

Expectations of Learning: A New Zealand Perspective

by

Jacqueline Birt

*School of Business and Information Management
Australian National University, Australia*

and

Carol Sherry

*School of Accountancy, Law and Finance
UNITEC*

and

Anthony Ling

*School of Accountancy, Law and Finance
UNITEC*

and

Greg Fisher

*School of Business and Government
University of Canberra*

and

Janet Lee

*School of Business and Information Management
Australian National University*

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Abstract

This study examines differences in the expectations of New Zealand international and domestic students, studying business at undergraduate level at a New Zealand tertiary provider. It replicates earlier research undertaken by Fisher, Lee and Birt (2002) examining international students in an Australian setting. Similarities and differences in expectations of the focus on theory or practice, deadline flexibility, study diligence and respect for the university teacher are discussed in terms of power distance and long-term orientation cultural dimensions. Whilst our results provide further support for the hypotheses concerning deadline flexibility and study diligence we find no support for hypotheses concerning respect for the university teacher.

Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed phenomenal growth in the number of international students studying in overseas countries. Approximately 1,800,000 students currently study in overseas locations and this is predicted to increase four-fold to 7,200,000 by 2025 and more than two-thirds of the international students will derive from Asia (Bohm, Meares, Pearce, 2002). There are at least 82,000 international students studying in New Zealand institutions; including secondary schools, universities, polytechnics, private providers and English language colleges. Approximately 31,000 of these students are from China, 15,000 are from South Korea and 13,000 are from Japan (Berno and Ward, 2002).

This significant growth in the number of international students has been most advantageous to the New Zealand economy, educational providers and society. In 2002 the revenue from international students contributed \$1.14 billion to the New Zealand economy (Taurima, 2003). The current vision for New Zealand's international student population is to provide a sector delivering sustainable, high quality international education and support services, producing a range of economic, educational and cultural benefits for New Zealand (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2002). Research has found that the integration of international students into the classroom also provides benefits for domestic students. The conscientious work habits of international students can provide positive examples for domestic students and also provide assistance in their foreign language development (Ward, 2001).

However, previous research has also reported on the negative aspects of increasing international student numbers. Problems such as the language difficulty of the international students, lack of support for the international student, difficulty in starting friendships and the difference in expectations of learning between the international students and domestic students are commonplace amongst international students (Ward, 2001). The difference in expectations between international and domestic students, such as expectations regarding flexibility in meeting deadlines, can greatly impact on the learning experiences in the classroom. Previous studies have found that many educators are not aware of the learning differences and do not incorporate changes with respect to their classroom delivery of material (Ward, 2001). This in turn can lead to student withdrawal from institutions and poor student experiences (Croninger, 1991; Good, 1993), which can directly affect the ability of universities to generate income from the export of education to international students, and consequently the ability for universities to meet their other strategic goals. Failure to meet student expectations can also have a direct impact on student-teacher relationships (Kolb, Oswald and Rubin, 1995; Feldman and Theiss, 1982) and affect promotion and tenure prospects of individual academics.

Even though past research has highlighted various negative aspects associated with increases in international students, research to date demonstrates that educators have made few changes to either the process or content of classroom activities (Ward, 2001; Li, Baker and Marshall, 2000). Shank, Walker and Hayes (1996) find that university teachers lack a clear understanding of cultural-based differences in learning styles and are therefore not equipped to meet student needs. This lack of understanding is attributed to the reliance on anecdotal or stereotypical descriptions (Ramburuth, 2001) or the possession of differing expectations by students and

teachers of the roles of each other (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997). Educators frequently adopt negative and stereotypic views of international students and misunderstand students who are not from the dominant cultural group (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991).

Previous studies researching international students studying in New Zealand have focused on areas including the interactions between international and domestic students, the impact on institutions, and the community and on domestic students (Ward, 2001). Only a modest amount of research has been undertaken focusing on the expectations of international students and how they impact on the classroom. The potential of international students to change both the content and the process of education has been investigated and it has been suggested that there are considerable benefits in bringing an international perspective to the classroom (Ward, 2001).

There have been a number of international studies that have explored issues relating to cultural differences in student expectations. Niehoff et al. (2001) explored cultural differences in classroom experiences of students from the United States and Taiwan. Fisher, Lee and Birt (2002) replicated and extended the Niehoff et al. (2001) study and explored four issues related to student expectations: the focus on theory or practice; deadline flexibility; study diligence; and respect for the university teacher. This study will explore expectations of international students studying in New Zealand and will focus on the same four issues as investigated in the Fisher et al (2002) study. As 82 percent of international students studying in New Zealand hail from Asia (Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2002), and most of the Asian countries are physically distant from New Zealand it is likely that there will be significant cultural issues such as power distance and long-term time orientation that will play an important role in determining whether student expectations are met.

Hypothesis Development

Cultural Differences Regarding Theoretical Focus in the Classroom

Longer-term time orientation identifies with cultures which share the belief that the older people should have more authority and younger people should work hard in life and persevere with learning to acquire new skills. "*Longer-term orientation stands for the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular perseverance and thrift*" (Hofstede, 2001). Characteristics of longer-term orientation include: relationships ordered by status; relationships and market position important and emphasis on persistence. Asian countries are identified as having longer-term time orientation compared to countries such as New Zealand, the US and Australia which have been identified as having shorter-term time orientation (Hofstede, 1980). This longer-term time orientation is also characterised by higher level, meaning-based and deep learning strategies (Chan and Drover, 1997).

Higher level, meaning-based and deep learning strategies are evident in courses which have a large theoretical component. These types of strategies are more concerned with meaning and understanding and using an investigative and analytical approach to learning. Fisher et. al (2002) supports the concept that Asian students are more likely to expect a focus on theory than Australian students and attributed this to the longer-term time orientation of Asian students. This leads to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a: International¹ students, compared with New Zealand students, will be more accepting of a focus on theoretical, research-based information in the classroom.

Previous literature has found conflicting results regarding student's preference for accepting a practical business focus. Niehoff et al (2001) find that US students are more accepting of a practical business focus than Taiwanese students. Ward (2001) comments that Sri Lankan students prefer a book providing knowledge rather than the practical aspects. Ward also notes that "*international students have difficulty in understanding work experiences and cultural knowledge in New Zealand and cases requiring business experience. They feel that they are disadvantaged because they do not have business experience*". Whereas, Fisher et. al (2002) finds no difference between International and Australian students as both groups demonstrate a particularly high expectation of teachers to focus on teaching materials applicable in the business world.

Following Niehoff (2001) and Ward (2001) we propose that:

Hypothesis 1b: There will be a significant difference between International and New Zealand students with the focus on business applications regarding the course material in the classroom.

Cultural Differences in Deadline Flexibility

There is a large body of literature highlighting cross-cultural differences between East Asian and Western business people regarding negotiation style and contractual understanding. Chen (2000) notes "*For the Chinese, in particular, contracts are expected to change....the contract merely marks the first stage in business dealings, not the final agreement*". Schuster and Copeland (1999) similarly note that a significant amount of time is required for establishing business relationships in Middle Eastern, Asian and Latin American cultures whereas in North American or Central European cultures spending several minutes is sufficient to establishing rapport.

In essence, an assignment deadline is a contractual agreement between the university teacher and the university student. As there are cultural-based differences in expectations of business contracts, and the negotiating process in a business setting, we should expect the same difference to be evident in the university education context (Fisher et. al, 2002). As such, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: International students will expect more flexibility in deadlines for assignments than New Zealand students.

¹ We note that our discussion does focus on the cultural differences between Asian and Australian, New Zealand and American students however we have used "International" students in our proposed hypothesis. This is because the international students surveyed in this study comprise 81 percent from a Chinese background, 9percent from other South-East Asian backgrounds and 5 percent from an Indian background. Thus, a large majority of our International students surveyed (95 percent) are from Asian backgrounds.

Cultural Differences in Study Diligence

A body of literature suggests that Asian students have greater levels of study diligence than their Western counterparts. An empirical study by Goyette and Xie (1999) finds that all Asian groups have higher educational expectations than domestic students. For instance, 58.3 percent of domestic students expected to graduate from college, while all Asian groups reported higher percentages. They also found that Asian parents tend to have higher educational achievement than domestic students as 28 percent of domestic students' parents had graduated from college, compared with 26.9 percent of Southeast Asian fathers, 38.4 percent of Chinese, and 64 percent of South Asian fathers.

Asian students' style of learning is characterised by repetitive learning, internalising deep meaning and reflects study diligence. (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997; Chan and Drover, 1997; Ward, 2001). Many aspects of Phillips (1990) stereotypical description of Asian learning styles, including *students work hard to learn* and *students are inclined to seek clarification*, also reflect study diligence. This leads to our third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: *International students will demonstrate a greater study diligence than New Zealand students.*

Cultural Differences in Respect for the Teacher

East-Asian cultures differ from New Zealand culture on the Hofstede's (1980) Power distance dimension. Power distance refers to the degree to which unequal power distribution in organizations and society is accepted. *"In societies with large power distance, people tend to accept a high level of hierarchical structure and centralization in organization. However, in societies with small power distance, people tend to oppose power inequality."* (Hofstede, 1980). New Zealand has been identified as having smaller power distance than the cultures in Asian countries. New Zealand ranks as one of the lower countries with Austria, Denmark and Ireland (Hofstede, 1980). Therefore, New Zealand appears to be a country where power inequality is opposed compared with Asian countries where power inequality is supported.

Asian cultures traditionally are taught to respect all people in authority such as teachers who are respected as experienced and educated people who provide answers to both academic queries and personal problems (House and Pinyuchon, 1998. Mathews, 2001 and Lee and Manning, 2001). Respect for teachers concurs with the large power distance dimension. Cortazzi and Jin (1997) similarly found that Chinese students studying in Britain expected their teacher to be *"an authority or expert, a parent, a person who gave answers and clear guidance"*. Li, Baker and Marshall (2000) concur with these findings and note that Asian students prefer it when the teacher *"prepares their lessons well, logically structures them and delivers skilfully"*. Whereas, the domestic students surveyed by Cortazzi and Jin (1997) expect their teacher to be *"a facilitator, organiser and friendly critic"*. These findings are consistent with the expectation that Asian students would place greater importance on respect for university teachers than their New Zealand counterparts. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: *International Students will have greater respect for university teachers than will New Zealand students.*

Method

Sample and procedures

For our study, we employ the survey research method to gauge the expectations of first year accounting students enrolled in a Bachelor of Business degree in a Business Faculty at a New Zealand tertiary provider. The total number of usable completed questionnaires is 180 which comprise 80 New Zealand students and 100 international Students. The majority of the students are female (73 percent) and only 2 percent of the students are under 19 years of age. 79 percent of students are in the 20-29 age bracket and 20 percent are over 30 years of age. We asked our international students to describe their country of nationality/citizenship and found that 81 percent of the international students are Chinese nationals, 9 percent are other South-East Asian, 5 percent are Indian and 5 percent are European.²

Survey and Measures

The survey includes a series of statements on teacher obligations and student obligations. Students are asked to rate each of these items on a seven-point Likert scale. These statements and rating system are a replication of those used in Fisher et.al (2002) and an extension of those used in Niehoff (2001). In addition, students are asked to indicate if they are a New Zealand or international student, their nationality and their ethnicity.

For measuring teacher obligations, we investigate three separate variables. The first variable contains one single item “teach theoretical research-based information”. The second variable “teaching application” contains three items *teaching materials used in the business world, applying textbook topics to business world* and *tests on solving business problems*. The third variable contains one single item *assignment deadline flexibility*.

Two variables are examined in relation to student obligations. The first variable, “diligent study habits” contains nine items: *reading all assigned readings; studying each day; arriving early for class; taking notes in class, arriving fully prepared; undertaking outside reading; turning in assignments on time, completing all assignments before coming to class* and *taking responsibility for getting materials covered on the days absent*. The second variable, “respect for teacher” contains four items: *refraining from talking to other students during class; giving notice if late for class; paying strict attention at all times during class* and *refraining from reading other material or working on other things in class*.

² We also included a question on ethnicity and found that 53percent of the entire group were from a Chinese background, 9percent were from an Indian background, 20percent were from a European background, 10percent were from a Pacific Islander background and 8percent were NZ Pakeha.

Data Analysis

Hypothesis 1a: This hypothesis proposes that international students will be more accepting of a focus on theoretical, research-based information in the classroom. As shown in Table 1 we find a significant difference at the .01 level between the two groups of students regarding their preference for teachers to *teach theoretical, research-based information*. International students indicate a stronger preference for teaching of theory than New Zealand students (mean = 4.95 and 3.76 for international and New Zealand students respectively). The result is consistent with the results found in Fisher et.al (2002). It also supports the argument regarding the long-term orientation aspect of culture experienced by certain Asian countries, which might have an impact on the acceptance of an “intrinsically driven process” of learning (Niehoff et al, 2001).

Hypothesis 1b: We hypothesise that there will be a significant difference between International and New Zealand students with the focus on business applications regarding the course material in the classroom. As shown in Table 1, contrary to the Australian results, there is a significant difference found between the two groups of students concerning the variable *applying textbook topics to the business world*. Our results indicate that more international students prefer the application of textbook topics than New Zealand students (international mean = 5.98, New Zealand mean = 5.66). This result is consistent with the comments in Ward (2001) that international students prefer the use of textbook cases compared to practical cases. However for all other variables our results are consistent with the Fisher et. al (2002) study. Both international and New Zealand students demonstrate a particularly high expectation of teachers to focus on *teaching materials used in the business world* (mean = 6.45 and 6.4 for international students and New Zealand students respectively). Both groups of students also show a strong preference for having *tests on student's abilities to solve business problems* (international students' mean 5.9 and New Zealand students' 5.99).

Hypothesis 2: This hypothesis tests student expectations on flexibility regarding assignment deadlines.

We hypothesize that international students will expect more flexibility in assignment deadlines due to the flexibility evident in business practices which contrasts with the quick focus and “getting down to business approach” favoured by the western style of management. Table 1 shows that this hypothesis is strongly supported at the 0.01 level and significant differences between the two groups were found (international mean = 4.82 and New Zealand = 3.89). The result also concurs with the results of the Fisher et.al (2002) study.

Table 1: Cultural Differences Regarding Teacher Obligation – Teach Theory, Teaching Application and Assignment Deadline Flexibility

	International Students (n=100)		Local Students (n=80)		F	I - L
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Teacher obligation						
<i>Teach theory</i>	4.95	1.53	3.76	1.62	25.24**	1.19
<i>Teach application</i>						
Teach materials used in business world	6.45	.85	6.4	1.03	0.15	0.05
Apply textbook topics to business world	5.98	.90	5.66	1.14	4.39*	0.32
Tests on solving business problems	5.9	.96	5.99	1.03	0.35	-0.09
<i>Assignment deadline flexibility</i>	4.82	1.66	3.89	1.97	11.72**	0.93

*p<.05 **p<.01

Hypothesis 3: This hypothesis relates to students' attitudes towards diligent study habits. Table 2 shows that significant differences between the two groups are found in two aspects: *studying each day* and *completing assignments for class*. International students showed stronger support for these aspects than New Zealand students. A significant difference is found in *turning in the assignment on time* but in the opposite direction to the other two aspects. New Zealand students demonstrate stronger support for turning in assignments on time compared to international students. There is no significant difference between the two groups with the variables; *reading all assigned readings*, *arriving early for class* and *taking notes in class*. The results further highlight the suggestion that the international students prefer flexibility regarding submission deadline and are less concerned about its compliance. These results contrast with the Fisher et.al. (2002) study where significant differences were found between students for *arriving early for class*, *taking notes in class* and *outside reading*.

Table 2: Cultural Differences Regarding Student Obligation - Study Diligence

	International Students (n=100)		Local Students (n=80)		F	I - L
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
<i>Student obligation</i>						
<i>Study diligence</i>						
Read all assigned readings	5.34	1.14	5.29	1.37	0.08	0.05
Study each day	5.05	1.31	4.53	1.58	5.95*	0.52
Arrive early for class	5.58	1.01	5.75	1.14	1.08	-0.17
Take notes in class	5.3	1.40	5.2	1.51	0.21	0.1
Come full prepared	5.41	1.03	5.41	1.01	0.00	0
Outside reading	4.96	1.24	4.75	1.46	1.09	0.21
Turn in assignment on time	6.03	.95	6.45	.90	9.14**	-0.42
Complete assignments for class	5.29	1.14	4.89	1.37	4.63*	0.4
Cover materials if absent	5.67	1.08	5.74	1.26	0.16	-0.07

*p<.05 **p<.01

Hypothesis 4: This hypothesis proposes that international students have greater *respect for their teacher* compared to domestic students. Table 3 shows the hypothesis is not supported as no significant differences are found between the two groups of students relating to the four measures of student's respect for the teacher. These results differ significantly from the Australian results where all categories of respect for teacher produced significant differences between Australian and New Zealand students.

Table 3: Cultural differences regarding student obligation - respect for teacher

	International Students (n=100)		Local Students (n=80)		F	I - L
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Student obligation						
Respect for teacher						
Not talking during class (R)	4.85	1.59	5.04	1.80	0.55	-0.19
Give notice if late (R)	4.97	1.40	4.63	1.80	2.09	0.34
Pay attention during class (R)	5.47	1.24	5.45	1.32	0.01	0.02
Not doing other things during class (R)	5.67	1.23	5.64	1.47	0.03	0.03

*p<.05 **p<.01

Discussion

The traditional arguments on the effect of power distance and long-term orientation cultural dimensions on student expectation towards teacher and student obligations are only partially supported. Our results only partially match the Australian results found in the Fisher et.al. (2002) study. The first hypothesis relating to international students being more accepting of a *focus on theoretical, research-based information* is consistent with the Fisher et.al. (2002) study. One of the variables in our second hypothesis relating to *applying textbook cases* is strongly supported and this contrasts with the Fisher et.al. (2002) study. Our results do however concur with the study by Cortazzi and Jin (1997) which found that Chinese students expect to learn practical skills regarding the use of business applications in their undergraduate studies.

There is a significant difference found in the question regarding *flexibility in assignment deadlines*. International students do expect to be allowed more flexibility in submitting assignments. Asians spend more time than Westerners on establishing business relationships and develop the contractual agreement over several meetings. The amount of time spent and level of specificity involved varies between the different groups (Schuster and Copeland, 1999). This result is also supported by the significant differences found between international students and New Zealand students regarding the variable *turning in the assignment on time*. International students place less value on this variable than New Zealand students. This can also be explained by the complexity of language comprehension problems and the difficulty experienced by international students in preparing for written assignments. Asian students find learning the concepts and the language simultaneously difficult (Beaven, Calderisi and Tantral, 1998).

There are significant differences found in three areas relating to *diligent study habits*. This is consistent with House and Pinyuchon (1998) who note that “...educational achievements are highly valued by South East Asians. Parents expect children to

bring pride and honour to their families by attaining a high level of success academically....scholastic achievement is the highest tribute to parents” The international students place more value on two of the variables: *studying each day* and *completing assignments for class* than the New Zealand students. However one of the significant differences is in the opposite direction. The variable *turning in assignments on time* is significantly more highly valued by New Zealand students than international students.

We hypothesize that international students will have a greater respect for their teachers and there are no significant differences in all categories. Our findings contrast with previous studies (e.g. Fisher et.al. 2002; Cortazzi and Jun 1997; Lee and Manning, 2001; Mathews, 2001). However, recent studies on student expectations in New Zealand may shed some light on this result. Ward (2001) notes that international students in New Zealand feel that New Zealand teachers do not understand the differences in their expectations and their language difficulties and that international students feel that the teachers do not make an effort with making changes to the curriculum or teaching method to help ease these differences. Sherry et al (2004) also note that international students would like staff to be more concerned with their educational process and focus more on language and study skills.

Conclusion

International student numbers worldwide have been dramatically increasing in the last decade. New Zealand has also experienced phenomenal growth and this is expected to continue in the next decade. The influx of international students has many benefits for New Zealand including financial benefits to the economy and also benefits to host institutions, domestic students and New Zealand society in general. However, there are issues with increased growth in international student numbers concerned with assimilating international students in the classroom with domestic students, and providing appropriate teaching material to the students that can maximize their learning potential.

To date, there has been a lack of empirical research investigating New Zealand international students and their expectations of teaching and learning. This study focuses on a specific group of students expectations from a New Zealand tertiary provider, and the results of this study are compared to results from a similar study conducted in Australia. Our results indicate several important differences between New Zealand international students and Australian international students.

In relation to student expectation of course content, our research indicates that international students have a greater expectation of theoretical content. Our research also indicates that international students place a greater emphasis on diligent study habits than their New Zealand counterparts do but they are more likely to expect flexibility in deadlines. Finally, our study shows that there is no significant difference between international students and New Zealand students regarding respect for the teacher. This finding contrasts sharply with the Australian study where it was found that international students place a greater emphasis on respect for the teacher. All of our findings have implications for teaching and learning practices within New Zealand.

This research highlights a need for further research examining teaching practices and methods employed by New Zealand educators. This study suggests that teachers need to acknowledge that international students prefer teaching methods incorporating the textbook. It is also important to note that whilst in previous studies (Fisher et.al. 2002: Niehoff et.al. 2001) hypotheses concerning respect for teacher have been strongly supported this is not the case with the results in this study. Further study is warranted to investigate why New Zealand international students do not have the same respect for their teachers as their American and Australian counterparts. Recent studies by Ward (2001) and Sherry et al (2004) provide further insight into this construct but additional research into actual teaching practices would help determine whether changes are occurring in institutions with the growth in international student numbers. Further research and a deeper understanding of these issues are necessary if New Zealand institutions are to continue to achieve the vision of “delivering a sustainable high quality education which produces a range of economic, educational and cultural benefits for New Zealand” (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2002).

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