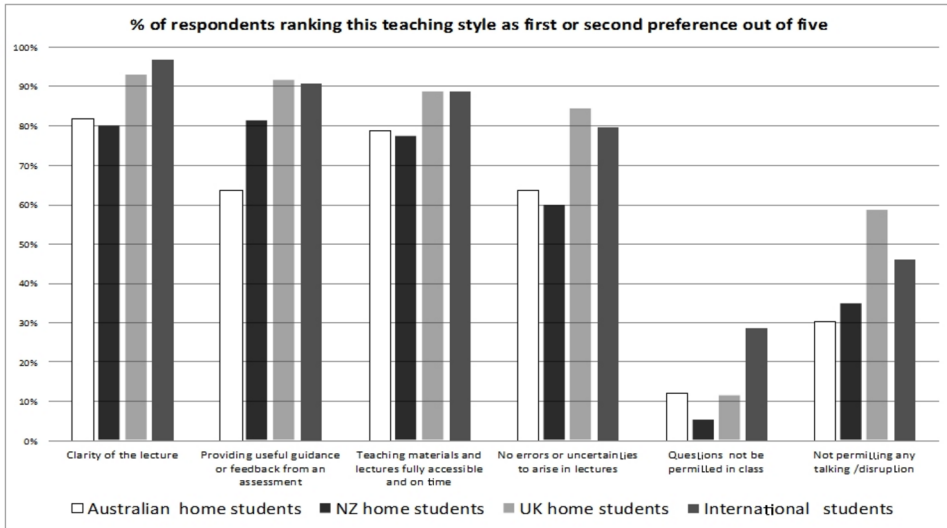


Fig 2a: Percentage of Respondents who Ranked this Teaching Practice as First or Second Preference Out of Five

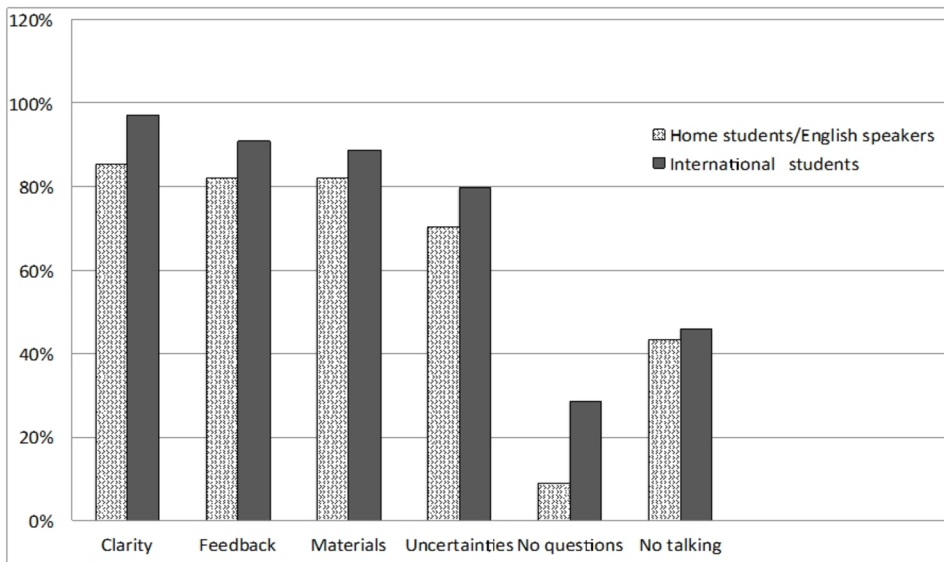


Fig 2b: Percentage of Respondents who Ranked this Teaching Practice as First or Second Preference Out of Five

Most students valued clarity of the lecture, useful guidance from feedback or other assessments, no errors and uncertainties in lectures, and teaching materials to be fully accessible. Very few students placed any importance on whether or not there were questions allowed in lectures in comparison with the four factors noted.

Discussion

According to the literature regarding culture and learning we could have expected International students to prefer different learning methods to home students. However, although the survey results were in some ways tangential to what the discussions expressed, both pointed strongly to lecturers as valuable for learning practices regardless of country or background. This is surprising in the modern era of the Internet and its resources and in light of a recent project on teaching and learning at Harvard arguing for a move away from that the lecturing mode of teaching and learning (Berrett, 2012). The students qualified this with the lecturer being lively and expert and a lecture that was clear. Textbooks also rated highly in the survey which again is surprising with competing alternatives such as material on the Web.

Active questioning was rated only moderately by the survey results, however in the focus groups students frequently pointed to a preference for learning via problems, worked examples, and intellectual engagement. The adaptability of the Internationals towards these perhaps more western pedagogies emerged from the focus discussions.

An anomaly between the survey results and focus group material is the role group work and tutorials play in learning for international students. Internationals indicated more support for group study in the survey, yet were critical of it in the focus group discussions. The strong negative attitude towards group work by the NZ Asian group despite the graphs indicating

otherwise was puzzling and may be somewhat explained by the background profiles of several of the participants which gives insight into the cultural learning experiences of their country of origin and may account for the negatives regarding the use of group work in learning from non-home and particularly Asian students (see Appendix C).

Language issues were not part of the survey but were frequently mentioned by Internationals in relation to learning in focus group discussion especially in relation to lectures, tutorials, reading of materials and assessments. It would be good to follow this up.

The study reveals limitations in using a survey alone. For example, the option “group work” was ambiguous. Some may interpret this as tutorials whereas others as a group project. Hence, from the focus groups we learned that in a future survey we would need both tutorial and group work as preferred options for learning. Zhu and Flaitz (2005) argue that previous research with questionnaires has a problem with the terms and categories possibly being interpreted differently by the respondents. It would be preferable to provide an open-ended option for learning preferences.

Conclusion

In examining the methods students find most valuable for their learning, this paper has shown that the traditional methods of lectures, textbooks and note taking were preferred, that tutorials and group work were less popular, and that social group learning was not necessarily conducive for Asian students. Common preferences were: lecturers who understood and engaged with the students, helpful feedback from a caring other, and the use of textbook and problem-solving exercises. Clarity of the lecture was also highly valued.

Significantly, in comparing perceptions of the teaching practices across different ethnicities, both the bar graphs and the interview analysis show no clear pattern of difference in preferences between home and international students. That seems to contradict the claim that ethnicity “transcend[s] specific situations, including education and educational theories” (Schwarz & Bilsky, 1987, p. 551) in that these data do not uphold the claim that racial or ethnic origins drive distinctive preferences for teaching styles (Ramburuth and McCormick (2001).

This study has been unique in that we have made a real effort to foreground the focus material rather than use it as an adjunct. Taking this approach, in some ways, complicated the conclusions that can be drawn. However, using the focus group discussion material in conjunction with a quantitative survey on the same broad topic pursues the research questions from a number of perspectives thus strengthening the insights gained by comparing International students’ learning preferences with those of Home students. It points to the fact that there is a new generation of International learners who adapt quickly to the home country’s more problem solving and discursive style of learning where the lecturer is approachable, and learning is inquiry-based more than didactic and authoritarian. Learning is a complex and multi-faceted process, and we can conclude that perceptions of best learning generalise across many university contexts and individual students.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Survey Numbers and Response Rates

	Students Invited	Dates	Via	Response Rate
UK	485	Dec 2008– February 2009	Approach with a personal invitation in the lecture, as well as a link on WebCT and an email with the URL	99/485 20%
NZ	700+700	July-Sept 2009	As the survey was held in semester two, an email was sent to the semester one students via an email; semester two students were approached with a personal invitation in the lecture, as well as a link on Blackboard	98/1400 7%
Australia	450	October 2009	Invitation to students in the lecture, on Blackboard and via a personal email. A reminder email was sent in late October.	84/450 18.5%

Table 2: Demographic Data of Respondents

	First Language English		First Language Chinese		Other International		
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Australia	11	22	26	8	8	5	80
New Zealand	53	22	3	2	11	5	96
United Kingdom	40	30	8	3	8	11	100
Total	104	74	37	13	27	21	276
This Table includes students whose first language was English but were not necessarily Home students							
It does not include the 6 respondents-probably Exchange students at the UK University—who stated they were not from any of the three Universities, nor one who did not wish to disclose their gender							
Not all these respondents answered the two questions analysed in this report							

Appendix B

Which of these methods have you found most valuable for your learning at university?
(move each item into one of the right-hand boxes)

<p>Items</p> <p>Note taking</p> <p>Listening to lectures</p> <p>Mindmaps</p> <p>Actively questioning</p> <p>Rewriting notes out</p> <p>Talking with lecturer</p> <p>Using on-line resources provided by the University</p> <p>Internet - such as Google , Wikipedia searches or similar</p> <p>Group revision or assignment preparation with other students</p> <p>Recording the lecture</p> <p>Textbooks</p> <p>Magazine Articles or the Newspaper</p> <p>Using University support or learning services</p> <p>Other</p> <input style="width: 100px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">used frequently</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">only used occasionally</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">not at all</div>
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Question 10

Which of the following would you describe as best teaching practices?

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Neither Important nor Unimportant	Very Unimportant	Not at all Important
Providing useful guidance or feedback from an assessment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teaching materials and lectures fully accessible and on time	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
No errors or uncertainties to arise in lectures or other teaching materials	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Questions should not be permitted in class, but dealt with by emails or similar	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Not permitting any talking or disruption in class	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Clarity of the lecture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Question 14

Appendix C: Background Contexts

Liu is a Chinese girl currently studying in England. Her mother worked in policy and father was a businessman. In China the teacher was the main and only one to talk, lessons were 40–45 minutes and her teachers were extremely available and devoted. There were maybe fifty children in one class. She said that many Chinese go to England to study as they think British education is best because it is traditional (as opposed to American). She did the INTO course first year and now was in the first year of Accounting at University in England. Here Liu has found writing easier than speaking as she studied this from the age of ten years in China and lots of grammar was taught. She found the “buddy system” of meeting up with a home student once per week socially very helpful. When she was younger she preferred the Chinese way of learning but she now prefers the independent style of English education

Ang is also from China and studying in Australia. His mother, when young, had wanted to do art but was forced to do a math degree by her father. So because of mother’s experience he was not forced in any particular way. When studying for a degree in English in his third year, he went to Canada to study as an exchange he realised there how different the education style of teaching was and how that the China style teaching was teaching through “cooking by the book—”they don’t think just practice”. For example in the Chinese University classroom there were forty people in a classroom and it was taught by powerpoints. Through this experience of being exposed to learning in a new country he realised he did not flourish in the Chinese system and that there was an alternative and hence he sought out international study. So now quite the contrary to his home country he loves the creative independent style of learning and himself takes no notes, likes to learn through examples and practices exercises and past papers. He doesn’t like group work preferring his own way rather than relying on others. He found essay writing the most difficult initially but when he took a class of third year politics and the assessment were essays he very much enjoyed this.

Ang describes himself as an aesthiet. He is aware of some cultural beliefs. For example regarding the teacher “Yeah. Um, ah one thing I wanna mention, ‘cause in China, um teachers more like, there’s, there’s a saying that a strict teacher, a strict teacher can, can a make a more promising student”. He does not believe there should be any adjustments for the fact that he is a doing his course in a second language as an international student and states that “though English is my second language. We had better accept it because this is the way the world goes. We chose to come here”

X and Y in the NZ group spoke of the authority of teachers in their home countries, China and Malaysia. At home they respected their elders, for example first names were never used for teachers but Sir as respect the teacher was like a second parent. In China students call their teachers Sir/Miss and in Malaysia they address the teacher as TEACHER. Schools were traditionally strict, disciplined, kept long hours and the students were drilled intensively.

Ashan, a Malaysian student studying in NZ, described being brought up in Malaysia as very disciplined. “We respect our elders because it’s one of the most important things in our culture. So the teacher is regarded as someone, as your second parents at school. So we have to like, we respect them the same to their advices and things.” However in China the teacher tells you what to do and you do the work. You get good marks for doing what the teacher said—you might not pass if you do it yourself.

X explained that since being in NZ their learning approach has changed “that’s one ability to learn things, do the research, you cannot expect teachers to tell you everything and the textbook to tell you everything. You need to find out by yourself.”

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