

# The effect of culture on educational methodologies in international business programs: an application to the iMBA program<sup>1</sup>

Luisa Andreu, Amparo Cervera, Joaquin Aldás, Marta Frasquet, Martina González-Gallarza, María Iborra, Isabel Sánchez

*Universitat de València (SPAIN)*

As the world becomes global, there are growing needs and opportunities for intercultural exchanges in learning processes. In the context of the Spanish University Strategy for 2015, one of the most important objectives is to increase internationalisation through international postgraduate courses (Spanish Ministry of Education, 2010). Intercultural teaching capabilities are now becoming necessary for better achieving perceived service quality among international students. In the area of business studies, research on pedagogical issues is needed in order to provide recommendations and group management implications. For instance, a challenge for international business programs is dealing with intercultural members' teamwork, skill very highly demanded by European companies. Consequently, research regarding the relationship between students' cultural value orientation and the level of satisfaction towards educational methodologies (i.e. attitude about teamwork versus individual work) is sparse in the context of international business programs in higher education. The aim of this research is to analyze how cultural differences along the Hofstede dimensions of individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term/short-term orientation influence the international students' perceptions towards working in teams. The academic context chosen for this paper refers to the international academic experience of the International Master in Business Administration, iMBA at Universitat de Valencia (Spain). Student profile is varied (different nationalities, ages and academic training) and they interact and exchange experiences. Results and recommendations are particularly relevant to educators teaching courses in a culturally diverse classroom.

Keywords: cross-cultural education, learning methodologies, service quality, teamwork

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the context of the Spanish University Strategy for 2015, one of the most important objectives is to increase internationalisation through international postgraduate courses (Spanish Ministry of Education, 2010). The internationalisation of university education changes the composition of the adult classroom, increasing diversity and bringing new associated teaching and learning problems (Kelly, 2009). Diversity in student home-country has several challenges for educators who must determine the appropriate teaching strategies (i.e., group problem solving in classes or more passive techniques) in a multicultural context.

Nowadays, organizations are increasingly relying on the use of teamwork processes to meet the challenges of global competition. Businesses rely on teams to increase quality and efficiency (Nielsen, 2010). Due to the importance of teamwork, educators in business colleges put emphasis on including teamwork experiences in their classes (Pineda et al., 2009). Group work is recognized within many academic disciplines as an important pedagogical tool when instructing graduate students. Similarly, working in groups allows students to assess their teambuilding skills for future use in the workplace (Rafferty, 2011). However, culture may impact upon the way teaching strategies are implemented. An international and diverse classroom poses challenges for the learner who may now have to work with

---

<sup>1</sup> Andreu, L.; Cervera, A.; Aldás, J.; Frasquet, M.; González-Gallarza, M.; Iborra, M. y Sánchez, I. (2012): "The effect of culture on educational methodologies in international business programs: an application to the iMBA program", ponencia presentada en el 6th International Technology, Education and Development Conference, INTED2012, Marzo, Valencia <http://library.iated.org>

a group comprising students that may be very different (Kelly, 2009). The challenge is also for the teacher who must determine the appropriate teaching style and strategy.

The aim of this research is to analyze how cultural differences along the Hofstede dimensions of individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term/short-term orientation influence the international students' perceptions towards working in teams. The academic context chosen for this paper refers to the international academic experience of the International Master in Business Administration, iMBA at Universitat de Valencia (Spain). Student profile is varied (different nationalities, ages and academic training) and they interact and exchange experiences. Results and recommendations are particularly relevant to educators teaching courses in a culturally diverse classroom.

## **2 CULTURAL CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Previous research in marketing has found culture to be an important determinant of consumer behavior (Dash et al., 2006), as the beliefs of the "appropriate" by a society determines the way its people interact. According to Solomon (1996; p. 539), culture is "the accumulation of shared meanings, rituals, norms and traditions" among members of an organisation or society, which projects the collective processing of the mindset and distinguishes a group or society from the others.

Previous studies reveal that cultures can be defined and measured without ambiguity as the existing entities. Furthermore, a few comprehensive models have been developed to capture the roots and consequences of cultural differences. For instance, in Geert Hofstede's works during the early 1980s, he addresses several cultural dimensions which prevail as a theoretical frame and develop the subject of cultural consequences. He makes an attempt to underpin the knowledge body of different cultures among societies, and uses the bipolar measurement to facilitate an understanding of cultural differences. Originally based upon a sample of 116000 IBM employees, Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions were designed to measure work-related values (Litvin et al., 2004).

Hofstede's (1980) four dimensions provide insight to better understanding the relationships depicted as high vs. low power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity, and long term orientation. Additionally, among the cadre of cultural influences that have been studied in the higher education literature, it appears that the role of cultural dimensions has been rarely mentioned. There is however theoretical support for the relationship between cultural differences and satisfaction beyond educational literature, which will be combined in the following review for the comprehension of the cultural variables.

### **2.1 Power Distance**

Power distance is referred to the degree to which the inequality in power among different levels of an organization or the society is considered normal and tolerable (Hofstede, 2001). The extent of inequality is accepted in varied ways among cultures, although it exists in any culture. Countries which rank as having a high power distance accept inequality and paternalism, which the status are based on rank, ancestry and wealth. Meanwhile, the objectives of the organization are quite often dictated from the heads to subordinates. High power distance include India, Hong Kong, Singapore, France, Belgium, Latin America; while the United States, Canada, England, Australia, Germany, Scandinavia show low power distance (Hofstede, 2001). Power distance also reflects general human inequality in terms of prestige, wealth, power, and law (Dash et al., 2006). In this sense, customers under a high power distance culture tend to depend more on the centralization and formalization of authority and display tolerance for the lack of autonomy, which fosters inequalities in power and wealth (Hofstede, 1980, 1991).

### **2.2 Individualism vs. Collectivism**

Individualist cultures are defined as being societies in which individuals are primarily concerned with their own interests and the interests of their immediate family. Collectivist's cultures in contrast, assume that individuals belong to one or more "in-groups" (e.g., extended family, other organizations) from which they cannot detach themselves (Hofstede, 2001). Individualist individuals tend to be self-oriented, whereas collectivist individuals are more group-oriented. In individualistic societies, workers take responsibility for themselves, whereas in collectivist cultures, individuals are part of cohesive groups in which harmony is more important than individual gain. Typical individualism nations are

Anglo-American, Scandinavia, Belgium, while countries like Singapore, Portugal, Mexico, Costa Rica are known as collectivism.

Individualist behaviors are regulated by cost/benefit computations, whereas collectivist behaviors are controlled by in-group norms (Triandis et al., 1993). Since the in-group's welfare is more important than the individual, the collectivist consumers to be less sensitive to individual rewards of effort and satisfaction as opposed to the individual. Similarly, collectivists will expend less effort on decision making than individualists, given the tendency of collectivists to place the locus of control on the group. Furthermore, being relatively self-focused, individualists expect their environment to be sensitive to them; while being situation-focused, collectivists feel that they are obligated to be sensitive to the environment (de Mooij, 2004). Given individualists' focus on the pursuit of personal goals and ideals (Triandis et al., 1988), while the collectivists tend to place harmony, security, and conformity, above individuals pursuits, the former possess higher expectations and standards in judging services.

### **2.3 Uncertainty Avoidance**

In Hofstede's definition (2001), uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree of comfort members of a culture feel in unfamiliar or unstructured situations and the extent to which 'a society tries to control the uncontrollable'. Specifically, high uncertainty avoidance cultures are not comfortable with unstructured situations. In other words, it indicates the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations that are unstructured, unpredictable, or unclear, and the extent to which these people attempt to avoid such situations by adopting strict codes of behavior and a belief in absolute truth. Countries have been assigned labels for uncertainty avoidance. In countries that rank high in this dimension, people feel threatened by uncertain situations. They tend to lay down rules and procedures for workers, and creative approaches are not welcomed. Low uncertainty avoidance nations for example are the US, Singapore, Hong Kong, Great Britain, Sweden, Jamaica; High uncertainty avoidance ones are Japan, Germany, France, Greece, Mexico.

### **2.4 Masculinity vs. Femininity**

Masculinity indicates the extent to which "masculine" traits are dominant in societal members. Generally, masculine values include lack of concern for others, assertiveness, quest for material wealth, and competitiveness (Hofstede, 1993; Stephens and Greer, 1995). Masculine cultures value financial success and career advancement. In feminine cultures, relationships, cooperation and security are held in higher regard. The examples for masculine cultures are the United States, Venezuela, Mexico, Japan and Great Britain; while the feminine includes most Latin American, Scandinavia, The Netherlands and the Far East.

### **2.5 Long-term Orientation**

Long-term orientation tries to distinguish the cultural difference mainly from the West and the East, which is an additional dimension from Hofstede's original four in thinking of the cultural consequences among countries (De Mooij, 2003). Earlier, the data collected from the IMB studies reveal that there is some cultural phenomena which cannot be omitted or included in the previous four cultural dimensions, thus Hofstede and his colleagues created a Chinese survey concerning the construct of value and distributed across 23 nations. Ultimately with an understanding of the impact of the Confucius teaching from the East, long-term orientation was defined (De Mooij, 2003). While LOT is significant cultural consequences in Asia, in Europe the differences are relatively smaller. Highest LTO ranking are countries locate in the Asian region such as China, Japan and South Korea, whereas in the western societies, Netherlands, Norway, the United State, the United Kingdom score relatively higher, and Spain scores lowest.

Long-term orientation (LOT) is accordingly the Confucian dimension, which indicates cultures in the Far East think in terms of generations and centuries, but not the profitable results for the next-quarter. Specific element encompassed by the Long-term orientation cultures are pragmatism, perseverance persistence and thrift. Other typical characteristics embraced by LOT societies are personal stability and steadiness, the importance on protecting the "face", respect the tradition and reciprocation. In this instance, people have a sense of shame; moreover, the relationships among the social members are arranged by personal status, and the ordering relationships are frequently observed.

Overall, the importance of understanding the cultural diversity arising from nationality differences lies in the increasing competitive global education market. The pressure thus drives the improvement in the service quality and leads to the expansion of international student markets. Moreover, recognizing the critical role of cultural differences has significant implications for service providers in their efforts to communicate with international or immigrant consumers.

### **3 CULTURE-BASED THEORY OF EDUCATION AND TEAM WORK**

Previous research highlights that national culture influences learning – style preference and teaching methods. Some people want greater control and personal responsibility in the learning process, and some prefer the teacher to provide structure (Dejoy and Dejoy, 1987). Literature on culture and learning preferences views preferred learning styles as a variable determined by culture (Kelly, 2009).

For instance, in a multicultural class, particular problems can be revealed when adopting teamwork. Students do not always come away with positive attitudes about teamwork and how teamwork relates to effective performance. Previous studies show that while most students recognize the importance of teamwork, they still prefer to work alone when the goal is achieving good performance.

Another issue is the selection of team members. Whereas student self-selection of team members may benefit from high levels of initial social cohesion it may result in homogenous groups. Tutors may need to take some control of the group formation process when educational goals include the development of transferable diverse group working skills. According to social identity theory, students will naturally select group members who are like themselves, and therefore, limit the experience of teamwork in the rich context of the diverse classroom.

### **4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH APPLICATION**

As mentioned in the introduction, the aim of this work-in-progress is to analyze how cultural differences along the Hofstede dimensions of individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term/short-term orientation influence the international students' perceptions towards working in teams.

In order to analyze the research objective, this work offers a proposal for comprehensive measurement of culture dimensions and perceptions towards working in teams. The academic context chosen for this paper refers to the international academic experience in the context of an international postgraduate course, the International Master in Business Administration (iMBA) at Universitat de València (UV). The iMBA is officially recognised by the International Business School Alliance, IBSA, and leads to a dual qualification: students receive the Master's degree qualification from the university where they study core subjects in the first semester and from the university where they study the specialisation. The universities in the network for 2011-12 are: Universitat de València, Hochschule Bremen, Institute of Business Studies Moscow, University of North Carolina Wilmington, University of Hertfordshire, Universiti Tu Abdul Razak and Advancia-Negocia Management School.

### **REFERENCES**

- Dash, S., Bruning, E., and Guin, K.K. (2006): "The moderating effect of power distance on perceived interdependence and relationship quality in commercial banking: A cross-cultural comparison", *International Journal of Bank Marketing*, 24 (5), 307 - 326
- De Mooij, M. (2003): "Convergence and Divergence in Consumer Behaviour: Implications for Global Advertising", *International Journal of Advertising*, 22, 183–202.
- De Mooij, M. (2004). *Consumer Behavior and Culture: Consequences for Global Marketing and Advertising*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Dejoy, J.K. and Dejoy, D.M. (1987): "Self-directed learning: The time is now". *Training and development journal*, 41 (9), 64-66.

- Hofstede, G.H. (1980). *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, CA.
- Hofstede, G.H. (1991). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill International (UK) Limited, London.
- Hofstede, G. (1993). 'Cultural Constraints in Management Theories', *Academy of Management Executive*, 7(1): 81-94
- Hofstede, G. H. (2001). *Culture's Consequences*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kelly, P. (2009): "Group work and multicultural management education". *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 20, 80-102.
- Litvin, S.W., Crofts, J.C., and Hefner, F.L. (2004): "Cross-cultural tourist behaviour: a replication and extension involving Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance dimension", *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 6 (1), 29-37.
- Nielsen, S. (2010): "Top management team internationalization and firm performance. The mediating role of foreign market entry". *Management International Review*, 50, 185-206.
- Pineda, R.C., Barger, B., and Lerner, L.D. (2009): "Exploring differences in student perceptions of teamwork: The case of U.S. and Lithuanian students". *Journal of International Business and Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, <http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/08089.pdf>
- Rafferty, P.D. (2011): "Group work experiences: Domestic MBA student experiences and outcomes when working with international students". *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 1-13.
- Solomon, M.R (1996). *Consumer Behaviour: Buying, Having and Being*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Spanish Ministry of Education (2010). Estrategia Universidad 2015: internacionalización, en <http://www.educacion.es/eu2015/ambitos-ejes-estrategicos/fortalecimiento-capacidades/internacionalizacion.html> Ministerio de Educación
- Stephens, G. K., and Greer, C. R. (1995): "Doing business in Mexico: Understanding cultural differences". *Organizational Dynamics*, 24, 39-55.
- Triandis, H.C., McCusker, C., Betancourt, H., Iwao, S., Leung, K., Salazar, J.M., Setiadi, B., and Sinha, J.B.P., Touzard, H., Zaleski, Z. (1993): "An Etic-Emic Analysis of Individualism and Collectivism". *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* September, 24 (3), 366-383
- Triandis, H.C., Chen, X.P., and Chan, D.K.S. (1998): "Scenarios for the Measurement of Collectivism and Individualism". *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 29 (2), 275-289