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Cultures of learning: the missing variable

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on selected results from a multi-stage research project conducted with undergraduate students of diverse nationalities studying in a hospitality management institute. The main aim was to investigate whether students of different cultural backgrounds agree on: what learning is; which strategies to use in learning; and the criteria necessary for successful learning. The research was carried out over three semesters in a series of two-hour workshops held with first semester students (n = 162), using participant-run focus groups. The findings suggest that although students of different cultural backgrounds agree to a certain extent on what learning is and the strategies used to learn, there is a marked difference in the criteria that they put forward as necessary for successful learning. Indeed the differences are such that one can speak of different cultures of learning (Harkness & Keefer, 2000; Li, 2003, p. 98; Salili, 1996; Tharp, 1994). This concept is expanded upon and the relationship to learning styles explored. The paper closes with recommendations to educators in the international higher education classroom.

Key words: culture, learning, higher education, international students

INTRODUCTION

Not surprisingly, with the market for global education and training already estimated at US$ 2 trillion in 1999 (Hira, 2003) and still increasing, forecasts suggest "2.8 million students studying abroad worldwide by 2010 and 4.9 million by 2025" (Van Damme, 2000, p. 2). A direct result of such changes is that "multiculturalism has shifted from a trendy buzzword to a wave of indelible influence on education" (Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2006, p. 2). Grey (2002, p. 165) goes so far as to suggest that "it is no longer appropriate to restrict one's frame of reference to one culture". Educators today should be asking how best to teach international cohorts and question how knowledge production and learning will best take place. It will be necessary to find out how best to deal with this new multi-cultural classroom in ways in which institutions and students alike benefit.

There seems to be an emphasis on the importance of educators and on training for teachers in this quest for knowledge production (OECD, 2000). However, this overlooks the fact that the learners can also be made more aware of how they themselves learn and thus become instrumental in their own knowledge development (Evans & Waring, 2006). In terms of learning as a process and as an outcome it is therefore increasingly important for institutes of higher education to have a thorough understanding of their students and the manner in which they are approaching their studies. One way that this can be done is by asking the students themselves. This research has done just that. The section below provides the reader with theoretical background before going into the methodology and results of this research.

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research with students in higher education on learning styles – defined as "a description of the attitudes and behaviour which determine an individual's preferred way of learning" (Honey & Mumford, 1986, p. 1) – supports the idea that there are culture-related differences in learning style preferences (Charlesworth, 2007). However, what remains to be shown is what might influence such differences. Work on what learning is in different cultures might bring more insight. In a study amongst US and Chinese college students on their beliefs about learning, Li (2003) reported interesting differences. Using prototype research to compile lists of learning-related terms, both cultures were found to possess a large number of terms (US: 203 and China: 225) which initially indicated some overall similarity. Further examination of the results showed that there was in fact little conceptual overlap between the two frameworks. One point of interest is that references to resources, teaching and schools were abundant on the part of the US respondents (18%) as compared to the Chinese respondents (3%). Further to this, "most striking of all was the near absence of reference to hard work, effort, and persistence on the US list (2%), whereas such concepts were abundant on the Chinese list (30%)" (Li, 2003, p. 262).

These results are not surprising, however, if one looks at how learning and culture intersect. In a general sense, learning can be said to be at the core of what we are:

> Human behaviour can best be understood as the product of learning, particularly learning that results from experiences with other people or with ideas, institutions, or other products of the behaviour of other people. In short, we are largely what we are because of culturally based learning (Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999, p. 5)

This supports the premise that learning will shape behaviour which itself is conditioned by culture. Although one must be careful not to generalise or to stereotype societies "the basic notion that behaviours shared by members of a society tend to be compatible with the society's values is reasonable" (Segall et al., 1999, p. 37). This link between learning and values fits nicely into the definition put forth by Perregaux (1994), which embraces both culture and values seeing culture as the "set of values, significations and behaviours acquired and shared by members of a group who tend to share a certain vision of the world and of relations with others" (p. 157 free translation).

This is further supported by Camilleri (1986), who sees culture to be:

> the more or less consistent set of the most enduring and widely shared acquired significations which the members of a group, because of their affiliation to this group tend to apply systematically to stimuli from their environment and from themselves, assuming towards these stimuli common, value-attributing attitudes, representations and behaviours of which they try to ensure the reproduction by non-genetic means. (p. 14)

If there are indeed differences in the values and significations held between cultures, then one would expect to find cultural differences in evidence in attribution theory. According to

Church and Lonner (1998), there is evidence that the importance attributed to the four causal factors identified by Weiner (1986) is fairly similar across cultures. These four factors comprise "the causal role of ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck on successful and unsuccessful performance outcomes" (Church & Lonner, 1998, p. 48). Salili (1996) in particular suggests that whereas the Chinese tend to attribute performance in learning more to effort and study skills than to ability, Western societies place considerably more emphasis on ability.

Further support for the idea of cultures of learning comes from Tharp's (1994) description of how Hawaiian and Navajo children learn in the home. In the case of the Hawaiian children "learning occurs in activity, as the learner is engaged in performing the skill or task. Emphasis is not on 'I'll tell you how to do it' but on watch, listen, participate and try" (Tharp, 1994, p. 98) . This contrasts with his observations of Navajo children where the emphasis was on observation and reflection with a minimum of verbal interaction. Although one might argue that this refers to informal learning whereas the focus in the research presented here is on formal learning, there are certain parallels that can be drawn. This relationship is made clear by Harkness and Keefer (2000) who state that "the difference between Hawaiian and Navajo styles of learning necessitated an important adaptation of a teaching method for language arts that had been developed and successfully applied in the Hawaiian context" (p. 97) in order for successful learning outcomes to be achieved by all.

The multicultural classroom brings together students from all over the world who have no choice but to come to terms with what is often a different way of learning. Lindblom-Ylänne (2004) speaks of conceptual consonance which implies coherence between a student's conceptions of learning and approaches to study and the study practices necessary for success. This provides support for the conceptual framework used here which is based on the assumption that a child grows up in a system where socio-cultural and educational practices will influence the manner in which he or she goes about learning, in turn impacting on their preferred way of learning or learning style, the strategies they employ and the criteria they feel are necessary for success.

Indeed, one's conception of learning is likely to be influenced by the environment in which learning occurs (Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996). Lingbiao and Watkins (2001) speak of "pedagogical flow" in terms of characteristic teaching practices found in one country that are linked to social-cultural practices. Although the 'flow' will vary from one classroom to another they see the class as "a component of the larger system of the school, which itself is a component in a wider system, comprising community and culture [and] thus, a very complex, multi-layered equilibrium is set up, with culture as the over-riding factor. In the classroom, this creates the characteristic 'pedagogical flow' of a country's schools." (Lingbiao & Watkins, 2001, p. 447)

Chan (1999) proposes an East-West comparison of educational systems (see Table 1), which to some extent illustrates some of these differences.

	Western (USA)	East Asia
Main purpose	Focus on individual Develop individual's full potential Transmitter of cultural heritage	Focus on loyal citizenry Helps select future leaders Transmitter of past cultural heritage
Instruction mode	Learner centred Stresses understanding, application and ability Use of educational psychology Learner active	Teacher centred Stresses recall of facts Use of rote learning Examinations as a motivator Learner passive
Curricular orientation	Present-future oriented Development of whole person Social interaction promoted	Past-present oriented Strict exams to development academic knowledge Concepts first then skills

Source: (Chan, 1999, p. 301)

Table 1: Educational systems in the West and in the East

The descriptions are broad but they do identify some basic differences that may impact on a student having spent twelve or more years in one system or the other.

Given these previous studies, the aim of this research was to examine how higher education students of diverse cultural backgrounds perceived learning. For the purposes of this research, all reference to learning styles is based on the definition put forth by Honey and Mumford (1986) which identified learners as having differing levels of preference for four styles of learning: activist, reflector, theorist and pragmatist: the *activist* being rather impulsive and prone to using trial and error; the *reflector* taking time for synthesis and the search of meaning; the *theorist,* more analytical and happy with logical argument; and the *pragmatist*, the problem-solver with a strength in practical application.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objective of this project was to establish whether the beliefs and conceptions about learning held by people of different cultures differ and, if so, to what extent. More specifically the research questions aimed to explore amongst higher education students of diverse cultural backgrounds:

- how they define what learning is;
- what strategies they use for learning; and
- what they identify as criteria necessary for successful learning.

METHODOLOGY

The research, using a sample of first semester undergraduate students, was carried out in an international institute of higher education, specialising in hospitality management, located in Switzerland and the findings presented are specific to this context. Current enrolment at the Institute includes students of over eighty different nationalities, which can be broken down into approximately 50% Europeans, 30% Asians, and 20% other countries.

Qualitative analysis was deemed particularly suited for this project as it allows for studying individual's own perceptions of their learning environments describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their 'lived world' (Kvale, 1996). It can be considered a valuable technique when examining values, methods of representation and culturally-bound perceptions (Pourtois & Desmet, 1997). In the interest of juxtaposing various ideas and ways of looking at learning, the method used here is based on that of focus groups. Focus group research can be qualified as group interviews which rely on interaction amongst the participants rather than the traditional question and answer format (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This project, however, has one major difference in that it has used participant-run focus groups. The reason for this was twofold: (1) firstly, it was felt that the students would speak more freely amongst themselves than with a facilitator, and (2) secondly, it allowed for a large number of focus groups to be conducted at the same time.

Initial pilot work suggested that this method could be used quite successfully especially where care has been taken to ensure common protocols and approaches for each focus group to enable direct comparison. The students were put into groups based on their nationalities and/or educational experience. Students were classified as homogeneous (meaning that they had both grown up in and been schooled in their home country) or heterogeneous (meaning that they had grown up at home or abroad but more importantly they had been schooled in international schools). As the workshops were held during regularly scheduled class time the composition of the groups was dependent on the class composition. With the large number of nationalities present in the school and the varying class composition there are a number of groups that are not referred to in the findings presented below. These include nationalities for which the sample size was too limited providing only one group, as well as groups which were made up of a mixture of nationalities.

For the purposes of this paper, three groups were analysed in detail: (i) homogeneous South East Asian, (ii) homogeneous European, and (iii) heterogeneous internationally schooled groups. During the pilot work the Asian international and European international group were initially treated as two separate groups, however, as the results for these two subgroups were very similar and the initial division found to be arbitrary given the fact that many of the students were actually of a mixed background, thus Asian and European

international students were put into focus groups together (comprising group (iii)) irrespective of their nationalities.

The focus groups were carried out within the framework of a workshop on learning, which is part of the regular curriculum. The workshop sessions lasted 2 hours beginning with a short introduction to learning in higher education and followed by time for individual in-class completion of a worksheet which was subsequently used as a basis for discussion in the focus groups that were held during the break-out time that followed.

Prior to the breakout sessions the students were given 15 minutes to fill out the worksheet individually which addressed the questions: what is learning? what strategies do you use for learning? and what are the criteria necessary for successful learning We used this approach for the following reason. In a pilot workshop the students had been provided with a 'Questions for Discussion' sheet on which the group was asked to write comments before transferring them to the flip chart paper. In most cases, however, very little was written on these sheets. In order to collect more information and also to encourage the students to reflect individually prior to entering discussion with their peers, the option taken in the following workshop sessions was to begin the exercise individually. This resulted in focus group discussions that were considerably richer and also in more completed worksheets. Following this individual exercise the students were put into groups related to their nationalities and previous school experience. All groups were asked to compare and discuss their answers to the questions and to prepare a slide for presentation and discussion in the plenary session that would follow, exposing the group's opinion on the same three questions. Comments made by the group members during the oral presentation were transcribed and put together with the slides which were collected following the presentation. The individual worksheets were also collected at this time. The results presented below are based only on an analysis of the slides presented.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings in Tables 2 to 4 are for the South East Asian (n = 13), European (n = 13) and International (n = 13) focus groups made up of a total of 162 respondents with an average of 4 participants per group. The results presented here are based on the slides provided by each group for presentation of their opinion in the plenary session. Although presented quantitatively the words are those of the students which came out in their focus group discussions. These slides were collected following the presentations along with the individual worksheets which are to be the subject of future analysis and which will allow for an expanded and more qualitative review of the material collected. The informal use of word repetition combined with unique word identification was used here to compile the findings. The tables all present the descriptors used by the participants on the x-axis. The words have been coded where necessary, for example 'learning by heart' has been included under 'memorisation'. In the large majority of cases, however, the same words have been used by all the groups. When words have different meanings, they are all mentioned separately in the descriptors. The y-axis shows the frequency of mention out of a possible 13, as there were 13 focus groups held per category.

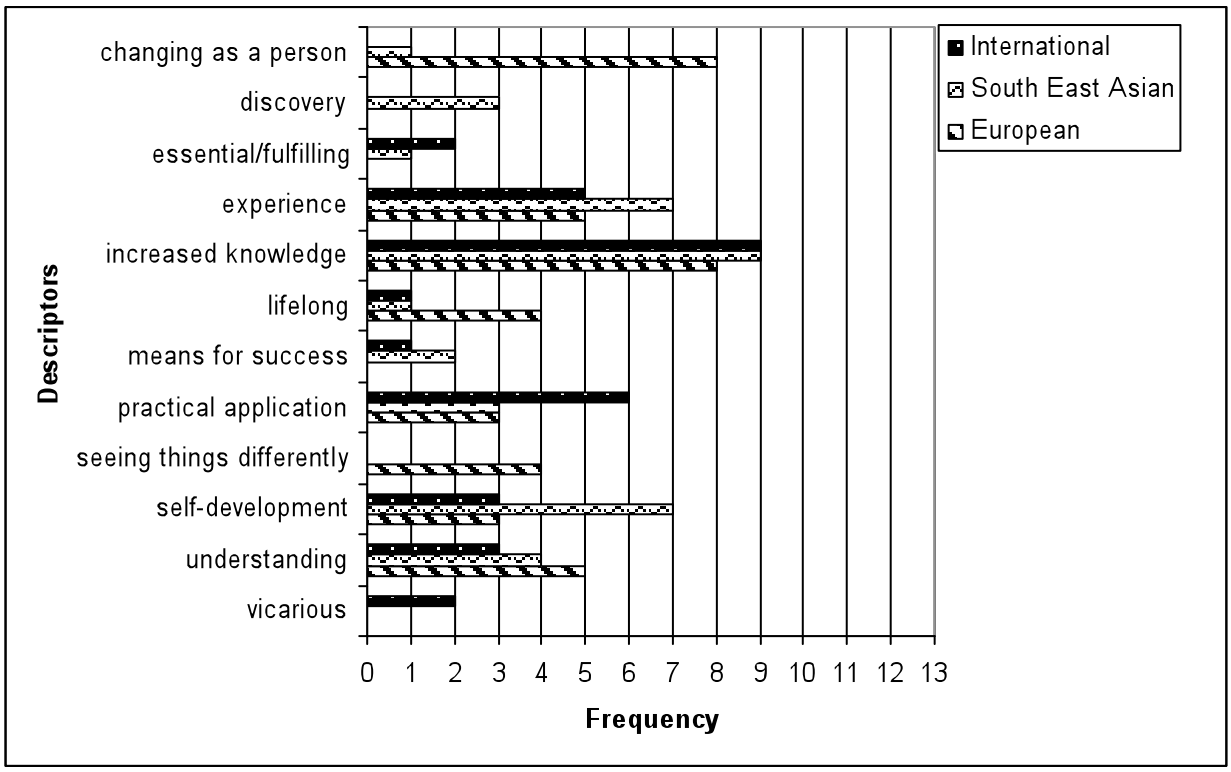

Table 2: What is Learning?

From Table 2, it is interesting to see that there are certain similarities amongst all the groups with the most frequent mention for learning being an increase in knowledge, followed by experience and understanding. The most noticeable differences are with the definitions related to changing as a person, which is almost exclusively a descriptor used by the European groups as is seeing things differently. The term discovery is used exclusively by the South East Asian groups who also mention self-development with greater frequency. Despite these differences related to changing, growing and developing, there would actually be considerable agreement in how all the groups speak of learning. It is of interest to see that five of the six conceptions of learning first identified by Säljö (1979) and later expanded upon by Marton et al. (1993) figure in the twelve descriptors used by the students. The six conceptions comprise: an increase in knowledge, memorisation, reproduction and application, understanding, seeing something in a different way, and changing as a person. The one conception of learning that is not referred to by the students is that of memorisation, however this is included in what the participants see as a strategy for learning, shown in Table 3.

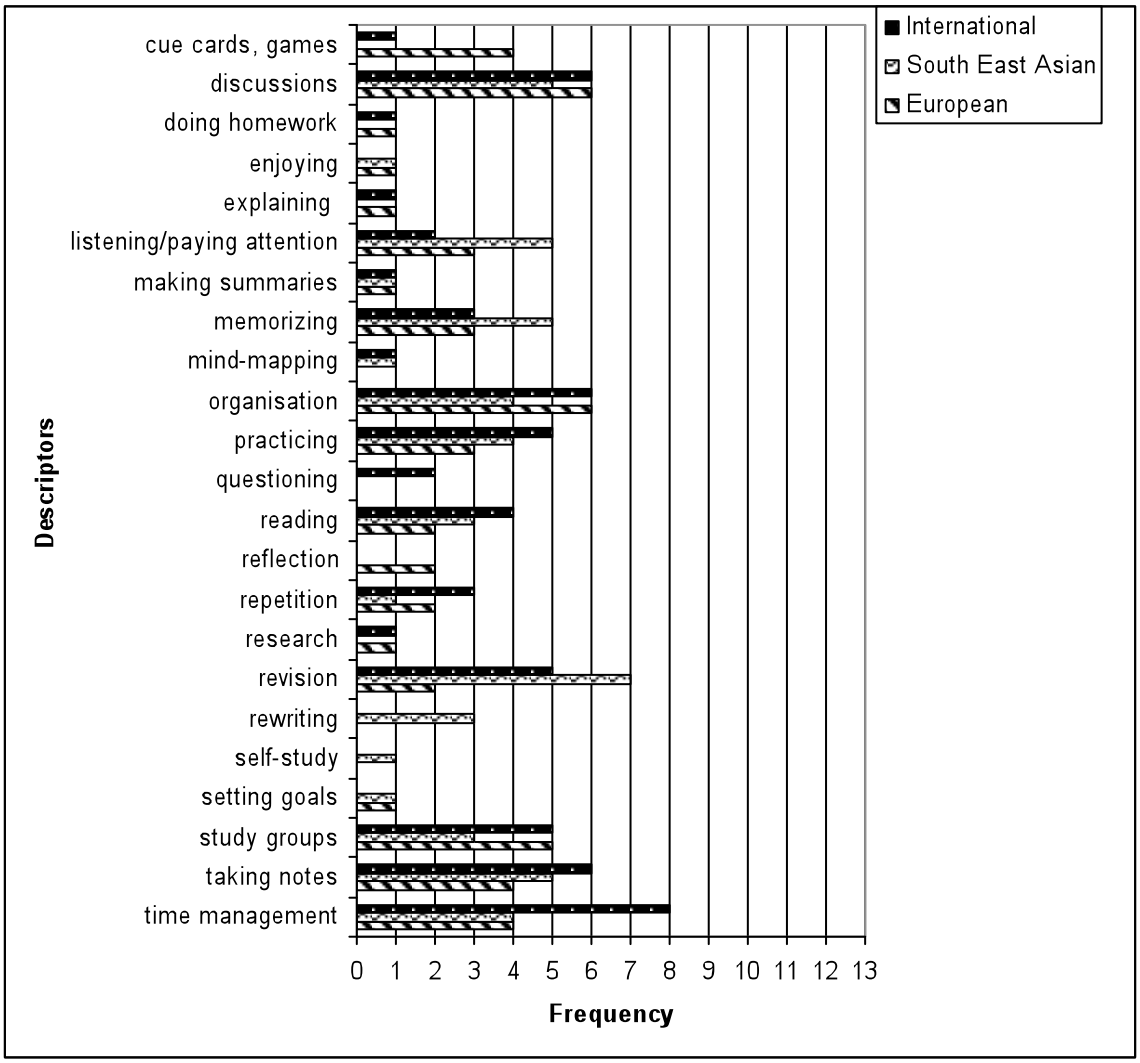

Table 3: Strategies for Learning

Despite differences between the three cultural groups in the strategies used for learning as demonstrated in Table 3, there is considerable consensus with the South East Asian groups indicating slightly more revision, rewriting and memorisation and the International groups mentioning time management and organisation with greater frequency.

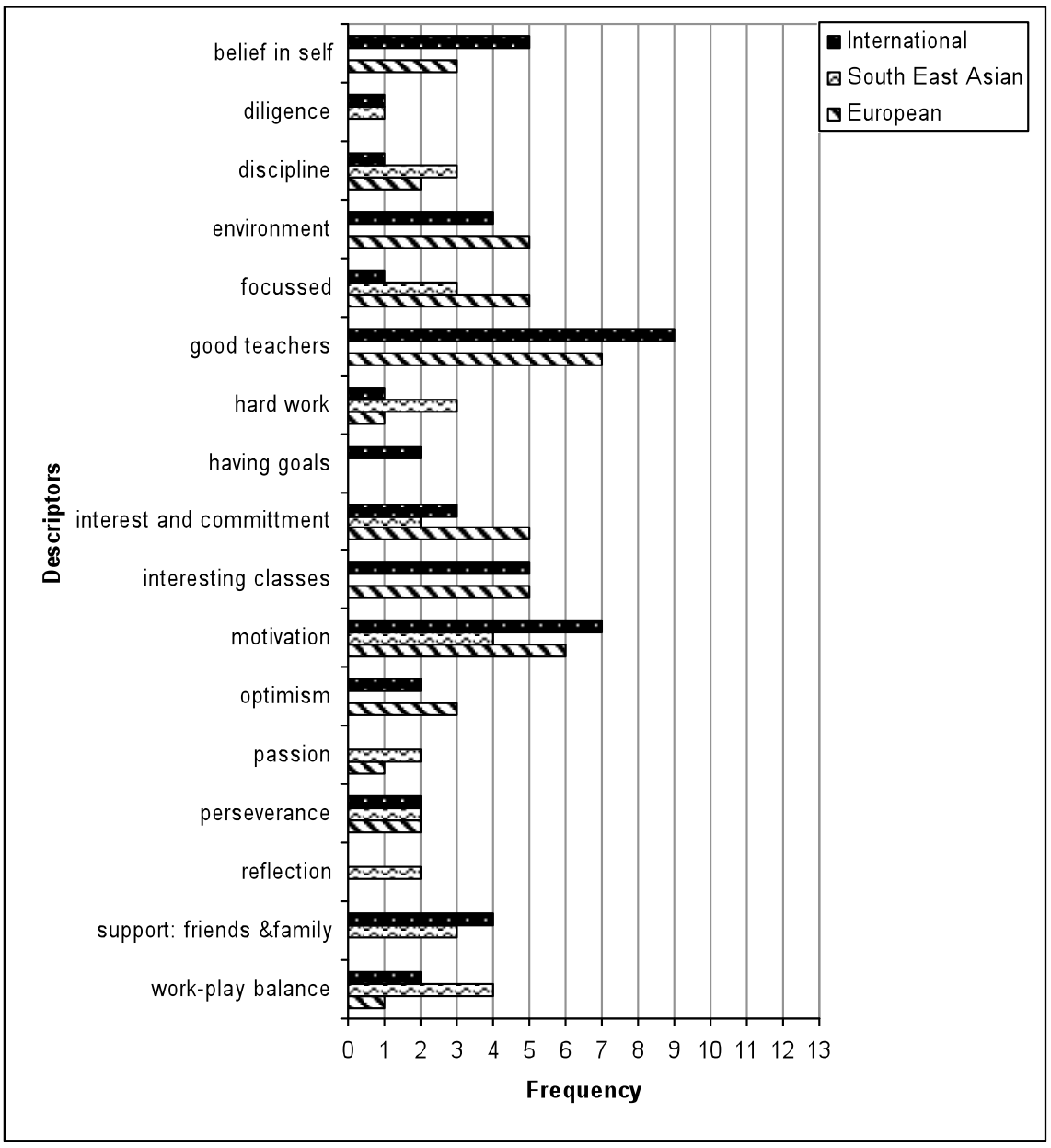

Table 4: Criteria necessary for successful learning

Most striking differences were found for the last research question, focusing on the criteria necessary for success in academic learning (see Table 4). For the International and European participants, and with seven and nine references respectively, having good teachers takes on considerable importance as does interesting classes with five references for each of these groups and environment with four and five references. Not one of the South East Asian groups made reference to any of these criteria. It is interesting to see that belief in self is also mentioned exclusively by the former two groups. For the South East Asian students what tips the balance of success is simply hard work, discipline, passion and perseverance.

DISCUSSION

The significance of this work lies in its exploration of culture, as a factor in the beliefs and conceptions about learning that goes deeper than what is often taken into consideration. With the changes in the student body evidenced in the European higher education arena it is clear that we need to question what learning is and how our students see it in order to better understand them. The challenge for educators is not only to recognise cultural differences but also to find methods of addressing them (Grey, 2002). Surely knowledge about different cultures of learning is essential in order to meet this challenge.

In response to our first research question in relation to individual students' conceptions of learning, it is of interest to note that there are no striking differences between the students of diverse cultural or educational backgrounds. Looking at the second question regarding strategies for learning, however, we see more emphasis on memorisation on the part of the Asian students than the Western students. We must, however, exercise caution in interpreting this, as memorisation is not interpreted in the same manner in Asia as in the West (Marton, Dall'alba, & Beaty, 1993; Marton, Dall'alba, & Kun, 1996). In the West one generally equates memorisation with rote learning and not with understanding. In Asia it has been shown that not only is there a relationship seen between memorisation and understanding but that within the concept of memorisation itself a distinction is made "on the one hand repetition can be associated with mechanical rote learning; on the other hand, memorisation can be used to deepen and develop understanding" (Marton, Dall'alba, & Kun, 1996, p. 82) . Taken this way, one can see that in effect the strategies in use by the populations sampled are not really that different across cultures. As mentioned previously, it is also worth noting that memorisation was not considered to be learning by any of the focus groups only a strategy to use in learning.

In contrast to the relative consensus on questions one and two across all the groups, the third question shows considerable divergence in the criteria the participants saw as important for successful learning. The South East Asian students overwhelmingly believe in the power of hard work, diligence and effort; aspects that are all completely under their control. The European and International students on the other hand feel that good teachers, interesting courses and a good environment - issues beyond their control - are all very important criteria for academic success. This is in agreement with Li's (2003) findings and supports the idea that there are cultures of learning, implying that students from different nations and educational backgrounds will approach their learning differently. Nisbett (2003), suggests that there are fundamental differences in the way in which East and West see the world, putting forth the hypothesis that this will impact "worldviews and cognitive processes, differences in attitudes and beliefs, and even in values and preferences" (p. xvii). What seems to be coming across here is that differences in attitudes and values may be impacting upon how one will approach learning.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is important to highlight that the research presented here took place at the outset of the students' higher education experience. Barron (2002) reminds us of the specific nature of

the foreign students' needs and requirements which include roles applicable to any student entering higher education, namely as "a student adjusting to the stress common to all beginning students and; as a maturing, developing person concerned about purposes, meaning and goals" (p. 28). He goes on to elucidate roles more specific to the foreign student, which are linked to culture but that are not as pertinent in the present situation where all the students, by virtue of the type of institute in question, fall into the 'foreign student' category. That is to say, there is no dominant culture to which the students must adapt due to the highly international environment in which they are beginning their studies. Nonetheless, his suggestions that go beyond the standard culture shock and homesickness issues and are for host universities to "recognise the different learning approaches and methods that many international students bring with them" (Barron, 2002, p. 40) merit discussion. Certainly if an institute "expends resources attracting lucrative international students to study their programmes, it would also be appropriate that some responsibility for the overall experience be shouldered by the host university" (Barron, 2002, p. 28).

Earlier research also conducted with first-year degree students of diverse cultural backgrounds (Charlesworth, 2007) provided support for the idea that there are indeed differences in the learning styles preferences of Southeast Asian students and European students, with the former showing a higher preference for the reflective style and the latter a higher preference for the active style at the outset of their higher education studies. This suggests that the Southeast Asian students prefer to take more time to examine a situation before acting upon it as compared to the European students who seem to prefer a more impulsive approach. In the classroom this may impact on many aspects, from the feedback-seeking behaviour of a student to the way in which they respond to questions or the manner in which they approach group work. This, coupled with the data from the research presented here, suggests that a number of students entering higher education have yet to learn that the onus for study and learning is in fact on them. The fact that these students often show an increased preference for an active learning style has to do with the fact that they expect interaction and involvement on the part of those teaching them. The students that expect to get through on hard work and perseverance, on the other hand, perhaps need to be encouraged to take advantage of a teacher and be encouraged to approach their learning more interactively.

With respect to programme development at the entry level, it is suggested that the development of introductory programmes that also address the difference in expectations that one might encounter between secondary and higher education might be beneficial to the student. This can allow students to reflect on their learning and can help to develop the kind of learning culture that can move students from a "performance orientation" to a "learning or mastery orientation" (Masui & De Corte, 2005, p. 366). In terms of course delivery, it would seem that methods of assessment that evolve along with the student as they progress through their programme of study would also allow the students to further develop their own individual approach to their studies.

De Vita (2001) highlights the fact that despite the large body of literature on learning styles, little work has been done on the relationship between culture and learning styles and "even rarer in the literature is the exploration of the implications that cultural influences on learning style preferences have for the instructional approaches to be adopted by teachers

and management educators who are confronted with culturally heterogeneous groups of learners" (p. 172). As Cortazzi and Jin (1996, p. 172) rightly say , despite the fact that "Chinese students constitute a major group of the world's learners, roughly 25%, as yet there is very little data-based research into their culture of learning". This is true not only for the Chinese students but also for students of many other nationalities.

This fits with the results and suggests that educators should provide students entering higher education with the possibility of understanding their learning style preferences and putting into practice strategies to develop their learning potential. The workshops that provided the forum for the research present here are an example of a measure that can be put into place to allow students to explore the idea of different learning preferences and possibly provide them with the opportunity of identifying how they both prefer to learn as well as how they learn best.

Further research into the cultures of learning in different countries could certainly help to complete the picture of how students of culturally diverse backgrounds both see and go about their learning, providing educators with the missing variable needed to better understand the type of student that they are increasingly faced with.

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