Chinese versus UK marketing students' perceptions of peer feedback and peer assessment

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to explore UK and Chinese students' perceptions of peer feedback as well as assessment for coursework conducted in groups during the course of their studies at a large UK Business School. Elements of Hofstede's cultural dimensions were used to develop a theoretical framework for this study. An abductive approach was taken using systematic combining where interviews with UK and Chinese students were integrated with academic literature to ascertain general perceptions towards peer feedback and assessment. From these interviews four attitudinal issues were extracted — how comfortable students are with an assessment mode, how important they find the mode, fairness of the assessment mode, and how useful they find the mode. A survey was then distributed to final year marketing students and their perceptions of these issues were assessed. These results were subsequently presented to separate focus groups for their insights into the survey outcomes. The principal findings of the study are that there are cultural barriers to fair and consistent formal peer assessment of group work involving heterogeneous populations, particularly pertaining to collectivist/individualist backgrounds as exemplified in this study.

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Assessment as a verification of learning, as well as verifying learning outcomes for purposes of programme validation, remains a core issue for higher education. In particular, attention to group-based project work and assessment is driven by industry expectations and accrediting bodies like the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008; Bacon, 2011; Bicen & Laverie, 2009). However, problems arising from the movement toward group-based coursework and assessment have also been noted (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008; Freeman & Greenacre, 2011). One such problem which has not been extensively explored arises from group work in heterogeneous populations, notably the trend toward mixed international and cultural backgrounds in business and management education.

An increasingly competitive higher education sector is leading academics and professionals to invest in efforts to better understand students' expectations, perceptions and experiences (for example Bennett & Kottasz, 2006; Crumbley, 2011). A growing body of marketing literature is exploring the factors that influence student satisfaction (for example DeShields, Kara, & Kaynak, 2005; Douglas, McClelland, & Davies, 2008; Navarro, Iglesias, & Torres, 2005; Petruzzellis et al., 2006), Arambewela and Hall (2009) indicate student satisfaction levels associated with educational and non-educational services varies among nationality groups. A factor that appears to influence both international and domestic students' expectations and satisfaction levels is the type and quality of the assessment (formally marked) and feedback (formal or informal, but unmarked).
mechanisms utilized by a particular University. In the UK the National Student Survey (NSS) assesses student perceptions of assessment feedback, but does not make comparisons between different international or cultural backgrounds. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that some students are frustrated with peer feedback as well as the peer assessment processes they sometimes encounter. The resulting negative impact on student satisfaction may have a harmful influence on NSS scores, business school rankings, and subsequent enrollment. Yang, Badger, and Yu (2006) suggests that even if peer feedback and/or peer assessment provides advantages, it should only be introduced if students find it acceptable.

Traditional forms of teacher based assessment and feedback are increasingly being replaced by peer assessment and feedback (Barron, Gourlay, & Gannon-Leary, 2010; Van Zundert, Sluijsmans, & Merrienboer, 2010). However, there is little academic work that explores international students’ perceptions of peer assessment and/or peer feedback, or makes comparisons between domestic and international students’ perceptions. It is commonly recognized that an increase in international student numbers is resulting in increasingly diverse student cohorts that can cause challenges for staff (Barron et al., 2010). Cultural and other differences between international and domestic students may have an impact on the effectiveness and practical applications of peer assessment and feedback. This study focuses on Chinese students studying in the UK and make comparisons between them and their domestic UK counterparts. There are over twice as many Chinese students studying in the UK as students from any other nationality including other EU member countries, with Chinese enrollments increasing by almost 20% between 2009 and 2010 (UCISA, 2012).

The objective of this research is to explore UK and Chinese students’ perceptions of peer feedback as well as peer assessment during the course of their studies at a large UK Business School. After reviewing the literature on peer feedback and assessment, a theoretical framework for this study is developed, before the three stage methodology employed to collect and analyze data is described. Next, the findings are presented, and conclusions and implications developed and described, before areas for further research are identified.

1. Literature review

Peer assessment is defined by Topping (1998) as ‘an arrangement in which individuals consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality or success of the products or outcomes of learning of peers of similar status’. It is a process where students evaluate, or are evaluated by, their peers (Van Zundert et al., 2010). In contrast, peer feedback can be thought of as a more informal process, where students learn from each other by means of receiving and giving feedback (Van Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2010). However, this feedback does not directly influence the grades students receive. In marketing and management education, a combination of the fact that team based assessment prepares students for the teamwork they are likely to encounter in the workplace and helps to reduce teacher’s marking loads, mean that the use of peer assessment is likely to continue in the future (Willcoxin, 2006). However, many students and staff recognize that there are troubling, unresolved issues relating to peer assessment including free riders or social loafers in team work, and ensuring fair as well as accurate assessment methods (Aggarwal & O’Brien, 2008; Fellenz, 2006; Willcoxin, 2006). Topping’s (2010) recent commentary on the methodological challenges associated with studying peer assessment highlights the challenges that exist when undertaking research relating to peer assessment.

Reviews of the literature on the effectiveness of peer assessment as well as peer feedback suggest that while the results of some studies have been positive, many remain inconclusive (Van Gennip et al., 2010). The outcomes of analysis of student perceptions of peer assessment have been varied and often resulted in significant variations in results, despite quite similar assessment schemes (Fellenz, 2006). Van Zundert et al. (2010) suggest that it is difficult to make claims about effectiveness of peer assessment due to the enormous variety in peer assessment methods and research techniques. Several studies report that feedback from teachers is more effective than feedback from peers and is more likely to result in changes or improvements in student work (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Paulus, 1999; Strijbos, Narciss, & Dunnebier, 2010; Tsui & Ng, 2000; Zhang, 1999). Many of these have focused on foreign students studying on intensive language courses where feedback is likely to be more useful than feedback from peers (Maio, Badger, & Zhen, 2006). In this context, culture has a significant impact on the effectiveness of peer feedback in groups (Allaei & Connor, 1990).

In the general marketing literature it is assumed that consumers are not homogenous and can be divided into segments that have similar preferences, attitudes or perceptions. However, much of the literature on peer assessment and feedback does not appear explicitly to recognize differences in student demographic, socio-economic, cultural and other factors. There is a lack of studies that explore the influence that such characteristics may have on students’ perceptions of peer assessment as well as students’ abilities to assimilate information and learn effectively based on feedback from peers. Exceptions include Langan et al. (2005) who examine a number of factors that may change the distribution of marks allocated through peer assessment including gender and higher education background. Gender differences have also been identified in a study by Van Zundert et al. (2010). In particular there appears to be a gap in the literature with regards to research that examines and assesses the influence that cultural factors, such as the country that a student has been brought up in, may have on their perceptions of peer assessment and/or peer feedback.

Research on peer assessment has mainly been conducted in western contexts (Bryant & Carless, 2010). However, peer assessment may not be practical for students where an examination culture is embedded such as in countries away from a western setting (Carless, 2005). Bryant and Carless (2010) suggest that overcoming the differences in assessment cultures is an obstacle to the adoption of peer assessment in some Asian cultures such as Hong Kong. Salili (1996) reports that students from collectivist cultures spend more effort in a peer cooperative process and perform better in such an
environment than students from more individualistic cultures. Humes and Reilly (2008) state that although intercultural teams may become increasingly important as organizational assets, they can often become dysfunctional, and recommend further investigation in this area. In their study of the use of peer assessment of students’ individual contributions to group projects, Friedman, Cox, and Maher (2008) conclude that such issues and motivations represent a complex process that requires further study. Woods, Barker, and Hibbins (2010) also report student difficulties, particularly in multicultural group projects, and offer guidance to help rectify the negative outcomes that can arise in these situations. Research by Freeman and Greenacre (2011) explores the impact of students’ social dynamics in groups learning, but does not specifically focus on international cultural issues. They suggest that more research is necessary to investigate if international students face unique challenges that influence group dynamics and how to address the desire for homogeneity, so that group dynamics can be better managed. Coates and Dickinson (2012) cite studies on students working in mixed cultural teams as part of their postgraduate learning in management education and note that although the practice is based on sound pedagogy that prepares students for their future career, many international students find it difficult to engage in discussions and team work activities. They conclude that if the student’s experience of working in teams is poor, this can have a negative effect over their whole programme.

Smailes and Gannon-Leary (2008) discuss various areas of difference between international and UK students, concluding that the major problematic areas include seminar activities and assessment strategies. Hall and Wai-Ching Sung (2009) report finding that there are indeed differences of academic culture beyond language difficulties that confound international students. Research by Crumbley (2011) examined the culture shock that Chinese students experience studying in the UK. She suggests that many participants reported dissatisfaction with the assessment process and their own performance as a result of the differences in educational practice. Warwick (2007) also suggests that international students can suffer from culture shock due to different life and learning styles. Hart and Coates (2011) further explore dissatisfaction and complaint behavioral differences between international and UK students, noting that dissatisfaction is likely to be pro-actively addressed, but also is likely to be reported to fellow students, compounding negative impacts. Topping (2010) suggests that further investigation of a number of variables including the first or second language of students, the learning culture of subject and the nature of peer assessment using large sample sizes is required. We propose these areas need further exploration, and attempt here to address apparent gaps in the literature in this regard.

1.1. Theoretical framework

Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimensions are widely referenced in business and education literature (for example Cronje, 2011; Richards & Ross, 2004; Rodrigues, 2005; Volet & Ang, 1998) and provide a useful theoretical foundation for this study. Although initially developed within a business context, Hofstede’s findings have also been applied in teaching and learning contexts, explaining differences between cultures in education (Hofstede, 1986). While his work has drawn some criticism (for example McSweeney, 2002; Ng, Lee, & Soutar, 2007; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Signorini, Wiesemes, & Murphy, 2009), it remains the benchmark for discussion of national cultures or values. It can help to extend knowledge in education literature by providing a framework to explore the differences between Chinese and UK students’ perceptions of peer assessment as well as peer feedback — something which has been given minimal attention in education literature to date.

Of Hofstede’s five dimensions, most relevant to this particular study is individualism (vs. collectivism). Individualism (IDV) presents polar behavioral characteristic differences between the Chinese and UK cultures, which could influence a student’s perceptions of peer assessment and peer feedback. The UK and China differ greatly in terms of the level of IDV. The UK’s high IDV index of 89 illustrates individualistic behavior and beliefs such as ‘thinking for yourself’ and ‘personal fulfillment.’ However, China’s IDV index of 20 displays a much more collectivist culture. Chinese students may be more receptive to being assessed by their peers due to their cultural commitment to in-groups, whereas domestic UK students display more private and inward interests and may be more apprehensive about peer-to-peer assessment. In addition the Confucian Heritage notion of respect for teacher may influence student perceptions as students are likely to respect their teachers’ feedback because it is ‘expert’ advice compared to their peers who, like them, are still learning.

The same arguments may help explain Chinese student’s perceptions of assessing and providing feedback to other students in their group. The impact of collectivism may be moderated by uncertainty avoidance as Chinese students may be unwilling to criticize others in their group (Carson & Nelson, 1994).

The Chinese collectivist culture suggests that people act in the interests of the group they are in and not themselves. As such, in-group relationships may prevail over task and company (Hofstede, 2001). This could help highlight key differences in group work scenarios. We argue that the collectivist nature of Chinese students is likely to make their perceptions toward a ‘group mark’, which is equal for all students, more positive.

2. Methodology

A pluralist study using a mixed methods approach was executed in three stages. Mixed methods research combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g. use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints) in order to increase the breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007).
2.1. Stage 1: Identification of key constructs using personal interviews

In order to identify key constructs that influence students’ perceptions of peer assessment as well as peer feedback, an abductive approach was used (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Systematic combining (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) which involved going backwards and forth between the data and the literature using observation and interviews provided a rich source of data which was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and characteristics. Systematic combining is a process where theoretical frameworks, research fieldwork and case analysis evolve simultaneously and can be used to integrate and extend existing theories. Ten student interviews were conducted using a purposive sampling technique where the content of each discussion was built upon previous responses. Each interview lasted approximately 60 min and after transcription, data was categorized using thematic analysis. The results were shared with the respondents and triangulated by those interviewed.

From the interviews, four key constructs were identified — how comfortable students are with an assessment mode, fairness of the assessment mode, how useful they find the mode, and how important they find the mode. The comfort (Chen & Warren, 1997; Stainer, 1997; Van Zundert et al., 2010), fairness (Chen & Warren, 1997; Pain & Mowl, 1996; Strijbos et al., 2010) and usefulness (Bryant & Carless, 2010; Kwok, 2008; Miao et al., 2006; Strijbos et al., 2010) constructs have been widely used in the peer assessment literature and therefore appear to be valid. Importance was a new construct that does not appear to have been specifically analyzed in this context. The constructs include the cognitive constructs importance, usefulness, and fairness as well as comfort which is physiological. In addition 13 scales were identified relating to different types of peer feedback and teacher feedback and assessment provided by teachers and in peer assessed work. These are presented in Appendix 1.

2.2. Stage 2: Survey instrument, sample and quantitative survey

A survey instrument was then constructed to evaluate these four variables for each type of feedback and assessment students encountered during their university programme. All students had taken part in group presentations where peer

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### Table 1

Results of analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback and assessment on individual work</th>
<th>Domestic students mean</th>
<th>Chinese students mean</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. Receiving informal individual feedback from teacher on individual work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>5.82</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. Receiving formal assessment from your teacher on your individual school work or performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td>6.22</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>6.34</td>
<td>5.52</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.002*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>6.03</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7. Receiving informal feedback from your teacher applied to your whole team</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.006*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9. Giving informal feedback to individual members of your team on their contribution to the team</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>–0.94</td>
<td>0.004*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>5.03</td>
<td>–0.58</td>
<td>0.035*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>–0.84</td>
<td>0.005*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10. Receiving a single formal assessment from your teacher that applies to your whole team</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>–0.89</td>
<td>0.007*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>–0.75</td>
<td>0.024*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11. Receiving anonymous formal assessment from other members of your team on your contribution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>–0.70</td>
<td>0.031*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q12. Giving anonymous formal assessment to individual members of your team on their contribution to the team</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>–0.63</td>
<td>0.049*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.131</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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feedback was provided, as well as written group assignments that had been peer assessed by their team members as well as their teachers. The instrument was comprised of 13 sets of four semantic differential 8-point scales.

The questionnaire was piloted on 20 students. Special care was taken to eliminate any ambiguous, vague or unfamiliar terms in the questionnaire so as to avoid common method variance and ensure the reliability of results. An example a typical question is provided in Appendix 2.

The survey was distributed to a large cohort of final year marketing students in their final semester of studies. All students had participated in a module in which two components (a group presentation and group assignment) were peer assessed and had been provided with peer feedback. 174 responses were received. Data were analyzed using t-tests and Cohen’s d effect sizes to test if significant differences exist between Chinese and UK students’ answers. Significant differences were identified over 7 of the original 13 scales. These scales, as well as the scales not subject to further quantitative analysis by students in stage 3, are presented in Appendix 1.

2.3. Stage 3: explanatory analysis of the quantitative findings

In order to add to the value of the quantitative analysis, an additional explanatory study using a mixed methods approach was undertaken (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Hunt, 1994). Explanatory research involves researchers first collecting and analyzing quantitative data, then building on those findings using a qualitative follow-up in order provide a better understanding of the quantitative results (Harisson & Reilly, 2011). A large number of articles have been published in the management and marketing literature that have utilized a similar explanatory approach to prompt in-depth discussions and bring together a comprehensive account that enhances the integrity of findings (for example Horsky, Nelson, & Posavac, 2004; McMullan & Gilmore, 2008; Steenkamp & Geyskens, 2006; Thomson, 2006; West & Prendergast, 2009).

Four separate focus groups containing eight students each were conducted to further explore and validate the results of the empirical survey. Each focus group contained an equal mix of male and female students. One focus group consisted of just Chinese students and another of UK students while the two others included both Chinese and UK students. In each focus group, which lasted for 45 min, students were provided with a copy of the results of Stage 2 of the research and asked to review them. A formal interview guide was developed and implemented, which provided a structure for exploring the answers to each question in turn, as well as examining the significant differences that existed between Chinese and UK student’s responses to some questions. All participants stated they understood the empirical results and thought they made sense. Each focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed and the results analyzed using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Wheeler, 1988). Quotations extracted from the data that represented the content of the discussions and was used to triangulate the results are presented in the results section.

3. Results

Overall, student expectations of the different possible modes of peer assessment they might experience in their university programmes are cautiously positive. There appear to be no strong prejudices at this stage. The results of the empirical analysis (Stage 2) are presented in Table 1. High scores indicate higher levels of comfort, fairness, usefulness and importance. In order to make comparisons with traditional student assessment and feedback that is provided to individual students by a teacher, the first two scales in Table 1 (Q1 and Q4) report the results of student’s perceptions of individual rather than group work. The relatively high scores on these scales illustrate a preference for traditional individual assessment and feedback rather than peer assessed group work. The results suggest that Chinese students do not appear to have as positive a response to teacher feedback or assessment from a teacher as domestic students. However, they have more positive perceptions of issues relating to group work. Domestic students appear to have worse team and peer assessment experiences than Chinese students. The results of the focus groups discussions suggest that the composition of teams and breakdown between Chinese and domestic students in a team has an influence on perceptions. When Chinese students are in homogenous groups with their Chinese or Asian peers, they are less concerned or embarrassed about possible mistakes caused by the fact that English is their second language. One Chinese student stated, ‘At high school, we are required to listen to our teacher and learn from what they say, however our culture supports providing and receiving feedback from other students.’

All focus groups discussed how Chinese students feel that being peer assessed from members of their team is fairer than domestic students. Findings from the survey also confirm that Chinese students were more comfortable with giving informal peer feedback to members of their team and found such peer feedback to be more useful than domestic students. When asked about providing anonymous assessment to individual team members, Chinese students again had more positive perceptions, but the only significant difference to UK students was that this type of peer assessment was more useful.

The results of the focus groups discussions suggest that the composition of teams and breakdown between Chinese and domestic students in a team has an influence on perceptions. When Chinese students are in homogenous groups with their Chinese or Asian peers, they are less concerned or embarrassed about possible mistakes caused by the fact that English is their second language. One Chinese student stated, ‘At high school, we are required to listen to our teacher and learn from what they say, however our culture supports providing and receiving feedback from other students.’
The empirical results suggest Chinese students have more positive overall perceptions assessing their group members as well as receiving peer assessment and peer feedback. However, the results of the focus groups discussions highlight that different group combinations (i.e. homogenous/heterogeneous) of UK and Chinese students can play a key role in informing student perceptions.

Findings from the empirical analysis show that Chinese students perceived a single assessment from a lecturer or tutor, applied to a whole team, to be more useful, important and fairer than domestic students did. The focus groups discussions provided supporting evidence, with one Chinese student stating that ‘in our culture, we often work together and build relationships with a team to work on a project or solve a problem. Therefore the whole team should be assessed equally on the results of a group project.’ Other Chinese students agreed. Once again, discussion in most focus groups emphasized how domestic students are generally more independent. Domestic students felt that if they made a greater contribution than other students in their team, they should get higher marks. One student commented that ‘I always work harder and play more of a role than others in the performance of our team, therefore I deserve higher marks.’

Although peer assessment was perceived to reduce the problems of free riders and similar factors associated with team work, many students felt uncomfortable in giving poor marks to peers who did not perform adequately. Chinese students discussed how ‘even in classes where we can allocate low grades for poor students, we feel reluctant to do so.’ Another student stated that ‘in some of our classes other group members freeloaded on those of us that worked hard, and as a result I don’t like peer assessed classes as much as I thought I would.’ Others agreed. Students were also concerned that members of some teams colluded to ensure that everyone in the group received the same mark or deliberately increased marks for their friends. For example, ‘some people give higher grades to their friends, even if they didn’t work any harder or contribute any more to an assignment.’ A number of students agreed with the comment that ‘in some groups we decided to give each student the same grade as everyone else in the group.’ Usefulness, importance and fairness constructs are rated significantly higher by the Chinese students, however no significant differences existed between Chinese and UK students’ perceptions of comfort.

4. Discussion and conclusion

These findings have major implications for the validity and usefulness of marks issued in classes that employ summative, formally peer assessed team work projects. Marking is supposed to be fair, consistent and an accurate indication of students’ learning, as well as a mechanism to communicate an individual student’s learning to a number of constituents, such as prospective employers and graduate schools.

It is apparent that different student cohorts are likely to use the peer assessment process differently, and, if the process affects the formal marks awarded, will produce inconsistent and potentially unfair results. Neither Chinese nor UK students appear particularly comfortable giving formal assessment to team members, however, UK students are more likely to be frank and critical when the need arises. This means that what marks ultimately result, depends on the constitution of the team. Chinese students are more comfortable providing peer feedback as well as receiving peer feedback. This finding support earlier work that indicates cultural differences in collectivism/individualism (Hall & Wai-Ching Sung, 2009).

The experiences students have with peer feedback and peer assessment in their university programmes are an important part of their overall university experience. If these are generally positive, as this study suggests with teacher-based modes, it should result in better student experience, better reputation and attractiveness for the institution and higher education overall. Conversely, negative experiences are likely to adversely affect future enrollment. It is clear from the focus group analysis of the findings that there are significant confounds to fair and consistent peer assessment in team work situations with heterogeneous populations, particularly when individualist/collectivist cultures are involved. This brings to question the wisdom of using such team work assessments, generally accepted as valid in the past, into the new international university setting. It is argued that one goal of team work with mixed groups promotes learning real life skills for the future (Volet & Ang, 1998), however it is possible that universities do not yet have in place teaching methods that are powerful enough to overcome the fundamental cultural issues at stake. Thus the study contributes a better understanding of the issues alluded to in earlier studies pertaining to difficulties encountered by culturally heterogeneous students in group work situations that require peer assessment.

Limitations include that this research was undertaken with marketing students at one UK University. This study focused on Chinese students and the issues of cultural style were made apparent. However, it may be a mistake to assume that such issues apply to all international students or even oriental students from countries other than China (Oyserman et al., 2002). Therefore, care must be taken in generalizing the results to other student groups Further research which examines the perceptions of students from other cultures would enrich the findings of this study. In additional a longitudinal study, exploring how students perceptions of peer assessment and peer feedback change over time as they are subjected to different forms of assessment and group work would provide additional insights.

In conclusion, in this paper we explore the cultural differences in UK and Chinese students’ perceptions of peer feedback and assessment. Given the increasing number of international students studying at UK business schools, this represents an interesting and potentially useful topic for educators, but one that has not been adequately explored in the literature. Hofstede’s individualism—collectivism and uncertainty avoidance dimensions provide a useful framework for
explaining the significant differences that exist between many aspects of UK and Chinese students’ perceptions of peer assessment and feedback for group work. The results of explanatory qualitative research suggests that although providing many benefits, working in heterogeneous group presents students with a number of problems and that teachers need to be aware of cultural differences when developing group assignments and developing peer assessment and/or peer feedback schemes.

Appendix 1. Original 13 scales (the 7 scales selected for stage 3 are highlighted in italics)

Feedback and assessment on individual work

Informal feedback that is not marked and recorded
  How do you feel about:

1. Receiving informal feedback from your teacher on your individual school work or performance.
2. Receiving informal feedback from other students on your individual school work or performance.
3. Giving informal feedback to other students on their individual school work or performance.

Formal assessment that is marked and recorded
  How do you feel about:

4. Receiving formal assessment from your teacher on your individual school work or performance.
5. Receiving formal assessment from other students on your individual school work or performance.
6. Giving formal assessment to other students on their individual school work or performance.

Feedback and assessment on team work in groups

Informal feedback that is not marked and recorded
  How do you feel about:

7. Receiving informal feedback from your teacher that applies to your whole team.
8. Giving informal feedback to other teams on their group work or performance.
9. Giving informal feedback to individual members of your team on their contribution to the team.

Formal assessment that is marked and recorded
  How do you feel about:

10. Receiving a single formal assessment from your teacher that applies to your whole team.
11. Receiving anonymous formal assessment from other members of your team on your contribution to the team.
12. Giving anonymous formal assessment to individual members of your team on their contribution to the team.
13. Giving anonymous formal assessment to other teams on their group work or performance.

Appendix 2. Sample question

Feedback and assessment on team work in groups

Formal assessment that is marked and recorded
  How do you feel about:
  Receiving a single formal assessment from your teacher that applies to your whole team

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Comfortable</th>
<th>Uncomfortable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not useful</td>
<td>Useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Not important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfair</td>
<td>Fair</td>
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</table>

References


