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Enhancing intercultural participation in group work towards a working model

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Project Reference Number:	171
Title:	Enhancing intercultural participation in group work – towards a working model
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Description:	<p>Aims of project</p> <p>The study reported here aims to contribute to the existing body of research by observing three instances of multicultural group work within an academic setting and analysing interactions in terms of quantitative and qualitative aspects. Building on previous research findings – particularly those on the importance of pedagogic design - we sought to create a group work task which applied best practice recommendations from existing literature, and tested them in a controlled setting.</p> <p>Background to project (or context)</p> <p>Graduates are increasingly expected to work in multi-cultural contexts, therefore skills in intercultural interaction are crucial. The concept of internationalisation in higher education (HE) has shifted away from a narrow focus on student mobility and international recruitment, towards a wider view emphasising the importance of an international perspective as a key part of higher learning. Potential benefits of an internationalised HE sector include enhanced employability as well as a richer academic and socio-cultural experience for all students. However, in practice, internationalisation has proved problematic in the UK context and elsewhere. Previous research has raised questions about the practicalities of internationalising the HE experience; most notably, those related to effective multicultural mixing within academic settings. The extant literature indicates that overseas students anticipate positive inter-cultural interaction but are often disappointed as some home students are unwilling to work in inter-cultural groups without explicit encouragement. It is well-documented that spontaneous mixing between home and international students is rare, owing to reservations about perceived language barriers, fear of causing offence, and belief that inter-cultural mixing may be detrimental to academic performance especially in group work. One way in which students can be encouraged to mix is through carefully designed teaching and learning activities which have inter-cultural interaction as a specific goal; however, this is rarely considered in curriculum</p>

planning. For those tutors who do make targeted efforts, it is possible to steer students towards fruitful discussion and such active management of student encounters can greatly enable the development of intercultural adaptability.

Methods used

The researchers used a case study approach, with mixed methods, in order to explore multi-cultural group-work, and to capture observed experiences as well as the perceptions of different student groups. The methods adopted for the study included observation of a group-work task (created by the research team and based on best practice recommendations from existing literature), and individual questionnaires completed by participating students. The project conformed to the ethical principles and procedures of the university. A purposive sampling approach was taken in order to maximize the opportunity to learn from a wide range of respondents. The research sample was selected from the university's Business School, on account of the greater mix of international students in this faculty. Students from the business school were invited to volunteer to participate in the project and 15 were recruited in total. A total of three group-work sessions were organised, of which two groups were mixed consisting of both UK and overseas students. The third group was homogenous with only overseas students. All sessions were video and audio recorded to aid analysis.

At the start of the project, the research team devised a group work task based on a literature review of the principles for effective multicultural group-work. The group work task was designed to ensure that all participants would approach it from the same level of knowledge. Participants were required to present a poster to the audience at the end of the exercise. All participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire about their experiences during the task, and their perceptions of their role. In addition, the three group work sessions were transcribed and analysed. Perceptions of participants towards the group work exercise were collected through the questionnaire responses and these were also analysed by gender and domicile. Participation by each member within the group task was measured by studying the number of interactions as well as the amount of time spent speaking by each group member. Variations between individuals and between groups were noted. Suggestions put forth by each group member were recorded and categorised into 'accepted', 'rejected' and 'ignored'. These measurements were used to provide a measure of the impact that each group member had on the group as a whole.

Results

	The findings suggest that in mixed groups, the UK students (particularly males) dominated discussions, with limited input from overseas students. In a more homogenous group, consisting solely of international students, the interactions were much more equal. However, an analysis of influence on group decisions (in terms of proportion of suggestions accepted by the group), suggested that the influence of mal home students was lower than their participation would imply. There is also some evidence that the levels of conflict in mixed groups were lower than in the more homogenous group.
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