

TEACHING INTERCULTURAL SKILLS IN THE  
MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

Research Paper – Teaching (Business)

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## TEACHING INTERCULTURAL SKILLS IN THE MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

### ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the adaptation of the ExcelL Intercultural Skills Program to an international human resource management course, and critically examines the effectiveness of integrating case study methods with the skills based ExcelL program. The ExcelL program is a theory-driven and evidence-based group program that utilises classroom cultural diversity, student experiences and role-plays to develop specific intercultural skills. The primary purpose of the study was to assess the usefulness of ExcelL within a sample of 85 third-year university business students. Four methodologies were used: (1) questionnaires, (2) case studies, (3) course evaluation survey and (4) focus groups. After completing the program, participants demonstrated improvements in intercultural competencies required in business contexts as well as increased self-confidence and feelings of self-efficacy in cross-cultural situations. Additionally, participants demonstrated improved identification and articulation of cross-cultural business problems and formulation of appropriate intervention strategies to address these problems.

In an era characterised by the globalisation of business, the demand for managers equipped with intercultural skills is increasing (Javidan & House, 2001). An increasing number of managers are sent on expatriate assignments (Harzing, 2004), and managers in many countries are required to manage staff from culturally diverse backgrounds (Lane, Maznevski, & Mendenhall, 2003). The development of managers with intercultural skills, therefore, has become an important priority for University business schools (Ledwith & Seymour, 2001).

The need for intercultural training for Australian business graduates has been well established by a report commissioned by the Australian Federal government in 1992 to help prepare Australian managers for the 'Asia-Pacific Century' (Karpin, 1995). The report highlighted the fact that Australian managers were seen as "unwilling to adapt to cultural differences and appeared to be unaware of cultural differences between countries" (Dawkins, Savery, & Mazzarol, 1995, p.37). Since the report's publication, business schools throughout Australia have attempted to raise the standard of cross-cultural management skills through specialist international business degrees and courses. An accompanying trend has been the growing number of international students in Australia's business school classrooms (AVCC, 2002), potentially providing a rich source of diversity for developing culturally savvy managers. The effective realisation of this potential, however, is unclear, with a similar situation in the UK resulting in a sometimes widening gap between international students and local students, even in classrooms where intercultural skills are being taught (Ledwith et al., 2001). This research paper presents the evaluation of the introduction of the ExcelL intercultural skills training program to an undergraduate international human resource management (IHRM) classroom. The ExcelL program provides an excellent mechanism for students to explain how communication behaviour is different in their culture, and the underlying values that influence the behaviour (Barker, Troth, & Mak, 2002). Further, the program makes explicit the values and norms underpinning behaviour in the host culture and creates a supportive environment for students to enhance their communication skills.

Local, international and immigrant students have gained increased skills in intercultural communication and improved their understanding of other cultures through their participation in the ExcelL program (Barker et al., 2002; Mak, 2000; Mak, Barker, Millman, & Logan, 1998a). However, where the ExcelL program has been embedded in business courses, as opposed to an extra-curricular workshop for volunteers, the learning benefits related to business coursework objectives are unclear and this has been raised as a question for further research (Barker et al., 2002). Using course feedback channels, participants have also questioned how the skills can be applied to the relevant business context (Barker et al., 2002). The application of the program to business situations, its integration into an undergraduate curriculum and its efficacy in teaching relevant intercultural management skills are the major issues that require evaluation, therefore.

### **Teaching International Human Resource Management**

The teaching of international human resource management in the undergraduate context provides a number of specific challenges, some of which are identified by DeCieri, Cox and Fenwick (2001) in their critical examination of teaching strategic IHRM. These challenges include guarding against the

oversimplifications of cultural naïvete, the ‘narrow exclusiveness of ethnocentrism’ and the ‘patronization of paternalism’ (DeCieri, Wolfram-Cox, & Fenwick, 2001). It is often difficult for the lecturer to resist the temptation to use simplistic cultural generalisations and to use the home country as the reference point for examining cultural values. The lecturer must also be aware that the classroom is rich with cultural knowledge and experiences, especially in the multicultural Australian university business classroom. The challenge for the lecturer as facilitator, therefore, is to provide a teaching environment that taps into this cultural diversity to welcome diversity through affirmation of differing cultural perspectives and to enable students to share those perspectives with the class. Further to this, the culturally diverse classroom presents an opportunity to experience and demonstrate the creation of culturally synergistic solutions through application of processes such as Adler’s (Adler, 2002) cultural synergy model in task oriented group settings.

Despite the opportunity that the culturally diverse classroom provides, evaluative survey research amongst 172 culturally diverse students in UK business schools (enrolled in a International Human Resource Management course) found that task based interactions amongst diverse students in the classroom were often perceived negatively (Ledwith et al., 2001). In addressing this, the researchers found that an assessment based process of requiring students to manage and respect cultural differences within multicultural groups produced generally positive experiences of classroom diversity (Ledwith et al., 2001). They recommended that a more deliberate, structured approach to managing classroom diversity focussing on the development of perceptual and interpersonal skills and the development of diversity competencies would help in developing intercultural competence in global oriented business students (Ledwith et al., 2001). The Excell program potentially provides this structured approach.

The development of intercultural skills for managers operating globally has been long established in the discipline related literature (Black & Mendenhall, 1989; Fish & Wood, 1997; Woods, 2003). There are a number of established methods of developing these skills including role-plays, simulations, sensitivity training, field experiences (Blake, Heslin, & Curtis, 1996; Woods, 2000), however most of these methods have been tested in the organisational setting rather than the higher education setting. The preferred methods in many higher education settings is didactic instruction and group discussion (Friga, Bettis, & Sullivan, 2003; Kumar & Usinier, 2001), whereas role-based training in groups has been suggested to be more effective in developing intercultural skills (Blake et al., 1996; Selmer, 1998). A combination of methods including also the case study method (Christensen & Hansen, 1987; McNair, 1954; Rees & Porter, 2002) has the potential to develop graduates with both analytical and practical skills.

### **The Excell Program**

The Excell program utilises classroom cultural diversity, student experiences and role-plays to develop specific intercultural skills. Excell is a theory-driven and evidence-based group program designed to enhance international students’ confidence and skills in academic, social and career contexts (Mak, 2000). Previous research has found that the resulting increased behavioural competencies decrease the stress associated with cross-cultural encounters, encouraging social contact with, rather than avoidance of, students from other cultures (Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama,

1998b). Further, ExcelL has demonstrable benefits for improving intercultural understanding between local Australian, international and immigrant students, thus maximising the potential benefits of the cultural diversity within university environments (Mak et al., 1998a). In addition to Australia, the program has been introduced in universities and higher education institutions in England, Canada, and New Zealand.

The ExcelL program has been demonstrated to provide optimal conditions for international students to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills for successful social interactions with host nationals, while maintaining their cultural identity, through incorporating various special features (Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama, & Barker, 1999). These features include the use of facilitator-based group work using rehearsal and retention methods based on cultural maps. These cultural maps provide succinct descriptions of effective ways of behaving in specific social contexts such as asking a lecturer for help. Cultural maps use a sequence of precise and concrete micro-skills (both verbal and non-verbal). The use of this method leads to decreased intercultural social anxiety by increasing social confidence. This social confidence is developed through mastery of actual skills that would be used in the 'real world'.

The ExcelL program uses six stages to progress participants from initial contact to the point of being able to use the new skills in intercultural settings. Prior to beginning this process, each session begins with an introduction where participants are welcomed or welcomed back. For continuing participants, their progress through the previously taught competencies is reviewed, and feedback and encouragement given. The first stage is called building 'alliance and assess'. This involves participants contemplating how they would behave in a social interaction in their home culture, and sharing these observations. The second stage is the development of the cultural map. The cultural map is developed from the observations stimulated within the first phase, with participants using the ExcelL manual to record the version of the cultural map that is most useful for them. Facilitators emphasise that maps are not prescriptive, but rather guides for participants to use and adapt. In the third stage, trainers demonstrate appropriate sequences of micro-skills represented in the cultural map. The participants then practice these skills, and further coaching from the facilitator is provided if required. Feedback and encouragement is given in the fourth stage. The fifth stage involves participants setting goals and recording a contract in their manual that describes where and when they plan to practice the new skills in the week ahead with someone from a cultural background different to their own. They are encouraged to use the reflective exercises that are in the manual to focus their learning about the interaction and to identify areas that require ongoing work. This leads to the final sixth stage, where the participants transfer the learning to actual settings. The transfer of learning occurs when the participants report on their experience of practicing the competency in the real-life situation and flexibility required to adapt these skills to different situations. Facilitators discuss how students can continue to use their analytical skills of dividing a scenario into components (the 'map'), as well as their behavioural and reflective skills. To provide a suitable context for application of ExcelL skills, it is proposed that the program be integrated with the case study method.

### **Case Study Method**

The case study method of teaching focuses on engaging students in a reflexive dialogic process aiming for conceptual, decisional, strategic and problem-focused analysis of a written or video case about a real company facing specific business problems (Christensen et al., 1987). The application of this method to teaching business students has been identified as originating almost 50 years ago from the Harvard Business School (McNair, 1954), and has been adopted in various forms in teaching business students at both the graduate and undergraduate level (Desiraju & Gopinath, 2001; Forman & Rymer, 1999). The benefits of the approach have been identified as the development of diagnostic skills, subject and functional integration, deep learning, and the involvement and motivation of students (Rees et al., 2002). The method, therefore, could provide a course related context in which intercultural skills could be critically examined in operation.

### **The Course Context**

The course 'International Human Resource Management' was offered to 90 third year undergraduates and three postgraduates at Griffith University in 2003. It is a third year undergraduate course with open enrolment and is a core course in the human resource management major of the Bachelor of Commerce degree. The 13-week course was structured around fortnightly two-hour lectures involving the whole class and two-hour fortnightly workshops of no more than 20 students. The course topics include the international application of human resource functions as well as managing international teams, international negotiation, managing the human resource dimensions of international joint ventures and repatriation. Four of the six fortnightly workshops focussed on a particular intercultural skill from the Excell program and these included expressing disagreement across cultures, giving feedback across cultures, making social contact with people from other cultures and participating in culturally diverse groups. Each workshop focussed on the development of a particular skill and its application within a particular IRHM case study. The marriage of intercultural skills and IHRM case topics took the format of: - expressing disagreement in international negotiations, giving feedback in managing international joint ventures, making social contact in developing local stakeholder networks, and participating in a group in managing international teams. The case studies centred on an IHRM scenario, providing the context for problem identification, strategy formulation, role-play setting and cultural map (skills application) focus in the workshop. Participation and learning from the workshops was not directly assessed as part of the final grade for the course. Thirty-five percent of the final grade was attributed to the analysis of a case study chosen by the student from the case studies examined in workshops. This was the only connection between the workshops and overall assessment of the course.

**Integration with case study method.** Most business courses, specifically management and human resource management courses, focus on the development of analytical skills and understanding of theoretical concepts in management. The Excell program, however is focussed on developing practical skills in intercultural communication. Excell was originally framed as an adaptation program, with its stated aims being to help international and immigrant students to learn skills that will improve their opportunities for success in the new country (Westwood, Mak, Barker, & Ishiyama, 2001). The course International Human Resource Management has two

objectives being ‘that students will demonstrate a theoretical and applied understanding of the unique challenges of International HRM and the skill sets necessary for managers operating in a global environment.’ ExcelL offers development of the skill set whereas the case study method offers development of an applied understanding of the challenges of IHRM. An example of the type of intercultural skills needed in specific business contexts would be utilising intercultural communication skills in negotiating an employment contract with subsidiary employees in an Asian/Pacific country. The application of intercultural skills to specific business contexts enables a more integrated teaching design, strengthening the links between the skills and the course content. Applying the ExcelL intercultural skills training to relevant case studies in workshops, has the potential to actualise these goals.

**Research Aims.** The effectiveness of integrating the case study method with the skills based ExcelL program requires careful evaluation, and this is a focus of this study. The primary purpose of the study was to assess the usefulness of ExcelL within a sample of higher-level university business students. Previous research has examined the efficacy of ExcelL in postgraduate University student samples (Barker et al., 2002), but the logical extension to undergraduate business student participants had yet to be researched. The adapted ExcelL program’s specific learning outcomes are:

1. Students will demonstrate improved skills in identifying cross-cultural interaction problems in business situations
2. Students will improve in being able to identify appropriate strategies to overcome problems in cross-cultural business interactions
3. Students will report increased self-confidence and feelings of self-efficacy in cross-cultural situations

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Of the 93 students in the class, 72% were female and 28% of the class male, and 28% were enrolled as international students. Most of the students were enrolled in the Bachelor of Commerce (66%) with 10% enrolled in International Business and nine other programs were represented. Eighty-five students completed the course evaluation survey. Forty-six participants completed the pre-test phase of the questionnaire, and twenty-three of these completed the post-test phase. Only thirteen of these questionnaires could be matched as a particular participant’s pre and post ExcelL questionnaire.

### Procedures

The study was conducted using four methodologies: (1) questionnaires, (2) case study analysis (3) focus groups and (4) a course evaluation. The questionnaires and case study methods used pre-test and post-test designs to compare participants’ knowledge and micro-skills before and after completing the ExcelL program. To complement this, the focus groups were conducted at the end of the program as a means of gathering participants’ opinions about developments in intercultural skills gained through the ExcelL program, and advice on potential improvements to the program for future course offerings. The course evaluation survey was conducted at

the end of the course. These four methods were used to allow an expanded analysis of the outcomes of the ExcelL program in the course.

Two case studies were presented to the participants, one prior to the ExcelL program and one after the ExcelL program. Participants recorded their conclusions about the most culturally appropriate ways to behave within these scenarios by answering the questions listed in Table 1. The case studies presented intercultural problems and issues, in order to allow participants the opportunity to report the skills they would use to bring about the most satisfactory conclusion. The accuracy of answers to questions about the case were rated according to set criteria to determine a score of 1 = low accuracy, 2 = medium accuracy and 3 = high accuracy. The pre-ExcelL and post-ExcelL accuracy of answers to the case studies for each participant were then compared.

At the end of the ExcelL course, two groups of four participants formed focus groups led by independent facilitators. The purpose was to evaluate the ExcelL program in the course and to generate ideas about how the ExcelL program might be improved. A modified version of the nominal group technique (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975) was used, with individuals generating ideas independently before bringing them back to the group. These ideas were then compared and categorised to distil key themes. In order to reduce the opportunity for groupthink, the key themes from each group were compared and the main themes extracted. Students were then able to vote for the three most appropriate responses to the focus group questions, with 3 points given for the most appropriate response, 2 points for the second most appropriate and 1 point for the third most appropriate. The results of the focus group votes were collated later to determine the most frequent responses to each question (Table 7).

## Measures

The focus groups asked five questions (Table 1) related to the relevance of ExcelL to the course content and course objectives (question one), the relevance of the skills to learning about IHRM (question two), the effectiveness of ExcelL in teaching intercultural skills (question three), the effectiveness of using the case study method in applying intercultural skills (question four), and the usefulness and areas for improvement for the participant's manual.

The questionnaire administered to ExcelL participants both before and after the program included the interaction skills checklist (Ishiyama, 1996). This checklist asks participants to rate their social interaction skills on 33 items using a 7 point scale from '1 = not at all effective' to '7 = extremely effective.' The checklist yields a total interaction skills score as well as six subscale scores being processing skills, active engagement skills, self-enhancement skills, approaching skills, assertive skills and interruption skills. This checklist assesses not only a person's perception of their skills, but their self-confidence and feelings of self-efficacy in utilising these skills.

The case study questions were designed to assess three particular areas that were related to the course objective of 'examining the skill sets necessary for managers operating globally.' The first question assessed the participant's ability to accurately identify intercultural problems by asking 'What do you think are the main intercultural problems evident in the case study?' The second question assessed the

ability to accurately select appropriate intercultural skills by asking ‘What intercultural skills would have helped in resolving the problems presented in the case study?’ The third question asked ‘What strategy would you suggest to help resolve the intercultural problems evident in the case study?’ to assess the participant’s ability to create an intercultural solution strategy.

The course evaluation questionnaire was developed from the course evaluation questions made available by the Griffith Institute of Higher Education (Armstrong & Conrad, 1994). A total of 28 closed ended questions were selected, where participants respond to statements using a six-point scale from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. The course evaluation questionnaire also contained four open-ended questions for participants to respond to (Table 3).

TABLE 1  
Focus Group Questions

	Question
1.	What was relevant in the Excell program to the practice of International Human Resource Management?
2.	The intercultural skills taught in the Excell program were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participating in a group</li> <li>• Making social contact</li> <li>• Expressing disagreement</li> <li>• Giving Feedback</li> </ul> In what way were these skills relevant to your learning about International Human Resource Management?
3.	What was effective about the Excell program in teaching you intercultural skills?
4.	The four case studies used and the video case on group interactions: What was effective about using the case studies in applying the intercultural skills?
5.	Give some ideas on how useful the participant's manual was and how it could be improved?

## RESULTS

Table 2 reports that most students were satisfied with the course overall. Although most students attended all or most of the lectures (68%), only 35% of students attended all or most of the workshops. The Excell program occupied four of the six workshops offered, and all six of the workshops focussed on specific IHRM case studies. Whereas most students found the lectures (77%) and the readings (72%) as either assisting or being a valuable aid to learning, only 57% of students felt that the workshops were a valuable aid to their learning (Table 2). It should be noted that class discussion was also promoted in the lectures; hence there was a high positive

response (83%) to the question on whether the teacher encouraged students to participate in class discussions.

TABLE 2  
Responses To Selected Course Evaluation Questions (n = 85)

Question	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Uncertain	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	Missing
In this course the teacher encouraged students to participate in class discussions	83%	14%	4%	0%
Overall, I was satisfied with the quality of this course	76%	13%	7%	4%
I found that the teaching methods used in this course were effective in helping me to learn	75%	16%	8%	0%
I attended all or most of the lectures	68%	7%	14%	11%
I attended all or most of the workshops	35%	18%	11%	36%
The lectures were a valuable aid to my learning	77%	14%	9%	0%
The workshops were a valuable aid to my learning	57%	16%	24%	2%
The required readings assisted my learning	72%	16%	9%	2%

Course evaluations also asked students to provide written answers to four questions. Altogether, 62 out of 85 respondents provided responses to one or more of the questions presented in Table 3. Table 4 presents the answers or comments related to the Excell program. The most frequently cited positive comment regarding the Excell program related to the interaction and discussion that the program facilitated. The most frequently cited negative comment regarding the program was that it was not linked to assessment. Opinion on role-plays was divided, with four participants commenting positively and two participants commenting negatively. A positive comment about identifying aspects of the course that helped their reading (question 2, Table 3) was “getting to practice things such as ways to communicate more effectively through role plays in workshops.” A negative comment in response to question 4 asking participants to recommend strategies for improvement on any aspects of the course that caused them concern, was “I thought Excell was very simplistic, to a point where it was insulting doing role plays – get rid of it and have more meaningful discussions rather than simplistic generalisations about other cultures.” Although three participants felt the workshops were boring, two other participants specifically commented that the workshops were interesting. The seven comments relating to case studies were all positive. In answer to question 1 that

asked participants to comment on the most valuable things they had learnt from the course, a participant wrote “The case studies are a fabulous way to facilitate learning.”

TABLE 3  
Open-Ended Course Evaluation Questions

1.	What are the most valuable things you have learned from this course? Include at least one illustration of how you achieved the course objectives listed above.
2.	Identify aspects of the course that helped your learning.
3.	Identify aspects of the course that hindered your learning.
4.	If any aspects of the course caused you concern, please recommend strategies for improvement.

TABLE 4  
Course Evaluation Comments Related To The Excell Program

Positive Comments	Negative Comments
Interaction and discussion was good (x9)	No link to assessment (x4)
Case studies gave real life examples (x7)	Boring (x3)
Liked role plays (x4)	Did not like role plays (x2)
Interesting (x2)	No link to lectures/ topics (x2)
Case studies are good in facilitating learning (x2)	Worthless activities (x2)
Learnt from the scenarios presented	Felt childish (x2)
Communication training	
Cultural mapping	
<b>Total = 27</b>	<b>Total = 15</b>

Paired sample t-tests of case study analysis reports before and after the Excell program (Table 5) found that Excell did have a significant effect on both intercultural skill selection and in the ability to create a solution strategy. The low number of matches between pre-workshop and post-workshop reports (10) and surveys (13) is indicative of the low and inconsistent attendance at workshops.

**TABLE 5**  
Paired Sample T-Tests For Case Study Analysis Reports Before And After Excell

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Intercultural problem identification before Excell - Intercultural problem identification after Excell	-.50	.707	.224	-1.01	.01	-2.236	9	.052
Pair 2	Intercultural skill selection before Excell - Intercultural skill selection after Excell	-.80	.632	.200	-1.25	-.35	-4.000	9	.003
Pair 3	Ability to create a solution strategy before Excell - Ability to create a solution strategy after Excell	-.70	.823	.260	-1.29	-.11	-2.689	9	.025

Paired sample t-tests for interaction skills (Table 6) assessed through the interaction skills checklist (Ishiyama, 1996), indicate improvement in all skills assessed. Significant improvement is noted in the total of all interaction skills, in processing skills, active engagement skills and assertive skills.

**TABLE 6**  
Paired Sample T-Tests For Interaction Skills Checklist Before And After Excell

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Total Interaction Skills	-11.7692	14.66375	4.06699	-20.6304	-2.9080	-2.894	12	<b>.013</b>
Pair 2	Processing Skills	-2.1538	3.21056	.89045	-4.0940	-.2137	-2.419	12	<b>.032</b>
Pair 3	Active Engagement Skills	-2.3077	3.52100	.97655	-4.4354	-.1800	-2.363	12	<b>.036</b>
Pair 4	Self-Enhancement Skills	-2.0769	3.54640	.98359	-4.2200	.0661	-2.112	12	.056
Pair 5	Approaching Skills	-1.9231	3.88290	1.07692	-4.2695	.4233	-1.786	12	.099
Pair 6	Assertive Skills	-2.1538	3.33782	.92574	-4.1709	-.1368	-2.327	12	<b>.038</b>
Pair 7	Interruption Skills	-1.7692	4.12621	1.14441	-4.2627	.7242	-1.546	12	.148

**TABLE 7**  
**Combined Major Responses To Focus Group Questions**

Q1.	<b>What was relevant in the ExcelL program to the practice of International Human Resource Management?</b>	
i	Provides practice context for IHRM	18
ii	Heightens cultural awareness	12
iii	Provides and understanding of impacts of cultural diversity on IHRM	12
Q2.	<b>In what way were the ExcelL skills relevant to your learning about International Human Resource Management?</b>	
i	Making social contacts and giving feedback due to cultural variance	11
ii	These skills help distinguish IHRM from domestic HRM	9
iii	Participation in a group so that one can be comfortable/ skilled in a group	5
Q3.	<b>What was effective about the ExcelL program in teaching you intercultural skills?</b>	
i	Relevant and practical	21
ii	The diversity of the group	8
iii	Effective use of case studies	7
Q4.	<b>What was effective about using the case studies in applying the intercultural skills?</b>	
i	Increases self awareness leading to skill improvement	10
ii	Provides real life context	10
iii	Provides practical context	7
Q5	<b>Give some ideas on how useful the participant's manual was and how it could be improved?</b>	
i	More specifics on each culture needed	11
ii	Questions provide focus for thoughts	11
iii	Is useful, practical and precise	9
iv	Simple format is good for business	7

## DISCUSSION

The ExcelL course combined with case study applications appeared to have a mixed level of success in reaching the goals prescribed. Based on the results of the case study questions, it appears as though students did achieve some improvement in

identifying cross-cultural interaction problems in business situations, but not at a significant level (Table 5). The goal of improving in being able to “identify appropriate strategies to overcome problems in cross-cultural business interactions” was also affirmed by the case study question results, with a significant improvement in question three and a significant improvement in question two.

The sample size of 10 out of a possible 93 students enrolled in the course, affirms the finding in Table 2 (Responses to selected course evaluation questions) that attendance throughout the Excell program was a major problem with only 35% of students reporting that they attended the workshops regularly. The student comments on the course evaluation gave reasons for this, with the major problem being that the Excell program was not adequately linked to overall course assessment.

Student’s receptivity to the Excell program appeared varied, with a number of students, including focus group participants, expressing strong support for the relevance of Excell to the learning of International Human Resource Management. Course evaluation comments, however, indicated that students were divided on the relevance and suitability of the program to the course. Some students felt that activities were ‘worthless’ and they ‘felt childish’. Some of these comments were linked to a particular staff member, whose manner was regarded as ‘condescending’ by some students. Nevertheless, the reaction to introducing a behavioural based program into University curriculum has been recognised as generating some level of student resistance as it is contrary to normal classroom expectations of business students (Rynes, Quinn Trank, Lawson, & Iles, 2003). It appears as though the relevance of the program to IHRM could also have been better framed according to student feedback recorded in Table 4. The reaction to role plays appears divided (Table 4) with four students expressing they liked this aspect and two expressing that they did not like it. Role plays in training can generate mixed reactions (Smith, 1998), however further training of facilitators often helps to reduce negative reactions (Noe, 1999).

The integration of the case study method and Excell seemed to be effective from the perspective of focus group participants with strongly rated responses being that the case studies ‘provide practice context for IHRM’, ‘heightens cultural awareness’ and ‘provides and understanding of impacts of cultural diversity on IHRM’ (Table 7). The link between case studies and intercultural skills training was regarded positively by focus group participants with the top responses being ‘increases self awareness leading to skill improvement’, ‘provides real life context’ and ‘provides practical context’ (Table 7). The focus group responses, however, must be tempered with the ‘voting with one’s feet’ aspect of poor workshop attendance, indicating that many students did not think the Excell program was relevant to their completion of the course.

Students reported increased self-confidence and feelings of self-efficacy in cross-cultural situations via the interaction skills survey results presented in Table 6. Students were encouraged to practice the skills outside of the classroom with students and friends from other cultural backgrounds. The resulting increase in self-confidence and self-efficacy are important when considering that intercultural success is likely to lead to further intercultural interactions, whereas failure often leads to further cultural isolation (Hullett & Witte, 2001).

## CONCLUSION

This research found that through completing the program participants were able to demonstrate improvement in some of the specific intercultural competencies required in business contexts, as well as reporting increased self-confidence and feelings of self-efficacy in cross - cultural situations. Additionally, participants demonstrated improved identification and articulation of cross-cultural business problems and formulation of appropriate intervention strategies to address these problems. The integration of the case study method with the ExcelL program is supported, however participation in the program must be linked to assessment, program facilitators must be well trained, and the integration of the program to the overall course must be clearly presented. Key themes were identified from the focus groups that will be incorporated and assessed in future versions of ExcelL designed for a business coursework audience. Considering that previous studies have consistently supported the usefulness of the ExcelL program in multicultural university environments, and this study supporting the application of ExcelL in business coursework settings, it is proposed that a modified version of ExcelL may provide businesses with training programs that gainfully assist adaptation within increasingly multicultural business environments.

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