

# Reflecting on the Relationship Between Standardised Admissions, Academic Expectations and Diverse Student Cohorts in Postgraduate Taught Business and Management Programmes

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between admissions approaches which rely exclusively upon standard academic criteria to select students for Business and Management programmes and classroom diversity. It draws on a small-scale research project carried out with postgraduate Business students at a British university in 2003 and 2004. The empirical data identifies a wide range of underlying notions of key business and management concepts held by students at point of entry to the programme of study. The paper goes on to discuss the complexity of teaching and learning dynamics that result from such diversity and its impact on student performance. In conclusion, the paper proposes a broadening of admissions criteria to take account of both learning transitions and the intercultural learning inherent in such international educational programmes

**Key words:** higher education, admissions, business and management, teaching and learning, internationalisation

## Introduction: pre-experience Masters degrees in Business and Management

I spend a lot of my time managing and teaching students on one-year university Masters programmes in the United Kingdom (UK), particularly in International Business. Courses like this have flourished in recent years, and are largely populated by premium-fee-paying overseas students, with a varied mix of backgrounds, educational and work experience. On the programme that I currently manage, entry requirements do not stipulate that students have prior Business and Management study or work experience. Instead, they require a first degree at a high standard (equivalent 2:1 /GPA 3.0) from a 'reputable' Higher Education (HE) institution (determined through the use of international benchmarking systems and the admitting university's internal database), and have a 'good' level of English language skill, demonstrated through achievements in a standard English language test (IELTS 6.5). In addition, the university's standard application form gives applicants an opportunity to make a personal statement about their motivations and suitability for study. In contrast with the admissions procedures in some other Anglophone countries and to many undergraduate degrees, however, such statements or other qualitative evidence do not play an active part in the selection process, whose focus remains almost exclusively academic. This approach reflects the prevailing institutional view that previous academic achievements possess sufficient predictive validity to assess future performance on what is essentially a conversion degree.

This programme and the admissions process attached

to it is fairly representative of many such courses in the UK. Their design has evolved relatively quickly in recent years – based on the MBA model, but geared towards the needs of a different student constituency. The university's expectation is that, during their studies, participants will be able to obtain reasonable academic insights into the world of work and theories about Business and Management. In general, applicants' reported expectations tend to be vocational. Students frequently apply for programmes because of their perceived power to enhance employment opportunities and to make a contribution to the development of tangible, practical skills (Kumar & Usunier 2001; Ottewill & MacFarlane 2003). The emphasis on enhanced employability that characterizes many of the marketing websites of Business and Management programmes tends to reinforce such expectations, encouraging the view that the programme of study will bring practical, skills-based advantages to the successful student which they can immediately put to work (Humfrey 1999; de Vita & Case 2003).

## Teaching and learning

In spite of the advertised attractions of such courses, in teaching terms I have found them to be more challenging than other kinds of Masters degree, whether specialised progression or general post-experience Management programmes. The very diversity of the cohort which can make them exciting educational ventures also brings forth more emphatic pedagogical challenges than other types of programme where students' previous work experience and /or study in the subject area provide some approximation to a common starting point for the learning conversations that take place. Beginning with a cohort from as many as thirty countries, often with educational experiences from within very

different traditions to the British, a large age range, and varying work experience from none to a few years, it is particularly hard to know where to look for an intellectual place that provides equal access to all participants. In addition, many students on such degree programmes undergo enormous personal learning during their studies and are likely to face their first experience of overseas or independent living (Egege & Kutieleh 2003; Turner 2006). In essence, students spend a single year in a new country and educational system, studying a new subject and living in an entirely new environment. In this context, it is not surprising that previous research into the experiences of international students in higher education shows that they can feel confused about educational objectives and progress, and intellectually and emotionally isolated (Morrison, Merrick, Higgs & Le Metais 2005). A pedagogically complicating factor within the cohort for the courses in which I have been involved is the presence of approximately fifteen percent British students, whose initial educational needs and perspectives are distinct from their peers – as first-language speakers of British English and cultural insiders who are continuing their studies within their own local educational tradition.

## The Project

To illuminate some of the initial teaching and learning complexities involved in pre-experience postgraduate programmes, this paper draws on small-scale research carried out with two groups of postgraduate (PG) students from Newcastle University, UK in 2003/04. The paper's particular emphasis is to reflect on the tendency of current admissions approaches to focus students' and lecturers' attention onto a narrow set of apparently universal academic criteria which do not recognize the contribution of cultural and social learning to a student's academic development and make little reference to intercultural competences. The project data illustrate cohort diversity by highlighting the degree to which psycho-social understandings about Business and Management terms varied across a cohort of students at the point at which they began their studies. The exercise commenced as a way of investigating the similarities and differences in students' underlying understandings of the building blocks of organisational theorizing. The cultural clusters that emerged from the data also provided a useful reflective opportunity to consider some of the pedagogical complexities within the teaching and learning task.

## Context

The project developed as a pedagogical action research project. It responded to my concerns about the performance of many international students on the programme that I managed compared to their local counterparts and emerging evidence that non-local students underwent a series of particular learning challenges during the first half of the year of study. The data prompting my reflections were contradictory, however. Between 2002 and

2004, more than ninety percent of students graduated with a degree at the end of the year and more than ninety eight percent within two years of completion. The admissions process, crude as it was, therefore, seemed to meet its basic purpose in recruiting academically 'successful' applicants. Nonetheless a detailed exploration of academic performance over the year revealed a more complex picture. Only an average of five percent of the international cohort received distinction-level marks on completion, for example, with more than forty percent initially failing some assessment during the year. Given that the programme recruited extensively from universities ranked within the *Times Higher* top 200 worldwide (THES 2005), this was surprising. Moreover, evidence showed a very steep learning curve for international students during the year, with average assessment grades for the first semester clustered marginally around the pass mark and later results more widely distributed, better mirroring the distribution achieved by local students. Dissertation performance showed an equally marked variance, with international students averaging marks more than ten percent lower than their British peers. Qualitative feedback received from the international cohort on the programme indicated disquiet with this level of academic performance and high levels of anxiety, particularly in semester one. Students articulated a link between their high expectations of their own performance and what they considered to be relatively straightforward acceptance onto the programme with the decline in their morale after receiving initial assessment marks. They also negatively contrasted their own early performance with that of local students. In this context, it was useful to reflect upon ways to sensitise the initial learning transition, exploring how to better balance their expectations and learning experiences.

## Admissions and classroom learning

The specific relationship between admissions and classroom learning lies in fine balance. It is possible to argue that admissions criteria represent only a crude approximation of academic suitability to commence a programme and possess little predictive validity for future academic performance. Nonetheless, factors within the admissions process imply both a psychological and actual or legal contract between institution and applicant. In spite of the very broad nature of the entry standards, applicants may construe acceptance on a programme as an institutional acknowledgement that they have a reasonable chance of successfully completing their course of study. Nonetheless, high levels of cultural difference in the particular resonances between acceptance on a programme of study and the anticipated outcome also exist. Within the UK context, the relationship between university and student has traditionally rested on the student's achieving certain assessed competence in their chosen programme of study, one in which success is contingent upon both the commitment and ultimate capability of the student (Ottewill & MacFarlane 2003). In other words, students can and do fail courses of study and individually accept that the major responsi-

bility for their academic success lies with themselves (Biggs 2003). This is consistent with the prevailing view of university students as fully adult, independent learners and a sociological construction of the nature of intelligence that suggests that it is in part innate, unequally distributed and individually developed (Barnett 1997). Such a construction is by no means universal, however. Many Asian societies, for example, developing from Confucianist philosophical and educational traditions, construct a view of intelligence that focuses more on hard work and application than innate ability and is more community-centred and extrinsic than the individualist, intrinsic perspective taken in 'the West' (Woo 1993; Kim 2003). In such contexts, responsibility for student success is widely distributed, with institutions rather than individuals ultimately accountable. These influences are compounded in countries such as China – a key sending country for UK conversion postgraduate programmes – with its egalitarian socialist dynamic during the twentieth century, highly influenced by Marxian ideals about the openness of knowledge and humankind's universal developmental capacity (Turner & Acker 2002). Islamic notions of education also differ sharply from those in 'the West', fostering community responsibility for learning within a specific religious moral and ethical framework (Halstead 2004)

Such cultural differences have a clear impact on the nature of the implied contract that exists between student and institution. In practice, in many Asian countries failure to obtain a degree is unusual. Assessment practices and systems are designed to give maximum support and provide numerous opportunities for students to retake 'failed' assignments. Lecturers' professional success is also intimately connected with the success of their students (Turner & Acker 2002). Direct responsibility for student success is commonly considered to lie with the teacher rather than the student:

In Chinese [there is] a saying. "There is no bad student, just a bad teacher."... Because every student, every people, they can learn. Why they didn't learn well, maybe is the method of the teacher...the teacher has some problems. They cannot teach the student well. (Turner 2006, p.40)

In such an environment, therefore, acceptance on a university course not only implies a willing commitment between institution and student that all will do their best, but forms a much stronger guarantee of success than is usually the case in countries like Britain.

## Language test scores

Inconsistencies emerge not only from standardised admissions processes as general indicators of academic performance but attach to particular criteria. The use of English language test scores is highly problematic, for example. Research shows that they are inherently variable and poor predictors of academic success (Seelen 2002). Equally, researchers have noted that teachers in Anglophone universities tend to proxy language competence for broader indicators of intellectual ability, influ-

encing their perspectives on students within a cohort (le Roux 2001; Sanderson 2004). Indeed, in part stemming from the false expectations raised by an admissions emphasis on language competence, an enduring stereotype that Asian students, for example, perform less well on taught PG programmes than their local Anglophone counterparts has persisted in recent years (Samuelowicz & Bain 2001; Walker 2004). This has occurred in the face of evidence indicating that, in terms of students' overall motivation and learning preferences, local students and their international counterparts engage with education in a similar manner (Ramburuth & McCormick 2001).

In the context of language competence, however, while general language ability may not provide a significant indicator of academic performance, nonetheless it is clear that disciplinary lexis can have a significant short-term impact on an individual's development of deeper understanding, particularly in vocational and applied subjects (Newman, Trenchs-Parera & Pujol 2003; Zhu 2004; Camiciotoli 2005). Conceptual and cognitive frames in academic language are loaded with nuanced and implicit meanings, especially in subject areas such as Business and Management where discourse is story-, metaphor- and jargon-rich. There is an essential paradox, therefore, in the interplay of language competence and higher learning. On the one hand, general language competence does not function as an indicator of intellectual ability or an individual's ability to achieve within a subject. On the other, a subject's textual and language density and specific cultural context can obstruct an individual's ability to achieve deeper and complex understanding initially.

## Time

The key issue within this paradox is the function of time in the learning process. It is clear that cross-border learning transitions take several months, as students adjust to new language and social environments and to different academic conventions (Hellsten & Prescott 2004). In the UK, however, Masters degrees typically last for only twelve months, providing scant opportunity for students to overcome learning transition challenges and adapt to the new educational environment with confidence. The first few weeks after a student has commenced their studies, therefore, are crucial in supporting their academic development and confidence-building (Cassidy & Eachus 2000; Beekhoven, de Jong & van Hout 2003; Major 2005). The implicit archetype of the PG student in the UK is that, having undertaken an undergraduate degree, they are fully cognizant with local academic conventions and can function in a sophisticated and competent manner inside UK HE. Study skills support provision can, therefore, be rather limited. In addition, the onus for take-up of such supports as are available often tends to be on the student and regarded as remedial rather than routinely incorporated into the curriculum. One-year programmes are designed with saturated academic timetables, however, leaving little intellectual or actual space for students who need addi-

tional support or opportunities to practise particular academic skills to be able to do so.

## The implications of the literature

Taking all these factors into account, it is clear that, in spite of acknowledged classroom diversity, a range of factors – including the homogenizing tendency of admissions criteria, disciplinary norms, the brevity and intensity of programmes and the privileging of cultural academic models and conventions – coalesce together to militate against its explicit recognition in everyday classroom practices. Essentially students tend to be left alone to figure out how to function as a student in the UK context. If they do so and are able to work confidently within prevailing classroom norms, then they may go on to achieve adequately – fortunately the majority do. Some are likely to become cultural casualties within the process, however, and many may under-achieve, with less obvious but damaging impacts on self-confidence as well as marks. More insidiously, if left implicit, such practices reinforce negative stereotypes about particular categories of students. It may seem simpler to the teacher to approach the teaching task as if the student body was unified and homogenous. Certainly admissions criteria tend to encourage the sense of a direct equivalence between different educational systems and students. This approach both ignores the importance of the complex skills involved in inter-cultural working and managing diversity, however, and accepts the dominance of a particular cultural model of working practice.

## Project design

The project focused on survey data taken from the students during their first week of study at the university. The aim of the questionnaire was to elicit lexical interpretations underpinning students' understandings of basic terms employed in Business and Management teaching, for example 'Manager', 'Management', 'Leadership'. This was achieved primarily through an exploration of descriptors and elicited metaphors about organisations and the people within them.

In total the questionnaire included eight questions. The survey was designed primarily for illustrative purposes and deliberately drew upon themes articulated within established cross-cultural organisational research (Hofstede 1984; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997).

The questionnaires were administered at the end of a cross-cultural management teaching session - completion was voluntary. Preliminary results were later informally discussed with the participants. All personal data were anonymized.

Questionnaire completion was not time constrained and averaged twenty to thirty minutes. The exercise was repeated in 2003 and 2004, giving a total of 184 responses. The style of the data collection instrument drew on other educational cross-cultural metaphor research (Cameron & Low 1999). To uncover qualitative

aspects of participants' understanding, the questionnaire included opportunities to draw pictures of organisations, freely describe management activities, depict symbols and artefacts attaching to managers and management and relate value concepts about management relationships through chains of similes. These are not discussed in detail within this paper, but rather form a lexical backdrop to it, illustrating the cultural and language diversity of the study group. Responses were collated in broad cultural group classifications, thematically organised and compared.

It is important to reemphasise the illustrative rather than substantive nature of the survey data. With a relatively crude design and a small number of responses made by students from more than twenty countries and with varying backgrounds, it was impossible to do more than generally illustrate themes and emergent issues. It was certainly not possible to develop any substantive or generalisable conclusions about particulars. Nonetheless the underlying levels of diversity indicated by the data highlighted some of the complexities at play in early teaching and learning conversations and provided a useful prompt for reflections on classroom dynamics.

## The sample

The research sample obtained was broadly representative of the cohorts of students participating on the degree programmes under consideration. Sixty-six percent of participants came from China, eleven and ten percent from the UK and EU, thirteen percent came from a wide range of origins, predominantly Asia (India, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia), approximately two percent from elsewhere (Ukraine, Russia, Middle East). The age range of students was 21-27, typical of pre-experience Business Masters, with seventy-six percent having joined the degree programme directly from home-country first degree studies. Twenty-three percent of participants had previously studied Business-related subjects, half in China. These broad classifications provided the basis for data encoding and analysis. Inevitably, the cultural groupings were limited – both 'EU' and 'International' groups included a wide range of nationalities which prevented effective analytical individuation. Nonetheless, the majority – Anglo-European and Chinese-Asian – revealed sufficiently high levels of general variance as to enable some limited discussion.

## Findings

From a surface examination of the data the abstract characterisations of business and management appeared similar between cultural groups. Two thirds of respondents ranked managers as 'highly important' inside organisations, for example, and a third explicitly commented on the existence of formality and hierarchy within organisations. Indeed, the pictorial representations of organisations showed formal constructions, employing schematic or planned drawings rather than freer, more imaginative depictions. In addition, respondents ranked managerial responsibilities as evenly split

between those directed to the CEO/Board and those to employees/subordinates. None of the groups recognised responsibility to self or to customers as significant for managers (0-1%). From these results, certain basic levels of common conceptual understanding about organisations and managers were evident, relating mainly to reporting and power structures. Nonetheless, more qualitative aspects of constructions of managerial work and identity showed significant variation in responses. Within the UK/EU groups, managers were identified as primarily responsible for communication and people management, whereas the Chinese / International groups indicated multi-dimensional responsibilities, emphasising directive, managerial decision-making. In describing organisational structures, the UK/ EU groups articulated vertical hierarchies and relationships based on power, whereas the Asian groups focused on lateral relationships and spheres of personal influence. This was further emphasised in identifying the rationale for management responsibilities. The UK/ EU groups focused on management for delivering organisational results (82%), while the Chinese/International groups highlighted the manager's loyalty to the company (51%). Equally the Chinese group characterised managers as paternalistic, through the spread of responses between 'top-down authority' and 'manager as friend' (36 % and 28 % ) and in similes describing managers as the 'heart', 'spirit', 'soul', 'teacher' of organisations. On the other hand, the UK group indicated a spread of manager-subordinate relationships and described a close consonance between management and leadership, frequently employing military metaphors ('captain of a ship', 'general', 'overseer', 'figurehead'). The EU group showed concern with managers as coordinators ('driver of a bus', 'a bridge') rather than personal or power relationships. Clustered together, therefore, patterns emerged from the data offering particular insights into the detail of the groups' perspectives on managerial work and organisations. The UK sample emphasised status hierarchies, for example, and a lack of differentiation between management and leadership compared to other groups, with a paradoxical emphasis on people management and communication. EU students expressed similar notions but with a considerable emphasis on managers' professional expertise. Asian and Chinese students focused on (male gendered) managers as at 'the centre' rather than 'the top' of organisations and described organisational life in very formal terms, with saturated management and supervisory systems linked through reciprocal responsibilities between managers and those around them. On the other hand, the UK/EU groups, while identifying a clear emphasis on upward relationships within the hierarchy and to direct external stakeholders such as shareholders, did not indicate reciprocity in the internal relationships outside of the narrow requirement for formal, organisational communication.

Taken as a whole, considerable variation emerged between responses where matters of value or affective and interpretive responses came into play. Whether a

manager was constructed as directive, individualist and autonomous or a coordinator within the context of formal inter-relationships; whether responsibilities were upwardly directed within a hierarchy or radiated outwards among circles of stakeholders; whether players in organisations were described by organic or mechanistic value metaphors, aspirational or facilitative, marshalled against external forces or internally predatory, all revealed a huge diversity within responses, coalescing around broadly cultural 'takes' on the nature of organisational life and work. Equally, the results – obtained from a multi-cultural cohort of students with little or no prior work experience – showed strong resonances with other substantive research outcomes drawing data from within organisations, hinting at widespread popular cultural constructions of managers and organisations both for those with and without work experience (Hofstede 1984). Certainly the data highlighted the wide range of understandings of common terms with which the student groups had entered the postgraduate classroom. They also illustrated the extent to which these initial conceptions diverged from the lexical associations articulated within many British and American textbooks and adopted by university teachers, both of which are saturated with the particular technical and cultural resonances of the disciplinary lexis (Linstead & Fulop 1999).

## Discussion

The results highlighted interesting conceptual variances in the ways in which apparently universalist descriptive language in Business and Management generated differing lexical interpretations among the student groups, especially when relating to stylistic, social and interpersonal aspects of organisational life and managerial work. As noted above, however, the details of the questionnaire data are to some degree of limited importance to the current discussion. The fact that so much of what was elicited from the survey resonated neatly with earlier research about cultural management and work styles was inherent in the research design. Of more interest, however, are the academic challenges posed by the evidence it presented, of an established and reasonably deeply-held diversity of beliefs and understandings about managers and work among a group of students, the majority of whom had little or no work experience and were new to the study of Business and Management. Confronted with such diversity, perhaps the most difficult challenge in PG conversion programmes is to find a place from which to embark upon an effective critique of the management literature – inherent in Master's level study – building from such a weak foundation of common understanding. To some extent, it could be argued that organizing such diversity of views and making them coherent is part of the basic aim of such programmes. There is little evidence that their curricula operate at a definitional level, however, to deconstruct the cultural loadings of common language terms employed in basic Business and Management discourse. Yet, without early attention to such foundational

concepts, it is easy to see the potential for some students to start out with interpretations differing to those normatively employed in British classrooms and for that to remain unarticulated throughout their studies.

As noted above, evidence suggests that university teachers in Anglophone countries have a tendency to approach the teaching task on the basis of negative stereotypes of some groups of international students, driven as much by the design of the kinds of taught programmes on which they study as anything else. Perhaps an underlying contributor to this lies in the implicit under-articulation of student diversity against the variety of mature, valid, different cultural perspectives which they bring to their early studies. Certainly teachers on pre-experience Business and Management programmes may suffer from a paradox of expectations. First, that students come to a new subject with an uninformed perspective; second, that as postgraduates with demonstrable English language skills, they will have an understanding of common language terms and uses within the discipline that is consistent with local students and the lecturers themselves. Equally, conversion programmes, owing to their brevity, may tend to encourage teachers to focus exclusively on disciplinary norms rather than develop the kind of critical subject orientation inherent in other kinds of Masters programmes. With a scarcity of pedagogical frameworks to help teachers to make explicit, validate and include diverse perspectives into classroom teaching, an easier option may seem to be to ignore or attempt to obliterate diversity through both the act of negative stereotyping and a continued privileging of more normative aspects of the subject. By doing so, however, enormous issues about the intellectual rigour of teaching and learning emerge, compounding institutional concerns about inclusivity, quality and the student experience.

The implications of high levels of diversity for teaching and learning relationships are also significant. Underlying cultural and disciplinary assumptions within both the descriptive and value-based language of Management discourse form an active short-hand into the study of the subject area for cultural insiders. Simultaneously they have considerable potential to obstruct deeper learning for those outside. This issue impacts particularly on taught postgraduate students because of the intensity of their period of study. Given the evidence about the length of cross-border learning transitions, the quantum of cultural, affective and intellectual learning inherent in a one-year conversion Masters, and the ways in which cultural stereotypes obstruct effective genuine reciprocal engagement between students and teachers, the potential for surface and instrumental learning seems high. The outcomes of my own reflections prompted by this exercise are that institutional admissions criteria give little clue either to applicants or teachers of the real depth and complexity of the cultural and academic challenges which routinely characterize the classroom. They can also deflect teacher anxiety away from their own practices and required academic supports made available to students

onto students themselves, with the risk that teachers characterize pre-experience programmes and their participants as intellectually unrewarding.

## Conclusion

Given that the pace of internationalisation in UK HE seems set to continue unabated and levels of classroom diversity in the composition of both international and domestic cohorts to increase, it is clear that more sensitive student recruitment strategies would benefit from development, supported by retrospective evaluation of the predictive validity of the admissions in determining developmental academic performance rather than simple degree outcomes. If teachers and students are to be adequately alerted to the cultural and social learning inherent in academic programmes, the admissions process might be broadened to incorporate a wider variety of qualitative measures to run alongside simple academic criteria, for example. Such measures would certainly be more expensive to administer, but perhaps prove more sustainable in delivering long-term educational quality objectives. Currently admissions systems can be beset by routine and mechanistic processes – particularly long-distance admissions to mass PG programmes – with a narrow focus on limited academic and language scores. The systems are often administered by those who have little direct experience of the educational systems from which they recruit. Such processes send misleading signals both to students and to programme teachers about the style and complexity of the teaching and learning task in which they are mutually engaged.

The stress upon the early weeks of teaching on international conversion Master's programmes seems evident. At their most depressing, a community of students - with high expectations of themselves and the programme encouraged by the admissions process – and teachers - who regard such programmes gloomily – might engage in a process of halting miscomprehension which offers little of mutual reward. At their best, however, such programmes offer enormous opportunities for intercultural learning and exchange both for cross-border and local students. The process of creating cultural inclusivity in the classroom is challenging; cultural lexis is very deeply embedded within the discipline and within local academic practices. On the other hand, the utilisation of the students' wide range of experiences in discovery learning activities, an intellectual focus on cultural pluralism within a critical orientation to the discipline and attention to the development of skills and cohort cohesion within the curriculum can all contribute to harnessing explicit international diversity as a positive learning strength rather than an impoverishing weakness. The fact that we may be saying different things, even when speaking the same language makes a potentially very powerful contribution to global misunderstanding. The remedy, however, lies in uncovering our minds so that we can listen to each other carefully. The international business classroom seems like a good place to in which to do that.

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