The Gains and Pains of Mixed National Group Work at University

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Abstract

According to a recent report, the top skill that employers are looking for in graduates is "An ability to work collaboratively with teams of people from a range of backgrounds and countries" (Diamond et al. 2011, 8). So as universities seek to internationalise, an important question is how successful they are in developing this skill. Both research (e.g. Summers and Volet 2008; Kimmel and Volet 2012) and anecdotal evidence suggest that it is a challenging task and that universities are struggling to achieve it. In this paper, we report a study on working in mixed national groups and its relation to intercultural skills. A total of 2000 responses were collected from students at a UK university to a questionnaire that had both closed and open questions. A range of statistical analyses were carried out on the quantitative data, and the open-ended comments were analysed thematically. The responses were compared across national/regional clusters and our findings indicate that mixed national group work is widely perceived across the clusters as enriching and not particularly challenging. Correlations indicate that students perceive such group work as more important for the development of intercultural skills than cross-national friendships.

Keywords: group work, internationalisation, mixed nationality, higher education

1.   Introduction

A number of recent independent studies (Diamond et al. 2011 on behalf of agr, CIEH and CHE; CBI 2012; The Economist Intelligence Unit 2012; The British Council 2013) have revealed that employers seek graduates who can offer more than technical/discipline-specific knowledge and skills. They want them to bring the skills to work effectively in international contexts. For example, Diamond et al. (2011) report that leading employers ranked the following qualities as being (in order) the most important: an ability to work collaboratively with teams of people from a range of backgrounds and countries, excellent communication skills (both speaking and listening), and the ability to negotiate with and influence clients across the globe from different cultures. In line with this, the 572 executives interviewed by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) believed that cultural differences were the greatest obstacle to productive cross-border collaboration. Yet it seems that employers have difficulties finding graduates with such capabilities, as the 542

employers in the CBI's (2012) study reported being least satisfied with employees' skills in foreign languages and cultural awareness.

While there might be multiple motives and reasons for HE institutions to internationalise, the demand for so-called 'global graduates' certainly forms part of it.
Montgomery (2009), for instance, argues as follows:

> One of the main educational aims of internationalisation is to encourage students to "understand, appreciate and articulate the reality of interdependence among nations (environmental, economic, cultural and social)" and to prepare students to develop competences and tolerances that enable them to live and work in an intercultural context (Knight & de Wit 1995,13).

Yet there is debate as to how such aims can best be addressed and how far they are being achieved (e.g. De Vita 2007; Montgomery 2009; Leask and Carroll 2011). In this paper we explore the issues through a large-scale study.

2. Literature Review

Studies on the internationalisation of higher education have explored a range of associated issues, including curriculum development, inward and outward mobility, friendship and integration, and mixed nationality group work (e.g. Jones and Brown 2007; Jones 2010; Clifford and Montgomery 2013; Streitwieser 2014). In terms of the latter, which is the focus of this paper, a small number of studies have identified the challenges that students report re their experiences of working in mixed national groups. Table 1 below shows the top twelve challenges identified in three studies that report them in detail.

Table 1: Major Challenges of Mixed national Group work reported in previous studies

	Popov et al. (2012)	Turner (2009)	Volet & Ang 1998/2012
Language & Communication	2. Insufficient language skills 3. Communication style	1. Unequal language skills 2. Quietness or silence 4. Communication issues 10. Overtalking or interrupting[1] 10. Chinese Ss' use of Mandarin in class	• Language 　○ Understanding different accents 　○ Use of mother tongue
Attitudes & Engagement	1. Free-riding 4. Low motivation 8. Negative attitudes towards others	6. Unequal commitment to the group 7. Time keeping or punctuality	• Negative stereotypes & ethnocentric views

[1] Items with the same number were equally ranked.

		8. Free riders or lack of participation	
Composition of group members	7. Different disciplinary backgrounds 9. Heterogeneous composition 10. Differences in academic attitudes 11. Differences in ambitions	9. Differing expectations of groups	• Cultural-emotional connectedness
Group management	5. Ineffective group management 12. Culturally different styles of decision making & problem solving	3. Leadership or role ambiguity	
Conflict management	6. Group conflicts	5. Conflict	
Other		10. Chinese students' cultural values	• Practicalities (work & family commitments of local students)

As can be seen, three main areas stand out across these three studies as being potentially problematic: Language and communication, attitudes and engagement, and issues associated with the composition of the group members.

In fact, many of the challenges within each of these clusters are not exclusively related to cultural differences, but are simply attributed to that. For example, free riding can occur among any groups of students, as can ineffective group management. Similarly, certain individuals from all cultural groups can be quiet and participate little in group discussions, or may lack particular disciplinary expertise. So it seems that, in line with Social Identity Theory (e.g. Tajfel and Turner 1986), there is a strong tendency for people to evaluate members of 'other cultural groups' more negatively than members of their own and to attribute challenges to 'cultural differences'.

Clearly, there may be cultural differences. For instance, Wright and Lander (2003) compared the number of turns taken during a group task by members of two different ethnic cohorts (Australian-born Anglo-Europeans and overseas-born South East Asian students) under two different conditions (mono-ethnic groups and bi-ethnic groups) and found that the latter took far fewer turns than the Australians. They interpret this as indicating that the South East Asian students were inhibited in their verbal interaction when they were with Australian students, implying there could be different normative or preferred styles of interaction.

Yet no matter whether the perceived challenges of mixed national group work result from prejudice or have a strong foundation in personal experience, a key aspiration (as explained above) for arranging mixed national group work is the promotion of the integration of home and international students and the development of intercultural skills within everyone. Unfortunately, however, this is not necessarily easy to achieve. For example, both Wright and Lander (2003) and De Vita (2007), on the basis of their research, argue that little meaningful interaction is really taking place.

In contrast, others have found more positive signs. Montgomery (2009), for instance, maintains that attitudes to working in mixed national groups are changing, with students perceiving such experiences as helping them prepare for work in international contexts. Such positive signs can also be found in some other studies. For example, Volet and Ang (1998/2012) report that both a number of home (Australian) and international students became aware, after an experience of working in culturally mixed groups, that some of their initial attributions of the 'other' were not accurate and needed to be revised. Similar findings are reported by Sweeney, Weaven and Herington (2008). In their study, students not only commented on changes in their attitudes but also on personal growth more broadly

However, surprisingly few studies give details of the benefits that students have mentioned of working in mixed national groups. Table 2 has been drawn up from interviewee comments reported in Sweeney, Weaven and Herington (2008) and Montgomery (2009), with our suggestions for clustering. As can be seen, there are potentially a number of benefits, ranging from personal self-awareness and growth, to exposure to new ideas and the development of skills for intercultural interaction.

Table 2: Benefits of Mixed national Group work reported by Sweeney, Weaven and Herington (2008) and Montgomery (2009)

Self-awareness	• Awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses • Personal growth • Learning about self & ability to lead a group
New ideas and learning practices	• Unique perspectives on issues • Deep content learning • Better learning practices (e.g. time management, critical evaluation and involvement) • Different perspectives essential for some subjects (e.g. international business)
Interaction skills	• How to compromise • Adept at working with strangers, people with a different mindset • More confident and comfortable, especially in presenting own view
Attitudes	• Change in attitudes towards others • Reduction in prejudices
Friendships	• Opportunity to make great friends

So taking these various studies into account, the overall picture of students' reactions to working in mixed national groups, is diverse and potentially confusing. Some studies report mixed national group work as challenging, with students' post-experience attitudes towards it remaining unchanged (at best) or more negative (at worst) (e.g. Summers and Volet 2008; Turner 2009). Others (e.g. Montgomery 2009) report more positive findings and maintain that students are becoming generally more positive towards mixed national group experiences. How, then, can these different conclusions be interpreted or explained? A number of reasons could underlie the discrepancies in the findings.

Kimmel and Volet (2012) argue that one possible factor is the type of research method used. They point out that since intercultural experiences are complex, multifaceted and dynamic, the use of a multimethod approach is vital. In fact, many of the papers report relatively small-scale qualitative studies, with numbers of participants ranging from around 18 to 25 (Volet and Mansfield 2006; Colvin, Volet and Fozdar 2014) for individual interviews and from around 42 to 70 (Volet and Ang 1998; Montgomery 2009) for focus group interviews. Quantitative (survey) studies are also not particularly large, with total numbers of respondents ranging from around 140 to 230 (Summers and Volet 2008; Popov et al. 2012; Kimmel and Volet 2012).

Sample size is particularly important in order to gain a balanced picture. In fact, recent evidence indicates that there are a number of factors that give rise to any population differences. For instance, Kimmel and Volet (2012) found that students' particular study context (e.g. size of group, nature of teacher support, and interdependence/non-interdependence of group task features) is important, while Volet and Mansfield (2006) found that personal goals have a significant influence. Other recent studies have pointed to the amount of variation within each so-called cultural group. The majority of studies on internationalisation, as well as mixed national group work, have compared home and international students, with little or no recognition that there could be considerable variation within each of these categories. Very little attention has been paid to the impact of level of study (undergraduate/ postgraduate) or to the potential differences among the extremely large category 'international students'. It is particularly important that the latter is taken into account, because several recent studies (Sweeney, Weaven and Herington 2008; Popov et al. 2012; Colvin, Volet and Fozdar 2014) have mentioned this issue. For instance, Sweeney, Weaven and Herington (2008, 125), in their focus group study, report as follows:

> Whilst both international and domestic students expressed similar frustrations with previous group experiences, there were consistent differences amongst the international contingent, with some cultures expressing more dissatisfaction with group process and outcomes than others.

Similarly, Colvin, Volet and Fozdar (2014, 440) report that in their qualitative study 'a link between students' cultural backgrounds and the depth of their intercultural

interaction experiences emerged', while Popov et al. (2012, 314) conclude from their survey study that 'perceptions of challenges in mixed national student group work differ across cultures'.

In this study, therefore, we address a number of these uncertainties by carrying out a large-scale study to explore the following research questions:

1. How challenging do students perceive mixed national group work to be and in what ways?
   a. To what extent are there differences across national groups in these perceptions?
2. How valuable do students perceive mixed national group work to be and in what ways?
   a. To what extent are there differences across national groups in these perceptions?
3. To what extent are students' perceptions of mixed national group work associated with their attitudes towards 'global graduate' skills?

3. Methods

Working in collaboration with the International Office at one British Higher Education Institution (henceforth BHEI), we added a number of questions relevant to internationalisation to two surveys run by the external organisation, i-Graduate: Student Barometer (SB) for home students and International Student Barometer (ISB) for international students.[2]

Six Likert-type items were added: two on friendship with people from other countries, two on working in groups with people from other countries and two on intercultural skills. Respondents rated these items on a 4-point scale, with '1' standing for 'strongly disagree' and '4' for 'strongly agree. The scale mean was therefore 2.5. In this paper we focus on the responses to the group work questions. Following each pair of items, respondents were given the opportunity to add open comments if they wished, and for group work, this was phrased as follows: "Comments (if any) on the potential value of working in groups / having students from different countries."

A total of 2000 undergraduate and postgraduate taught students completed the surveys at the BHEI in the summer of 2014. Table 3 shows the distribution of respondents according region/country (UK, EEA, China and other overseas). We also compared the relative distribution in our sample to the distribution in the entire population[3], i.e. the entire university. As can be seen, the relative distribution in the sample and in the population are almost identical. Thus, our sample, with respect to the chosen regional clusters, is representative for the population and no bias was introduced by creating these categories ex-post. However, it needs to be highlighted that in claiming this, we are only referring to the representativeness of the

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[2] For more details, see http://www.i-graduate.org/universities/
[3] Data was retrieved directly from the student records of the analysed BHEI.

respondents in terms of proportions of students from different countries/regions at this particular HEI. This should not be interpreted as indicating that the findings are necessarily representative of the viewpoints of students at other HEIs or from certain countries/regions.

Table 3: Distribution of sample, according to region/country, level of study, number of open comments

	Sample	% of sample	population	% of population	Open comments	% of total open comments
UK	1145	57%	11657	58%	109	73%
EEA (excl. UK)	288	14%	2075	10%	16	11%
China	165	8%	1727	9%	21	14%
Other overseas	402	20%	4638	23%	3	2%
TOTAL	2000	100%	20097	100%	149	100%

We decided to separate international students in this way for the following reasons: European students are treated in the UK as 'home' students for fees purposes, and according to our personal teaching experience, they often have different integration experiences from many other non-UK students. So we were interested in exploring how similar or different their perceptions were compared with other non-UK students as well as with UK students. So we further divided students into smaller sub-groups to help counteract the widespread bi-polar distinction between home and international students (e.g. Volet and Ang 1998/2012; Sweeney, Weaven and Herington 2008; Turner 2009; Jones 2010; Leask and Carroll 2011). We decided to use the EEA as an entity, rather than the more political unit of the European Union, since it did not seem to make sense to exclude countries like Switzerland and Norway. Secondly, Chinese students constitute approximately 20% of all non-UK students at the BHEI and they were the nationality singled out for comment most frequently in the survey as a whole, as well as with reference to group work. For these reasons, we decided to treat China as a separate national cluster.

The quantitative data was imported into SPSS® and a range of statistical analyses were carried out. The open comments, along with demographic data, were imported into the qualitative data analysis software programme, MaxQDA®. There was a total of 429 open comments altogether, 150 of which related to working in mixed national groups. All of the comments were read a number of times, and following this, a small amount of autocoding was carried out over the whole dataset for two prevalent themes: language and nationality. Each of the coded segments was checked for accuracy. Following this, a conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) was carried out on the open comments on group work. Comments were coded into broad categories and then coded again into sub-categories. The full matrix of coding distributions is show in Appendix A and B.

We chose a mixed-methods approach (see also Creswell 2009) for this study to identify factors that are important when studying students at HEIs but that cannot

be captured by a quantitative score only. This allowed us to make a more informed interpretation of the survey results and yielded the necessary detailed insights into this topic.

4. Findings

In this section we report the findings from our statistical analyses, as well as from our analyses of the open comments. We deal with each research question in turn.

4.1. Perceived challenges of working in groups with people from other countries

First we report our findings on the perceived challenges of working in groups with people from other countries. In the literature, findings are frequently presented in terms of home and international student perceptions (e.g. Volet and Ang 1998/2012; Sweeney, Weaven and Herington 2008; Turner 2009; Jones 2010; Leask and Carroll 2011), and so we start by taking this approach. As can be seen from Table 4, neither of the student groups regarded working in groups with people from other countries as challenging. Although there is a statistically significant difference, $t(1453)= -4.266$, $p <.001$, with UK students finding it less challenging, the means are nevertheless quite close and neither grouping finds it particularly problematic, $d=.22$.

Table 4: Perceived challenges of group work: Group comparison between UK and 'Rest of the world' students (t-test)

		n	Mean
Working in groups on my course is challenging when members are from many different countries.	UK	916	2.11
	Rest of the world	711	2.29
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000**

Next, in view of our concerns about the simplistic bi-polar distinction, we analysed our data according to nationality/region: UK, EEA (not including the UK), China and other overseas countries. **Error! Reference source not found.** shows the means for each cluster. As can be seen, students from the UK, EEA and other overseas countries all held rather similar perceptions and rated working in diverse groups as relatively unchallenging. However, the Chinese students held more neutral viewpoints (i.e. they regarded mixed national group work as neither particularly challenging nor unchallenging), reflecting quite a noticeably different viewpoint from the UK students (a difference in means of 0.41), and a somewhat different viewpoint from the other clusters. A one-way ANOVA[4] was conducted and showed that the differences were statistically significant, although overall effect size remained low ($\omega=.12$).

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[4] Given the large sample size for each of the groups, and in line with the Central Limit Theorem (see also Field 2013), a one-way ANOVA was chosen irrespective of the normality of our data within the chosen sub-groups. Thus, no test statistics for normality are reported. Apart from that, since the survey was sent to the entire population of the BHEI, sampling would not have influenced this in any way.

Table 5: Challenges of mixed national group work: Comparisons between the UK, EEA (excl. UK), China and other overseas (ANOVA)

		n	Mean
Working in groups on my course is challenging when members are from many different countries.	UK	916	2.11
	EEA (excl. UK)	253	2.20
	China	136	2.52
	Other overseas	322	2.26
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000**
	F(3, 1623)		10.987

Next we turn to the open comments. Clearly, to make valid judgements of mixed national group work, people need experience of both working in groups and also of those groups being culturally mixed. In our sample, 10 people (7%) remarked that they had limited experience of group work and 16 (11%) commented on the cultural mix of their groups: 10 (7%) stated that there were not many international students on their course, five (3%) that one nationality (Chinese) dominated, one that there were not enough UK students, and one that there was a good mix.

21 (14%) students commented that they found mixed national group work problematic, but nine out of these 21 also said that despite being challenging it was also valuable. A further four (3%) people remarked that it was sometimes good and sometimes bad. This indicates that the success or otherwise of group work depends on various factors and the ones mentioned by the respondents are shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**.

Table 6: Comments on challenging factors affecting group work, according to UK, EEA (excl. UK), China and other overseas students, and in percentage of the sample of students who provided open comments (see also Table 3).

	UK (n=109)	EEA (n=16)	China (n=3)	Other overseas (n=21)	Total (n=149)
English proficiency	27 25%	2 13%	0 0%	6 29%	35 23%
Group participation	7 6%	0 0%	0 0%	4 19%	11 7%
Individual differences	7 6%	2 13%	0 0%	1 5%	10 7%
Commitment & motivation	5 5%	2 13%	0 0%	1 5%	8 5%
Sticking together	3 3%	0 0%	0 0%	1 5%	4 3%
Prior experience	3 3%	1 6%	0 0%	0 0%	4 3%

As can be seen, by far the largest number of comments referred to English proficiency (23% of all students who provided comments). For many, English proficiency was the critical factor affecting the challenge of group work. Some simply commented on this:

1. The difficulty of working in groups with members from different countries solely relates to the inability of some group members to speak English which makes it hard to communicate. [Germany]

2. Language barriers are sometimes a detrimental factor to working together. A group of students from markedly disparate backgrounds may find it difficult working together without a roundly strong grasp of English. [Denmark]

3. Difficult to communicate with people from other countries due to different level of English. [Kazakhstan]

Others identified different types of impact, including the limitations it put on exchange of ideas and hence of learning, the extra work or strain it caused, and the emotional frustration that resulted:

4. Some people's English is so poor you can't get basic points across. [UK]

5. Since my group assignments only consisted of Chinese people who find speaking English hard/do not want to speak in English (the only common language), I found communicating with them, and therefore learning from them almost impossible. [India]

6. It can be difficult when they don't speak the language very well and in group projects I often have to rewrite entire sections. [UK]

7. The inability of many international students to communicate actively in seminars and groups had a negative impact on my learning experience in these contexts. Furthermore, as a native speaker I felt self-conscious about speaking too much [UK]

8. The lack of ability with English can put a strain on natural speakers. You have to be less dependent on those who's quality of written English - requiring others to step in. [UK]

9. A lot of the international students struggle with written English which can be a frustration in group projects. [UK]

A few students, however, while acknowledging the challenges associated with language proficiency, also mentioned the positive side:

10. Language barriers have been difficult, however I have learned a lot about culture and differences. [UK]

11. The language barrier has occasionally been problematic, but it has taught me a lot about patience and explaining clearly. I only speak English, so I try to remember that the people I'm working with are communicating in a second or third language. [UK]

Another aspect of language and communication which was mentioned relatively frequently is participation in group discussions (11 times, i.e. 7% of students). This can often be related to level and confidence in English, but can also involve other factors like personality and group dynamics.

12. There was a serious problem on my course with student participation and level of English. Not everyone, but a majority. [UK]

13. Half the people don't say anything! Especially the Chinese! (No offence intended) [Malawi]

14. Sometimes students from other countries are nervous and shy about their English language abilities and have perhaps not been encouraged to speak in seminars and therefore do not contribute to group discussions because their confidence has not been built. [UK]

15. There may be a form of racism or a bit of language barrier so ones that are less able to speak in English has the disadvantage at not being heard of in discussions. [Malaysia]

16. I find that most local British undergraduates are not as forthcoming in opening up during seminars, often either not having done sufficient reading or unwilling to make effort and focus to come up with ideas - but it seems to be the case when I am present. [Singapore]

Related to the issue of participation, several people mentioned 'sticking together' in language and cultural groups, which made it difficult for people to work together effectively:

17. Most people on my course are Asian, and they don't want to work outside of their social groups. [UK]

18. Students from different countries tend to group together and speak in their native language. This makes communication with them difficult. [UK]

19. Most people form groups of their own nationalities and speak their native languages which is a barrier for outsiders who feel left out. [Iraq]

Many of the comments quoted so far indicate a 'them and us' orientation, either in terms of specific nationalities, or home/international. However, some students emphasised the importance of individual differences, arguing that these are more relevant than nationality (10 students, 7%), or stressed that diversity in whatever form is irrelevant for the function of group work (14 students, 9%).

20. International students can be really great, enriching people, or unmotivated and bad at English. As mixed a bag as the home students. [UK]

21. Whether working in a group was easy or not depended on the personalities not the country they were from. [The Netherlands]

22. Personally it doesn't matter which country you're from as long as you have the right work attitude. Group work being rather different from making friends. [Singapore]

Several students pointed to levels of commitment or motivation, sometimes stressing individual differences, sometimes mentioning a home/international distinction, and sometimes pointing to educational factors like credits:

23. It doesn't seem to make a difference when it comes to group work - I dislike group work either way. It is only a problem when the international student is only here for a year and so the work doesn't count towards their degree. [UK]

24. I had one problem with a team presentation. Two of the members of the team came from the United States and their grades does not count for their average in their home university so they do the work but do not want to spend too much time. [Belgium]

25. It can be great to work with people from different countries, especially when they are equally keen to work together, but sometimes students from other countries seem much less motivated to contribute to group work and this can be stressful. [UK]

A few (four, 3%) felt that prior experience of living or working in an international context meant that working in mixed national groups was nothing new.

26. Have been in International School for so many years so isn't really new for me. [UK]

4.2. Perceived value of working in groups with people from other countries

Having considered the challenges of working in mixed national groups, we now turn to exploring the value that students attached to it. As can be seen from **Error! Reference source not found.** and
Table , non-UK students rated it consistently positively, while UK students were significantly less positive. Once again, further tests that examined regional/country perceptions rather than simply home/international, showed that there were no significant differences in the perceptions of EEA, Chinese or other overseas students ($F_{(2,708)}=0.357$, $p=0.700$); all were equally positive. In other words, it was the UK students' ratings that underlay the overall significant difference.

Table 7: Perceived value of mixed national group work: Group comparison between students from the UK and the rest of the world (t-test)

		n	Mean
Having students from different countries on my course has enriched my experience of working in groups.	UK	812	2.98
	Rest of the world	712	3.34
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000**
	$t(1524)$		-4.315
	d		-.50

Table 8: Perceived value of mixed national group work: Comparisons between the UK, EEA (excl. UK), China and other overseas (ANOVA)

		n	Mean
Having students from different countries on my course has enriched my experience of working in groups	UK	814	2.98
	EEA (excl. UK)	247	3.34
	China	141	3.30
	Other overseas	324	3.36
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000**
	F(3, 1522)		32.198
	ω		0.24

44 (30%) respondents commented on the value of mixed national group work. As mentioned above, nine of these linked it with challenge, viewing benefit and challenge as not necessarily contradictory but rather as potentially interconnected.

27. You can get new insight but there are also cultural issues and tensions. [UK]

28. Working with students from different countries can be difficult but it is a good training for work in real-life. [Malaysia]

Many of the comments were rather vague in terms of exactly what the benefits of mixed national group work are, describing it with phrases such as 'enriching', 'beneficial', 'added a lot', 'fantastic', 'an aid to education' and 'vital for creativity'. 19 (13%) people, however, referred to the new insights and different perspectives that it brings.

29. The perspective gained by having a variety of different viewpoints is invaluable. [UK]

30. Different perspectives and interesting solutions can greatly enhance our knowledge base. [UK]

31. Working with students from different countries is interesting because it can enable you to look at certain issues from different perspectives, giving a more well-rounded understanding. [Germany]

32. From the two experiences I had this year, working in groups with students from different countries has enriched my work, and theirs, by sharing different cultural and personal views on discussions, in a way which would not (otherwise) be possible. [Portugal]

33. Studying politics and international studies means that fellow students from various countries can be extremely helpful! [South Korea]

Other benefits that people referred to included good preparation for the world of work, better collaboration, insights into other's learning styles and preferences, improvement in personal qualities (e.g. patience) and greater adaptability.

34. Working with students from different countries can be difficult but it is a good training for work in real-life. [Malaysia]

35. We study differently so it was interesting to see their state of mind and methods. [UK]

36. I've never been fond of working in groups, but I've found that the addition of non-British students to group courseworks always made things better, as the group was more willing to cooperate and explain things, as well as play to my strengths. [Romania]

37. The language barrier has occasionally been problematic, but it has taught me a lot about patience and explaining clearly. I only speak English, so I try to remember that the people I'm working with are communicating in a second or third language. [UK]

38. You have to adapt to others working habits and see how they approach things. [UK]

4.3. Students' perceptions of development of skills for the international workplace and its relationship to mixed national group work

As explained above, it is widely assumed that integration of home and international students, both socially and academically, is helpful for the development of 'global skills', and that participation in mixed national group work is particularly helpful for this. However, to the best of our knowledge, there has been little or no empirical work to check on this claim. Our questionnaire items allowed us to do this by examining the correlations between items about mixed national friendship and group work and items about the development of intercultural skills.

As can be seen from Table 9, working in groups with students from other countries is very significantly positively correlated with both the perceived importance of developing international working skills and students' judgement as to how far their experiences on their degree programme are enabling them to develop such skills. This is consistent across the different regional/national clusters (r>0.43), and is even stronger, by a substantial amount, for the Chinese respondents (r>0.64 and r>0.54).

When looking at the extent to which mixed national group work is perceived as challenging, its link with both the perceived importance of developing skills for international working and students' judgement that their experiences on their degree programme are enabling them to develop such skills is more variable and also much weaker. The UK students show a rather small negative correlation (r=-.220, p<.001); in other words, the less value that UK students attach to the development of intercultural skills, the more challenging they perceive mixed national group work to be. For students from EEA and other overseas countries only one significant negative correlation was found and that was extremely weak. For China, on the other hand, there is a tendency for a very slight positive correlation, with a weakly significant link between perceptions of challenge and the development of intercultural skills for the workplace (r=.196, p=.023).

When the correlations between international friendships and the development of intercultural skills are examined, fairly consistent positive correlations are found across the regional clusters. However, it is interesting to note that when they are compared for strength with those between mixed national group work and the development of intercultural skills, the latter are noticeably stronger. This indicates that students perceive opportunities for mixed national group work as being of greater importance for the development of 'global graduate' skills than having friends of different nationalities. For UK and other international overseas students, it seems that having friends from other countries is also positively related to their perception of cultural diversity in group work being enriching. This is slightly less the case for EEA and Chinese students.

Table 9: Developing skills for the international workplace: Correlations with perceptions of mixed national group work and friendships

		Working in groups on my course is challenging when members are from many different countries.				(2) Having students from different countries on my course has enriched my experience of working in groups				(3) Developing the skills to work effectively in international contexts is very important to me.				(4) My experiences during my degree programme are helping me develop the skills needed for working effectively in international contexts			
		UK	EEA	other	China	UK	EEA	other	China	UK	EEA	other	China	UK	EEA	other	China
(2)	r	**-.366****	-.144*	-.160**	.133												
	Sig.	.000	.025	.005	.126												
	N	776	242	309	134												
(3)	r	-.220**	-.080	-.112*	.067	**.485****	**.432****	**.446****	**.644****								
	Sig.	.000	.210	.048	.442	.000	.000	.000	.000								
	N	825	247	316	133	753	242	319	139								
(4)	r	-.153**	.009	-.097	.196*	**.483****	**.456****	**.452****	**.541****	**.515****	**.465****	**.479****	**.488****				
	Sig.	.000	.892	.087	.023	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000				
	N	787	243	312	134	723	236	314	138	856	252	335	140				
Within my friendship groups, there are people from different countries.	r	-.114**	-.150*	-.151**	-.066	**.339****	.242**	**.401****	.286**	.256**	.239**	.245**	.203*	**.318****	**.380****	**.337****	**.373****
	Sig.	.001	.017	.007	0.444	.000	.000	.000	.001	.000	.000	.000	.016	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	904	252	319	136	801	246	321	139	921	258	345	140	871	252	337	140
I find it difficult to socialise with people who are from different countries.	r	**.330****	**.340****	**.409****	.265**	-.255**	-.275**	**-.336****	-.179*	-.169**	-.295**	-.178**	-.263**	-.150**	-.209**	-.258**	**-.300****
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.036	.000	.000	.001	.002	.000	.001	.000	.000
	N	899	250	321	133	797	245	323	138	916	256	346	139	867	251	339	139

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

Considering how students rated their difficulty in socialising with people from other countries, only rather weak relationships were found with the importance they attached to the development of 'global' skills and with the extent to which they felt they were acquiring such intercultural skills on their degree programme. However, quite moderately large correlations were found between perceived difficulty in socialising across national groups and their perceived challenges of group work. This is particularly true for other international students while, somewhat surprisingly, the correlation is weaker for Chinese students. Nevertheless, for all regional clusters, results indicate that the difficulties of socialising with students from other countries contributes to the perception of mixed national group work being a challenge, and for Chinese students, it more noticeably affects the extent to which they feel they are acquiring intercultural skills on their degree programme.

In conclusion, while students perceive their experiences of mixed nationality friendships to be important for the development of intercultural skills and group work, they regard their experiences in class, and especially of mixed national group work, as being of even greater importance for this.

5. Discussion

The BHEI in our study is a highly internationalised university, with large numbers of non-UK students (almost 50%). Yet despite this, just over 10% of the people who made comments on mixed national group work referred to the issue of mix. More than half of these people remarked that there were few international students on their course, while others stated either that one nationality (Chinese) dominated or that there were not enough UK students. A recent report (Holly Else, 19 March 2015) in the THE (Times Higher Education) states that the proportion of non-UK students (compared with UK students) awarded postgraduate taught qualifications in the UK has increased significantly in recent years. The shift is discussed in terms of potential financial impact for institutions, but clearly it has major implications for internationalisation, student satisfaction, and the nurturing of students' 'global graduate' capabilities. Without a suitable balance, reactions may be negative, or even emotional, as the following comments illustrate:

39. I come from Malaysia so I'm used to working with different culture. The only problem I have with [name of department] is that they get too many Chinese students and my class has >70% Chinese. This means every module I have will end up with groups of all Chinese. [Malaysia]

40. Whilst I agree that having many international students is a good thing, the ratio of International to local students of 270:0 is not desirable. English students, I believe, should have a proportionate representation. [India]

Overall, though, the vast majority of students were positive about their mixed national group work experiences, agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were enriching. A number of critical factors (see Table 6) emerged as pivotal for the 'success' or otherwise of mixed national group work, indicating that if they are

handled well, students' evaluations will be positive, and if not, they will be negative. One student expressed this as follows:

41. Working with people from different countries is an extremely valuable experience, providing a) their level of English is very high and b) they have a genuine interest in the subject and high motivation levels - without these it is totally counter productive. [UK]

The open comment coding segments indicate that for many students, like this particular one, language and communication is a key issue, especially proficiency in English language (see comments 1–9). Others mentioned level of participation in discussions (see comments 12–16). The overwhelming impression is that a high level of English language proficiency is critical for positive intercultural interaction to take place in the BHEI. These findings are closely in line with those of Volet and Ang (1998/2012), Turner (2009) and Popov et al. (2012).

However, the ability to adapt one's use of language to the needs of one's interlocutor is an important feature of intercultural competence (Bremer et al. 1996; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009; Spencer-Oatey and Stadler 2009) and, as mentioned in the introduction, is a capability that many companies are now looking for in their new recruits. Developing this competence requires practice over time, and mixed national group work at university offers an ideal opportunity to hone such capability. So it is probably unwise to aim to eliminate, or even significantly reduce, communication challenges, as then students will not gain the experience of interacting in the kinds of contexts they are likely to face in the world of work. Rather, they need to receive support in understanding the potential benefits of such challenges and help in developing effective strategies for handling or overcoming them. Very few students displayed any awareness of the need for this, although one person did (see comment 11). The need for this support is in line with Kimmel and Volet's (2012) finding that students' perceptions of mixed national group work are affected by study context, including the nature of teacher support. So we would recommend that universities consider how they could raise both staff and students' awareness of (a) the potential value of mixed national group work for the development of 'global graduate' skills, and (b) effective strategies for handling communication challenges in these contexts. This has recently been attempted at two universities (one in the UK and one in Belgium), with very positive feedback from both staff and students.

A number of the respondents argued that people's motivation or attitude to work is a key factor. Occasionally this was linked with a person's status as an international student (e.g. see comment 26), suggesting a degree of stereotyping, but more frequently it was linked with structural issues like the need for credit. These findings are again in line with those of Popov et al. (2012), Turner (2009) and Volet and Ang (1998/2012). So this raises the question: to what extent does nationality influence people's behaviour in mixed national groups and/or influence their evaluations of its challenges and benefits?

A number of students emphasised the importance of individual differences, and argued that nationality is irrelevant (e.g. comments 22 and 23). Certainly, some of

the qualities attributed to international students, both in this study (e.g. in comment 26) and in other studies (e.g. Turner 2009; Popov et al. 2012), are not necessarily culturally based. They probably reflect the tendency towards bias that, according to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986), affects people's evaluations of 'other cultural groups'. On the other hand, the statistical analyses yielded some noticeable differences across nations/regions which were statistically significant. These included:

- Chinese students found mixed national group work somewhat more challenging than students from the other national/regional clusters;
- UK students were significantly less positive than those from other national/regional clusters about mixed national group work enriching their experience;
- Chinese students associated mixed national group work experiences more closely with the development of 'global graduate' skills than students from the UK, EEA and rest of the world;
- For UK students, the challenges of mixed national group work were more negatively associated with the development of 'global graduate' skills than for students from the EEA, China and rest of the world;
- For Chinese students, the challenges of mixed national group work were somewhat positively associated with the development of 'global graduate' skills, whereas for students from the EEA, China and rest of the world the associations were either negative or neutral.

These findings support, in general terms, those of Sweeney, Weaven and Herington (2008), Popov et al. (2012) and Colvin, Volet and Fozdar (2014), who all found differences in perspectives among international students from different countries. In terms of the UK findings in our study, they could be in line with those of Harrison and Peacock (2010), who found that home students (i.e. UK) perceived threats to their academic success and group identity from the presence of international students on campus and in the classroom. Since there is no longitudinal data, it is impossible to know whether the situation is improving with the increased internationalisation of UK higher education, as Montgomery (2009) claims, or whether there is little change.

How, then, should these statistical differences across regions/countries be interpreted?
In terms of the Chinese findings, they raise once more the issue of the 'Chinese learner' and whether they are a 'special case'. This has been debated in the literature (e.g. Watkins and Biggs 1996; Gieve and Clark 2005; Coverdale-Jones and Rastall 2006), with arguments for and against them being similar or different to other learners. Yet the emergence of differences for UK and Chinese students could be completely unconnected to nationality per se, but could result from other factors, such as the size and dominance of the groupings. If there are large groupings of particular nationality groups, issues such as 'desire for emotional connectedness' and 'sticking together' (Volet and Ang 1998/2012) could be key factors. So we would warn against any simplistic interpretations of the findings in terms of particular nationalities. Rather, further research is clearly needed to try and ascertain what

factors underlie the differences that emerged in our study with respect to the UK and Chinese students' viewpoints and perceptions.

Finally, note should be taken of the strength of the link students perceived between the importance and development of intercultural skills and their experiences of mixed national group work. It was far stronger than for the cross-national friendships. This suggests again that universities need to move beyond strategies for promoting social integration (which is extremely important, of course) and increase their efforts on providing high quality mixed national group work experiences for as many students as possible.

6. Limitations and future directions

There are a number of limitations to our study. Firstly, although the sample size is very much larger than most other studies of this kind, the number of respondents per country is still very limited, except for the UK and possibly for China. Moreover, we feel that a 6-point Likert-type scale may have yielded more nuanced findings, which is particularly helpful when comparing multiple groups and using correlations; unfortunately we were constrained by i-Graduate's requirements over that.

Secondly, the data was collected at a single higher education institution, and studies need to be conducted at other universities in order to ascertain whether similar findings emerge at other places. Universities may differ in their organisational cultures, including their values, strategies, structures and operations (Dauber, Fink and Yolles, 2012), and they may have different social integration policies and strategies. As a result, students' opinions at other universities could be significantly different from those in this study. Only through additional data collection at other HEIs and subsequent analyses can this be checked.

Thirdly, while it was important to us to examine potential differences between students, that go beyond the mere comparison of home and international students, analysing regional/national groups of students in the way we did also has significant limitations. The groupings are still very big and the large amount of variation that inevitably exists within both regional and national groups is masked. So while general trends can be valuable for some planning purposes, they need to be complemented by the richness and detail of qualitative research findings.

Fourthly, there are other ways in which the large categories of 'home' and 'international' students could be broken up. Factors such as level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate), age, and prior experience of living/working in international contexts could all potentially yield other patterns of difference, as could personal characteristics such as personality or intercultural adjustment potential (Matsumoto, Yoo and LeRoux 2007). Further analyses are needed to explore such possibilities. Fourthly, many of the open comments suggest that larger national groups tend to gravitate towards each other, resulting in comments that they 'stick together' too much. It might therefore be interesting and meaningful to compare the experiences of national majorities with those of national minorities. Finally, the staff perspective is missing. Academics at HE institutions shape students'

academic life very substantially, and so gathering data on their perspectives and goals would offer interesting complementary insights.

7. Concluding comments

This study is one of the few large scale investigations into university students' perceptions of key elements of university life associated with internationalisation and the development of 'global graduate' qualities. It has revealed a number of important findings relating to the challenges and benefits of mixed national group work, and has shown that students' perceptions of the extent to which they are acquiring intercultural skills is closely associated with their experiences of mixed national group work. It has also shown that there can be national/regional differences in students' evaluations of their experiences. Further research is needed to gain deeper understandings of these findings, as well as to explore possibilities such as the potential impact of size of national cohort. Meanwhile, there are some clear implications for universities. As they pursue their goals of developing 'global graduates', they need to expand their efforts beyond campus integration and mobility, and pay greater attention to providing high quality mixed national group work experiences for as many students as possible. It is important for them to remember that this will entail working not only with students but also with academic staff

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Appendix A: Matrix of codes, with number of coding segments (seg.) per national/regional cluster

	UK		EEA		other		Chinese		Sum	
	# of seg.	%	# of seg.	%	# of seg.	%	# of seg.	%	# of seg.	%
Group work	**194**		**26**		**55**		**6**		**281**	
Group work\Composition	**19**		**0**		**11**		**2**		**32**	
Group work\Composition\Mix	**10**		**0**		**6**		**1**		**17**	
Good mix	0	0%	0	0%	1	5%	0	0%	1	1%
Not enough UK	1	1%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%
Dominant one nationality	0	0%	0	0%	4	19%	1	33%	5	3%
Not many international students	9	8%	0	0%	1	5%	0	0%	10	7%
Group work\Composition\Nationality	**9**		**0**		**5**		**1**		**15**	
Non-European	1	1%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%
European	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
British	2	2%	0	0%	1	5%	0	0%	3	2%
Indian	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Chinese	4	4%	0	0%	4	19%	1	33%	9	6%
Asian	2	2%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	2	1%
Group work\Challenge factors	**52**		**7**		**13**		**0**		**72**	
Group participation	7	6%	0	0%	4	19%	0	0%	11	7%
Prior experience	3	3%	1	6%	0	0%	0	0%	4	3%
Sticking together	3	3%	0	0%	1	5%	0	0%	4	3%
Commitment & motivation	5	5%	2	13%	1	5%	0	0%	8	5%
Impact of English proficiency	27	25%	2	13%	6	29%	0	0%	35	23%
Individual differences	7	6%	2	13%	1	5%	0	0%	10	7%
Group work\Evaluations of Mixed Group work	**70**		**13**		**12**		**1**		**96**	
Sometimes good sometimes bad	4	4%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	4	3%
Diversity irrelevant	13	12%	1	6%	0	0%	0	0%	14	9%
Valuable	1	1%	2	13%	0	0%	0	0%	3	2%
Valuable\Problematic but valuable	7	6%	0	0%	2	10%	1	33%	10	7%
Valuable\Benefits	27	25%	4	25%	7	33%	0	0%	38	26%
Problematic	7	6%	2	13%	2	10%	0	0%	11	7%
Problematic\Strain for native speakers	3	3%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	3	2%
Dislike groupwork	1	1%	1	6%	1	5%	0	0%	3	2%
Limited experience	7	6%	3	19%	0	0%	0	0%	10	7%
Groupwork\Gains	**27**		**5**		**7**		**0**		**39**	
Generally beneficial	7	6%	2	13%	1	5%	0	0%	10	7%
Different perspectives	14	13%	2	13%	3	14%	0	0%	19	13%
Help with language learning	2	2%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	2	1%
Promotes collaboration	0	0%	1	6%	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%
Personal growth	2	2%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	2	1%
Others' learning styles	1	1%	0	0%	1	5%	0	0%	2	1%
Good training for work/real life	1	1%	0	0%	2	10%	0	0%	3	2%
Group work\Subject of Study	**5**		**0**		**1**		**1**		**7**	
Group work\Uncertain coding	**2**		**1**		**0**		**0**		**3**	

% ... Based on the respective student population, i.e. UK (n=109), EEA (n=16), China (n=3), other overseas (n=21)

Appendix B: Matrix of major coding categories, with number of coding segments (seg.) and relative number of coding segments

	UK		EEA		other		Chinese		
	# of quotes	%	# of quotes	%	# of quotes	%	# of quotes	%	SUM
Group work (i.e. total # of coded seg.)	194	100%	26	100%	55	100%	6	100%	281
Group work\Composition	19	10%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	32
Mix	10	5%	0	0%	6	11%	1	17%	17
Nationality	9	5%	0	0%	5	9%	1	17%	15
Group work\Challenge factors	52	27%	7	27%	13	24%	0	0%	72
Group work\Evaluations of Mixed Group work	70	36%	13	50%	12	22%	1	17%	96
Group work\Gains	27	14%	5	19%	7	13%	0	0%	39
Group work\Subject of Study	5	3%	0	0%	1	2%	1	17%	7
Group work\Uncertain coding	2	1%	1	4%	0	0%	0	0%	3

% = # of coded segments/total # of coded segments