

Factors affecting academic performance of international students in project management courses: A case study from a British Post 92 University

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Received 7 February 2008; accepted 12 February 2008

Abstract

The aim of study is to investigate the factors affecting the academic performance of international students in project management courses. To achieve this aim, a conceptual framework including three categories of factors: (i) Teaching Style, (ii) English Language and Communication and (iii) Assessment Methods was developed and empirically tested on a sample of international students from a British Post 92 University.

The results suggest that the factors: level of details given in lectures, speed of lectures, academic internet sources, English Language skills, group or individual assessment, the qualitative/quantitative content of assessment are important drivers of the academic performance of international students in project management.

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Keywords: Project management; Higher education; International students; Academic performance; Teaching and learning

1. Introduction

International students constitute an important part of university life in the United Kingdom (UK). Most universities in the UK have a considerable fraction of their students from overseas and this has many advantages. It makes the university vibrant, enables contact, understanding, and shared experiences between students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and allows university staff to broaden their knowledge about the education systems in different countries.

In addition, international students contribute significantly to the financial resources of universities through full payment of the education costs. In this context and given the ever growing competition between different parts of the world (United States, Europe, Australia) to attract

these international students, it is vital and crucial that UK universities offer the best possible educational experience for these students to ensure that universities do not lose their competitive advantage to other parts of the world.

The aim of this paper is to investigate an important area of the education of international students, that is, their academic performance in UK universities. Because the experience of the authors is in teaching project management courses, we would like to investigate the factors affecting the academic performance of international students in project management modules at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Academic performance, in this case, means the general level of grades in exams, course-works, and dissertations.

Although, our observations suggest that international students tend not to do well in some project management modules, it is important that the issue of international students' academic performance is formally investigated and its underlying factors determined and addressed.

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Perhaps unsurprisingly we found no existing research on the academic performance of international students in project management. The literature that does exist on learning, teaching and assessment in project management is quite limited and focuses mainly on the issues regarding the topics, which should be included in the teaching of the subject and how these topics should be taught and assessed [1].

To overcome this lack of research in this area and fill this gap, the aim of this paper is to identify whether aspects of the project management subject or aspects of learning, teaching and assessment may indicate a potential reason to explain the academic performance of international students.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section presents a literature review of previous research in the area of academic performance. This is followed by a presentation of the research methodology and the process of data gathering. The results are then presented and discussed. The paper concludes by a summary of the main findings and identification of potential routes for further research.

2. Literature review

Morrison [2] highlights some of the different definitions of international students. Our definition is broad, to encompass all students for whom English is not their first language and/or those who may not have studied in the British or higher education systems in which English is the main language of studies. Thus, we include European Union (EU) students who, according to fee status definitions, would otherwise be considered ‘home’ students.

Few articles or texts on international students (generally studying in UK, US or Australian higher education institutes) relate to academic performance. More commonly covered are the student experience [3], matters of cross-cultural adjustment, the ‘deficits’ in language or academic skills, institutional support [4], and guidance for tutors or students preparing to study in western institutions in which English is the main language of study [5–7].

Much of the work takes a problematical view of international students in higher education, focusing on the deficits and how these might be remedied. In this context, Biggs [8] argues that the ‘deficit approach’ (responding to what international students are deemed to lack and what home students are assumed to possess) arises from certain perspectives on teaching, namely assimilating and accommodating student differences. However, a ‘contextual’, flexible approach, emerges from ‘aligned teaching’¹ and the premise that whilst international students may experience difficulty with matters of teaching, they are not necessarily different to those experienced by other students. Therefore ‘good’ learning strategies and teaching practice

benefit all students. These conclusions draw on studies by Volet [9] and Mullins [10] and are demonstrated implicitly in recommendations on specific learning, teaching and assessment techniques.

Similarly, De Vita [11] makes recommendations for inclusive approaches and adapting Teaching Style to learning style in the multi-cultural classroom [11]. Practices such as making material available in visual form and enabling students to read before and/or reflect after lectures are often recommended to support international students.

The few studies on the performance of international students demonstrate the complexity of factors involved and that views cannot be generalised. For example, the UK national study by Morrison [2] found that overall, international-domiciled students achieved fewer first class or upper second class honours degrees than did UK-domiciled students and, in multi-level analysis, identified variations by region, country of origin, discipline, and qualifications on entry [3,12–19].

To seek explanations for the academic performance of international students, we reviewed literature on the factors that influence academic success (whether measured in terms of grades and awards achieved or progression). We found that contemporary texts on teaching and learning in higher education (for example, [8] and [20]) are based on constructivist approaches and student learning and teaching approaches that encourage ‘deep’ learning [21].² However, this literature is general in nature and does not differentiate explicitly between international and home students on the approaches that lead to academic success. The same can be said about some of the factors that are considered to be an indicator of performance, such as pre-entry qualifications (excluding test of English as a foreign language, TOEFL, or similar).

Other factors found to have impact on academic performance of international students relate to the English Language skills of these students. Although many universities set a minimum standard of English Language for international students and the great majority offer language support, (pre-session and/or in-session [4]), language is still experienced as an issue by lecturers. Language cannot be addressed simplistically. Cammish [24] identifies the difficulty in separating language from culture (as does Todd [25]) and differentiates between the difficulties faced by international students in four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

Adjustment to a new academic environment and culture has also been highlighted by a number of writers. Cortazzi

¹ The alignment of ‘Presage’ factors (the learning context and student-level factors that precede the learning process), ‘Process’ (activities that should promote ‘deep’ learning) and Product (learning outcomes, whether qualitative, quantitative or affective). See Biggs [8] 3Ps model, page 19.

² ‘Learning approach’ is the term generally accepted to describe the “qualitative approaches in how students respond to a learning task.” (Marton [22] cited in [23]) and includes both the students’ intention and process of learning. A ‘deep’ learning approach is more likely to elicit a higher level of understanding than a ‘surface’ approach. Byrne [23] also identifies a strategic approach, where students adopt a strategy appropriate to achieving high grades and the ASSIST inventory identifies the instrumental approach (apathetic to the surface approach).

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