



THE EXCELL INTERCULTURAL SKILLS PROGRAM 

## Intercultural Skills for Academic Success: The contribution of the Excell Intercultural Skills Program


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## Overview

- What is Excell?
- Program rationale
- Excell model
- Adaptation of program to classes
- Future directions

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## Context

- International students in Australia are significantly more likely than their local counterparts to report difficulties within academic and everyday social interactions (*Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones & Callan, 1991*).
- Local students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD) report similar problems including speaking up and giving presentations in class, mixing with other students, participating in project groups, and understanding expectations of classroom behaviour (*Gorman, 1999*).

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## Context

- Research has identified that local Australian students have mixed feelings about studying with the overseas-born (*Pittaway, Ferguson & Breen, 1998*).
- While many local students acknowledged personal and career benefits, there was also a considerable amount of racism expressed against overseas-born students.
- International students are also hesitant to interact with local students.



## What is Excell?

- An intercultural skills training program that promotes **Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership**
- Provides *students, professionals, and business people* with the tools to build effective social competencies for success in a culturally diverse context
- 4 to 6 sessions of 2 hours each
- Groups of 10 to 20 participants including both local and CALD participants



## Developers

- Professor Marvin Westwood, University British Columbia, Department of Counseling Psychology, Canada
- Professor Anita Mak, University of Canberra, Faculty of Health, Centre for Applied Psychology, Australia
- Associate Professor Ishu Ishiyama, University British Columbia, Department of Counseling Psychology, Canada
- Professor Michelle Barker, Griffith University, Griffith Business School, Australia



## How has it been offered?

- Offered to international students as a post-orientation program, or
- To mixed groups of international, migrant and local students as part of an academic program, orientation program or in residential colleges
- To skilled migrant jobseekers
- To students in career transitions



## Excell at Griffith

- Orientation program for international postgraduate students
- In-course adaptation for International Human Resource Management
- Career transition programs
- Australian University Teaching Award for Innovation Across the Institution in 2003
- AAUT Individual Teacher Award 2005 – Law, Business, Economics



## What is ExcelL?

- Is skills-based and practice-focused
- Draws on the culturally diverse backgrounds and experiences of participants to develop the WHAT, HOW, and WHY of key social competencies for meeting personal, educational, and career goals
- Strong theoretical basis: Utilises integrated social learning model, classical and operant conditioning



## Key Social Competencies

1. Participating in a group or team setting
2. Seeking help or information
3. Making social contact or conversation
4. Refusing a request
5. Expressing disagreement
6. Giving feedback



## Rationale

- Emphasis on social skills development, not just cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity
- Recognises newcomers' need for cultural maps
- Targets generic social scenarios that are relevant to both student and professional contexts, e.g., participation in a group, making social contact, giving feedback, seeking help, expressing disagreement



## Rationale

- Where possible, use culturally diverse role models for credibility and models from host culture background for authenticity
- ExcelL augments repertoire of skills rather than replaces original sociocultural skills and identity

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## Social self efficacy

Social self efficacy (confidence about one's competence)



Mastery of social competence

(Bandura 1986, 1989,1996)


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## Role-Based Training in Groups

- Simulations in group situations provide opportunities for observing different ways to deal with problems (Corey & Corey, 1988)
- A safe and inclusive situation for taking on the risks of adopting new social behaviours required by novel social roles
- Opportunities for mutual validation and extension of repertoire of skills, thus minimising threat to identity

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## Barriers to Becoming Interculturally Competent

- Limited opportunities for coaching and practice
- Interpersonal anxiety in cross-cultural encounters (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988)
- Leads to social avoidance from hosts and seeking refuge in co-ethnic "enclaves"
- Original cultural pride or identity may be threatened when newcomers sense pressure to assimilate (Mak et al., 1994); augmentation & extension of repertoire of social skills preferred, not replacement

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## Teaching Sociocultural Competencies



- Build group alliance & explore culture of origin values
- Develop cultural map & explore host cultural values
- Demonstrate/ Practice/ Coach
- Feedback/ Encourage
- Participant to set goals and contract
- Participant to transfer learning to actual setting





## Constructing Cultural Maps

1. Behaviours are precise and specific
2. Described in sequential steps
3. Behaviours are described as observable units that can be reproduced by the observer.
4. Cultural explanations are given (values behind the behaviours, and compared with the cultural explanations of the learners.



## Constructing Cultural Maps

5. Provide alternative supportive strategies.
6. Context-specific nature of cultural maps; trainer must be able to construct maps for and with their participants.
7. Offered as one socially appropriate way to navigate in the new culture, but not prescriptions to follow without question.
8. Ishiyama's ABCD Model of Interactions provides a useful framework for outlining cultural maps.



## Demonstration

- Social competency = making a request
- Scenario = request remark of an assignment
- Alliance building and explore cultural practices and values
- Group constructs local cultural map



## Scenario – Request for re-marking an assignment

**Preparations:** Make appointment to see lecturer or go during consultation hours; bring along marked assignment

### 1. Approach

- Knock on door, wait for response, enter room
- Maintain eye contact

### 2. Breaking in

- Clear, calm voice; body oriented to lecturer; sit if indicated
- “EXCUSE ME, DR. XXX, DO YOU HAVE A MOMENT?”
- Introduce self and state clearly what you are seeing the lecturer for, e.g., “I WOULD LIKE TO SPEAK TO YOU ABOUT MY RECENTLY MARKED ASSIGNMENT IN SUBJECT XXX.”



### Scenario – Request for re-marking an assignment

#### 3. Commenting

- Maintain eye contact, calm voice and open hand gesture
- Ask lecturer for more feedback and to explain mark given
- If mark still seems unexpectedly low to you, state you would appreciate to have the assignment re-marked
- Give explanation for request, e.g., read all references, put a lot of work into essay

#### 4. Developing/Closure

- Thank for giving the time (even if negative) and considering to re-mark (if positive)



### Course Adaptation

- International Human Resource Management Course (3<sup>rd</sup> Year Business) – 93 students (2003), 105 students (2004)
- 7 two-hour lectures
- 6 two-hour workshops – four combined the Excell method, an Excell skill and a relevant IHRM case study
- Assessed with a case study analysis, 6 quizzes, an end of semester seen exam (2003), learning journal (2004).



### 2004 – Restructured Assessment

Student learning journal (35%)

- Workshop reports on what students learned about IHRM; integration of content with own thought, experiences, feelings; ability to identify how the workshop has contributed to one's own professional growth.
- Excell homework reports from Participant's Manuals.



### Course Evaluation 2004

- Overall, I was satisfied with the quality of this course – SA/A = 94%
- Overall, I achieved the aims and objectives of this course – 95%
- I attended most of the tutorials (workshops) for this course – 92%
- I would recommend this course to other students – 95%



## Excell Comments

- “Through the Excell program, I learnt and understood that cultural differences must be appreciated for a successful relationship with those from other cultures.”
- “Learned a lot of skills that will help me in my life and also my career. Eg. Expressing disagreement. I used this skill at Uni according to what I learned and was successful.”
- “Learnt about how other cultures work and the importance of respecting them. This was very appropriate to everyday life.”
- “It made myself aware of how culturally unaware I was and gave me exercises I can do to improve this aspect in all dealings with other people.”



## Evaluation

Samples using local and international students (Griffith, USQ and U of Melbourne) showed

- increase in social confidence
- increase in interaction skills (Processing, Engagement, Self-Enhancement, Approach, & Interruption Skills).



## VCC EVALUATION

- Shergill (1997) collected data for Ph.D.:
  - prior to training
  - at completion of training
  - at 4 months’ follow up
  - post-training interview with Vancouver Community College instructors
  - Increase in intercultural social efficacy beliefs



## VCC EVALUATION

- Independent “blind” raters gave higher ratings on trainees’ interjection and clarification skills in a simulated scenario
- Trainees reported higher post-training social interaction skills and lower social avoidance tendency.



## VCC EVALUATION

- At follow up, students reported having applied competencies in real life settings, mostly successfully and eliciting positive feedback from others.
- Program recently evaluated for developing general social effectiveness in VCC students (Yuk Shuen Wong, 2001).



## UK EVALUATION

- LEEDS UNIVERSITY & SOUTHBANK UNIVERSITY international students
  - Increase in social self-efficacy in interacting with British people
  - Increase in social interaction skills
  - Decrease in social avoidance tendency



## EVALUATION

- Overseas-born only students (N = 45) from Melbourne University and University of Southern Queensland
- Mixed sample - overseas-born and Australian-born (N = 30) at USQ
  - Increase in interaction skills
  - Reduction in social avoidance tendency



## EVALUATION

- Both Australian samples showed
  - increase in social confidence
  - increase in interaction skills

(Details in Mak, Barker, Logan & Millman, 1999)





## University of Melbourne Trainer's Observations

- Responded well to modelling & practice
- Safe & positive environment to practise & build confidence in real world
- Sharing, positive comments, & synergy, facilitated learning
- Real shift in students' confidence levels
- Suitable for undergrads & postgrads



## USQ TRAINERS' OBSERVATIONS

- Effective transition to university culture, both for overseas and Australian students
- Development of networks that promote feelings of community and connectedness
- Involve students in the dialogical processes of learning



## USQ TRAINERS' OBSERVATIONS

- "Of all the processes I have used to attempt to improve racial attitude, EXCELL is by far the most successful..... On a campus where we are dealing with race issues and the development of tolerance, the students of EXCELL may be the leaven in the bread".



## CONCLUSIONS

- International & migrant students benefit from increased social confidence and interaction skills
- Local students in mixed groups reap the same benefits
- Learning transferred to real life settings
- Learning about others' and own culture
- Improved racial attitudes

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## Training for Excell Trainers

- 3-DAY WORKSHOPS OFFERED IN
  - Vancouver, Canada
  - Durham, UK
  - Amersfort, Netherlands
  - Adelaide
  - Townsville
  - Melbourne
  - Brisbane
  - Canberra
  - Christchurch, NZ
  - Wellington, NZ

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## Current Extensions

- On-going research and evaluation
- Adaptation with job-search migrants in Brisbane (HEAT Program)
- Development of resources to assist within-curriculum adaptation and staff development
- Specific cultural groups (eg Muslim students)

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## In-Course Adaptation Issues

- **Problem** of high level of facilitation skills required
- **Solution** may be to adapt mapping and cultural validation and de-emphasise coaching and contracting
- **Problem** of low level of energy in teaching staff for innovation adoption
- **Solution** may be to develop an 'easy to adopt' module

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## In-Course Adaptation Issues

- **Problem** of connecting groups of local and international students
- **Solution** may be engage participants based on their travel experiences, their cross-cultural experiences at school, their experiences as/with migrant families
- **Problem** of reduced time to complete the whole program
- **Solution** may be to divide the program into smaller independent modules



## Questions & Comments

- For further information and publications:  
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