



**May 2001 Edition**

**Cross Cultural Learning Behaviour in Higher Education: Perceptions versus Practice**

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**Keywords:** Internationalisation, globalisation, diversity management, cross-cultural learning.

**Article style and source:** Peer Reviewed. Original ultiBASE publication. Paper originally presented at the Seventh International Literacy and Education Research Network (LERN) Conference on Learning, RMIT University, Melbourne, 5-9 July 2000.

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## Abstract

**With the internationalisation of Higher Education in Australia, tertiary institutions have become extremely diverse. Despite this diversity, and the implications for teaching and learning, there is insufficient understanding of how students from diverse backgrounds approach their learning, or how they may differ in their learning behaviour from local students. Much of the available evidence tends to be anecdotal and based on generalisations.**

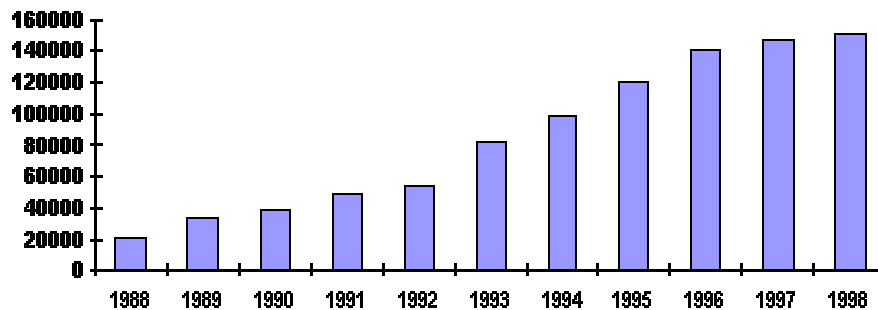
**This paper reports on the results of a study that investigated learning diversity in a sample of 1235 undergraduate and postgraduate, local and international students in the Faculty of Commerce and Economics at the University of New South Wales. The study focuses on cross cultural learning behaviour in relation to international students because of a pressing need to understand the learning styles, needs and expectations of these student who comprise 30% of the Faculty's student population. The main source countries are in Asia and South East Asia. Through implementation of the Study Process Questionnaire, initially devised by Biggs (1987a) and modified for the purposes of this study (Consultation, Biggs, 1998), significant differences were identified between local and international students on several constructs of their approaches to learning. The results support some of the findings and discussion in the literature on cross cultural learning and refute others. They serve to question some of the anecdotal evidence relating to the learning behaviour of international students, and have implications for teaching, learning, and diversity management in tertiary classrooms, and in the Faculty of Commerce and Economics. [top](#)**

## Introduction

Currently there are approximately 151,000 international students studying in Australian educational institutions. This is despite recent fluctuations and uncertainties in some Asian economies, and "a 2.7% fall in overseas student enrolments in 1998 over 1997... the first decline in overseas student numbers since fee paying students began studying in Australia in the mid 1980s" (Australian Education International, 1998, p. 9). Furthermore, 85.5% of these students come from Asian and South East Asian countries, with the current top ten source countries (listed in order of largest to smallest provider of international students) being Indonesia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, India, Taiwan, Thailand and China. Australian Education International statistics (AEI, 1998) also indicate that of these students, 49.9% are in Higher Education and 50% are engaged in studies in the popular areas of Business and Economics.

Figure 1 below provides an indication of trends in international student numbers during the period 1988 to 1998. These figures reflect a dramatic rise from the small beginnings of 3,000 students in 1986.

**Figure 1:** Overseas Student Numbers in Australia 1988 - 1998



The statistics may be interpreted from different perspectives. There are those (Laurie 1992; Powell, 1994; Scott 1994) who have tended to view the number of international student enrolments in terms of economic gain, with reference to "boom times" and "lucrative markets" (Powell, 1994, p. 15). Revenue from the "export education industry" is now estimated at over three billion dollars (AEI, 1998; AIEF, 1997). Others (Phillips, 1990, p. 765) have drawn attention to the changing nature of the tertiary classroom and the implications for teaching and learning, with the "major shift in the character of the student population, from one of primarily Anglo-Celtic English speaking origins, to one which also includes a large and increasing percentage of students who come from a NESB background". And there are researchers (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; Biggs, 1990; Samuelowicz, 1987a; 1987b) who have drawn attention to cross cultural differences in approaches learning and the potential for misunderstanding. [top](#)

## Literature review

Despite the increasing number of international student enrolments, the accompanying differences in learning orientations, and the obvious need to become fully conversant with issues relating to cross cultural approaches to learning, there are limited Australian-based studies (Biggs, 1989; Niles, 1995; Ramburuth, 1997; Volet and Renshaw, 1996) in this area. In the absence of such studies that would serve to provide accurate profiles of cross cultural learners, there is the tendency to rely on anecdotal evidence and generalised statements about their approaches to learning, as indicated in the literature. Below is a sample of such generalisations and stereotypical descriptions, often cited as 'evidence' of the approaches to learning of students from Asian and South East Asian backgrounds:

I believe overseas/migrant students rely more heavily on memorisation and less on understanding than Australian students... (Computer Science Lecturer, in Samuelowicz, 1987a, p. 123)

I am mainly familiar with postgraduate students. Want to learn off: reluctant to question/critically evaluate. If it is written in a journal or in a book, then it is correct and will learn it. Adjusting to critical questioning is the greatest difficulty / shock in the initial stages. (Commerce Lecturer, in Samuelowicz, 1987a, p. 124)

They take down every blessed word you say. I mean, they're good students, in a way, but you don't get much reaction out of them. I've given up trying to discuss different ways of approaching the problems in tutorials. They just want me to give them the best and quickest method for reaching an answer and no wasting time... (Economics Lecturer, in Ballard and Clanchy, 1991, p. 2)

Comments such as these tend to be based on perceptions of the learning behaviour of cross cultural students. They fail to demonstrate accurate understanding of how these students conduct their learning, nor do they acknowledge, as suggested by Biggs (1999), prior learning and cultural influences. They tend to suggest that Asian students are relentless rote learners, surface learners, syllabus dependent, passive and lacking in initiative, not expressive of opinions, and lacking in independence (Gatfield and Gatfield, 1994).

Harris (1997) provides examples of similar perceptions of the learning behaviour of international students in the university system in the United Kingdom:

Many overseas students now originate in Pacific Rim countries, whose educational cultures characteristically value a highly deferential approach to teachers and place considerable emphasis on rote learning. This approach, of course, promotes surface or reproductive learning, which is at variance ... with officially encouraged teaching innovations ... to ensure deep transformational learning. Harris, 1997, p.78

So far as Far Eastern (China, Japan, Korea) students are concerned it is a *truism* that, raised in a conformist educational system, they are happier with memorising and reproducing information than with problem-oriented and more active teaching strategies. Harris, 1997, p. 87 [top](#)

### Comparison of 'Asian' and 'Australian' learning behaviours

Phillips (1990, p. 772) offers the following explanation for understanding "typical" learning differences between international students from Asian backgrounds and Australian students:

**Table 1:** Comparison of Asian and Australian Learning Styles

Asian	Australian
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rote learning is common</li> </ul>	Evaluative learning is preferred
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Non critical reception of information</li> </ul>	Critical thought is expected
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students work hard to learn</li> </ul>	Students selectively learn the central

everything	concepts as well as detail
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are inclined to seek clarification</li> </ul>	Students are willing to seek assistance as part of the learning process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Few initiatives are taken</li> </ul>	Independent learning and research are rewarded
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A willingness to accept one interpretation</li> </ul>	Students are encouraged to apply general principles to specific situations and to test various interpretations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall concepts are seen as important to understanding</li> </ul>	<p>Analytical thinking is encouraged. Students are expected to support opinions with logical argument.</p> <p>(Source: Adapted from Phillips 1990, p. 772)</p>

Researchers such as Biggs (1990) and Kember and Gow (1991), however, have challenged some of the generalisations and stereotypical descriptions indicated above, particularly those relating to the surface and rote learning practices of cross cultural students from Asian backgrounds, with Biggs (1990, p. 1) drawing attention to the fact that:

Considerable research gathered in Hong Kong, Australia, and other S. E. Asian countries suggests that the stereotype is based on a misunderstanding; Chinese students generally have a more 'academic' approach to learning (low surface, high deep) than Australians, while cross-cultural studies show that Asians' attributions for academic success are more controllable, and therefore more amenable to intervention, than are those of Western students.

Biggs' contention has been supported by studies of the learning behaviour of Chinese students at Polytechnics in Hong Kong (Kember and Gow, 1991; and Kember, Gow, Chow, Slaw, Barnes and Hunt, 1989) which found no support for the notion of students from Asian backgrounds adopting essentially surface or rote approaches to learning. Through implementation of Biggs' SPQ (1987c), and comparisons with norms established for Australian CAE students, it was found that, overall, the mean scores of the Hong Kong students were similar to those of the Australian students, with the achieving and deep approach scores being higher for the Hong Kong students.

More recent studies of cross cultural learning involving Asian students at universities in the Northern Territory (Niles, 1995) and New South Wales (Ramburuth, 1997), and Singaporean students at a university in Western Australia (Volet and Renshaw 1996), also confirmed that the approaches to learning of Asian students were not vastly different from those of their local Australian counterparts. Volet and Renshaw (1996) reported a

finding of no difference between Singaporean and Australian students in their patterns of adaptation to academic demands after a semester of study. On the basis of their findings, they concluded that Chinese students' approach to study was, like that of their Australian counterparts, influenced by their perceptions of course requirements rather than any 'typical' personal or cultural characteristic.

Results reported by researchers such as Ramsden (1988), Todd (1996) and Volet and Renshaw (1996) indicate that use of the reproductive approach may not be confined to cross cultural students from Asian backgrounds, whilst Kember and Gow (1991, p. 118) suggest that students will generally use a surface approach if "that is what the curriculum appears to demand". They suggest that, in investigating students' learning behaviour, there is a need to proceed with caution when making generalisations about the learning approaches of students from other cultures, a suggestion with which the author concurs.

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### **Memorisation and the reproductive approach**

In their investigations into the learning behaviour of Chinese students, Beaty, Dall'Alba and Marton (1990) identified clear links between learning, memorising and understanding. In a further study, Marton, Dall'Alba and Tse (1993) identified two types of memorising in which Chinese participants engaged: mechanical memorising and memorising with understanding. They suggest that in the Western context, repetition and memorising are generally viewed as learning strategies that do not lead to understanding, whilst in the Asian context these strategies are viewed differently and tend to be intertwined with 'understanding.' On (1996) supports the notion of cultural dimensions to memorising, suggesting that it is a significant part of learning in the Confucian tradition and precedes understanding, and should not simply be equated to rote learning. Clearly, the distinction between deep and surface learning approaches (as defined by Biggs, 1987a; 1987b) are not as readily differentiated in these cultural contexts. [top](#)

### **Research focus and aims**

The aims of this research study were to:

- (i) Investigate the approaches to learning, motives and strategies of students in the Faculty of Commerce and Economics, to develop a more accurate understanding of how students learn;
- (ii) Identify similarities and differences in the approaches to learning of international students (mainly from Asian backgrounds) and local, Australian students;
- (iii) Develop for the Faculty, a profile of its international student population;
- (iv) On the basis of findings, to make recommendations for teaching diverse student groups. This is essential as the enrolment numbers of

international students rise, tertiary classrooms become increasingly diverse, and educators are faced with the challenge of providing an equal and sensitive education to all students, regardless of their backgrounds. [top](#)

## Method

### *Sample*

The total student sample consisted of 1235 first year students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs in the Faculty of Commerce and Economics. The undergraduate cohort

comprised of 719 local students and 248 international students. The postgraduate student cohort comprised of 166 local students and 102 international students. Verification of students' backgrounds was made possible through the Faculty's 'Student Information' data base.

### *Instrument*

The instrument used was the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) developed by John Biggs (1987a; 1987c) for use with Australian tertiary students, and validated for use with students in several Asian countries. The SPQ identifies student learning in terms of the descriptors: deep, surface and achieving approaches to learning, with each approach being made up of motives and strategies. For the purposes of this study, the SPQ was modified, in consultation with Biggs (January, 1998) to focus on the two constructs of deep and surface learning.

Table 2 below provides a description of the two selected approaches to learning and their accompanying motives and strategies as identified by Biggs (1987a):

**Table 2:** Approaches to learning and studying: motives and strategies

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Motives</b>	<b>Strategies</b>
<b>SA: Surface</b>	Surface motive (SM) is to meet requirements minimally; a balancing act between failing and working more than is necessary	Surface strategy (SS) is reproductive; to limit target to bare essentials and reproduce them through rote learning.
<b>DA: Deep</b>	Deep motive (DM) is intrinsic interest in what is being learned; to develop competence in particular academic subjects.	Deep strategy (DS) is to discover meaning by reading widely, inter-relating with previous relevant knowledge etc.

(Adapted from Biggs, 1987a, p. 3)

The modified version of the SPQ consisted of twenty eight items, with seven items for each of the motivations and strategies. Responses to the items were made by circling options on a five point Likert-type scale ranging from (5) always or almost always true of me to (1) never or only rarely true of me. The SPQ yielded scores for each student on four subscales by summing seven items in each case (a raw score range of 7 to 35 for each of the motive and strategy subscales). The score for each of the approaches (scale score) is determined by combining the score for its motive and strategy (Biggs, 1987a; 1987b; 1987c).

### *Implementation*

The SPQ was administered in the first week of Session 1, 1998 in a core subject (Microeconomics 1) in the undergraduate program, in conjunction with a language task which forms the basis of a separate study. Implementation during a targeted subject ensured that most first year undergraduate students would complete the questionnaire, and that coordination of the investigation (which involved a large and dispersed cohort) was made feasible. Such coordination was less possible with implementation strategies involving the postgraduate cohort as there was no common core subject, and seemingly greater difficulty in convincing teaching staff to participate. Consequently, the postgraduate cohort is much smaller than originally expected.

### *Data Analysis*

T-tests for independent samples were used to distinguish differences in the approaches to learning, motives and strategies demonstrated by international and local students in the sample. The results of these statistical analyses and procedures are discussed below. [top](#)

## **Findings and discussion**

### *Undergraduate*

Analyses of the data in Table 3 below indicated that, contrary to some of the anecdotal evidence cited in the literature, the undergraduate cross cultural (international) students in this study demonstrated a higher mean for the deep approach to learning (Mean 48.8) and a lower mean for the surface approach (Mean 47.0), as do the Australian students.

**Table 3:** Undergraduate students' group means for the overall surface and deep approaches to learning

Local: n = 718  
International: n = 248

<b>Group</b>	<b>Surface Approach</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Deep Approach</b>	<b>SD</b>
Local	45.1	6.5	48.0	7.0
International	47.0	7.3	48.8	6.7



Furthermore, when statistically compared to the Australian students (see Table 4), there were no significant differences between the two cohorts in their deep approach to learning, consistent, to some extent, with findings in similar studies in cross cultural learning (Biggs, 1987b; Kember and Gow, 1991; Ramburuth, 1997; Volet and Renshaw 1996). However, the international students also displayed higher group means for the surface approach to learning, surface motivation and use of surface strategies, and were significantly different from their Australian counterparts on all dimensions of the surface approach (see Table 4). This is contrary to results reported in the literature, which tends to suggest that Australian students are higher on the surface approach (Biggs, 1990; Kember and Gow, 1991). The extent to which to which findings may be influenced by the high undergraduate entry levels in the Faculty of Commerce and Economics (UAI score of 94.5 for 2000, and TER score of 93 for 1999), needs to be further investigated.

**Table 4:** Comparison of the approaches to learning, motives and strategies of local and international undergraduate students.

Local: n = 718

International n = 248

\*Significant at .05

\*\*\*Significant at .001

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>t value</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
<b>Surface Approach</b>					
<b>Local</b>	45.1	6.5			
<b>International</b>	47.0	7.3			
			-3.81	965	.000***
<b>Surface Motive</b>					
<b>Local</b>	23.5	3.9			
<b>International</b>	24.3	4.3			
			-2.48	965	.015*
<b>Surface Strategy</b>					
<b>Local</b>	21.6	3.7			
<b>International</b>	22.8	3.9			
			-4.16	965	.000***
<b>Deep Approach</b>					
<b>Local</b>	48.0	7.0			
<b>International</b>	48.8	6.7			
			-1.68	965	.094
<b>Deep Motive</b>					

<b>Local</b>	23.7	4.1			
<b>International</b>	24.4	3.7			
			-2.43	965	.015*
<b>Deep Strategy</b>					
<b>Local</b>	24.3	3.8			
<b>International</b>	24.4	3.8			
			-0.51	965	.610

### *Postgraduate*

Analyses of the data in relation to postgraduate cross cultural students, (see Table 5 below) also indicated that, contrary to anecdotal evidence, the postgraduate international students in this study demonstrated a much higher mean for the deep approach to learning (Mean 50.6) than the surface approach (Mean 47.5). Similar findings were made for the Australian students (Surface Approach Mean: 44.9 and Deep Approach Mean: 48.1).

**Table 5:** Postgraduate students' group means for the overall surface and deep approaches to learning

Local: n = 166

International: n = 102

<b>Group</b>	<b>Surface Approach</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Deep Approach</b>	<b>SD</b>
Local	44.9	7.7	48.1	6.9
International	47.5	7.1	50.6	6.2

Comparisons of the group means for the international and local student cohorts, using t-tests for independent samples (see Table 6), indicated that the former made significantly higher use of all learning dimensions measured, except 'surface strategies'. The significant differences on the deep approach, deep motives and deep strategies used certainly serve to dispel the myth of cross cultural learners from Asian backgrounds being essentially 'rote learners'. They also serve to draw attention to the learning diversity in tertiary classrooms. As with the undergraduate cohort, the postgraduate international students also demonstrated higher use of the surface approach and surface strategies.

**Table 6:** Comparison of the approaches to learning, motives and strategies of local and international postgraduate students

Local: n = \*Significant at .05

International n = 102 \*\*Significant at .01

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>t value</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-</b>
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					<b>tailed)</b>
<b>Surface Approach</b>					
<b>Local</b>	44.9	7.7			
<b>International</b>	47.5	7.1			
			-2.77	266	0.006*
<b>Surface Motive</b>					
<b>Local</b>	23.9	4.2			
<b>International</b>	24.8	4.2			
			-1.86	266	0.065
<b>Surface Strategy</b>					
<b>Local</b>	21.0	4.4			
<b>International</b>	22.7	3.6			
			-3.19	266	0.002**
<b>Deep Approach</b>					
<b>Local</b>	48.1	6.9			
<b>International</b>	50.6	6.2			
			-2.973	266	0.003**
<b>Deep Motive</b>					
<b>Local</b>	23.8	4.1			
<b>International</b>	24.8	3.3			
			-2.054	266	0.041*
<b>Deep Strategy</b>					
<b>Local</b>	24.4	3.6			
<b>International</b>	25.9	3.6			
			-3.288	266	0.001**

Whilst allowing for the nature of the sample mix, the closeness of the means and random measurement errors, overall, the findings tend to indicate more frequent use of both the surface and deep approaches by the international students in this study, when compared to local Australian students. The findings suggest that the two constructs of 'deep' and 'surface' may not be mutually exclusive, a conclusion confirmed in discussions with Biggs (September, 1998) who notes that "students can be both" (that is deep and surface in their learning). Furthermore, the results tend to support the concerns of Marton, Dall'Alba and Tse (1993) that, because of the inter-weaving relationship they identified between memorising (associated with the surface approach to learning) and

understanding (associated with the deep approach), the 'deep/surface' framework may not be suitable for assessing the learning behaviour of students from certain cultural backgrounds. Chalmers and Volet (1997) recommend that it is more important to consider the learning context and the learners' intentions which will, in turn, influence the learning strategies to be used. [top](#)

## **Implications**

Despite its limitations in terms of sample size and sample mix, the study draws attention to 'the gap' in on-going perceptions of the learning behaviour of cross cultural students (particularly international students from Asian backgrounds) and actual practices as identified by a sample of students from these backgrounds. The study confirms that these cross cultural students do, in fact engage in deep learning, as identified in Biggs' (1987a; 1987b; 1987c) framework, perhaps even more so than their Australian counterparts. Consequently, it could serve to dispel the myths and generalisations relating to cross cultural learning behaviour. For the Faculty of Commerce and Economics, the study provides data and information that could enable staff to understand more clearly the learning behaviour of their students and differences that exist, and, on the basis of this understanding, to reconsider misplaced perceptions.

Understanding and acknowledging the similarities and differences is the first step to diversity management, taking action to address issues of difference is the next step. At the institutional level, there needs to be support and resources for developing innovative strategies for diversity management, including cross cultural training programs for staff and academic acculturation programs for students. At the classroom level, there needs to be adjustments to the curriculum, the adoption of more inclusive approaches to teaching and learning, and the modification of teaching styles to accommodate students' diverse learning styles.

Clearly, the findings suggest combined usage of the deep and surface approaches by cross cultural students. The extent to which these approaches are influenced by cultural factors, as in the practice of memorisation, or by learning context and environmental factors, as suggested by Volet and Renshaw (1996) and Niles (1997), also need further investigation.

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