

Management of Cultural Diversity in Group Assessment for Learning

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Executive summary

At Northumbria University, the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Assessment for Learning (CETL) is a national centre for expertise in Assessment for Learning methods. Learning environments which support Assessment for Learning (AfL) methods can be described by the following six conditions (Northumbria University: 2008).

1. An emphasis on authenticity and complexity in the content and methods of assessment rather than reproduction of knowledge and reductive measurement.
2. Using high-stakes summative assessment rigorously but sparingly rather than as the main driver for learning.
3. Offering students extensive opportunities to engage in the kinds of tasks that develop and demonstrate their learning, thus building their confidence and capabilities before they are summatively assessed.
4. Providing an environment that is rich in feedback derived from formal mechanisms e.g. tutor comments on assignments, student self-review logs.
5. Providing an environment that is rich in informal feedback e.g. peer review of draft writing, collaborative project work, which provides students with a continuous flow of feedback on 'how they are doing'.
6. Developing students' abilities to direct their own learning, evaluate their own progress and attainments and support the learning of others.

Innovative assessment can be designed to produce a more meaningful activity for students so that the student can become engaged in the process of assessment and transfer the knowledge gained to a variety of circumstances, promoting deep approaches to learning (McDowell & Sambell: 1999; Shreeve, Baldwin & Farraday: 2004). In practically based subjects it is often common practice to use project work in assessments to provide a realistic context, and allow students to develop their own individual response to the assessment brief (Shreeve, Baldwin & Farraday: 2004).

Some studies have reported that students were found to value assessment tasks they perceive to be 'real' and authentic which they can take seriously, and undertake for more than just for the grades, but also because they will help them acquire relevant knowledge and skills that they believe mirror the skills needed in the workplace (James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002).

In Computing and Engineering undergraduate programmes, group projects are often used to provide an 'authentic' setting in which to role play the work of a project development team. Though generally often successful, the assessment of these modules is not without difficulties. Issues such as allocation of students to groups, defining student roles, group organisation and dynamics, group interaction and communication mechanisms need careful consideration, particularly when the class contains students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Teaching and learning methods that may be seen by the lecturer as innovative and effective for developing students' understanding may not always have the desired outcome due to learners' educational expectations and cultural differences. Some research has already shown that the operation and outcomes of peer response groups for example can be influenced by cultural factors relating to individualism, collectivism, power distance, the concept of saving 'face' and communication styles (Nelson: 1997).

The management of culturally diverse classes has been a key issue for New Zealand universities due to their large numbers of international students and permanent resident students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The proportion of students from diverse cultural backgrounds studying at New Zealand and UK universities has increased in recent years reaching a peak around 2003. New Zealand's universities have built

individual responses to inclusion which are beginning to succeed in achieving educational success with a culturally diverse student population (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004; Crengle: 2004; Paewai & Meyer: 2004). This project aimed to discover strategies for good practice in managing teaching, learning and assessment methods in culturally diverse classrooms from academic staff and learning advisors in both Northumbria University and universities in New Zealand.

As part of a project for CETL and the School of Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences at Northumbria University, a review was undertaken of the use of assessment for learning methods which involve students working together in groups. The project reviewed the ways in which different assessment for learning initiatives, particularly regarding group work and group assessment, have been adopted by universities in New Zealand.

Research from universities in New Zealand can provide further information and recommendations relating to the management of co-operative learning situations so that intercultural communication and assessment for learning opportunities can be optimised. This report also relates findings relating to the management of cultural diversity issues in other areas, such as extra-curricular study programmes.

Methodology

Various staff at all eight universities in New Zealand and at Northumbria University were contacted at the start of the project to ask whether they would volunteer to be interviewed. 45 volunteers from five New Zealand universities and Northumbria University comprised the sample group. Informal semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic staff, international student advisors and learning advisors at these universities. Academic staff were questioned about their use of group work, group assessment, feedback and assessment for learning practices. They were shown the six AfL conditions and asked to comment on areas of their teaching where these conditions were met. The academic staff were also asked about the amount of cultural diversity in their classes, and whether there were any issues or recommendations they could make about group work and group assessment in culturally diverse classes. International student advisors and learning advisors were asked about their roles in the university, the services they provide and their experiences with international students, particularly relating to working in groups. Throughout the interviews certain additional

issues were raised or problems commented on which the interviewer could follow up further if desired. The interviews were anonymised, analysed and summarised, and the comments were grouped into related sections.

Key findings and recommendations

The key findings and recommendations below are derived from the literature review and the interview responses from the academic and learning advisory university staff.

Group work

Several researchers and respondents reported that it can be a challenge to ensure that group work projects are a positive learning experience for all students. Despite several students seeing the overall benefits of groupwork skills, most respondents found that their students would generally prefer to work alone, so that they have total control over their own marks and performance. As the abilities of students within a class are all different, there is a feeling that some group members could bring down marks of others. Several lecturers found that the main resistance to group work occurred when all students in the group were given a shared mark. Students were reported to often find formative groupwork more fun and seem to like to discuss things in 'safer' small groups than in front of the whole class. In this way group projects are not viewed as assessment opportunities but as forms of learning experience. It was recommended that, if group project outcomes of the task cannot be trusted to reflect individual learning, and group process measures also don't reflect learning, then academic staff should consider assessing learning individually.

Several respondents believed that there are some more practical and applied topics which can't be taught as effectively in traditional lecture situations as they can by practical groupwork taking a problem-solving approach. Some activities are 'naturally' group activities and should only ever really be done in teams. The group activities that are set for these students are therefore relatively authentic practices for the kind of employment the students wish to attain. It was recommended that academic staff consider the appropriateness of the group work activity for the students' programme's subject discipline. Several lecturers interviewed felt that their students were often most motivated by projects they perceived as having value and consequence. Several academic respondents recommended giving students sufficient time to get to know

each other and learn about forming and working in groups before starting the group work task. This must be carefully considered as giving this extra time for familiarisation and team building can leave fewer weeks to complete the project work.

Group work and culture

The main conclusion that can be reached about the experiences of students working in multi-cultural groups is that it is not possible to generalise as to student and group behaviour based on culture. There appears to be no agreement from the literature or from the findings of this study on whether students find working with mixed-cultural groups a more positive or negative experience than working with mono-cultural groups. Ledwith et al (1998) and Ho et al (2004) for example found some domestic students were reluctant to work with international students and this made international students feel uncomfortable in those groups. However more than one lecturer interviewed during this project and in other studies (Holmes: 2003; Caspersz et al: 2004) reported experiences of mixed-cultural groups who had worked well together from the start of the group work experience.

Peer review

Peer review activities can help students learn how to revise and edit drafts of written work to see what works well and what could be improved (Nelson: 1997). Even if students are unwilling or unable to identify weaknesses in their own essays, they may perhaps be more willing to identify weaknesses in another student's essay and this process then allows them to reflect on and critique their own work. Individual students or student groups can evaluate other students' or groups' documents, presentations and demonstrations of their work. These activities can provide a good quantity of timely feedback from peers.

Teachers need to recognise that some students from traditional educational backgrounds and countries with a large power distance may see tutors as holding a position of power and being the source of knowledge, therefore the teacher's comments may be valued far more than feedback from other students (Nelson: 1997; Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). Therefore the value of peer response tasks may not be appreciated by students from all cultures.

Students may need help in understanding the value of others' feedback via preparation sessions and emphasising the potential benefits. Telling students to 'criticise' each others work might be perceived by students, particularly international students, as only providing negative comments which may make them feel less comfortable with the peer response task. No student likes to lose 'face' however this issue needs careful consideration in peer review activities, especially with international students who may be unfamiliar with this type of exercise. It was recommended that tutors could help the 'face saving' issue by asking the whole class to critique an example of work together, so that the criticism does not feel so personal. Alternatively the tutor could rephrase the peer review task so that students understand they are 'assisting' other students to get a better mark for their work.

Some academics are wary of using peer review to award marks, rather than for formative feedback, due to issues of whether students are capable of carrying out summative peer assessment professionally due to lack of maturity or insufficient training and preparation in how to do it. Some students were reported to feel uncomfortable with assessing other students' work and issues of potential bias by group members who are friends were also raised. It was recommended that tutors should consider whether the peer assessment will be useful and engaged in by the students in the way intended by the tutor. The tutor should also consider whether the students are mature enough and sufficiently prepared to summatively assess each other's work.

International and domestic student interactions

Creating and facilitating opportunities that promote intercultural mixing can be challenging. Such opportunities should recur throughout the students' time at university. It should not be assumed that a cultural mix of students on campus will lead to intercultural learning or positive cultural interactions (Wright & Lander: 2003). Carefully planned interventions by teachers and other university staff may be needed to encourage meaningful interactions between home students and international students and to break down barriers in the classroom and outside (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). It is recommended that tutors plan and facilitate activities in class that might increase levels of trust, acceptance, sharing and mutual support between students' and 'teach students how to provide help to each other' such as peer pairing and cooperative learning.

Culture and learning

Some interview respondents noted that cultural background can frame their students' mentality and had a great impact on their learning. More than one academic respondent noted that students from Asian cultures preferred the lecturers to teach them and didn't want to be 'taught' by fellow students via peer review, groupwork etc, as they had less trust in their fellow students' ability to help them learn. These methods do not fit with their expectation of 'proper learning'.

Some believe that students' learning styles can be affected by whether they prefer to work cooperatively or competitively (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). Cooperative learning has been argued by some to be particularly effective with students from collectivist cultures (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004; Tang: 1996). However Kumaradvadivelu (2003) posited that considering the communication behaviour of international students predominantly based on cultural factors will result in a lack of understanding of these learners and appropriate teaching methods for them. A group of students from collectivistic cultures will not necessarily form cohesive groups (Strauss: 2001). As was indicated earlier, while specific cultures may have general preferences toward collectivism, individuals within these specific cultures vary in the strength of that preference, and so generalisations should not be made.

Prior experience issues

It is possible that some university teachers don't fully appreciate the many obstacles students can encounter when adapting to study in another culture and may mistakenly assume that international students enter their institutions with a full knowledge of the language requirements and learning expectations (Bodycott & Walker: 2000). Some teachers believe it is the student's responsibility to adapt to the language and learning culture created in the classroom and that it's the student's responsibility to engage with the social culture of the university (Bodycott & Walker: 2000). Mills (1997) and Strauss (2001) for example also found that some teachers had a tendency to interpret their experiences with international students using quite simplistic cultural stereotypes.

Language issues

Some researchers found that language was perceived to be the major deterrent to voluntary interaction and mixed culture group formation (e.g. Chamberlain & Hope: 2003). Cultural problems with communication may be alleviated by providing opportunities for students to speak out in non-threatening ways, such as group work and internet-based forum discussions, wikis etc.

Language problems may be exacerbated for many students by unfamiliar approaches to teaching and learning, and the cultural changes involved in moving to another country (Cownie & Addison: 1996; Smith et al: 1998). Some New Zealand universities have pre-degree English language courses, which were thought to be very good for preparing international students for their courses, however they may still not be sufficient. It was reported by most of the learning advisors interviewed in the New Zealand universities visited that the most common reason for international students coming to the student learning centres is to check that their English makes sense. It was recommended by learning advisors that academic staff ensure they review assignment briefs and check for things such as conciseness, appropriate cultural references, simple statements, assumptions which need to be made explicit, ensuring they include a clear set of expectations which aren't mixed in to a long statement alongside the task statements.

Extra-curricular programmes for international students

Working with peers has also been found to be effective outside of the classroom too, such as international buddy systems and other peer-pairing programmes, where a host student is paired up with a new international student. Westwood & Barker (1990) found that the international students who took part adjusted significantly better academically and socially than those students who didn't participate.

Several international student advisors interviewed for this project commented on the usefulness of cultural expectations training, such as the Excell programme. This type of programme is intended to make things culturally familiar for international students, provide them with practical strategies and prepare them for the reality of the educational experience, not just the social ideal.

SECTION 1 – LITERATURE REVIEW

1.0 Introduction

At Northumbria University, the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Assessment for Learning (CETL AfL) is a national centre for expertise in Assessment for Learning methods. Learning environments which support Assessment for Learning (AfL) methods can be described by the following six conditions (Northumbria University: 2008).

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Teaching and learning methods that may be seen by the lecturer as innovative and effective for developing students' understanding may not always have the desired outcome due to learners' educational expectations and cultural differences. Some research has already shown that the operation and outcomes of peer response groups for example can be influenced by cultural factors relating to individualism, collectivism, power distance, the concept of saving 'face' and communication styles (Nelson: 1997).

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universities has increased in recent years reaching a peak around 2003. New Zealand's universities have built individual responses to inclusion which are beginning to succeed in achieving educational success with a culturally diverse student population (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004; Crengle: 2004; Paewai & Meyer: 2004). This project aimed to discover strategies for good practice in managing teaching, learning and assessment methods in culturally diverse classrooms from academic staff and learning advisors in both Northumbria University and universities in New Zealand.

Research Project

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advisors were asked about their roles in the university, the services they provide and their experiences with international students, particularly relating to working in groups. Throughout the interviews certain additional issues were raised or problems commented on which the interviewer could follow up further if desired.

The interviews were anonymised, analysed and summarised, and the comments were grouped into related sections. The findings of the interviews are presented in chapters 4 and 5.

Limitations

For this project, the interviews were limited to academic and learning advisory staff. No students were interviewed, though this would be recommended for further work in this area. International and domestic students could be interviewed to discover their experiences and opinions of group projects and assessments, peer review and other assessment for learning activities.

Definition of terms

International student - a student who is studying at a university which is not in their home country.

Domestic student - a student who is studying at a university in their home country.

Module – a unit of study on a university programme. In New Zealand, commonly referred to as a paper.

Tutor – synonym for university lecturer.

Multi-cultural – from more than one cultural background

2.0 Learning via interaction with peers

In practically based subjects it is often common practice to use project work in assessment, often in groups, which provides a realistic and authentic context, with an expectation that the individual or group will find their own response to the brief (Shreeve, Baldwin & Farraday: 2004). Though generally often successful, the assessment of these modules is not without difficulties. Issues such as allocation of students to groups, defining student roles, group organisation and dynamics, group interaction and communication mechanisms need careful consideration, particularly when the class contains students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The sections in this chapter will consider these issues and others in more detail.

The literature reviewed in section 1 does not exclusively relate to studies and findings from New Zealand universities, with some findings coming from Australian, American and UK universities, which can be said to have sufficiently similar classroom practices to include in the discussion. New Zealand's Ministry of Education has commissioned several research projects in the area of multicultural education, of which two are frequently mentioned in this chapter due to the wealth of research findings and recommendations contained within. Ho, Holmes & Cooper's (2004) research project was commissioned by New Zealand's Ministry of Education and Education New Zealand. The project involved an extensive review of research literature on cultural differences in teaching, learning and intercultural communication in the multicultural classroom in New Zealand schools and universities, and the development of guidelines for strategies for managing diversity in the classroom. Ward's (2001) report provided a literature review for New Zealand's Ministry of Education, relating to the impact of international students on domestic students and host institutions in New Zealand, to inform policy development and effective planning in the area of international education.

2.1 Co-operative learning

Co-operative learning in the classroom has the following features (Shachar & Amir: 1996): small groups of equal status, where students interact directly with one another, unmediated by the teacher. Cooperative work is based on mutual assistance and exchange of ideas in pursuit of a common academic goal (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). Students are commonly thought to learn more if they are active participants in the learning process. Therefore a teacher should try to ensure that all members of the group participate actively in the process (Latu & Young: 2004).

There is a difference between cooperative and collaborative learning. In cooperative learning, teachers still intervene frequently and randomly in the work of groups (Bruffee: 1995). However in collaborative learning contexts, the group's management remains as much as possible in the hands of the students (Bruffee: 1995). Dillenbourg (1999) believes that in the cooperative approach, group members really work as individuals and then 'assemble the partial results into the final output'. However in collaborative work, the groups work 'together' throughout (Dillenbourg: 1999). Collaborative activity may be most suitable for 'the construction of a solution that could not otherwise have been reached' (Littleton & Hakkinen: 1999, p21).

2.2 Group work

Group work is a way for students to work together to accomplish joint learning goals and learn from each other (Johnson, Johnson & Smith: 1998). Small cooperative groups working together have been found to have several advantages. They can facilitate student learning, improve interpersonal relations between students and enable students to learn a range of perspectives from others. Working in groups can allow students to interact and discuss, and improve their thinking and language skills (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004; James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002). Group work can offer students a safe environment to try out ideas or listen and respond to the views of others (McCallum: 2004).

James, McInnis & Devlin (2002) developed several resources relating to assessment for the 'Assessing Learning in Australian Universities' project commissioned by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee. They identified that working collaboratively can directly enhance learning and facilitate the development of the following skills:

- teamwork skills (working with team dynamics and leading groups)
- analytical and cognitive skills (evaluating the work of others, critical appraisal)
- collaborative skills (communication, conflict management and resolution, accepting intellectual criticism, flexibility, negotiation and compromise)
- organisational and time management skills (James, McInnis & Devlin (2002))

Providing ongoing opportunities for students to engage in group work is thought to enable them to improve these skills thereby increasing the success of the experiences (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004).

Class-based group projects are often incorporated into the curriculum because professions, such as engineering, business and computing frequently expect their staff to work in multi-disciplinary groups or teams (Wright & Lander: 2003). There appears to be no agreed best model for groupwork as this depends on the context of the work undertaken. Some groups may prefer to meet within a formal structure with agendas, resolutions and minutes; others may prefer a series of informal discussion groups. Staff need to consider why the work is being done in groups and not individually (James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002). It has been suggested

that students should really be involved in worthwhile and feasible tasks that are best done, or only done, by a group so that multiple skills are brought to bear on problems and conflicting views can be considered (Strauss & U: 2007; James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002).

This view fits with the assessment for learning principle which refers to 'authenticity ... in the content and methods of assessment' (Northumbria University: 2008), meaning that assessed tasks are chosen for their suitability to the learning objective. Students also usually wish to know how the group activity can help achieve the learning objectives of this subject so they can understand its relevance (James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002). If students can't see the objective of group work, are unsure of what is expected of them, or believe the assessment to be invalid or unfair, the educational benefits are reduced and tensions can emerge (James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002).

If students only work co-operatively and not collaboratively, i.e. if students only divide work up rather than working on the whole project together, each can have a good understanding and knowledge of their particular aspect of the project but may have gained very little insight into the broader picture (McCorkle et al: 1999). Dillenbourg (1999) and Littleton & Hakkinen (1999) posited that collaborative groups can encourage deeper learning and the formation of more innovative solutions. Strauss & U (2007) reported on two of their studies in a New Zealand university which involved gathering information about the difficulties facing lecturers in charge of undergraduate classes with a large mix of domestic and EAL (English as an additional language) students. They concluded that 'participation in collaborative groups appears to require some experience with group projects and a degree of maturity and commitment that is not always found among students, particularly those in undergraduate programmes' (Strauss & U: 2007, p156).

Johnson et al (1998) reported that members of cooperative groups should believe that they will not succeed unless the other group members are also successful, and that they should also be accountable to the other group members by accepting their responsibility to contribute and to support and praise each other. They also concluded that group members should have some knowledge of teamwork skills and some ability in assessing their progress as individuals, and as a team (Johnson et al: 1998).

Strauss & U (2007) advocated allowing sufficient time for students to be pre-taught how to form and maintain workable groups, and to be introduced to strategies to help them to deal with conflicts that might arise due to differences in assumptions and expectations. Clinebell & Stecher (2003) found that time limits can hamper a team's ability to establish proper roles in the group. Time limits can prevent normal group development processes from being carried out properly. Clinebell & Stecher (2003) argued that a 15-week semester doesn't provide enough time for the formation of 'positive social relationships.'

It can be a challenge to ensure that group work projects are a positive learning experience for all students (Strauss & U: 2007) and the design of these tasks needs careful thought and preparation. Students new to university group work such as some international students, may find clear guidelines about the possible roles and expected contributions of group members useful in guiding their behaviour and contributions (James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002).

2.3 Group assessment

Lecturers are often required to implement group assessment, the value of which has been called into question by some (Strauss & U: 2007). Group assessment is popular with some because there is a perception that group work and the accompanying assessment can be a good way of developing skills for employability (Lejk et al: 1997; Mutch: 1998; McCorkle et al: 1999).

The fair allocation of marks and the handling of issues such as 'freeloading' whereby students may feel the marks have not been fairly awarded amongst group members are very important and require careful consideration. Students who've experienced 'unfair' treatment in one group work experience may have their approach coloured for future group work (Strauss & U: 2007).

Eley, Lajbcygier & Spratt (2004) suggested that group outcomes, rather than individual work, might be better interpreted as reflecting the effectiveness of a group's operation, i.e. evaluating whether students are good group members, and evaluating the group process. However, this is a difficult thing to assess and best methods of assessing group processes will depend on the nature of the task and the particular learning objectives.

Lejk, Wyvill & Farrow (1999) found that the vast majority of methods used in group assessment assess a group product and then distribute the mark among members of the group through some form of peer assessment. This is usually done by the other team members judging the individual's contribution to the team (James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002). This method is also quite contentious as the students may not feel sufficiently experienced to judge each other, or personal factors and bias could affect their judgement of the contribution of other group members.

The potential for evidence-based assessment of group work via a portfolio may be worth investigating in particular contexts (James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002). Portfolios should contain any evidence of the achievement of the module's learning objectives. Portfolios allow the tutor to get a clear idea of individual contributions and can increase student responsibility for learning. However assessing portfolios can be very time-consuming for staff, particularly where classes are large, and again information from students may be subjective and therefore potentially unreliable (James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002).

It is however possible in group assessed work to have a group which operates effectively and produces a high quality outcome yet not all the group members benefit in terms of personal learning and understanding (Eley, Lajbcygier & Spratt: 2004). This would appear to defeat the intended learning objectives of groupwork modules. If project outcomes cannot be trusted to reflect individual learning, and group process measures also don't reflect learning, then Eley et al (2004) and Lejk et al (1999) suggested that individual learning should be assessed individually. This would mean that group projects are not viewed as assessment opportunities but as forms of learning experience. Although this approach runs counter to the philosophy behind cooperative learning, it addresses some of the difficulties presented by group evaluation. However Lejk et al (1999) suggested that if group work is not assessed students are unlikely to take it seriously and may work in ways contrary to the philosophy of the assigned group task. Therefore it is a challenge for teachers to find ways to structure group projects so that students engage and participate fully (Eley, Lajbcygier & Spratt: 2004).

2.4 Groupwork concerns

While some students consider group assessment to be appropriate preparation for employment, James, McInnis & Devlin (2002) found that others are yet to be convinced. Some believe that university group work is not carried out or evaluated in the same way as in the workplace, as employers focus on employing an individual, not a team (James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002). Also there is a structured hierarchy of authority in the workplace, unlike in student teams. These factors may reduce the impression of the tasks' authenticity for students. Students do not always willingly participate in collaborative encounters and may not be prepared to work through perceived difficulties arising in a group situation (Wright & Lander: 2003) unlike in the workplace where they have less choice in the matter.

U & Strauss (2006) interviewed EAL students, domestic students from English-speaking backgrounds (ESB) and lecturers at a New Zealand university about their experiences of group work and group assessment. One of the strongest concerns that students were found to have about group work seemed to be when the work is assessed and the group assessment practices may not fairly assess individual contributions (U & Strauss: 2006; James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002). U & Strauss (2006) found that students resented having group members who contributed minimally or nothing at all to the project but were still rewarded with a good mark. Students were keen to agree group rules and expected that grading practices are established so that grades properly reflect the levels of input and performance of each student (James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002; U & Strauss: 2006). An issue here is how the teacher knows the level of input of each student. Some students feel uncomfortable 'telling' on group members who weren't contributing (U & Strauss: 2006) therefore careful monitoring and control is needed by the teacher. These issues will be considered further in section 2.6 which looks at peer assessment.

2.5 Cultural effects on education

Gay (2000) reported that many educators believe that it is only the individual, not his race, ethnicity, culture or gender that counts in the learning process. However others believe these factors cannot be ignored when designing and implementing pedagogical practices and that individuals cannot be separated from the contexts of their lives (Gay: 2000). The following sections consider some potential issues relating to culture and teaching and learning, particularly relating to students working with their peers.

2.5.1 Collectivism and individualism

Some of the literature relating to culture and learning focuses on different cultural orientations, such as collectivism and individualism, to explain learning approaches and preferences. These orientations will briefly be described in the following sections.

2.5.1.1 Collectivism

In collectivist cultures, individuals generally place the needs of the group above their personal needs. Usually they tend to belong to the same groups for a long period of time (Nelson: 1997). Their groups provide collectivists with a sense of self-identity with roles and norms that determine their behaviour, and with a sense of purpose. A primary goal of the group is to maintain the relationships that constitute the group, to maintain cohesion and harmony among the group members (Nelson: 1997).

Triandis, Bontempo & Villareal (1988) provided a theoretical analysis of the constructs of individualism and collectivism as well as the findings of three studies relating to in-groups and social behaviour with participants from universities in America, Japan and Puerto Rico, as well as some older Japanese participants. They suggested that collectivist societies differ on which feature of collectivism they emphasise. Some such as the Far East cultures emphasise in-group harmony, where people present themselves to others as modestly as possible and avoid conflict and confrontation with others (Triandis et al: 1988). Other collectivist cultures most value respect, dignity and preservation of one's honour. Triandis et al (1988) suggested that in all cultures both types of mechanisms are used; it is simply a matter of degree of use.

2.5.1.2 Individualism

Individualist cultures tend to socialise their children to work independently and compete with others, whereas children from collectivist cultures tend towards working in groups (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). Though individualist cultures focus on individuals this does not imply that groups are insignificant to their members (Nelson: 1997). Members of individualist cultures frequently belong

to many groups but no specific group is responsible for one's total identity. People from individualist cultures tend to shift group membership frequently. Group membership depends more on personal choice, convenience and specialisation, rather than a commitment to maintain actively the relationships that constitute the group (Nelson: 1997). Consequently these groups tend to exert less influence than do ingroups in collectivist societies where people belong to fewer ingroups (Cohen: 1997).

2.5.1.3 Collectivism-individualism continuum

The collectivism-individualism continuum framework represents the degree to which a culture places emphasis on fostering interdependent relations, social responsibility and well-being of the **group** versus fostering independence and **individual** fulfillment (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). East and South Asians, Africans, Latin Americans and South Europeans are often quoted as people from collectivist cultures, whereas New Zealanders, Australians, North & West Europeans and North Americans of European background are peoples from individualist cultures (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004).

Differences between these two orientations have been reported in teaching and learning (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). In collectivist cultures, students often expect to learn 'how to do'. Individualist cultures emphasise 'how to learn', i.e. how students experience and organise a learning task and make them independent learners (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). Students from collectivist cultural backgrounds have been reported to be more likely to feel they must cooperate and support the teacher at all times and avoid confrontation in the class, whereas students from individualist cultures have been reported to be more likely to prioritise providing the teacher with the correct information as more important than saving face (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004).

Ho, Holmes & Cooper (2004) reported that some researchers believe that students' learning styles are affected by whether they prefer to work cooperatively or competitively. Cooperative learning has been argued by some to be particularly effective with students from collectivist cultures (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004; Tang: 1996). Ward & Rzoska (1994) noted that behavioural studies on

cooperation and competition can be used to complement values research on individualism and collectivism.

Many Western culture schools, such as those in New Zealand, Australia and the UK, are founded on individualistic values and tend to emphasise a competitive orientation amongst the children and discourage group cooperation and problem-solving (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004; Ward & Rzoska: 1994). However, although 'Western' culture can be broadly classified as individualistic, the social and cultural life of each particular country can be much more complex (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). The social and cultural life of New Zealand is one example demonstrating this, and will be considered here in more detail.

Maori learning is traditionally more cooperative, reciprocal and interactive between teacher and student, favouring a practical approach to teaching. Maori educational traditions focus on holism, reciprocity and collectivity (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). Ho, Holmes & Cooper (2004) reported that research with Maori, Pasifika and Pakeha (New Zealand European) students in New Zealand in the 1970s showed that Maori and Pasifika children were more cooperative and higher preference for cooperative activities than Pakeha children (Thomas: 1975, 1978). These findings provided support for the introduction of cooperative learning strategies into ethnically mixed classrooms in New Zealand due to its appropriateness for students from collectivist cultures.

Ward & Rzoska (1994) reviewed research relating to schooling in New Zealand and the impact of cooperative, competitive and individualist elements of teaching and learning. They also concluded that group oriented experience is particularly suited to Polynesian students who have substantial experience in cooperative interactions which lend themselves to effective problem solving (Ward & Rzoska: 1994). According to Ward & Rzoska (1994) the introduction of cooperative learning strategies has enhanced inter-ethnic relations in New Zealand classrooms and promoted higher levels of achievement and more positive attitudes towards education.

Several studies have focused on learners in Chinese universities to find out more about their learning preferences in group situations. Tang (1996) studied collaborative activity in informal study groups with Chinese university students in Hong Kong. Biggs too has reflected on Chinese learners and their approaches to learning, via empirical research of teaching and learning in Hong Kong, Nepal and Malaysia (e.g. Biggs: 1996). Bodycott & Walker (2000) reflected on the experiences of English-speaking lecturers from 'Western' educational backgrounds teaching in Hong Kong.

Tang (1996) reported that it would seem likely that small groups involving collaboration and co-operation would be a natural way to structure learning for ethnic Chinese learners as they are accustomed to working collectively in groups and often 'spontaneously collaborate' outside of class time in their own countries (Tang: 1996; Biggs: 1996; Bodycott & Walker: 2000). Volet & Renshaw (1995) found that students from South-East Asia valued tutorial interaction with academic staff and other students more than local students, and found little evidence that they preferred a teacher-centred, passive, rote-learning style of instruction (see also Volet: 1999; Biggs: 1996). McKay & Kember (1997) also found that Chinese students taught in Hong Kong with a student-centred approach involving case studies, role playing and student-led seminars preferred that style of instruction (Volet: 1999).

The collectivism-individualism continuum framework needs to be used carefully because categorisation of people can lead to inaccurate stereotyping and pigeonholing, as there can be substantial variation within cultures (Kim et al: 1996; Triandis, Bontempo & Villareal: 1988). It is important not to oversimplify the situation by such dual categorization, as this implies a direct opposition between individualism and collectivism, which is not the case (Triandis, Bontempo & Villareal: 1988). Teachers should also not assume that students of certain backgrounds can only learn one way, thus depriving them of a broad repertoire of learning mechanisms (Alton-Lee: 2003).

2.5.2 Groupwork and cultural issues

The following section will describe some studies undertaken in universities in New Zealand, Australia and the UK involving group work with multi-cultural classes. Several different experiences and reactions to them are discussed.

Wright & Lander (2003) investigated verbal interaction rates during a collaborative group activity between 72 engineering students from two ethnic cohorts at an Australian university; the cohorts being Australian-born domestic students and overseas-born South-East Asian students. They reported that the skills required to work effectively in culturally diverse groups are quite different from those needed for working in culturally homogeneous groups (Cox: 1993; Watson et al: 1993). Wright & Lander (2003) concluded that an individual's participation in interactions can be shaped by their cultural orientation, which involves the unstated but shared assumptions that are often only revealed when contact is made with a person from another culture.

Bodycott & Walker (2000) found that the South-East Asian students in their study appeared to learn best in small groups. They posited that the students' willingness to contribute in class was directly related to whether they worked in individual or group situations. The form of learning in this case was more influential than the content involved (Bodycott & Walker: 2000). Early (1993) warned against adopting group-based activities across the curriculum for students from collectivist cultures, stating that it is the type of group which is of importance.

Volet & Ang (1998) gathered information from 17 domestic students and 23 international students (who were all from South-East Asia) at an Australian university about their views on issues of cultural mixing between domestic and international students. The international students generally thought that a common cultural background facilitates inter-personal communication and consequently, makes group management easier. Some international students had realised that conversations across cultures often cannot go beyond small talk until people had a chance to get to know each other (Volet & Ang: 1998). Volet & Ang (1998) found that having opportunities to work in cross-cultural groups made some Australian students realise that communication with international students from non-English speaking backgrounds was not as bad as they had initially anticipated. Some groups therefore stayed together for subsequent assignments, and came to

realise that cultural differences may not be as important as individual differences and that misperceptions can be corrected (Volet & Ang: 1998). However despite this, the Australian students were not ready to be proactive in seeking mixed group activities. They appeared to have a willingness but not a strong interest in working with international students (Volet & Ang: 1998).

None of the international or local students interviewed by Volet & Ang (1998) made any reference to the fact that the Australian student population is not homogenous and that many Australian students are from Asian or other non-Anglo Saxon backgrounds. Some international students also realised that they had stereotyped views about Australian students' work-related attitudes. Australian students with ethnocentric views were found to be likely to avoid teaming up with international students for group assignments (Volet & Ang: 1998).

Beaver & Tuck (1998) conducted a study in New Zealand and found that Asian and Pasifika students were interested in intercultural mixing in their classrooms and both of these groups rated mixed classes higher than did Pakeha (New Zealand European) students. Pakeha students were found to be more interested in their individual learning and working with people they perceived to be of the same academic level and English ability in order to achieve their academic goals, while Asian students rated themselves much lower than Pakeha students on study skills and language ability (Beaver & Tuck: 1998). However these perceptions did not necessarily correlate to lower levels of achievement for Asian students (Beaver & Tuck: 1998). Ledwith et al's (1998) British survey found that domestic students were reluctant to engage in group work with a mix of domestic and international students, and revealed strong preferences for working in mono-cultural group settings.

Ho, Holmes & Cooper (2004) found that international students from traditional (non-Western) backgrounds tended to view group work as an interdependent cooperative activity whereas domestic students often take an individualistic approach of dividing up the work and bringing it together at the end of the task. Though it also should be mentioned that sometimes teachers encourage the latter means of dividing and integrating work as it takes less time, so this is not always an issue to do with culture.

As can be seen from the studies described above, some varied experiences have been recorded in this type of research. The motivation of international students for being at an overseas university may also have an effect on how they interact in groups. Strauss & U (2007) discussed that the prime motivation for many international students is to obtain a qualification from an English-speaking country to pursue careers in their home countries. It is therefore argued that they are likely to prefer to achieve this goal more easily and pleasantly by working with groups of people who share their language and cultural values (Strauss & U: 2007). It is understandable that students will actively seek group membership where the group experience offers fewer constraints, and working collaboratively and interculturally does require particularly well-developed skills that the students might feel they do not have (Wright & Lander: 2003).

2.5.2.1 Collectivism and group work

Early (1993) suggested that when students from collectivist cultural backgrounds are placed in non-ethnically mixed groupings their sense of efficacy as learners may decline, as does their performance with managing activities in the group. However as was indicated earlier, while specific cultures may have general preferences toward collectivism, individuals within these specific cultures vary in the strength of that preference. To group simply by ethnicity and overall orientation is argued to be too simplistic (Gibbs: 2005).

Early (1993) also warned against making these kinds of generalisations about the group work ethic of various cultures, saying that ‘.. the blanket adoption of group-based work in a collectivistic culture is not appropriate.’ One of the problems appears to be that certain cultures are identified as collectivistic and it is assumed that students from these cultures will work well in team situations simply because of their cultural backgrounds. A group of students from collectivistic cultures will not necessarily form cohesive groups (Strauss: 2001).

Some research has reported negative impacts on students’ effort when collectivistically-oriented groups are combined with out-group members. Yamagishi (1988) commented that members of a collectivistically-oriented society generally contribute positively to collective effort with ingroup members. However when placed in groups which include out-group members they invested less

effort. What seems to be important here is the degree to which inter-connectedness is apparent between, and recognised by, members of groups (Gaertner & Schopler: 1998; Hamilton, Sherman & Lickel: 1998).

2.5.2.2 Preference for multi-cultural groups

Despite the general resistance to working in culturally mixed groups, Ward's (2001) study found considerable evidence that this practice produces positive academic and social benefits. Ho, Holmes & Cooper (2004) reported that New Zealand students raised several advantages of group work experiences with international students: they saw them as being focused in achieving their tasks and that they helped to create a more competitive learning environment. The international students in Holmes' (2003) New Zealand study spoke of the positive experiences they encountered in group work, such as improving their understanding, discovering connections with others, and enjoying the creativity and courage of their domestic student peers.

Volet & Ang (1998) studied perceptions of Australian and Asian students both before and after experiencing a mixed group project in class. Some participants had found ethnocentric and stereotypical views to be a major barrier for both groups in preventing the students from forming mixed academic groups in the past (Volet & Ang: 1998; Ward: 2001). After a successful experience of culturally mixed group work, participants realised that cultural differences were not as important as having similar goals and a mutual commitment to the task. Experiencing positive outcomes in terms of cultural learning from one another was thought to aid in dispelling the previously held negative views (Volet & Ang: 1998). However Volet & Ang (1998) also reported that despite this, the study provided no evidence that either group of students would deliberately form culturally mixed groups in future.

Kirchmeyer (1993) and Watson et al (1993) concluded that culturally diverse groups produce higher quality solutions to problems than monocultural groups when they have been given sufficient time to settle into their groups. Culturally diverse groups can achieve success by looking at problems in different ways and reducing uniformity in thinking (Kirchmeyer: 1993).

Volet & Ang (1998) proposed that all students be given opportunities to work with students of different cultures if possible on a regular basis during their time at university. To allow for potential emotional and social challenges, initial tasks should be highly structured with set roles given.

2.5.3 Group composition

There are different methods of selecting groups which can be broadly classified as tutor-selected or student-selected. There are various means of allocating students to groups within each of the two approaches. Both methods have their drawbacks and advantages and are subject to large amounts of debate by researchers into group work practices. These issues will be considered further in the following sections.

2.5.3.1 Tutor selected groups

James, McInnis & Devlin (2002) proposed that in situations where group dynamics and the challenge of working effectively as a group are an expected part of the learning, the work may be facilitated by the tutor forming the groups. The tutor may choose to either randomly allocate and mix up the group, or to form groups based on the skills of group members. When the group member selection is outside the students' control and students are working in diverse groups with people they don't know, then different skills are needed to enable students to manage the group effectively compared to when students have chosen their own group members (Wright & Lander: 2003). A concern with tutor-selected groups is that students may not take ownership of their group if they believe it has been imposed on them, rather than been chosen by them (Ledwith & Lee: 1998).

In multicultural classes, while some tutors saw lecturer selected groups as an ideal opportunity to encourage intercultural exchanges and allow international students to improve their English, others were aware of the resentment many domestic students harboured towards being put into mixed groups of domestic and international students (U & Strauss: 2006). There was a concern among the lecturers surveyed by U & Strauss (2006) that both international and domestic students might be placed in groups where they might not be welcome or where they would be disadvantaged because

of being in such a group. This issue is not exclusive to tutor-selected groups however as random group selection can also present the same difficulties (U & Strauss: 2006).

Although culturally mixed groups offer the opportunity for increased contact and intercultural learning, research reveals that these types of groups rarely form spontaneously (Ward: 2001). Volet & Ang (1998) reported that in their study at an Australian university, the domestic and international students initially preferred working in 'their own' groups. This was found to be due to four major reasons: cultural connectedness, language, pragmatism and negative stereotypes (Volet & Ang: 1998). Cultural-emotional connectedness refers to the students' perceptions of feeling more comfortable, thinking along the same wavelength, and sharing a similar communication style and sense of humour when interacting with peers from the same cultural background (Volet & Ang: 1998).

Ho, Holmes & Cooper (2004) suggest that teachers provide an opportunity for students to have one member from the same culture in their group, if they prefer, so that they can have language and other peer support. However they also suggest that groups should ideally be heterogeneous across ethnicity, ability, gender, home country etc (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004).

Ho, Holmes & Cooper (2004) also recommend that teachers make careful decisions about the length of time their students stay in the same group. Sometimes students may prefer to stay in the same group because they have developed effective cooperative strategies and developed trust. Though another consideration is that exposure to a range of different students may improve cultural understanding and engagement with different ideas and styles (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004).

2.5.3.2 Student selected groups

Ho, Holmes & Cooper (2004) advocated that lecturers allow students to form their own groups occasionally, though said that this method should be used sparingly and with caution to avoid reinforcing social group differences. This assumes that allowing students to form their own groups is more likely to lead to homogenous cultural groupings, which might not be the case.

U & Strauss (2006) found that students preferred to self-select their groups. However, from a cultural perspective, this method did not appear to encourage cultural mixing. Slavin (1990) found that students tended to select members like themselves. Lecturers have also raised concerns about what happens to the 'leftover' students who were not welcome in any of the groups (U & Strauss: 2006).

If students are allowed to select their own group members, they will often chose those students with whom they feel comfortable working with, and it becomes difficult to prevent the formation of homogenous groups of either all international or all domestic students (Buckenmyer: 2000; Wright & Lander: 2003). This may have a negative impact on international students who feel that domestic students don't want to work with them. However it may on the other hand be preferable to placing international students in groups with domestic students if their presence is not welcomed (Strauss: 2001). It may well be that students, particularly from collectivist cultures, learn more effectively within in-groups of the same cultural background because there are likely to be fewer relational barriers (Wright & Lander: 2003).

Tan & Goh (1999) studied Chinese students in Australian universities and found that during group work Chinese students preferred in-group study practices. The students felt more comfortable speaking in groups of other Chinese students, as they perceived Australian students to be often be aggressive and intimidating. The Chinese students were more comfortable whilst maintaining harmony within the group by discussing and basing decisions on group consensus rather than debate (Tan & Goh: 1999).

Ledwith & Lee (1998) conducted a survey of domestic and international students and lecturers asking them about their experiences of group work and assessment at a UK university. They found that students reported overwhelmingly that their most positive group work experiences had been in groups who had been organised by themselves, or jointly with their tutors, and that a large

proportion of the students' mostly negative group experiences had been in groups organised by the tutors alone (Ledwith & Lee: 1998).

There are many issues to consider here, and the means of group selection may be determined by the characteristics of the class, or by the task being set. There is also the possibility mentioned by Watson and Marshall (1995, p407) that 'some students simply learn most effectively alone.' This could be due to their personal learning style or preferences or due to factors in their lives which means they don't have as much time to work in groups.

2.5.4 Negative groupwork experiences

The international students surveyed by Ho, Holmes & Cooper's (2004) survey of students in New Zealand also spoke of domestic students' lack of interest in their ideas, feeling they were often marginalized or ignored and that the domestic students controlled group work processes. Wright & Lander (2003) proposed the possibility that the domestic students' mode of operation in their study was assumed as the dominant and the default (Wright & Lander: 2003). Leki (2001) posited that domestic students might position themselves as expert members of the classroom community and view the international students as novice members. The status of the latter international students might be considered to be quite low (Verbitsky: 1998), with some in U & Strauss' (2006) study reporting that their domestic student group members would not take directions from them. The domestic students are thought to have significant advantages due to their language fluency and their relative confidence working in the familiar social and academic classroom environment (Wright & Lander: 2003).

Wright & Lander (2003) studied classroom interactions between Australian domestic students and South East Asian students. They found that domestic students placed much greater emphasis on socialising within their groups than the South East Asian students, who approached the task more seriously. It was suggested by Wright & Lander (2003) that the social aspect of rapid conversation is an effective brainstorming strategy where new ideas can be proposed and rejected without causing any offence to the speaker. It is often hard for students to articulate their opinions and ideas fluently in English if this is not their first language (Strauss & U: 2007). Domestic students have also been found to complain that they need to write or re-write the whole

group assignment as the other students' English is inadequate (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004; Ledwith & Lee: 1998). However some of these problems may apply to group work in general, and are not always due to having mixed cultural groups.

De Vita (2002) found that UK domestic students emphasised the importance of their individual average mark and were concerned that working in groups with students who aren't good at coping with group projects might lower this mark, potentially impacting negatively on their final degree performance (U & Strauss: 2006). U & Strauss (2006) also found that some students had a perception that others could be helped out through their studies by 'freeloading' in group work assignments. If international students are seen as freeloading, either because of language difficulties or other factors which make it more challenging for them to take part in group assignments, this is likely to have a negative effect on their self-esteem (Strauss: 2001). Some teachers might wish to place international students in groups with native speakers or fluent speakers of English to take a leadership role in the group and to help with any language difficulties (U & Strauss: 2006; Ledwith & Lee: 1998). Ledwith & Lee (1998) found that the native speakers are often resentful of these extra pressures and expectations.

U & Strauss (2006) found that some international students who have experienced problems with group work used counter strategies such as withdrawing from interactions with domestic students and forming groups with students of the same language and cultural background to themselves. Some would remain silent if put into groups with domestic students (U & Strauss: 2006). U & Strauss (2006) warned that this kind of counter strategy may lead domestic students to regard the international students acting in this way as ethnocentric.

2.5.5 Positive groupwork experiences

De Vita (2002) proposed that findings from research conducted with an undergraduate business studies cohort at a UK university indicates that, on average, assessed work in multicultural groups has a positive effect on the individual average mark of all students, rather than pulling the domestic students' average down as some may believe.

De Vita (2002) postulated that culturally mixed groups can lead to multiplicative rather than just additive positive effects, due to cultural synergies, meaning that group performance could even exceed the ability level of the most able group member. Caspersz, Skene, Wu & Boland (2004) reported findings of research into lecturer and student attitudes and experiences of teamwork in an Australian university. They also found that many students said that they preferred to work in culturally diverse teams, feeling that the cultural diversity helped improve their problem-solving skills because 'there are more points of view to solve the problem' (Caspersz, Skene, Wu & Boland: 2004).

2.6 Peer review and assessment

Peer review tasks involve students reading or viewing each other's work to provide their fellow students with feedback on how they can improve their work (Nelson: 1997). Hamer, Kell & Spence (2007) described experiences with peer review and assessment with undergraduate students at a New Zealand university. They summarised that peer review and peer assessment can assist in reinforcing and deepening understanding by providing students with cognitively demanding tasks to engage with. It is important for students to learn skills in reviewing, summarising, giving clear and concise feedback, identifying missing knowledge and misconceptions. Students are given an opportunity to consider work of a variety of styles from students with different ideas and abilities (Hamer, Kell & Spence: 2007).

Peer review tasks can encourage students to reflect on course learning outcomes and the purpose of the assessment that has been set (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton: 2002). Providing feedback to other students can improve students' social and professional skills as well as their understanding and self-confidence (Hamer, Kell & Spence: 2007). Another benefit is the quantity and variety of feedback provided by other students (Mowl & Pain: 1995; Hamer, Kell & Spence: 2007). Stefani (1994) questioned students in two undergraduate classes at a UK university about peer and self-assessment procedures. She found that almost 100% of the students said that these types of activity made them think more and 85% said that they felt they made them learn more traditionally assessed work (Stefani: 1994). These results were thought to indicate a highly motivated activity compared to traditional means of assessment, such as exams (Stefani: 1994).

The techniques used in peer review can correspond with several assessment for learning principles such as 'providing an environment that is rich in formal and informal feedback', as well as 'developing students' abilities to direct their own learning, evaluate their own progress and attainments and support the learning of others', and offering students opportunities to engage in the kinds of tasks that build their confidence and capabilities before they are summatively assessed (Northumbria University: 2008).

Nelson (1997) advocates peer response activities to help students learn how to write essays and to highlight the importance of revision and editing of essay drafts. Even if students are unwilling or unable to identify weaknesses in their own essays, they may perhaps be more willing to identify weaknesses in another student's essay and this process then allows the author to reflect on and critique their own work. Responses from student reviewers can help the author to see what works well and what could be improved (Nelson: 1997).

Nelson (1997) described a study by Nelson & Carson (1995) which looked at EAL (specifically Chinese) students' and domestic students' reactions to peer response tasks in an essay-writing class at an American university. Three groups containing Chinese and non-Chinese students were videoed during their peer response sessions. The researcher then viewed the tape with each student afterwards in an interview situation and asked them about their thoughts and feelings about the experience. Peer response groups are built on the assumption that students value the responses of their peers and believe that their peers can help them improve their written work. However, if students do not value their peers' suggestions and do not consider their peers knowledgeable enough to offer useful feedback, then peer response groups are not going to work the way they are intended by the teacher (Nelson: 1997).

It is therefore essential for teachers to be explicit about the purpose of peer response tasks, and the roles of teachers and all students in the cooperative process to make clear the advantages of feedback from other students (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). The teacher needs to provide guidance on how to review written work and how to give and receive balanced feedback (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004; Nelson: 1997). Mowl & Pain (1995) found that students are generally capable and conscientious peer assessors, as long as they have been appropriately prepared and understand the value of the activity. Hamer, Kell & Spence (2007) also found that the students in their study were pleasantly surprised that their peers assessed them fairly and consistently.

Nelson (1997) agreed that it is important to train all students in appropriate peer response group behaviour as well as intercultural communication and an awareness of any cultural differences that may be revealed. By being informed of cultural differences in communication, domestic students may be in a better position to interpret the feedback they receive from students who are non-native speakers of English and also to provide those students with effective appropriate feedback (Nelson: 1997). Cultural factors such as individualism, collectivism, power distance, saving 'face' and communication styles, can play a role in whether students find peer response work to be a valuable exercise (Nelson: 1997). Teachers need to recognise that students from traditional educational backgrounds and countries with a large power distance may see tutors as holding a position of power and being the source of knowledge, therefore the teacher's comments may be valued far more than feedback from other students (Nelson: 1997; Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). Nelson & Murphy (1992) found that all the international students in their study agreed they did not feel sufficiently competent to comment on each others' papers and that they would have liked the teacher to be part of the group. Sambell, McDowell & Brown (1997) found that students in their study were often initially worried about judging their friends' work and lacked confidence in their ability to act as fair assessors, though this was not due to cultural factors.

In certain countries, for example in the Middle East, criticism can be seen as destructive and as a form of personal insult (Nelson: 1997). Therefore peer response tasks may not be at all appreciated by students from all cultures. 'Constructive criticism' is not translatable into Arabic for example (Nelson: 1997). It is important to consider issues of face and respect. It has been suggested that criticism should be indirect, and include assurances of high regard for the author (Nelson: 1997). Teachers should aim to develop peer response tasks which allow for harmonious relationships in which all students can retain their integrity, dignity and self-respect (Nelson: 1997).

Nelson (1997) recommended that critical comments are not given in front of others and suggested that they could be written down instead of spoken. Students have also mentioned that anonymity of responses may lessen the anxiety that students face when having to show their work to others (Hamer, Kell & Spence: 2007). Nelson (1997) found that Chinese students in particular were concerned for the feelings of their peers, and often did not want to embarrass or hurt the feelings of their peers. However this could also equally apply to

domestic students and so is not necessarily just a cultural factor. The Chinese students in Nelson's (1997) study were reluctant to criticise their peers' work, believing that negative comments must lead to division rather than cohesion in the group. This was thought to demonstrate how the Chinese students in the study were mostly more concerned with the group's social dimensions than with providing their peers with feedback (Nelson: 1997).

One way to get round some of these problems could be to ask students to work in pairs instead of small groups, as the interactions should be less complex. Students are less likely to lose face if only one other student is involved in the exercise. Teachers can ask the authors to consider their peer response partner's suggestions but also remind them that they are the authors and can therefore make the ultimate decisions about how to write their essays and whether to include some of the suggested improvements (Nelson: 1997). Hamer, Kell & Spence (2007) found that the students in their study largely felt confident in rejecting feedback that they felt was misguided, and some did adopt writing styles or ideas from their peers. These students reported that they actually preferred to be criticised by other students rather than lecturers (Hamer, Kell & Spence: 2007) and appreciated the AfL approach. Another potential solution to make students feel more at ease with peer response tasks could be for the teacher to also consider whether it is feasible or appropriate to group speakers of the same language and cultural background together in a peer response group, on the assumption that they will better understand the subtleties and finer points of each other's feedback (Nelson: 1997).

The issues raised in this section are particularly pertinent to the main topic of this report and the subject of assessment for learning, as they show that there are added complexities in asking students to provide feedback via peer or self review, which may not have been planned for by teachers. Cultural factors can mean that a task involving peer feedback may cause personal discomfort or task failure if not carefully planned to allow for cultural differences and preferences.

2.7 Contributing student approaches

One way of encouraging group work and peer review could be to use a contributing student approach. The 'contributing student' pedagogy involves learners creating learning materials and sharing them with others

(Collis: 2005). Hamer (2006) wrote about his experiences with the contributing student approach with students on two computing courses at a New Zealand university. The students themselves find out about one or two appropriate topics each and share the results with the rest of the class (Hamer: 2006). An online collaboration tool is used to share the work as it is progressing. The collaboration tools are based on wikis which are websites whose content can be edited by anyone who has access to it. Students draw on peer and self evaluation skills as regular peer assessments are used as a measure of quality control and to encourage students' exposure to the full range of course material. Students can then contribute and add their own comments to others' work (Hamer: 2006). Again this kind of approach supports assessment for learning principles relating to students providing informal feedback to peers, supporting the learning of others, directing their own learning and evaluating their own progress and attainments (Northumbria University: 2008).

It is unfortunate but possibly unavoidable that students are likely to receive an uneven exposure to the course material. Hamer (2006) found that students knew the topic for which they had prepared the material much more thoroughly than the other topics. The students were found to be good at updating the wiki with their own work, but they did not tend to spend time reading material from other groups (Hamer: 2006). This raised issues of fairness as the curriculum was not necessarily being fully covered by all students. Currently research in this area appears to be fairly limited as it appears to be a relatively new approach. It is likely that some further useful findings will come out of this area as more teachers experiment with the contributing student approach and it is developed further.

2.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has considered the organisation of groupwork modules and associated issues such as group composition, allocation, management and assessment. Cultural issues relating to teaching, learning and assessment have also been considered, with reference to studies which have provided particular recommendations when the group work involves students from varied cultural backgrounds. Assessment for learning activities such as group project work and peer review have been reported to be successful in helping students support each other and evaluate their own learning. Teachers may wish to carefully consider the

best way to organise these activities so that they benefit students from a diverse set of cultural and prior educational backgrounds.

3.0 International student issues and cultural awareness

This short chapter will consider some of the additional issues faced by international students and some suggested solutions to these problems. Though not the main focus of the report, there are some relevant support strategies that relate to improving the overall experience of being an international student which are worth discussion.

Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock (1995) surveyed students from three Australian universities about their study-related and personal experiences, and found that all students shared a general pattern of problems associated with studying at university, however international students suffered more problems to a higher degree. Burns (1991) specifically researched the experiences of first year international students in an Australian university, and also discovered that international students' stress levels were significantly higher than home students but found that the problems were similar to those that home students faced. Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas' (2000) survey of Australian international students and lecturing staff highlighted the potential extreme loneliness of being an international student and the consequent need for empathetic support such as mentoring schemes. Though these studies related findings from Australian universities, similar experiences can be assumed for international students at other 'Western' universities in the UK and New Zealand. Some of the interview responses discussed in chapters 4 and 5 support this assumption as do the reports commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education by Ward (2001, 2006) and Ho, Holmes and Cooper (2004) pertaining to international students' experiences at New Zealand universities.

Nesdale and Todd (1993) researched cultural contact at an Australian university, including both domestic and international students' perceptions of friendliness and preferred levels of mixing with the other group. They posited that domestic students' preferred levels of mixing with international students are likely to be influenced by the number of international students on their course of study (Nesdale & Todd: 1993). They found that those with high levels of international students on their course tended to prefer less contact than those with low levels (Nesdale & Todd: 1993). Volet & Ang (1998) also deduced from their findings that the

presence in many Australian classes of large numbers of South-East Asian students was inhibiting the formation of culturally mixed groups.

Nesdale and Todd (1993) and Volet and Ang (1996) also found that students' preference for cross-cultural mixing decreased from first year to second and final year of undergraduate study. The extent to which both international and home students share responsibility for the lack of inter-cultural contact needs to be investigated further (Volet & Ang: 1998). Carefully planned interventions by teachers and other university staff are needed to encourage meaningful interactions between home students and international students and to break down barriers in the classroom and outside (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004).

3.1 Peer-pairing schemes and cultural awareness

Spontaneous inter-cultural contacts have been found to often be few and far between if students are left to make their own choices (Quintrell & Westwood: 1994). Some students may feel that formal group work in classroom settings is the only way to get the domestic and international students to mix (Volet & Ang: 1998). However there are extra-curricular schemes that can also help. Peer-pairing and 'buddy' systems are one of the most frequently adopted schemes to assist international students to adapt to their new environments (Ward: 2006). They can be used in scheduled classes as mentioned previously to support teaching and learning, or as extra-curricular support. Westwood & Barker (1990) investigated peer-pairing programmes in Australian and Canadian universities and found that the international students who took part adjusted significantly better academically and socially than those students who didn't participate. The domestic students who were involved in the scheme reported 'increased cultural awareness and sensitivity' (Westwood & Barker: 1990).

Ward (2001) who has researched domestic and international student relations and interactions in New Zealand universities emphasises that it is important for peer interactions to involve equal status contact. If buddy systems are set up to place domestic students in the expert role and international students in the learner or novice role, the programmes are less likely to empower the international student and to enhance intergroup relations (Ward: 2001). It is important for international students to contribute something to the

process that is meaningful for both parties, such as cultural informant, language teacher or some other role (Ward: 2001).

Geelhoed, Abe & Talbot (2003) researched the experiences of domestic host students who took part in a peer-pairing programme with international students at an American university. They found that in peer-pairing schemes, host students experienced the benefits of getting to know someone from another culture and dispelled previously held negative stereotypes and assumptions (Geelhoed, Abe & Talbot: 2003). However some host students were found to often feel uncomfortable, frustrated and dismayed by the difficulty they encountered in the first interactions with their international partner. Geelhoed, Abe & Talbot (2003) recommended that tutors need to provide more guidance and structure to students before the programme commences about what to expect.

Not all host students will be willing to get involved with peer-pairing schemes and other forms of intercultural communication (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). It is important to find ways to encourage and support volunteers and to highlight the benefits to both parties too. Volet & Ang (1998) reported that it appears that university students rarely initiate interaction with members of different cultures. Increased contact of a voluntary, equal and meaningful nature leads to more positive intergroup perceptions (Amir: 1969). This type of regular contact enables members of different cultural groups to know each other as individuals rather than as stereotyped members of out-groups (Ward & Masgoret: 2004). Ward & Masgoret (2004) produced a report for New Zealand's Ministry of Education on the results of a national survey of international students in New Zealand. The results indicate that international students studying in New Zealand who have greater contact with their domestic peers felt that the domestic students have more positive attitudes toward international students (Ward & Masgoret: 2004).

Wright & Lander (2003) warned that it should not be assumed that a cultural mix of students on campus will lead to intercultural learning or positive cultural interactions. The challenges for educators lies in creating and facilitating opportunities that promote intercultural mixing (Wright & Lander: 2003). Such opportunities should recur throughout the students' time at university and should aim to encourage students to actually seek out intercultural interaction. Ward & Masgoret (2004) reported that though 59% of students questioned

said that they felt included in their classroom, less than 42% believed they had been given opportunities for other students to learn about their culture, and thereby students had missed chances to benefit from each other's cultural knowledge (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004).

To overcome the lack of potentially beneficial intercultural mixing, Chamberlain & Hope (2003) recommended that tutors need to facilitate activities in class that are more likely to lead to intercultural cooperation and friendship outside the classroom, such as peer pairing and cooperative learning as mentioned in an earlier section. Teachers can also encourage students to reflect on cultural behaviours and similarities and use an extensive variety of instructional strategies (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004).

3.2 Language and Communication issues

The sense of belonging, familiarity, bonding provided by a co-national peer group can be enhanced by common language. Smith & Bond (1993) stated that language can often become a unifying force for social cohesion. Although important, language may not be perceived by some as being as vital as cultural background. Volet & Ang (1998) argued that the common condition of being new in a foreign country could be what brings students together.

Language problems can be exacerbated for many students by unfamiliar approaches to teaching and learning, and the cultural changes involved in moving to another country (Cownie & Addison: 1996; Smith et al: 1998). Chamberlain & Hope (2003) surveyed tutors in tertiary institutions in New Zealand about problems encountered with increasing numbers of international students in their classes, and the strategies they used to overcome the problems. They found that language was perceived to be the major deterrent to voluntary interaction and mixed culture group formation (Chamberlain & Hope: 2003). Engaging successfully with group members requires a relatively sophisticated command of language that many international students seem to lack (U & Strauss: 2006). Classroom activities, such as group work and class discussions, require communication and interaction which may be unfamiliar to students from other cultures, but which can be improved if both teachers and students learn from each other (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004; Biggs & Watkins: 1996; Tan & Goh: 1999; Volet & Renshaw: 1995).

Wright & Lander (2003) studied South East Asian students studying in Australia and found that the South East Asian students were more confident in speaking English in groups of students from the same ethnic backgrounds than when in the presence of Australian students in mixed ethnic groups. These findings suggested that when in the presence of Australian students, South East Asian students were more inhibited in terms of their frequency of verbal interactions (Wright & Lander: 2003). Holmes' (2003) study of domestic and international students' interactions at a New Zealand university indicated that both domestic and international students, and also lecturers, perceived language as contributing to communication breakdowns in group work.

As mentioned previously in the section on peer review, the idea of 'losing face' might explain the apparent reluctance of the South-East Asian students' in Wright & Lander's (2003) study in an Australian university to speak in mixed ethnic groups. International students may be reluctant to speak out in front of domestic students if they believe their language skills or understanding of the learning requirements to be poor (Wright & Lander: 2003).

Mills (1997) researched interactions between international and domestic students at a New Zealand university, and identified that international students need to learn the rules regarding turn-taking and interrupting during discussion to feel comfortable in participating in group work interactions. The cultural rules surrounding discussions are likely to be new to them and may take time to learn (Mills: 1997). Ho, Holmes & Cooper (2004) reported that some international students in New Zealand said that domestic students become impatient with them when they tried to talk, which made group interactions difficult.

Chamberlain & Hope (2003) suggest that cultural problems with communication can be alleviated by providing opportunities for students to speak out in non-threatening ways, such as group work and internet-based forum discussions as mentioned in previous sections; though others may argue that group work is not necessarily non-threatening for some students. Since speaking out is risk-taking in most cultures, strategies to encourage risk-taking may generally also apply to overcoming differences in learning cultures (Chamberlain & Hope: 2003). Some domestic students' habits of interrupting someone who is talking to make a point were found astonishing by many international students (Volet & Kee: 1993). These behaviours seem to contradict their fundamental beliefs about appropriate class conduct (Volet: 1999). As discussed in the next section,

cultural expectations programmes may help with understanding the norms and acceptable behaviour of the new university.

Some teachers believe it is the student's responsibility to adapt to the language and learning culture created in the classroom and that it's the student's responsibility to engage with the social culture of the university (Bodycott & Walker: 2000). University teachers often fail to appreciate the many obstacles students can encounter when adapting to study in another culture (Bodycott & Walker: 2000) and may mistakenly assume that international students enter their institutions with a full knowledge of the language requirements and learning expectations (Bodycott & Walker: 2000).

3.3 Cultural awareness programmes for students

Cultural awareness education programmes, such as the Excell programme which was developed by trainers from universities in Canada and Australia (Mak, Westwood, Barker & Ishiyama: 1998) and Eisenclas & Trevaskes' (2003) programme designed for Chinese students at an Australian university, may help students discover more about the learning expectations, values and implications of their new university (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). The Excell programme trainers identify Western cultural values that underlie recommended actions that are likely to lead to successful results in a given social situation, through a process of cultural mapping (Mak et al: 1998). Trainers model the competency in a practice scenario and participants are encouraged to do likewise.

In the Excell programme students are taught key competencies such as participation in a group setting, making social contact, seeking help or information, refusing a request and expressing disagreement (Mak et al: 1998). The aim of the programme is to increase self-confidence and reinforce appropriate cultural practices. Participants are encouraged to analyse how they would approach a situation in their own culture and the underlying values for such behaviours (Mak et al: 1998). The students share their observations of how local students behave and what the international students think of those behaviours. This stage of the programme builds alliances and identifies and acknowledges all unique cultural backgrounds of participants (Mak et al: 1998). Students observe live and videoed role-plays of social situations which they then refine through practice, discussion and corrective feedback (Mak et al: 1998).

3.4 Cultural awareness for teachers

Teachers also should be encouraged to question their prior assumptions about teaching and learning approaches and student identities, including identification of any cultural biases and assumptions, and of the benefits of learning from diverse students. Teachers should be prepared to explore ways of changing their practice and examine their assumptions about the 'ideal student', considering how they can help students to be more like that without changing their current cultural behaviours (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004).

Mills (1997) found that some teachers had a tendency to interpret their experiences with international students using quite simplistic cultural stereotypes and referred to 'Asian students' in ways that suggested they were a homogeneous group'. Strauss (2001) reported that sometimes lecturers appeared to make assumptions regarding different cultural groups that verge on stereotyping, such as the contention that Asian students enjoy group work because they come from collectivist societies. Kumaravadivelu (2003) posited that considering the communication behaviour of international students predominantly based on cultural factors will result in a lack of understanding of these learners and appropriate teaching methods for them.

3.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has considered some of the additional support and learning issues that international students may face, and the potential solutions which can help them and possibly domestic students too. The next section will move on to consider the interview responses attained during the current study from academic staff and learning advisory staff at New Zealand universities and Northumbria University in the UK.

SECTION 2: RESULTS OF PRIMARY RESEARCH

4.0 Interview results relating to group interactions

Various staff at all eight universities in New Zealand and at Northumbria University were contacted at the start of the project to ask whether they would volunteer to be interviewed. 45 volunteers from five New Zealand universities and Northumbria University comprised the sample group. Informal semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic staff, international student advisors and learning advisors at these universities. Academic staff were questioned about their use of group work, group assessment, feedback and assessment for learning practices. They were shown the six AfL conditions and asked to comment on areas of their teaching where these conditions were met.

The academic staff were also asked about the amount of cultural diversity in their classes, and whether there were any issues or recommendations they could make about group work and group assessment in culturally diverse classes. Throughout the interviews certain additional issues were raised or problems commented on which the interviewer could follow up further if desired. The interviews were anonymised, analysed and summarised, and the comments were grouped into related sections. The following sections cover the issues which were raised relating to assessment in general, groupwork and culturally diverse classes.

4.1 Traditional vs non-traditional assessment

The academic respondents interviewed were mainly from the fields of computing, engineering and business. Multiple respondents mentioned that these subjects along with others such as architecture, accounting and law, were often best taught interactively and practically. In other subject domains such as humanities, some things can be taught without doing. It is therefore important to differentiate by subject and task when providing a rationale for practically based activities and project work.

Respondents mentioned that textbooks and traditional lectures aren't always very good for teaching some practical subjects. More than one teacher reported that traditional methods of teaching didn't work well with

their students. Students were found to sometimes miss the excitement in the subject due to the traditional method of teaching.

4.2 Group work rationale and benefits

The following sections describe the key benefits of groupwork in general which were identified by the interviewees.

4.2.1 Consolidation of theory

Groupwork modules of study are often used to link authenticity of practice with theory. One participant reported that there is nothing as useful for students as well-applied good theory. It was believed that there are some more practical and applied topics which can't be taught as effectively in traditional lecture situations as they can by practical groupwork taking a problem-solving approach.

4.2.2 Authenticity

Relating to the above point, it was noted by several academic respondents in subjects such as engineering, software development and management, that students would be frequently expected to work in groups in the workplace in these areas. Working in groups is a real-life phenomenon and some activities are 'naturally' group activities and should only ever really be done in teams. People working in the aforementioned subject domains seldom work alone without interacting with others. The group activities that are set for these students are therefore relatively authentic practices for the kind of employment the students wish to attain.

4.2.3 Motivation and interest

Some research participants mentioned that they would never teach their subject material via normal lectures as the students see that method as boring. More than one teacher mentioned the importance for students to be motivated and interested in their learning. It was reported that for students, working together can really focus learning and allow them to be more creative and learn from each other's ideas. The group dynamic was found to be important for advanced idea creation. Respondents reported that students often found it more fun to work together, and that results were often better than when the same students worked individually.

Lecturers found that students were often most motivated by projects they perceived as having value and consequence.

4.2.4 Task size and complexity

When there is too much work in the project scope to do individually, groupwork allows the students to be given bigger and more complex problems to solve. Ideally a group project requires a variety of skills. No one person has all these skills; therefore working well as a team allows the production of a final product as a whole which is greater than the individual parts. Tasks should be valid activities that are best achieved working together. Respondents mentioned that it is not effective to have a difficult task when using groupwork, as there are enough additional issues.

4.2.5 Professional and teamwork skills

Several academic respondents mentioned that they have been told by employers that they want and expect employees with good teamwork and communication skills. Technical knowledge and skills are often not enough. Several of the lecturers who were interviewed identified that students also need value-added skills such as being able to talk to, rely on and assess others and learn about group dynamics and roles. They should also be given opportunities to work with people they don't know and create their own dynamic. These skills are also part of the core graduate attributes for several universities; students are expected to know how to be responsible for a group by the time they graduate from university.

Groupwork activities can also make students mature. Problem-solving on the run allows students to deal with more than just technical problems, also personal issues too. It allows students to develop their ability to communicate and articulate concepts well; so that they can learn to describe their internal thinking to others. Students can learn how to be resourceful and become independent learners.

Several of the comments made in the previous sections can be related to assessment for learning principles concerning the 'emphasis on authenticity and complexity in the content and methods of assessment' (Northumbria University: 2008).

4.3 Group composition

A large amount of information was gathered relating to the composition of the groups formed in modules implementing groupwork. Many different practices were identified and some respondents had strong opinions on the merits of their chosen method of allocating students to groups. The methods discussed by respondents are summarised in the following sections.

4.3.1 Student selected groups

Several teachers allow students to form their own groups and favour student-selected groups. Several interviewees reported that many of their students have said they prefer to choose their own groups so that they can work with the people they know they get on with. This was reported to be true of students from all cultural backgrounds from respondents who had investigated cultural issues in groups further.

Some teachers allowed groups to advertise for members, completing a form detailing their skills and prior experience etc, as well as other projects and roles they were interested in. Students could then form teams based on the skills needed for the specific project, not just friendships. Some respondents suggested it may be a good idea to allow students to choose groups but give guidelines as to a desired mixture for best groups. Examples were given whereby students were sometimes asked to choose groups according to language abilities, technical abilities, a gender mix and a mix of nationalities.

4.3.2 Tutor selected groups

Some academic respondents reported that they preferred to control the mix of students as they found that letting students choose their own groups didn't work as well. Reasons for this were: all students wanting to work with the 'good students', or wanting to work with their friends which didn't always result in a balanced mix of skills and abilities. Some teachers mix the groups so that they are similar in make-up and ensure a mix of gender, cultural background, skills, work experience etc.

Some lecturers ask the students to send their preferences of project to the teacher and the teacher allocates them to groups accordingly. Others asked students to fill out a form specifying their own strengths and which people they would like to work with. One respondent mentioned that a small proportion of students usually

don't care who they work with. The same interviewee noted that they had found that small cultural groups and females were more likely to specify who they wished to work with.

4.3.2.1 Random allocation

A few academic respondents reported using random allocation in order to simulate the real world of work where team members are not permitted to choose who they work with. The lecturers who had adopted this method felt strongly that it is more authentic to work in random groups rather than working with friends or in an unbalanced mixture of skills and abilities.

Some tutors had concerns that by putting students in groups randomly as the students could blame the tutor if the group didn't work well. However none of the tutors who implemented this means of group allocation received any student complaints about this issue.

4.3.2.2 Allocation by ability

Two tutors reported allocating students into groups based on their prior academic performance. The groups were designed to contain members of mixed ability. Their rationale was the same as that provided by tutors who allocated groups randomly; that it is a similar situation to the workplace where you can't choose who you work with. The tutors reported that students were happier with being allocated this way once the rationale had been explained to them.

4.3.2.3 Allocation by work orientation

One academic respondent chose a novel approach to group allocation, by organising student groups based on whether the students believed themselves to have a collectivist or individualist orientation towards team projects. The students were given a simple questionnaire about their work preferences and all those who believed themselves to have a collectivist orientation were grouped together, and those with individualist orientation were grouped together. Those who couldn't decide whether they are collectivist or individualist were put in a group together too.

The lecturer reported that by grouping students this way, they had a better understanding of how the others expected them to work, and their work practices were more compatible. For example, students who always like to work together did not have to contend with someone who prefers to work alone at home and spend minimal time in meetings. In the past the lecturer had not grouped students in this way, and had found that groups were more likely to break down as they weren't working compatibly.

4.3.2.4 Mixing up cultures in groups

Tension can be introduced into group allocation process when there are students from a large number of different cultural backgrounds. Some lecturers recounted that they were sometimes encouraged by their university management to make groups diverse. More than one academic respondent reported having bad experiences putting culturally diverse groups together deliberately. Students have been known to complain about being forced into mixed cultural groups not of their choosing. For this reason, some of the academic respondents stated that they do not deliberately mix up students from different cultural backgrounds within groups.

However some lecturers found that their international students wanted the lecturer to put them into groups as they did not feel confident enough to find their own groups. It was frequently mentioned that the international students also didn't want to end up in a group of students all from the same culture and asked for this to be avoided. Tutors reported that if the students self-selected their groups, they would often end up culturally homogenous. The tutors were therefore often asked to put the students into mixed cultural groups. Some respondents who had investigated these issues further in their own research believed that many of the international students they had encountered were not as interested in improving their knowledge as much as improving their English and making friends via group work, hence their preference for working with at least some domestic students. Some international students told their lecturers that they don't want to be seen as outsiders. The same respondents mentioned that domestic students may or may not have reluctance to work in mixed cultural groups. Some respondents reported occasions where domestic

students said that they felt it could be more effort to work in mixed cultural groups or that it could bring mark down.

Some respondents commented that international students also may not like group work due to language issues as well as lacking the confidence to speak up both to their teachers and fellow group members. This can lead to frustration as the student will end up often just listening to others rather than being an active participant in the groups.

It is not possible to generalise as to student and group behaviour based on culture however. More than one lecturer reported experiences of mixed cultural groups who had worked well together from the start of the module. They commented that groups can be enhanced by different approaches and abilities. One respondent repeatedly found that the best projects were often carried out by the most culturally diverse groups, speaking several different native languages. The lecturer speculated that perhaps the level of diversity drove them to good communication, due to 'a no-nonsense approach' and a realisation of the need to be organised.

4.3.2.5 Leftover students

Most respondents mentioned the issue of leftover students in self-selected groups, as well as those who arrive late to a module and have to be added to groups that have already been formed. Forming groups of 'leftover' students was found to be a problem as there is no natural alliance between them and it is not possible to ensure a spread of ability and skills in these groups. Some teachers thought it was ethically wrong to allow students to choose their own groups due to these 'straggling' students who don't form groups outright.

4.4 Group roles and management

The interviewees were asked how much they intervene and control the groups on their modules. Most tutors said they tell the students how the distribution of effort should work in their group, but they usually leave it to the students to decide which group member does what exactly. The tutors don't always suggest to students

how their team should work. In practice, the students were often found to discover their own roles which seemed to work for them.

4.4.1 Group project management

Academic respondents reported several different ways they have suggested that students manage their groups. Some lecturers adopt a more controlling means of managing their student groups, others allow them to get on and self-manage. Several advise the practice of democratic leadership. If no group manager volunteers or is agreed to, the management role can be rotated amongst all group members or allocated by the teacher.

The project leader needs to be the right person with the right type of skills. Often it was found that groups don't have a clear leader; instead one assertive person emerges and the others just do what they're told. Some were found to do a good job, others end up dominating too much and not actually doing the work. Some students actively choose the project manager role and some feel it has been forced on them either by the lecturer or by no-one else in the group volunteering. Usually the team leader was not given any extra marks for the work, meaning there is less of an incentive for students to volunteer for a role which may mean they feel they have to do more work. One academic respondent did give an incentive of extra marks if the student volunteered to take on the extra role and work.

Problems were reported with group management too. Some students struggled to get their group to work together. Others were found to be unable to reach a consensus easily, due to their leadership style and other group members taking offence that one group member has taken control. Some academic respondents believed that making the students adopt a project manager role forces a paradigm that isn't realistic in a university environment where students cannot exercise authority over others.

Some respondents allowed groups to 'fire' a member of their team if the student has not contributed at all. The fired student then does the same project themselves individually. Other respondents did not believe in the idea of firing students from groups. Most respondents mentioned the difficulties of handling groups which

broke down and couldn't work well together, and acknowledged that these sensitive and stressful situations usually needed careful handling and a flexible approach to the (re)allocation of work and marks.

4.4.2 Group operation

Some students are told how to break up the task by the tutor, others are left to work it out for themselves. The lecturers interviewed found that some groups chose to work collaboratively, others cooperatively just chunking the work into individual tasks and bringing them together at the end of the project. The fact that the end result of the project is usually the only thing being assessed often leads to this way of working, as students are usually not significantly assessed on their group conduct and management. Some students chose to be responsible for the practical aspects of the project, others the written tasks, thereby playing to their strengths. It was reported that if the work is divided this way, the students still need to have enough understanding of the whole project to cover all the learning outcomes of the module. Often this is checked by asking each student to individually explain and reflect on the entire project to tutors. This approach can help to ensure that students don't work in isolation. Some academic respondents reported that their student groups did work 'properly' as a group, as they would have hoped. Successful groups often involved students who motivated each other, collaborated for idea generation and drafted and shared feedback via internal reviews.

4.4.3 Preparation for groupwork

Several teachers hold preparation sessions on the best ways to approach groupwork. The students are explicitly told how to handle group situations and problems. Some suggested that students with particular problems may prefer to work alone as this prevents problems with the larger group. Several respondents believed it was important to explicitly explain to students why group work is needed in the module so that they understand its value in the project process.

Several respondents recommended giving students sufficient time to get to know each other before starting the group work. Though it is often advised not to start group work too early in the module if possible, giving this extra time for familiarisation and team building can mean there are fewer weeks left to complete the project work. This can be a difficult situation to manage given the time constraints of some modules and programmes of study but it is something to consider.

4.5 Positive student feedback

The following section describes some of the positive feedback from students which was reported by the academic respondents.

1. Motivation and self-direction - Several interviewees reported that students were generally positive about group work and felt that it gave their module a positive feel and provided a more interesting experience than standard assessments. Academic respondents reported high levels of student engagement in groupwork tasks and felt that generally students liked working in groups. Group-based projects were thought to allow students to excel and build their confidence, as it is difficult to fail if they contribute. The projects were thought to sometimes force the students to do things they thought they couldn't do.

More than one respondent reported that students respond to the whole group process better as something is 'happening'. The group work is a form of active rather than passive learning. Several felt that traditional methods do not work as well in higher education these days and that students need and prefer something more 'real'. Several students were reported to like the fact that this type of module allows for self-direction and has minimal focus on lectures.

2. Authenticity and learning by doing - Several respondents reported that their students initially did not like working on group projects, but most said that by the end of the project that they learnt a lot by doing them. The students seem to often realise the value of the experience further down the line. Lecturers reported that industry feedback indicated that groupwork does often provide valuable experience. The skills learnt for the assessments can be put to use and have practical benefits, which can be seen as fitting in with some of the principles of an AfL approach.

The group projects described by most lecturers interviewed often relate to the world of work. Several of the students were reported to say they felt it was like real life and an authentic experience. When the project involved working for a real client as several did, the students appeared to really appreciate this as an opportunity to work on authentic real-life tasks.

3. Social – Several respondents also mentioned that their students seemed to enjoy having opportunities to meet others and make friends via groupwork activities.

4. Safe context and saving face – Some respondents mentioned that initially some of their students didn't appear comfortable talking in groups. They found that students generally come to realise they can't really get anything 'wrong' in the context of a group discussion; they can be corrected and encouraged to think from a different perspective, but in a safe environment.

4.6 Problems with groupwork

Some of the interview respondents had interviewed international students about their perceptions of groupwork and found that it is not popular amongst their Chinese and Asian students. However the international students were actually found to like groupwork a little more than domestic students did in this case. The following sections describe some of the problems with groupwork that students reported to academic respondents.

4.6.1 Personality issues

Students can find it stressful working in groups especially if they are working on multiple group work modules at the same time. Personal issues can arise during groupwork experiences and several lecturer respondents mentioned that it was necessary to be prepared for the debriefing and rescue in case any problems arise. Several lecturers thought that the most common problems raised during groupwork were due to personality clashes, misunderstandings or miscommunications.

Some groups experience problems when they are not able to make contact with certain group members or don't like who they're working with. The ability and motivation of some group members was thought to sometimes affect the group's sub-culture. Some tutors found that even able students can become sloppy and de-motivated if working with others with a poor work ethic.

Some academic respondents believed that learning teamwork skills should involve learning how to deal with difficult individuals. They suggested that some problems can be alleviated by preparing students in lessons in listening skills and how to give constructive criticism, as will be mentioned in section 4.6.7.

4.6.2 Organisation and time management

Organisation and time management were also mentioned frequently by the academic respondents as a significant problem for their students when working in groups. The main recurring issue was that students left too much of their work too late. Also they reported that student projects could stall if the students have not taken the initiative to get organised.

Group members were found to often have different levels of time management. Some try to do the least amount of work and the more conscientious students can end up with lots of work to do.

Some students try to leave the work till the last minute despite needing to plan their time around others. An additional problem is sometimes raised in that some groups may find it difficult to arrange times for meetings as they might not necessarily be in same cohort or have the same availability. When group meetings can be arranged, some students were found to complain about a lack of focus to their meetings, seeing them sometimes as a waste of time with few decisions made or actions planned; instead they were sometimes treated as a social distraction by some group members.

Several academic respondents reported that students sometimes feel that it takes more of their time to work in groups than individually. It was noted by some respondents that these are often, but not always, the same students who miss the point that they have been asked to work in groups to spread the workload and to work as a team. It can sometimes be the case that it does take longer to work cooperatively with other students though it can be a more effective way of working. This is something that several of the respondents believed comes with experience and practice. More than one person commented that organisational and group skills come with time and that lecturers shouldn't expect that they will be picked up in just a few weeks.

4.6.3 Individualism

A common problem raised by respondents is that of students who were not particularly interested in finding out how to make their group work, rather they just wanted to know how to get the marks for the completed work. Lecturers reported students who tried to find strategies to get round the groupwork, e.g. by focusing more on individually assessed components if they are any. Negative past experiences can affect student perceptions of the value of group work and some choose to 'opt out' of it and don't see the point at working together.

Several respondents reported groups of students who still tended to just see themselves as individuals rather than a member of a group. Some students asked if they could work as individuals even if this meant they had the same amount of work to do as an entire group would normally have had. Despite several students seeing the overall benefits of groupwork skills, most respondents found that their students would generally prefer to work alone, preferring to have total control over their own marks and performance. Some tutors found that the exception to this were the more 'lazy' students whose performance could often be improved by working in groups, perhaps because of increased motivation or from others doing more of the group's work for them.

Practical constraints such as part-time working hours can mean that students find it easier to work alone, especially mature or part-time students. One respondent mentioned that students on scholarships with financial constraints can be very worried about their mark being brought down by others. So despite the benefits of this type of work, students often have other priorities and some have a lot at stake when undertaking their studies.

4.6.4 Fairness

The lecturers interviewed commented several times that students are often concerned about the fairness of group assessments. As the abilities of students within a class are all different, there is a feeling that some group members could bring down marks of others. Less capable students can find this daunting as they feel they can't contribute well, and those who are good students do not want to feel that they are not working to their full potential performance due to others. Group work can hide individual student inadequacies and some can become suspicious of it, seeing it as an opportunity for 'social loafing'. Several academic respondents

believed that most students feel they do more work than others or at least the same amount as others. However they also commented that sometimes the students who believe they are being held back are actually no better than the others and what they were hoping to achieve wasn't necessarily realistic. Students' different interests and expectations affect their approach to group work; some just want to pass, others want to excel.

More than one lecturer found that the main resistance to group work occurred when all students in the group were given a shared mark. The effect of the allocation of marks between group members will be discussed further in a later section.

Despite the benefits of group work mentioned by respondents and discussed in an earlier section, one respondent mentioned that the students can sometimes come away from group projects feeling disappointed as they now have an awareness of the problems that can occur in this type of work. It could be argued that this awareness is an important lesson to learn and that it is one of the costs needed to gain the benefits of groupwork.

4.6.5 Authenticity of the situation

Some lecturers found a resistance from their students sometimes to authentic, interactive methods of teaching and learning. Some students saw the projects as only a simulation, not an authentic real-life scenario, therefore they didn't take them seriously. More than one respondent mentioned that initially some students resisted this method of learning as they feel that 'this is not what university is about' or 'the lecturer is not doing their job' when they are expected to manage and direct their own work, even with the assistance of their peers.

4.6.6 Quantity of assessment

Some students had reported to their lecturers that they felt like they were being constantly assessed by group projects which adopted an assessment for learning approach. Usually however the assessment is the incentive to make the students actually go through the formal processes required for the project, and receive more frequent informal and formal feedback which is a feature of AfL. Lecturers reported frustration that their

students often miss the point of the assessments; and feel that the point of the module is to produce documents or artefacts. Students can be tempted to stop thinking about the problem they should be solving whilst they focus on producing the documents. They don't always understand that these documents are really the interface to communicate with their lecturers about what their group is doing and receive feedback from the lecturers and peers in return.

4.6.7 Solving problems

Managing group work modules can be problematic and difficult for the lecturers in charge too. Several respondents mentioned the need for students to be taught how to work in groups, manage groups and write group documents. Also by anticipating how conflicts could be managed, this gets expectations and the potential problems out in the open and makes them explicit. It is important for the teacher to be pro-active about problems and to try to head them off if possible.

Different means of dealing with groups that weren't working out were reported. One respondent asked the group to do a self-review against different categories of skills to identify where the problem lies. Each member reviews their peers and shares the results. Others allow group members to be 'fired' by their group. Situations like this are high-risk and can be stressful for those concerned. They therefore need to be tightly managed like a counseling session and lecturers need to feel confident in handling these situations when managing group work modules. More than one interviewee mentioned that the groups that fail to work together have to resort to individual work, which also needs to be carefully designed to cover the same learning outcomes for the module.

4.7 Peer review and assessment

Peer review is a method used by several of the academic respondents, usually for formative feedback, either for group or individual work. Most tutors interviewed gave their students a copy of the specific assessment criteria to be used for reviewing each other. They usually discussed the marking criteria with the students when the assignment was given out. Some tutors negotiated marking criteria via discussion with their students, which some students were reported to find interesting as they hadn't previously considered how to write marking criteria.

Students generally evaluate another person's or group's work against the criteria and give their review back to the student or group who then address the feedback and recommendations if they feel it is appropriate. Some tutors allow the feedback to be provided anonymously, others during face-to-face discussions in a classroom setting with a tutor present. The process is intended to be positive and productive so that students can share good practice and knowledge. Most respondents who had attempted peer review in their classes felt it was beneficial for students to read each others' work. It means the class becomes more accustomed to each other and get to know each other better, which in turn creates a safer environment for giving future feedback.

Lecturers advised introducing the peer review process and teaching the students to be sensitive, professional and factual, basing their criticism on concrete examples. At the end of the peer review activity, some respondents recommended a follow-up session where the tutor gives feedback to the class about the peer review activity.

More than one tutor used posters for peer review. The students reviewed each others posters and critiqued and self-assessed their own in light of each other's work. This was reported to work well and the students took a professional approach to the task. For those whose feedback was limited, the tutor could cajole and ask questions, allowing students to critically reflect on the key issues.

More than one respondent mentioned that students intending to work in certain industries need preparation in a safe environment for receiving criticism of their work. They need to learn to be able to separate themselves from their work, which is why they are given several opportunities to practice this.

As mentioned in chapter 2, these techniques can correspond with several assessment for learning principles such as 'providing an environment that is rich in formal and informal feedback', as well as 'developing students' abilities to direct their own learning, evaluate their own progress and attainments and support the learning of others' and offering students opportunities to engage in the kinds of tasks that build their confidence and capabilities before they are summatively assessed (Northumbria University: 2008).

4.7.1 Student reactions to peer review

Some students were reported to be anxious about having their work critiqued in case they have missed something obvious or basic. However this is the whole point of the task and they can take suggested improvements forward to subsequent drafts or other assignments.

More than one academic respondent mentioned that students don't seem to be as worried about submitting poor quality work to the lecturer as to their peers. These tutors believed that the fact that the students know someone else will read their work had greatly enhanced the quality of the work. These respondents mentioned that students are usually really keen and interested to see each others' work, and know that they have to put their own work forward in order to see others' work, therefore the process is balanced.

The students do not always accept their peer feedback and can decide themselves on whether to act on the feedback or not. One respondent mentioned seeing students who were shocked to receive the comments on their peer review form and were keen to find out what they meant. Some tutors provided face to face opportunities for the students to 'defend' their work to the reviewer, at which the reviewer can change their mind or provide further explanation. Most respondents who commented on their experience of peer review found that students were usually critical but fair in their reviews.

4.7.2 Issues with peer review

Some respondents found that for the majority of their students, their initial reactions to peer review were that it was something to worry about. Students can take time to understand the requirements of peer evaluation activities.

Some tutors suggested that undergraduate students may not be mentally prepared to carry out peer review properly. There is often too much variation in ability amongst these students to ensure that the feedback would be beneficial for each other. One respondent mentioned that postgraduate students have already reached a certain level of attainment and are a more critical group of students generally therefore they can benefit more from peer review activities.

Some academic respondents found that students weren't always very critical in their reviews and some students would always just say that all students' work was 'good'. This could perhaps be because the students were not then being assessed on the quality of their review. If the review was assessed by a tutor for its criticality, then this kind of issue might be avoided. It could be that by using a combination of informal and formal feedback mechanisms, assessment for learning opportunities could be optimised.

4.7.3 Peer assessment

Peer assessment is often used in groupwork and involves each group member rating the rest of the group. Some respondents believe this method appears to work in preventing 'passengers' in groups, i.e. those who do less work than others but otherwise would have received the same mark as those who had worked more. Lecturers have to plan and orchestrate the peer assessment process very carefully and intervene at the sign of any problems.

Some interviewees were wary of using peer review to award marks, rather than for formative feedback. One respondent reported that a number of higher education institutions don't allow it to be used for marks. They allow students to comment and ask questions of each others work but not for marks, as some students are thought to lack the wherewithal to perform peer review appropriately. Several respondents mentioned that their students generally don't like the responsibility of peer assessment.

Some lecturers have complicated mechanisms for calculating marks; these need to be communicated explicitly. Some allocate an average mark for each group as a base mark, and give students relative ratios for their individual contributions which are used as a multiplier of the base mark to provide different weightings. Usually no student's mark can go up from the base mark, but it can go down. One respondent emphasised that peer assessment should not be able to increase or decrease a student's mark by much, due to its issues of fairness.

One tutor decided that if there are no problems everyone gets the same mark as the default and commonest outcome. Some tutors ask students to indicate the percentage of the work that each had been responsible for

and ask them to rate the quality of that contribution. Some tutors have formal mechanisms for identifying equal contribution, such as weekly status reports, journals of contribution, formal records and notes for each group, including registers of attendance. One respondent mentioned a good example where for one module, a teaching and learning advisor taught students about how to work in groups and assessed their group contribution while the lecturer assessed their knowledge of the subject-specific content.

Peer assessment is allegedly used by lecturers for fairness. Respondents reported that their students are warned about responsibility and awareness against marks rigging. Students could agree to give all of their group members the same marks if they are friends for example, but it is usually not possible to artificially boost marks this way. Sometimes peer assessment is only partially successful as students wouldn't always 'grass' on their fellow group members. Some student teams have been reported to complain that the group grade can still give a too high grade to freeloaders. However the fact that students often have to provide evidence if they are dissatisfied with another team member can seem like too much effort for some students to bother with.

Peer assessment could provoke severe disharmony when there are freeloaders in the groups. One lecturer reported that some students seem to delight in the opportunity to 'stick it' to the loafers in their group. However others can get quite concerned about having to 'point the finger' at students even if they know they haven't pulled their weight. Students are often asked to provide evidence, such as meeting minutes and emails, to substantiate their peer review ratings. Some academics might interview students who appear to have not been pulling their weight or who appeal against the peer assessed marks. Some might use their own discretion to re-weight the peer assessed marks if it is felt necessary. Some academics ask for the peer assessment to be submitted confidentially. Others make the group members openly agree to the marks weightings and sign a form to confirm this.

Some academic respondents reported that some students suggested that all group members deserved equal marks and didn't differentiate marks even when it was blatantly obvious that different effort had been made. More than one respondent mentioned that they had found this especially with Chinese and Indian students.

One tutor reported an example of students who did not turn up at all for group meetings yet were still given a reasonable mark by their Chinese group members, who were worried about allocating low marks to others.

One respondent also provided an example which shows a difference in peer marking behaviour between undergraduate and postgraduate students. The tutor marks the same work that has already been peer assessed, and then makes a comparison between the tutor and peer marks. For postgraduates, this respondent found that the peer marking was always tougher than the tutor marking. The same tutor found the opposite to be true in an undergraduate module with assessed presentations, where the peer marks were always more generous than the tutor marks. The lecturer suggested that the difference could be either down to different levels of maturity and experience between undergraduates and postgraduates, or due to the fact that the reviews were anonymous in the undergraduate module but not in the postgraduate module.

4.7.4 Peer review and cultural issues

The advantages of social learning activities are not always evident to students who are unfamiliar with peer review tasks. More than one academic respondent mentioned that international students in particular feel that they have come to study at an overseas university to be taught by and learn from experts not other students. International students were found to be more likely to report that they feel they are no better at the work than their peers and are making the same mistakes as them, so question how they are qualified to check each others work. This concern can however apply to domestic students as well as international students. There may also be cultural factors for academics to consider relating to gender, e.g. one interviewee mentioned that Korean men had been found not to appreciate suggestions from Korean women.

Some respondents commented on the fact that international students often don't feel comfortable reviewing and critiquing other students' work. Some students were reported to be reluctant to hand over written documents, especially international students who might lack confidence in their written English, and wish to save 'face'. No student likes to lose 'face' however multiple respondents mentioned that this issue needs careful consideration with Asian students. Also, if the student's English is not as good as the person's they are reviewing, they might not feel comfortable offering advice on their work.

Learning advisors and academic respondents mentioned that international students may need help in understanding the value of other students' feedback which can be a tricky lesson to convey. Some suggestions were made as to how to help with this understanding of the potential value of peer comments. One learning advisor suggested that telling students to 'criticise' each others work might be perceived by international students as only providing negative comments which they are less likely to feel comfortable with. It was suggested that the tutor could rephrase the task so that students understand they are 'assisting' other students to get a better mark for their work. This could also be explained in terms of role play, for example saying 'pretend you are the tutor, how would you help this student get an A grade?'. Another suggestion from this respondent to get round the 'face saving' issue is for the whole class to critique an example of work together, so that the criticism does not feel so personal. Asking students to provide anonymous feedback on other students' work might also help, for example, writing comments on paper and submitting them to the teacher who summarises the comments to the author or the class.

The responses above showed that there are some effective AfL approaches being used by respondents which can work well with students in helping them to support and evaluate each other and reflect on their own work and progress in the process. Some issues relating to peer review and feedback need careful consideration to ensure that students feel the process is fair and useful, and not something for them to worry about.

4.8 Formative work and innovative practice

Several respondents have implemented non-assessed group work such as group discussions of questions and issues. Students were reported to often find formative groupwork more fun and seem to like to discuss things in 'safer' small groups than in front of the whole class.

Other respondents mentioned that they have implemented elements of role play in group projects, whereby their students role play different stakeholders to evaluate other groups' documents, presentations and demonstrations of their work. These activities can provide a good quantity of timely feedback from peers.

Several respondents mentioned some innovative practice with their student groups. One lecturer teaches a module on the management of dysfunctional groups. The students are deliberately put into groups of eight

which is obviously too big to manage easily. Part of the learning process is to find out what is wrong with the group as the students are not usually initially aware of the problems they may face. They are set up to fail to be fully functional so that they can reflect on lessons learnt about group management. It is important to manage this situation carefully as the issues faced can be sensitive.

One respondent reported mixing formative and summative essay writing and peer review at post-graduate level. If the students do not do the formative work, the tutor refuses to mark the next summative submission until the formative work has been done. The students are told that they are not ready to do the summative work until they have completed the formative work. This gives the students a clear message about what formative work is for, and how their feedback can be used in further work. This type of activity fits in very well with the principles of assessment for learning which advocate that students should be offered 'extensive opportunities to engage in the kinds of tasks that develop and demonstrate their learning, thus building their confidence and capabilities before they are summatively assessed' and 'using high-stakes summative assessment rigorously but sparingly' (Northumbria University: 2008). The students receive formal and informal feedback from both tutors and peers, so they can feed forward comments into their future work.

Another respondent described how students are asked to write two sample multiple-choice exam questions and submit them online for a given module for other students to complete as formative work. The students are given guidance on how to write unambiguous questions with suitable answers and distracter answers. The students must also answer a certain amount of the multi-choice questions submitted by others as well as contributing their own questions. In this way the students are responsible for creating some of the course content.

4.8.1 Use of wikis

Some universities in New Zealand have made frequent and productive use of wikis for formative work and self-directed learning. At some universities students request the use of online resources such as collaborative forums and wikis for each module if the lecturer has not yet provided them, which shows how they have become accustomed to using these formative learning tools.

One tutor mentioned how they developed a wiki for students to develop exam revision material for their module, allowing students to add their own content, read that of others, and make comments on it via a discussion page. This fits in well with the AfL principles mentioned previously relating to students providing informal feedback, evaluating their own progress and supporting the learning of others (Northumbria University: 2008). The tutor found that generally the wiki was coherent and did not read as if several students have chunked work together, however it was not possible to tell whether the majority of it was one student's work more than others. It was also not possible to tell whether students went on to use the wiki as a resource for exam revision, or whether they just created it because they had been asked to by the lecturer.

Another task was for the student to use a wiki to make contributions to a hyper-textbook, which is a set of linked notes capturing the students' understanding of the course material. The students were asked to work in groups and post information about a topic. They also needed to look at others' reports, comment on what they thought of others' work and reflect on it, recording their thoughts and comments online.

Another use of wikis in the computing subject domain was to allow students to post online what they did in their practical lab sessions and to reflect on their process of discovery and any unexpected or interesting happenings. The lecturer in charge of this module said that this made the students realise that their reports have a purpose and feel that their activity has value. A few students also took on the role of 'lab maintainers' who were responsible for bringing all the students' work together in a consolidated report which summarises the different lab tasks and their results. They noted the things to look out for and highlighted good examples. Shared resources are thereby created by the students themselves, who can add to them and learn from them, without so much intervention from the teacher.

4.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has described and discussed the findings from the interviews with academic and learning advisory staff based at Northumbria University in the UK and universities in New Zealand. Many different teaching, learning and assessment practices and experiences have been described and some recommendations for good practice in group work and peer review can be considered based on what respondents have reported.

5.0 Interview results relating to cultural awareness and learning support

The interviewees who worked in learning advisory roles, particularly those working closely with international students, were also asked about their particular jobs, experiences and recommendations. The following sections describe their responses.

5.1 Cultural attitudes to teaching, learning and assessment

The proportion of students from diverse cultural backgrounds studying at New Zealand and UK universities has increased in recent years. Respondents noted that cultural background can frame their students' mentality and has a great impact on learning. There is a large cultural distance between Asian and New Zealand and UK classroom cultures in general, with several differences in approaches to teaching and learning. Cultural background and previous educational experiences can help to determine what students and teachers see as good teaching practice. Several academic and learning support respondents thought that cultural issues were often mainly due to language.

It was reported that some international students were comfortable with both traditional and non-traditional ways of learning and could easily adapt. However others were found to be unhappy with working within Western educational practices but they have to put up with them anyway. Some respondents reported that their international students told them they prefer traditional assessments, such as individual essays and reports, based on the material found in the recommended textbooks. More than one academic respondent noted that students from Asian cultures preferred the lecturers to teach them and don't want to be 'taught' by fellow students via peer review, groupwork etc, as they have less trust in their fellow students' ability to help them learn. These methods do not fit with their expectation of 'proper learning' which is based on their prior experiences.

Some students told their lecturers that there is no value for money from their student fees in working in groups, feeling instead that they pay fees to listen to lecturers, not talk to each other in discussions. One respondent mentioned that lecturers would not necessarily know if their international students did not appreciate their method of teaching though, as they often don't want to disappoint the lecturer by criticising their methods when asked to provide feedback to the lecturer.

It was reported by some respondents that the motivation for success in the students' home country compared to the host country workplaces and universities can be very different. One academic respondent, who has carried out research in this area, mentioned that students from Asia, Korea, China and Japan have often been encouraged not to speak up from childhood and often have different workplace rules to those in Western workplaces. Speaking up at work was reported to also be seen as undesirable behaviour, unless the employee is a leader or manager. Therefore the argument that practice in group interactions and oral communication skills are useful for future employability may not be seen as relevant to these students.

The same respondent also commented that these students consider the 'power' of the teacher as very strong. In Chinese universities for example, the respondent reported that students don't interrupt lecturers unless invited to. They are more likely to ask questions after class however as they don't want to be seen to waste other students' time. Additionally it was mentioned that often students don't want others to know that they have questions to ask, which could be judged as a lack of understanding. By getting the answer later, this saves the students' 'face'.

5.2 Learning support

Learning support staff at multiple universities in New Zealand reported a huge increase in demand for their services when the number of applications from international students, especially by Chinese students, increased in 2003. The same situation is unlikely to arise again as this was an unexpected influx. Increasingly now learning support services in New Zealand universities are working with international students from 'Western' educational backgrounds, such as the USA and Northern Europe. As the proportion of international students goes down again after this big influx, some of the teaching and learning problems have been alleviated to some extent.

5.2.1 Learning support roles

Where there was a particularly large number of international students in a particular school in one New Zealand university, a role of English language assistance teacher was created specifically for that school. This role included generic plus subject-specific learning advice.

The learning advisors interviewed at most New Zealand universities usually offer either individual meetings with students or groups or provide in-class presentations on topics such as oral presentations and academic writing. Those respondents interviewed who were in these roles reported a huge demand for one-to-one sessions where the advisor identifies the students' specific learning needs or the student brings along their own work to seek advice about it. Respondents commented that educators can't expect to tell the students about a particular study skill just once and assume they have understood or learnt it. It is important to continue reinforcing, building and scaffolding these skills until students have mastered them. The skills must be embedded throughout the curriculum and the same advice repeated for each module of study.

Some New Zealand universities have pre-degree English language courses, which are very good for preparing international students for their courses, however they may still not be sufficient. It was reported in most New Zealand universities that the most common reason for international students coming to the student learning centres is to check that their English makes sense. The learning advisors point out the particular errors that the student makes, rather than proofread the work. Their aim is to try and make the students more independent at spotting their own errors.

The learning advisors might also offer services to academic staff, such as raising cultural awareness, reviewing assignment briefs and pointing out things such as inappropriate cultural references, complex rather than simple statements and where there are assumptions which need to be made explicit. If academic staff approach the learning advisors with a specific issue then advisors reported that they would first set up a workshop with students to solve the immediate problem and then work out a plan to pre-empt similar problems occurring in future. Additionally, if lots of students were coming for learning support about the same issue or assignment brief, the learning advisor would liaise with the appropriate academics about the phrasing of questions, extra support etc.

One respondent mentioned that international students can place the wrong emphasis on learning objectives written in assignment briefs and some might think they are the actual tasks. They mentioned the importance for assignment briefs to be concise, with a clear set of expectations which aren't mixed in to a long statement alongside the task statements. This respondent believed that a lot of problems could be solved by clearly

written and explicit assignment specifications, particularly for international students, but also for domestic students.

It was reported that in-class learning support staff for international students are quite rare at universities. One learning advisor found that it worked really well to have a double team providing academic skills support and content specialism in tutorials to help students by coming at the work from both perspectives. This respondent emphasised the importance of scheduling learning support sessions in the usual lecture time rather than additional to existing timetabled sessions, as otherwise students were much less likely to attend. Failure to attend and engage in class can affect the effectiveness of the programmes intended to provide learning support. Though teachers and learning advisors can provide opportunities to address skills, students may not have engaged with these opportunities or attended relevant sessions.

5.3 Cultural awareness programmes

Several international student advisors commented on the usefulness of cultural expectations training. As mentioned in chapter 3, one such programme available is the Excell programme. Excell had not been taken on as a current programme at any of the New Zealand universities visited at the time of the interviews, though some universities have staff trained in it already or had used it in the past. One New Zealand university trains their domestic students in how to run the Excell programme. The domestic students model expected behaviour and share how it would be done in other cultures. Originally the programme was designed for students but it can also be used for staff to raise awareness. This type of programme is intended to make things culturally familiar for international students and prepare them for the reality of the educational experience, not just the social ideal, as mentioned previously. Programmes such as this attempt to provide students with practical strategies and guidance.

Some New Zealand universities have used programmes such as the Excell programme to target certain cultural groups who haven't acculturised well. One international student advisor respondent mentioned that it would be useful to send more information such as this to students pre-arrival at university and also to hold orientation events and seminars pre-arrival too.

5.4 Peer learning support

Some universities have 'buddy systems' for peer learning, where a host student is paired up with a new international student. One institution found that most host student volunteers were also international students and the take-up of such schemes can be fairly low. It was found that it was important to incentivise these schemes where possible, to encourage local students to contribute.

Several New Zealand universities organised study groups to facilitate discussion about a specific topic or skill. Respondents who worked in learning support agreed that effective study groups can help academic studies for all students, not just international students. It is beneficial to provide this extra support in a safe space as students can feel vulnerable and need a learning environment where they feel comfortable asking questions. The learning support advisors interviewed found that small study groups could provide a very nurturing learning environment. Students can become good friends and continue to support each other outside of the sessions. Domestic students were usually also welcome to attend the same study groups as international students but occasionally it was found that they could dominate the group and change its dynamic.

One New Zealand university's learning centre employs peer tutors, who are second or final year students who have performed well, to work with students. International students can request an international peer tutor. The peer tutors look at subject-specific content as well as general learning skills and teach theory and concepts on a one-to-one basis. The first six sessions with peer tutors are free. This was reported to be a very popular service with students.

One university in New Zealand offers conversational classes set up by students. These also had a huge take-up from students. The international student advisors promote these classes to students who they believe would benefit from taking them. It was reported that many of the domestic students in New Zealand have no experience of internationalisation and so these classes can also benefit them. Another university organised a news discussion group for domestic and international students, so that students can keep up with current affairs and discuss issues, thereby improving their conversational skills and confidence.

5.5 Peer mentoring

One international student advisor mentioned that peer mentoring of international students is the number one intervention strategy for international students' retention issues. Mentors volunteer for the programme, and the international students identify a mentor in the first six weeks of their course of study. Such programmes were found to be good for social integration for those who do take them up.

The international student advisors must train the peer mentors in cultural awareness issues and the boundaries of the support they can offer their students. The mentors are given case scenarios to prepare them for what to expect. Both volunteers and participants can lose interest. One learning advisor respondent reported that the likelihood of the international student completing their course lessens without the support of the mentor student.

In some New Zealand universities, Maori and Pasifika students also have their own mentoring groups which cover the same things as the international student mentoring schemes but in a different setting. It was reported that the Maori and Pasifika students are less likely to seek learning support and advice but often have specific needs which can be addressed by specific strategies. One university reported a 39% dropout rate in mature Maori students. It was also found that the students weren't always accessing the learning support services offered by the university.

5.6 Chapter summary

This section has reviewed the responses from international student advisors and learning advisory staff at universities in New Zealand and at Northumbria University in the UK. Some of the advice and good practice mentioned can be considered for future recommendations.

SECTION 3 – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.0 Conclusions and recommendations

The findings in this report reflect the perspectives of 45 academic and learning advisory staff at several universities in New Zealand and one university in the UK. The viewpoints expressed are limited to the interviewees' responses from the interviews. The academic staff were asked to comment on their experiences of working with domestic and international students in group work and peer review activities. Learning advisory staff were additionally asked to provide information and viewpoints on learning issues faced by international students and any extra-curricular support programmes offered to assist international students with their academic work and social integration at university. This final chapter summarises the key conclusions of the report and provides some recommendations based on the interview responses and literature reviewed.

6.1 Group work

Several researchers and respondents reported that it can be a challenge to ensure that group work projects are a positive learning experience for all students. Despite several students seeing the overall benefits of groupwork skills, most respondents found that their students would generally prefer to work alone, preferring to have total control over their own marks and performance. As the abilities of students within a class are all different, there is a feeling that some group members could bring down marks of others. Several lecturers found that the main resistance to group work occurred when all students in the group were given a shared mark. Students were reported to often find formative groupwork more fun and seem to like to discuss things in 'safer' small groups than in front of the whole class. In this way group projects are not viewed as assessment opportunities but as forms of learning experience.

It was believed by several respondents that there are some more practical and applied topics which can't be taught as effectively in traditional lecture situations as they can by practical groupwork with a problem-solving approach. Some activities were felt to be 'naturally' group activities and should only ever really be done in teams. The group activities that were set for students in these subjects were therefore thought to be

relatively authentic practices for the kind of employment the students wish to attain. Several lecturers interviewed felt that their students were most motivated by projects they perceived as having value and consequence. Several academic respondents recommended giving students sufficient time to get to know each other before starting the group work. This must be carefully considered as giving this extra time for familiarisation and team building can leave fewer weeks to complete the project work.

Recommendations

- Where possible ensure that students have time for familiarisation and team building activities before they start assessed group work projects.
- Ensure that sessions are organised at the start of a group work module to inform students about how to form and maintain workable groups, to anticipate issues, and to be introduced to strategies to help them to deal with conflicts that might arise due to differences in assumptions and expectations.
- Provide clear guidelines about the possible roles and expected contributions of group members.
- Carefully consider group composition issues. The means of group selection may be determined by the characteristics of the class, or by the task being set.
- If group project outcomes cannot be trusted to reflect individual learning, and group process measures also don't reflect learning, then consider assessing learning individually.
- Group work can be the most authentic practice for certain practical and applied disciplines compared to other more theoretical subject areas. Consider the appropriateness of the group work activity for the students' subject discipline.

6.1.2 Group work and culture

The main conclusion that can be reached about the experiences of students working in multi-cultural groups is that it is not possible to generalise as to student and group behaviour based on culture. There appears to be no agreement from the literature on whether students find working with mixed-cultural groups a more positive or negative experience than working with mono-cultural groups. Ledwith et al (1998) and Ho et al (2004) for example found some domestic students were reluctant to work with international students and this made international students feel uncomfortable in those groups. However more than one lecturer interviewed during this project and in other studies (Holmes: 2003; Caspersz et al: 2004) reported experiences of mixed-cultural groups who had worked well together from the start of the group work experience.

6.2 Peer review

Peer review activities can help students learn how to revise and edit drafts of work to see what works well and what could be improved (Nelson: 1997). Even if students are unwilling or unable to identify weaknesses in their own work, they may perhaps be more willing to identify weaknesses in another student's work and this process then allows them to reflect on and critique their own. Individual students or student groups can evaluate other students' or groups' documents, presentations and demonstrations of their work. These activities can provide a good quantity of timely feedback from peers.

Teachers need to recognise that some students from traditional educational backgrounds and cultures with a large power distance may see tutors as holding a position of power and being the source of knowledge, meaning the teacher's comments may be valued far more than feedback from other students (Nelson: 1997; Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). Therefore the value of peer response tasks may not be appreciated by students from all cultures.

Students may need help in understanding the value of others' feedback via preparation sessions and emphasising the potential benefits. Telling students to 'criticise' each others work might be perceived by students, particularly international students, as only providing negative comments which may make them feel less comfortable with the peer review task. No student likes to lose 'face' however this issue needs careful

consideration in peer review activities, especially with international students who may be unfamiliar with this type of exercise.

Some academics are wary of using peer review to award marks, rather than for formative feedback, due to issues of whether students are capable of carrying out summative peer assessment professionally due to lack of maturity or insufficient training and preparation in how to do it. Some students were reported to feel uncomfortable with assessing other students' work and issues of potential bias by group members who are friends were also raised.

Recommendations

- Allow frequent opportunities for students to provide peer feedback to each other, perhaps via review of documents, presentations or demonstrations.
- Consider not giving critical comments in front of other students and consider written feedback rather than spoken.
- Help the 'face saving' issue by asking the whole class to critique an example of work together, so that the criticism does not feel so personal.
- The tutor could rephrase the peer review task so that students understand that they are 'assisting' other students to get a better mark for their work. This could also be explained in terms of role play, for example saying 'pretend you are the tutor, how would you help this student get an A grade?'
- Tutors to consider whether the peer assessment will be useful and engaged in by the students in the way intended by the tutor. The tutor should also consider whether the students are mature enough and sufficiently prepared to summatively assess each other's work.

6.3 International and domestic student interactions

Creating and facilitating opportunities that promote intercultural mixing can be challenging. Such opportunities should recur throughout the students' time at university. It should not be assumed that a cultural mix of students on campus will lead to intercultural learning or positive cultural interactions (Wright & Lander: 2003). Carefully planned interventions by teachers and other university staff may be needed to encourage meaningful interactions between home students and international students and to break down barriers in the classroom and outside (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004).

6.3.1 Culture and learning

Some interview respondents noted that cultural background can frame their students' mentality and have an impact on their learning. More than one academic respondent noted that students from Asian cultures preferred the lecturers to teach them and didn't want to be 'taught' by fellow students via peer review, groupwork etc, as they had less trust in their fellow students' ability to help them learn. These methods do not fit with their expectation of 'proper learning'.

Some respondents believed that students' learning styles can be affected by whether they prefer to work cooperatively or competitively (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). Cooperative learning has been argued by some to be particularly effective with students from collectivist cultures (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004; Tang: 1996). However Kumaradvivelu (2003) posited that considering the communication behaviour of international students predominantly based on cultural factors will result in a lack of understanding of these learners and appropriate teaching methods for them. A group of students from collectivistic cultures will not necessarily form cohesive groups (Strauss: 2001). As was indicated earlier, while specific cultures may have general preferences toward collectivism, individuals within these specific cultures will vary in the strength of that preference.

6.3.2 Prior experience issues

It is possible that some university teachers do not fully appreciate the many obstacles students can encounter when adapting to study in another culture and may mistakenly assume that international students enter their institutions with a full knowledge of the language requirements and learning expectations (Bodycott & Walker:

2000). Some teachers believe that it is the student's responsibility to adapt to the language and learning culture created in the classroom and that it is the student's responsibility to engage with the social culture of the university (Bodycott & Walker: 2000). Mills (1997) and Strauss (2001) for example also found that some teachers had a tendency to interpret their experiences with international students using quite simplistic cultural stereotypes.

Recommendations

- Academic staff to receive cultural awareness training.
- Tutors to plan and facilitate activities in class that might increase levels of trust, acceptance, sharing and mutual support between students' and 'teach students how to provide help to each other' such as peer pairing and cooperative learning. These tasks may be more likely to lead to intercultural cooperation and friendship outside the classroom.

6.3.3 Language issues

Some researchers have found that language was perceived to be the major deterrent to voluntary interaction and mixed culture group formation (e.g. Chamberlain & Hope: 2003). Language problems may be exacerbated for many students by unfamiliar approaches to teaching and learning, and the cultural changes involved in moving to another country (Cownie & Addison: 1996; Smith et al: 1998). Some New Zealand universities have pre-degree English language courses, which were thought to be very good for preparing international students for their courses, however they may still not be sufficient. It was reported by most of the learning advisors interviewed in the New Zealand universities visited that the most common reason for international students coming to the student learning centres is to check that their English makes sense.

Recommendations

- Academic staff to review assignment briefs and check for things such as conciseness, appropriate cultural references, simple statements, assumptions which need to be made explicit, ensuring they include a clear set of expectations which aren't mixed in to a long statement alongside the task statements.

- Where possible employ in-class learning support staff where there are large numbers of international students in classes. Making use of a two-person teaching team in tutorials, comprising a learning advisor who provides academic skills support, and the lecturer to provide the subject-specific content specialism, could help students by coming at the work from both perspectives.
- Cultural problems with communication may be alleviated by providing opportunities for students to speak out in non-threatening ways, such as group work and internet-based forum discussions, wikis etc.

6.3.4 Extra-curricular programmes for international students

Working with peers has also been found to be effective outside of the classroom, such as international buddy systems and other peer-pairing programmes, where a host student is paired up with a new international student. Westwood & Barker (1990) found that the international students who took part adjusted significantly better academically and socially than those students who didn't participate.

Several international student advisors interviewed for this project commented on the usefulness of cultural expectations training, such as the Excell programme. This type of programme is intended to make things culturally familiar for international students, to provide them with practical strategies and prepare them for the reality of the educational experience, not just the social ideal.

Recommendation

- Universities to organise peer-pairing opportunities and cultural expectations training for international students to assist their academic and social integration, and for them to become familiar with the expectations of the new academic institution via interaction with other students.

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