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March 23, 2019

# NARROWING THE ATTAINMENT GAP BETWEEN DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: USE OF A SIMULATION AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN MIXED-COHORT STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT TEACHING.

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## ABSTRACT

*In this article we present an Action Research project which attempted to address the significant performance gap between domestic and international students on an undergraduate Business Management course at a UK university business school. In designing a final year strategy module around a business simulation, we provided international students with opportunities for active engagement through collaborative tasks, which we hoped would lead to enhanced performance and deeper engagement with teamwork, leadership and negotiation skills when studying in mixed-nationality cohorts.*

## INTRODUCTION

Recent figures from Universities UK International (2017) indicate that the UK receives almost half a million international students each year, with about 30% of these doing some form of Business and Administrative Studies. China is by far the largest country of origin, followed by Malaysia, USA, India and Nigeria. Within the Business Management subjects, international students make up about 27% of the total at undergraduate level and 63% on postgraduate taught courses. As many of the international students are on 'top-up' courses, the proportion of international students in a final year BM programme can be considerably higher.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CHALLENGES

Despite this successful recruiting by UK universities, many international students face daunting cultural and linguistic adaptation challenges in their host institutions – and achieve lower grades than their 'domestic student' counterparts. It is therefore incumbent on these institutions to enhance their understanding of students' needs, in order to provide high quality educational experiences for both domestic and international students (Hyland et al., 2008). Regarding students of East Asian origin studying in Western universities in particular, a number of scholars refer to an academic cultural gap due to their previous exposure to Confucian or traditional didactic teaching methods (e.g. Bache and Hayton, 2012; Rajaram and Collins, 2013). Typical of this view is Aoki's comment: "In contrast to Western education in which students are encouraged to engage in debate, Confucian education has emphasized rote learning and memorization" (Aoki, 2008: 35). However, this static, determinist view of students' academic culture has been heavily criticised. Ryan and Louie are particularly critical of these reductive, often dichotomous perspectives since

*"[They] construct Asian or CHC [Confucian Heritage Culture] students as having outlooks that are opposites of Western academic values, and many construct a 'deficit' view of them as learners, viewing them in terms of the characteristics that they lack, rather than those that they bring to their new learning environments" (Ryan and Louie, 2007:406)*

Several authors have investigated and recommended best practices for effective targeting of support to those CHC students (e.g. Arkoudis et al., 2013; Sloan and Porter, 2008). In contrast, other authors suggest that domestic students and their teachers are under-prepared for the challenges of working successfully in mixed-nationality classrooms (Case and Selvester, 2000; Higgins and Li, 2009).

In an effort to bridge this gap, many scholars advocate the use of constructivist or Active Learning [AL] pedagogic approaches that require students to perform collaborative tasks, leading to more extensive interaction between domestic and international students, and higher levels of engagement with the academic content of their courses. (Devlin and Peacock, 2009; Volet and Ang, 2012).

In our previous research, students' perspectives on their experience of learning with a strategic management simulation have been reported (Loon et al., 2015; Evans & Kerridge, 2015). This was supplemented by qualitative research (Simpson, 2015) into the specific perspectives of the largest sub-cohort of international students – those from the People's Republic of China [PRC] – on a range of courses using active learning pedagogies, which found that language, relationships with non-Chinese students and metacognitive skills related to collaborative teamwork presented significant challenges for these students. In this paper we consider how experience of a simulation, and the facilitated experiential learning associated with it, may be effective in narrowing the

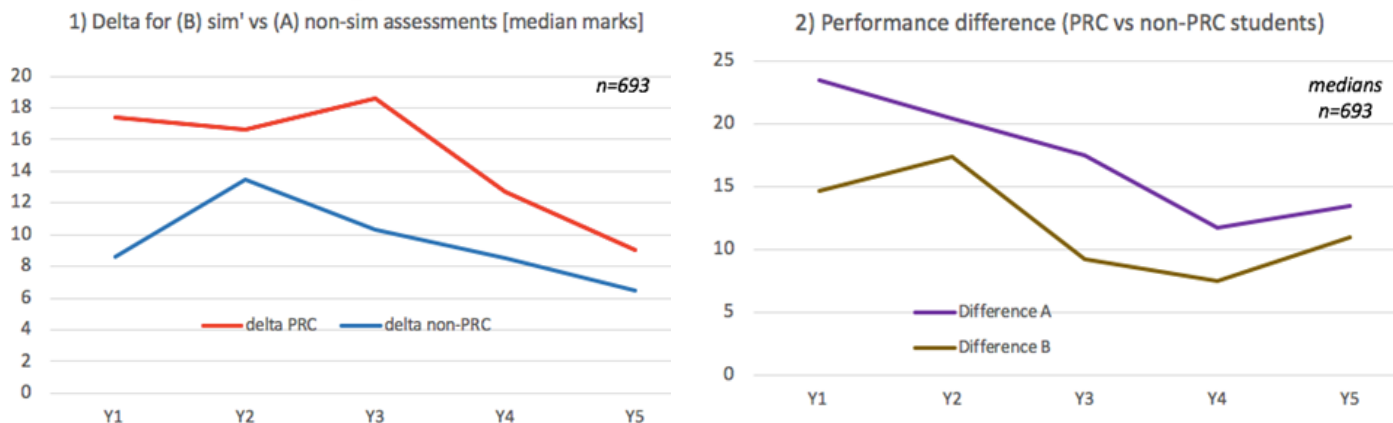
performance gap between Chinese (PRC) and other students on a final year undergraduate Business Management module (Strategic Management).

The module was established with its two 12-week teaching semesters employing different delivery and assessment regimes:

- A. Semester 1 – ‘traditional’ delivery: weekly lectures and weekly seminars (with learning sets); individual portfolio assessments (50% weighted);
- B. Semester 2 – blended learning approach: weekly lecture or simulation sessions, and weekly group-working seminars, focussed on simulation progress; assessment of groupwork reports and reflections, based around the simulation (50% weighted, including a peer review element).

In the 2nd semester studies, students worked as ‘management teams’ (usually four or five members) of a virtual company, analysing qualitative and quantitative information provided in the proprietary simulation, negotiating and determining strategic priorities, and taking collective decisions on a series of action options. KPIs were both financial and non-financial, with a composite performance figure obtained after each week’s iteration.

Grade statistics collected over a five-year period (approx. 700 participants; 30% from PRC) allowed us to compare marks of the same students on the traditional (lecture/seminar) elements and on the active learning elements (based around the business simulation) of a year-long strategy module.



## FINDINGS

This investigation produced three important findings:

1. There is a significant difference between the average performance of PRC and non-PRC students on both the traditional and the simulation elements of the module.
2. The AL/simulation elements seem to lift the grades of all students (Figure 1) and therefore do not appear to present a greater challenge to PRC than to non-PRC students.
3. The simulation appears to lift the average grades of PRC students more effectively than those of non-PRC students, i.e. contributes to reducing the performance differential between Chinese students and domestic students (Figure 2).

These findings support the conclusion that, contrary to the views of scholars who believe that constructionist pedagogies are more challenging to students from Confucian Heritage Cultures, constructionist approaches appear to effectively narrow the performance gap between PRC and non-PRC students.

We also report on exit interviews with PRC students, which support our conclusion that the simulation and associated experiential learning particularly enhanced their understanding of the theoretical elements of the module, increased their interaction with domestic students and led to a greater mastery of teamwork, leadership and negotiation skills.

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