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**Response to the Discussion Paper -June 2008 to the Review of Higher Education in Australia by the Federal Labour Government**

**Introduction**

This paper will analyse the role of higher education to the culture of international students. During 2002 there were 157,296 international students enrolled within Australia's higher education sector representing 20.4% of Australia's higher education enrolments (Roach 2003). It is predicted this number will grow by 2025 to over one million students and be worth more than \$38 billion (Roach 2003). Even though international student enrolments within Australia's tertiary education sector are growing at a significant rate there seems to be little research that delves into cultural influences on learning preferences. Therefore the questions "Is there a relationship between students' cultural values profile and their course satisfaction?" and "Is there a relationship between students' cultural values profile and their learning style preference?" have been rarely asked and this paper attempts to answer both of these questions.

**Literature Review**

Brand equity has five distinct areas consisting of brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and other proprietary assets (Aaker 1991). Brand loyalty and perceived quality (which also inherently includes satisfaction) are deemed to be the two appropriate components of brand equity to gauge student course experiences and their resultant influence on their willingness to refer the course and institution to others; and to repurchase another course from the university.

Rowley (1995) claims the quality of the educational experience of students rests with the institutions and staff. Service quality is significantly related to the circulation of information about university courses (Athiyaman 2000). The referral behaviour of students to prospective students is primarily motivated by learning experiences, and is one of the most powerful motivations for prospective students according to Mavondo, Zaman and Abubakar (2000). Mavondo et al. (2000) also found student satisfaction to be both directly and indirectly positively related to students' referring behaviour. This highlights the importance and implications of the student course experience, in dictating their willingness to refer and to repurchase. Past experiences are positively associated to perceptions of performance and future intentions (Harris et al. 2000). In the airline industry Harris and Uncles (2000) found that situational influences, like word of mouth also affect future intentions, and that future intentions are positively related to reuse. This relationship may also apply in higher education where student past experiences shape perceptions of course quality and satisfaction and their willingness to repurchase another course. These situational factors could include a student's demographics and cultural background.

Brand loyalty is developed from the purchase cycle elements of awareness, initial purchase and post purchase evaluation, decision to repurchase, and repurchase (Griffin 2002). There are two critical factors for loyalty to occur and these are the attachment to the product or service; and repeat purchase (Griffin 2002). The most common reasons for remaining loyal to an organisation are relational beliefs (Caldow

1998). Caldwell claims that there are two frames of reference concerning loyalty by customers and these are friendliness and recognition given by the service providers. According to Caldwell (1998) the main reason for customer switching behaviour is price and service offered by competitors, as previously highlighted by Griffin (2002). All students who enter university have knowledge acquisition and learning behaviours. These have been shaped by students' personalities, abilities, and previous educational experiences (Ballard & Clanchy 1997). Ballard and Clanchy (1997) also stated that different cultural traditions embody different attitudes to knowledge that vary significantly among different cultures. Biggs (1996), Chan and Drover (1997), Watkins and Biggs (2001), and Ballard and Clanchy (1997), described international students from Asia as characteristically taking a low profile, rarely asking and answering questions, and rarely making public observations and criticisms. Therefore, do students' demographics and cultural values influence their course satisfaction?

It is also well documented that students who are studying in a second language face added challenges, and tend to be unable to participate fully in classes (see Ballard et al. 1997; Cortazzi & Jin 1997; Furnham 1997; Macrae 1997). It is also increasingly important for Australian universities to embrace cultural differences in course design and implementation, as the majority of Australia's international student intake is from Asia where a 'Confucian' heritage is high (Barron & Arcodia 2002). A common instrument to gauge these cultural differences is Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Robertson 2000). Hofstede (1980) proposed a four dimensional framework of national culture and more recently added a fifth dimension (Hofstede 1991; Hofstede & Bond 1988). Hofstede (1991) defined culture in terms of five dimensions power distance (this dimension measures the equality or inequality within society), uncertainty avoidance (the extent that members of a culture feel threatened by unstructured situations), individualism/collectivism (individualism is where the relationships between individuals are loose, collectivism is its opposite), masculinity/femininity (whether society reinforces traditional masculine values), and most recently Confucian dynamism (a culture's long term orientation).

The power distance dimension (Hofstede 1991; Hofstede & Hofstede 2005) measures people's perceptions of inequality within society and not wealth. Short power distance countries are more democratic in their approach to power. Hofstede (1980; 1991; 1998; Hofstede et al. 2005) describes the uncertainty avoidance dimension as the creation of complex rules to avoid risks in any situation. Hence the lower a society's uncertainty avoidance score the society is more comfortable with change and innovation. Within a higher education context students who hold low uncertainty avoidance scores may be more comfortable with educational innovations.

Individualism measures whether the relationships between individuals are loose and collectivism measures whether relationships are highly respected and valued (Hofstede 1991; Hofstede et al. 2005). Hofstede (1991) and Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) found the top four individualist national cultures to be all Anglo-Saxon, headed by the USA followed by other European countries. On the collectivism dimension Anglo-Saxon countries tend to score low.

The masculinity dimension measures the level of assertiveness and competitiveness within a society (Hofstede 1998; Hofstede et al. 2005). Anglo-Saxon societies tend to score high on the masculinity dimension (that is low femininity). Femininity focuses on cooperation, good working relationships and security within society (Hofstede 1991; 1998; Hofstede et al. 2005). Asian countries except Japan score high on this dimension. Therefore within a higher education context, students who have high masculine beliefs can be thought of as being goal driven with the aim of quick course completion. This could influence students to maintain a Student-Driven learning preference to learning. In contrast to this, students who hold high feminine (low masculine) beliefs still see goals as important but also see knowledge and experience as equally important.

Hofstede (1991) and Hofstede et al. (2005) describe the Confucian dynamism otherwise discussed as the Short-Term/Long-Term orientation dimension as perseverance, thrift, having a sense of shame and ordering relationships by status. He found China and other Far Eastern countries score high on this dimension and Anglo-Saxon countries score low. Therefore a Teacher-Driven Learning Preference can be defined as: high Femininity, that is low Masculinity, high Power Distance, high Uncertainty Avoidance, high Confucian Dynamism (high Confucian) and high Collectivism that is low Individualism.

As an increasing number of students in Australian universities are international students from non Anglo-Saxon backgrounds (Roach 2003) it is becoming more important for universities to understand student cultural differences. A large proportion of Australia's international students have a Chinese background. Confucianism according to Chan (1999) encourages the Chinese to respect hierarchical relationships, hence within an educational context the role of teachers is seen to teach and guide pupils. Ballard and Clanchy (1997) found the following characteristics to be the norm for Asian students' study regime: attend all classes, take detailed notes, avoid class discussions and only ask questions for clarity in private with the lecturer. Therefore what constitutes 'good learning' may also be culturally dependent.

As identified earlier there are a number of problems that international students face when studying abroad and these include social-cultural adjustment, language, and learning/teaching problems due to culture (Biggs 2000). Therefore universities need to develop an understanding of different learning preferences, to ensure students' course experiences remain satisfactory. There are a number of different theoretical models to classify learning styles (see Barron et al. 2002; De Ciantis & Kirton 1996; De Vita 2001).

Kolb's (1976) Learning Style Inventory, Honey and Mumford's (1992) Learning Style Questionnaire and the Surface and Deep Learning continuum are three of the popular instruments used for gauging learning style preferences (see: Barron et al. 2002; Brown 2003; Brown 2003; Case & Gunstone 2003; De Ciantis et al. 1996; De Vita 2001; Drew & Ottewill 1998; Goby & Lewis 2000; Hassall & Joyce 2001; Henson & Hwang 2002; Jones, Reichard, & Mokhtari 2003; Landrum 1999; Loo 2002; Passman 2003; Sharp 1997; Simon 2000; Van Zwanenberg, Wilkinson, & Anderson 2000; Zhang & Sternberg 2000).

The aim of Kolb's (1976) Learning Style Inventory was to measure participants' learning styles on four distinct dimensions: the Concrete Experience (CE), the Reflective Observer (RO), Abstract Conceptualisation (AC) and Active Experimentation (AE). Kolb's (1976) Learning Style Inventory and theoretical framework were built upon by Honey and Mumford (1992) with their Learning Style Questionnaire. Similar to Kolb's Learning Style Inventory, Honey and Mumford's (1992) Learning Style Questionnaire also presented four learning styles: activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists.

Good learning has been defined by Honey and Mumford (1992) as when people move through all stages of learning. According to the Learning Style Questionnaire, activists prefer learning from situations where they are involved in activities like business games and competitive teamwork tasks. Reflectors have a preference to take a step back from the situation to listen and observe. Theorists prefer structure, where activities are offered as part of a concept, model or theory. Pragmatists like activities where the subject matter directly links to a job task or opportunity. Honey and Mumford's (1992) Learning Style Questionnaire has been reviewed by a number of authors (Caple & Martin 1994; De Ciantis et al. 1996; Van Zwanenberg et al. 2000). Caple and Martin (1994) stated that the Learning Style Questionnaire clearly implied that certain learning styles had distinct and consistent behavioural characteristics. The reliability of the Learning Style Questionnaire was acceptable across a number of different studies (De Ciantis et al. 1996; Van Zwanenberg et al. 2000). Mumford (1996b) suggests that any learning style preference obtained through using the Learning Style Questionnaire is not stagnant but a preference that changes over time. Studies conducted within an Australian higher education setting (Barron et al. 2002; Volet & Renshaw 1996) validated Mumford's (1996b) assertion. These studies found that Asian students studying courses in Australia shifted from a reflective theorist preference to an active preference over time. This suggests that students' cultural value profiles and experiences may affect learning style preferences. Due to their shared history, Kolb's (1976) Learning Style Inventory and Honey and Mumford's (1992) Learning Style Questionnaire have conceptual similarities.

It becomes apparent that the Kolb 'Diverger' construct (individuals who favour Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation), and Honey and Mumford's 'Reflector' construct gauge a similar type of learner; and Kolb's 'Assimilator' construct (individuals who favour Abstract Conceptualisation and Reflective Observation), and Honey and Mumford's 'Theorist' construct, gauge another type of learner. This Teacher-Driven learning style preference is based on deep and highly structured learning and is consistent with Hancock et al. (2002), Brown (2003) and Hassall and Joyce's (2001) definitions on deep learning as well as Honey and Mumford's (1992; 1995) reflective-theorist dimension. This reflective-theorist dimension (Honey et al. 1992; 1995) is where learners reflect on what they have been taught and use theoretical frameworks to form conclusions. This is also consistent with Lavelle and Guarino (2003), Webb (1997) and Campbell et al. (2001) descriptions of deep learning. In contrast to this, Student-Driven learning can be conceptualised as a preference for surface or broad ranged learning based on active experimentation. This is consistent with Honey and Mumford's (1992; 1995) pragmatic-activist dimension.

The Teacher-Driven (Deep) learning preference therefore can be seen to revolve around a highly structured environment in which the teacher organises the learning tasks and time, presents material in accordance with teaching objectives and the methods for instruction (Brown 2003; Hancock et al. 2002) and a correspondingly low level of active experimentation by students. Within a Teacher-Driven environment the teacher is dominant within the classroom setting, establishing and enforcing the rules. The teacher structures the learning tasks, method of task completion, time allocation; explains the lesson and actively ensures students are on track, responds to students with direct 'correct answer' or 'incorrect answer' feedback, and summarises key points of lessons (Brown 2003; Hancock et al. 2002). Therefore the Teacher-Driven learning preference is where the learner attempts to grasp the subject area within a theoretical framework of ideas, concepts and self reflection (Hassall et al. 2001).

An interesting finding (Hancock et al. 2002) was that students within a Teacher-Driven classroom and a deep learning preference, do not necessarily perform better academically than those students who adopt a Student-Driven classroom and a surface learning preference, which encourages a more active pragmatic approach to learning. However, Case and Gunstone (2003) found that the deeper the Teacher-Driven learning preference the greater the sophisticated learning outcomes achieved. Nevertheless such sophisticated learning is not necessarily reflected in higher academic grades (Hancock et al. 2002). Indeed, Passman (2003) found that students were progressing more academically with the Student-Driven preference. Therefore the normative assumption that deep learning is a better form of learning than surface learning should not be unquestionably accepted.

In Anglo-Saxon societies 'good learning' has often been equated with deep learning and Teacher-Driven learning preference (Biggs 1994). Within this paradigm good learning occurs when abstract frameworks are used by students to conceptualize tasks, plan and monitor their progress, interpret outcomes and perceive learning as both enjoyable and results based (Biggs 1994; Hassall et al. 2001). A different perspective of good learning is presented by Biggs and Moore (1993) although it is still a normative perspective, it depicts good learning occurring when teachers focus on Student-Driven learning by assigning cooperative group work tasks, contextual teaching within small groups and that assessment addresses high levels of cognitive outcomes in a non-threatening classroom climate. Such a style would allow active experimentation by students and be less curriculum-driven than the Teacher-Driven learning process. Clearly not all researchers agree with such normative perspectives of good learning, (see: Biggs 1994; Chan et al. 1997; Chan 1999; Woodrow & Sham 1998) and prefer to view good learning as how different learning styles of students can be responded to by the higher education sector (Chan et al., 1997). However some researchers have demised what Honey and Mumford (1992) have called the activist, pragmatist's styles or Kolb's (1976) active experimenters as 'surface' learners (Case et al. 2003; Hassall et al. 2001).

One of the most commonly used instruments for gauging learning predispositions is Honey and Mumford's (1992) Learning Style Questionnaire (LSQ), which is a development from Kolb's theoretical framework. Studies conducted in Australia to gauge students' learning style preferences, found that Chinese/Confucian heritage students are highly adaptable and maintain a high achievement orientation (Barron et

al. 2002; Volet et al. 1996). These students have also been described as being strongly influenced by the Chinese culture and Confucian/collectivist beliefs (see: Biggs 1994; Chan 1999; Woodrow & Sham 1997; 1998). Mohamed's (1994) study which focused on Malaysian students' learning preferences also found a 'theorist learning style preference', which confirmed Chan's (1999), Woodrow and Sham's (1997; 1998) and Bigg's (1994) views. Therefore these students would have a high preference towards Teacher-Driven Learning.

Using the LSQ (1992), Barron and Arcodia (2002) and Volet and Renshaw (1996) found Confucian students studying business courses have a reflector learning style preference in their homelands which is different to Mohamed's (1994) findings. Western students in these courses had an 'Activist' learning style orientation. Barron and Arcodia (2002) and Volet and Renshaw (1996), found that Confucian students over a period of time while studying in Australia, adopted an 'Activist' learning style preference, similar to their Western peers. Thus, it suggests that a person's demographics and cultural beliefs impact upon learning. It also highlights that Asian students are highly adaptable and flexible learners (Biggs 2000; Lee 1996; Stevenson & Stigler 1992). Therefore supporting Mumford's (1996) assertion that a strong or low orientation to a particular learning style is not one of a fixed trait, but a preference that changes over time.

### **Discussion**

High Collectivism beliefs and high Uncertainty Avoidance beliefs along with the demography variable Age seem to be the predictors of Course Satisfaction. This suggests that high Collectivism and high Uncertainty Avoidance beliefs could also form the foundation to whether a student refers the course and university to others and or repurchases another course from the university as alluded to by Aaker (1991), Rowley (1995), Athiyaman (2000), Mavondo et al. (2000) and Harris et al. (2000). An understanding of students' cultural beliefs by universities may also improve the relationships between students and the university and create loyalty to the university as suggested by Caldow (1998) and Griffin (2002). Thus the greater the level of student loyalty to the university, there is a greater likelihood that they will refer the course and university to others; and or repurchase another course from the university.

It is also not unusual to find the demography variable Age to be a predictor of course satisfaction, as with age comes greater experience, knowledge, pre-determined behaviours and expectations. This is supported by Ballard and Clanchy (1997) who state that all students who enter university have pre-determined knowledge acquisition, learning behaviours, abilities, personalities and previous educational experiences. This also suggests that if universities are aiming for a 'mature age' student population, for example postgraduate studies, that they investigate what that market is after from a quality and content basis as to create loyalty and referral behaviour as discussed by Caldow (1998), Griffin (2002), Aaker (1991), Rowley (1995), Athiyaman (2000), Mavondo et al. (2000) and Harris et al. (2000).

High Masculine beliefs, High Confucian beliefs, High Uncertainty Avoidance beliefs and High Collectivism, seem to be the cultural predictors of a Teacher-Driven learning style preference. These empirical findings suggest that students with these cultural beliefs are more likely to have a Teacher-Driven learning style preference. Conceptually it has been argued that students with a Teacher-Driven preference are more likely to prefer a highly structured classroom environment where the teacher

organises the learning tasks and time (Brown 2003; Hancock et al. 2002). These students are also more likely to favour learning new material within a theoretical framework that they can reflect on (Hassall et al. 2001; Lavelle et al. 2003; Webb 1997). They would be more willing to integrate materials (Campbell et al. 2001; Lavelle et al. 2003; Webb 1997). These students may also be more likely to be motivated by the subject material as an end in itself rather than as a means to some other end such as high academic grades or course completion. Students with a Teacher-Driven learning preference may indeed have a more sophisticated preference to learning as previously mentioned by Case and Gunstone (2003) and may be less likely to engage in active experimentation and pragmatic learning. This later style however is the one most common amongst Australian business students (Barron et al. 2002). There is no clear empirical evidence in the literature that students who hold a Teacher-Driven learning preference receive better grades or have higher course completion rates.

As a series of exploratory cross-sectional studies this research is unable to gauge any changes in business students' Teacher-Driven learning preferences and Course Satisfaction over time. They only focused on one Australian University with campuses located in Australia. Studies that examine students' preferences longitudinally and use multiple campuses are needed. Hopefully this study had identified some variables worthy of further examination.

Its findings suggest that a number of assumptions about international students learning preferences and course satisfaction need to be more carefully examined. The degree to which students hold masculine, Confucian, collectivism and uncertainty avoidance cultural values helps to explain the extent to which they will favour theoretical and reflective learning styles and prefer a Teacher-Driven learning environment; and the degree to which students hold collectivism and uncertainty avoidance cultural beliefs helps to explain differences in course satisfaction. These cultural values are more common amongst international students. This understanding may help educators be more sensitive in their selection of teaching styles when working with this student sub-population as well as helping these students be more satisfied with their course selection.

## **Conclusion**

This study illustrates the failure of the current political system to provide the setting for sustained review of the long-term trends and their possible social and political consequences for international students who come from different cultures and learning. There are inadequacies in research, in technical analysis, public engagement and consultation, and in the way issues are drawn into the formal political system. No single change can address these deficiencies. Australia needs to invest in each of these areas if it is to have the capacity to respond to new contingencies and persistent trends in an effective way.

Research, technical analysis, monitoring and reporting are the backbones of a good system. There is not, however, the investment in research found in other countries on international students. Informed public opinion is the second essential for wise public choice. There is not now sustained concern for public education, involvement and debate on international students.

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