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Do students value intercultural group work? The effects of perceived value in diversity on intercultural interactions

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ABSTRACT

To understand under what conditions intercultural group work (IGW) leads to more intercultural interactions, a survey was conducted among local students ($n = 80$) and international students ($n = 153$) in Dutch universities. In this study, students were more inclined to engage in intercultural interactions when they perceived that working with culturally diverse others prepared them to work and live in a diverse setting. The positive association was strengthened when students perceived that diversity, in terms of nationality within their work group, was also beneficial for accomplishing their group task. The findings demonstrate the significance of students' perceptions of IGW, including the perceived general value for personal development and intellectual benefits related to specific tasks. This implies that institutions and teachers could be made responsible for engaging with innovative educational methods to address and incorporate student diversity into curriculum.

KEYWORDS

Diversity; intercultural group work; intercultural interactions; value of diversity

Introduction

Diversity in European higher education, here understood as the integration of international student mobility with local students' mixed cultural backgrounds, has been identified as a transformative opportunity for promoting intercultural appreciation and driving positive changes for local and global communities (Jones et al., 2021; Leask & de Gayardon, 2021). However, the *contact hypothesis* (Allport, 1954) suggests that encountering cultural differences does not guarantee that this intercultural contact will be experienced as positive. Rather, a relevant factor supporting positive outcomes from intergroup contact and for reducing intergroup conflict and prejudice is some form of cooperative interdependence in pursuit of common, superordinate goals (e.g. (Brewer, 1996; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In the intercultural education context, exposing students to cultural differences in cross-cultural contexts is a necessary but not sufficient condition to foster intercultural competence (Poort et al., 2021). Without meaningful intercultural interactions, intercultural competence development may be a desirable, yet unrealistic goal (Leask & Carroll, 2011).

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Intercultural group work (IGW) where students with different cultural backgrounds work together has become a common mode for intercultural education (De Vita, 2005; Montgomery, 2009). The wide use of IGW is based on the notion that students bring different views and perspectives to the table and exchange task-related information which is crucial for reciprocal learning, group connectedness and intercultural development for all (Tran & Pham, 2016). As Volet et al. (2009) suggested, high-level collaborative learning processes, including self-reflection of different perspectives (Blasco, 2012) and conscious integration of new knowledge that emerges in the group (Poort et al., 2020), are also important aspects of students' intercultural learning. Following the perspectives on contact hypothesis and collaborative learning processing, in this study we conceptualise intercultural interactions in student groups as the individual's exchange, discussion, and integration of task-related information in group.

While interactive processes are meaningful for intercultural competence development, students, especially for local students (Volet & Ang, 2012), students tend to avoid cross-cultural interactions. In order to strengthen intercultural education outcomes, we therefore aim to explore when intentionally designed IGW leads to more intercultural interactions. From the perspective of Educational Psychology (Rosenzweig et al., 2019), the value an individual attaches to the educational activity is directly related to their achievement-related behaviours (e.g. motivation or persistence) and their performance. Colvin et al. (2014) also suggested that the way individuals perceive diversity can impact their intercultural experiences. However, the extent to which students perceive the value of diversity and how their perceptions may influence intercultural interactions is, to our knowledge, not yet known. Therefore, this study explored students' positive diversity perceptions and their influences on intercultural interactions. The explorations may help us to understand students' motivation in intercultural groups, and it may provide insights for educators to facilitate intercultural interactions.

Literature review

In 2012, Volet and Ang proposed that the presence of multicultural student populations on campus creates ideal social forums for fostering cross-cultural awareness and communication skills. Due to growing multiculturalism in society and internationalisation of higher education in Europe, Crowther (2000) emphasised that diversity can be a potential resource for domestic students, enriching their learning experience by being exposed to cultural differences that they would not have had otherwise. Educational researchers increasingly hypothesised that, through internationalisation, both domestic and international students can benefit from intercultural experiences (Cotton et al., 2013; De Vita 2005; Liang & Schartner, 2020; Otten, 2003; Volet & Ang 2012).

Recent studies clearly found that students generally believed that they benefitted from an international environment (e.g. Montgomery, 2009; Poort et al., 2019; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017; Yang, 2021). Students appear to be developing an awareness of the complexity of culture and the perceived benefits of an intercultural context. Focused on IGW, Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2017) surveyed students and found that self-reported diversity benefits in IGW prevailed, ranging from personal self-awareness to the development of intercultural communication skills. Poort et al. (2019) further categorised students' attributed benefits of IGW as attainment value (e.g. intercultural experiences) and

utility value (e.g. intercultural communication skills). It is notable that students perceived value in diversity regarding openness, appreciation of intercultural experiences, and improvement of intercultural communication skills. Based on existing studies, we construct *general value in diversity* (GVD) in this study. Here, GVD refers to the extent to which students see value of diversity as helpful for their generic competences development. Yang (2021) found that students who perceived higher value for multicultural activities are more interested in gaining culture-related competence and skills. Indirect evidence from organisation studies also showed that a group that is accepting of its internal heterogeneity will be more likely to share knowledge (Homan et al., 2007; Luring & Selmer, 2013). Together, this leads us to *hypothesis 1*: Students' perceived general value in diversity (GVD) is positively related to intercultural interactions in intercultural group work.

Heffernan et al. (2019) found that students have positive views on the value of working with culturally different others in general. However, in their study, Science and Biology students did not understand the relevance of intercultural learning in relation to their subject study. This suggests that the perceived value of diversity relative to their studying is another aspect of students' diversity perceptions (Gregersen-Hermans & Lauridsen, 2021). Although specific disciplinary cultures expressed in academic standards and protocols may create a homogenising context for IGW, it cannot negate students' opportunity for exploring cultural differences at a deep level across the curriculum and across all disciplines. Responding to this education responsibility, many institutions and teachers innovated their practices and moved from simply introducing international students into classroom to strategically designing learning environments to improve students' intercultural learning experiences (Asia Society & OECD, 2018). Clayton-Pedersen et al. (2009) highlighted the efforts of teachers to engage with diversity in the classroom as active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with differences in people, the curriculum, the co-curriculum, and communities in ways that increase one's awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions' (p. 6). However, relatively little research focused on the extent to which students perceived diversity value in helping them accomplish specific tasks during IGW. Therefore, we constructed the concept of *task-specific value in diversity* (TVD) in this study. Here, TVD refers to the extent to which students see cultural diversity as relevant and beneficial to a specific task achievement. Specifically, TVD is associated with deep-level diversity benefits, including task-related information and knowledge, which are rooted in the individual's cultural background. TVD does not comprise general perceptions of diversity value, but it is specific to dimensions of diversity and task contexts. Seeing diversity value in a tangible way would not only motivate students to learn about the relevance of the topic from their peers, but also encourage them to critically examine their own cultural preconceptions. These insights lead to *hypothesis 2*: students' perceived task-specific value in diversity is positively related to intercultural interactions in intercultural group work.

Previous research demonstrated that students have become more aware of the added value of diversity and more open to intercultural learning activities (Montgomery, 2009). However, many studies in Organisational Psychology indicated that in cross-cultural groups, there is a high probability that people will still stick to the subgroups within the broader diverse group setting, and will not open up to input from members of other

subgroups (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Accordingly, it is reasonable to believe that students' internalising positive beliefs about cultural differences is fundamental for successful intercultural interactions. Without openness to diversity and attaching some general value to diversity, individuals refrain from actively engaging in intercultural interactions within diverse groups (De Vita, 2007). In addition, we assume that when students perceive cultural diversity in their learning group as valuable for accomplishing a specific task, they may also be more prone to attach more value to diversity in general. We therefore propose that the link between students' perception of task-specific value and their intercultural interactions, at least partly, may rely on the extent to which their perceived task-specific value in diversity will feed into their perceived general value in diversity. This leads to *hypothesis 3*: The relation between perceived task-specific value in diversity and intercultural interactions is significantly mediated by perceived general value in diversity in intercultural group work.

Finally, many studies have raised the question whether an individual's enrolment status, i.e. as local or as international student, is linked to their experiences and performance in relation to intercultural activities (Tran & Pham, 2016; Turner, 2009). Intercultural learning occurs and constructs through a personalised and dynamic process between students from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, apart from the posited hypotheses, this study will also explore potential differences in diversity perceptions of local and international students.

Methods

Research design

To understand the influences of students' (1) general value in diversity (GVD), (2) task-specific value in diversity (TVD), and (3) their enrolment status (in this study differentiation between Dutch (local) or non-Dutch (international)) on intercultural interactions in intercultural group work (IGW), a cross-sectional study was conducted using an online questionnaire as the method of data collection. After the questionnaire was developed, experts in the field of Internationalisation of Higher Education and Social Psychology were consulted to critically review the instrument and the face validity of the items. Subsequently, to ensure clear and understandable questions, we piloted the questionnaire among two Dutch students and two non-Dutch students.

Participants

Upon ethical approval of the study, we contacted a list of international programmes in Europe to participate in the survey. The International Business and the Global Responsibility & Leadership Bachelor programmes in the Netherlands offered us permission to conduct the survey. In total, 270 students participated in this study. After removing incomplete and unengaged responses (i.e. response rate <75%), 240 valid questionnaires remained. However, 7 further participants were excluded because they were only involved in nationally homogeneous group work. The final sample therefore comprised 233 participants. 59.7% of the respondents self-identified as female, 39.5% as male, and 0.8% as other. Students who identified as non-Dutch accounted for 65.7%, the remainder

as Dutch. The average age of participants was 21.42 (SD = 2.92). The workgroup size varied between 2 and 9 students, and over 80% of participants worked with 3–5 members.

Measures

Three latent measures assessed the intercultural interactions, GVD, and TVD. To measure *intercultural interactions* in IGW, four items include the extent to which students try to exchange task-related cultural information to help and collaborate with others to solve problems. For example, 'I actively searched for task-relevant information'. Moreover, six items deal with the extent to which students try to reflect and interpret different perspectives provided by their group members. For example, 'I tried to use the opinions of others in the search for a task solution'. There was good reliability of the joint scale with the average scores from the items of the two instruments (*Cronbach's alpha* = 0.82).

To measure students' perceived *general value in diversity* (GVD) in the intercultural context, we adapted two instruments that were previously designed to measure task value and reward (Poort et al., 2019; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017). For example, 'Group members' perspectives led me to learn something new.' The reliability of the scale was good (*Cronbach's alpha* = 0.79).

The measurement of *task-specific value in diversity* (TVD) was based on educational practices and contextual conditions. Since the Bachelor programmes, where we collected our data, encouraged students from different countries to work together on a task, we speculated that in most instances, students might be inclined to explore each other's national background. Therefore, we measure TVD with an emphasis on national diversity. An example item is 'The task gave group members a chance to share their national perspectives'. The reliability of the 5-item scale was good (*Cronbach's alpha* = 0.83). To indicate individual students' *enrolment status*, students who identified themselves as Dutch were categorised as local students, and students who identified themselves as having a non-Dutch nationality as international students. In addition, we asked participants' socio-demographic information and group characteristics. The questionnaire can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

Analysis approach

First, we conducted exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis using SPSS to validate the variables used for measurement. Then, we employed a correlation analysis for the main variables and control variables. Moreover, we did an independent sample t-test in SPSS to compare local and international students, regarding their mean scores on the three main variables. Finally, to address the first three hypotheses we applied hierarchical regression analysis. The Process macro in SPSS (Model 4, Hayes, 2013) was applied for testing hypothesis 3.

Results

Descriptive statistics

As independent sample t-test analysis showed, local students perceived less GVD, less TVD, and showed less intercultural interactions than international students (see, [Table 1](#)).

In Table 2, GVD was positively correlated with both intercultural interactions in IGW ($r = .43, p < .01$) and with TVD ($r = .50, p < .01$). TVD was positively correlated with intercultural interactions ($r = .20, p < .01$). Neither age nor workgroup size correlated reliably with the three main variables of our study.

Main analyses

We conducted a hierarchical regression analysis, entering enrolment status (model 1), TVD (model 2) and GVD (model 3) stepwise into the model. Table 3 shows the standard coefficients of each predictor and the significance of F change of the regression models. First, as already known from the descriptive, enrolment status (international vs. local students) did not affect intercultural interactions. Second, when entering TVD, in line with hypothesis 2, a significant link is indicated with $B = .10$, explaining 4% of the variance (model 2); however, this link is no longer significant once GVD is entered in the last step. Model 3 confirms that as predicted in hypothesis 1 GVD is strongly and positively associated with intercultural interactions in IGW: the level of intercultural interactions can be predicted by their GVD, which accounted for 11% of the variance ($\beta = .31, p < .01$).

Finally, the Figure 1 showed that in line with the analysis above, the direct effect of TVD on intercultural interactions was positive and significant ($\beta = .11, p < .01$). However, when adding GVD into the model as a mediator, the coefficient for the link between TVD and

Table 1. Independent *t*-test on local and international participants' general value in diversity (GVD), task-specific value in diversity (TVD), and intercultural interactions.

	GVD			TVD			Intercultural interactions		
	M (SD)	t (df)	p	M (SD)	t(df)	p	M (SD)	t(df)	p
Local student (n = 80)	4.06 (.58)	-1.01	0.31	2.85 (.72)	-4.78	0.00	4.21 (.41)	-1.58	0.12
International student (n = 153)	4.15 (.65)	(231)		3.36 (.82)	(230)		4.30 (.45)	(231)	

Note: 1(low) to 5(high)

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of main variables and the correlations.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1 Age	21.41	2.91	-			
2 Group size	3.83	1.23	0.16*	-		
3 GVD	4.12	0.63	-0.09	-0.07	-	
4 TVD	3.11	0.82	-0.12	0.13	0.50**	-
5 Intercultural interactions	4.27	0.44	0.08	0.01	0.43**	0.20**

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples.

Table 3. Regression analysis of GVD, TVD, and intercultural interactions.

	Model 1 B(SE)	Model 2 B(SE)	Model3 B(SE)
Dependent variable: Intercultural interactions			
Enrolment status	0.01 (.11)	0.05 (.06)	0.09 (.06)
TVD		0.10* (.04)	-0.03 (.04)
GVD			0.31** (.05)
R ² (Adjusted R ²)	0.01(.01)	0.04 (.03)	0.19 (.18)
Sig. F change	0.10	0.01	0.00

Notes: * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$. Results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples.

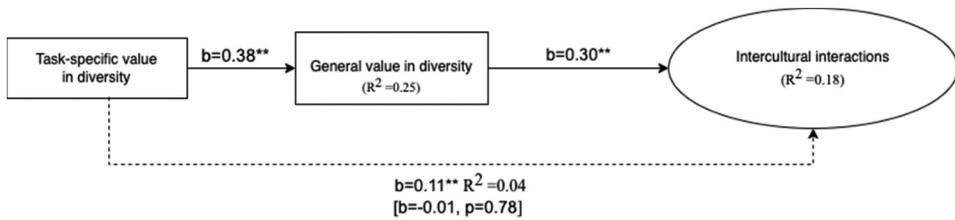


Figure 1. The full mediation influence of general value in diversity (GVD) between task-specific value in diversity (TVD) and intercultural interactions is shown as solid lines. The direct effect of TVD on intercultural interactions without adding GVD is shown as a dotted line. When including the mediator, the beta weight for task relevance is indicated in brackets ($n = 232$; $**p < 0.01$).

intercultural interaction was reduced to an insignificant value ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .78$). Accordingly, hypothesis 3, stating that GVD mediates the relation between TVD and intercultural interactions, was supported.

Discussion and implications

Universities have a critical role to play in our rapidly changing, fractured, and fragile world, including preparing students for polarised environments in both personal and professional life. Due to an increasingly diverse student population in higher education, learning groups are nearly always composed of members with different cultural backgrounds. Starting with the educational belief that diversity benefits collaboration on campus (De Vita, 2005), the present study aimed to provide some insights into *when* intercultural group work leads to more intercultural interactions. Our research firstly established that students' perceived general value in diversity (GVD) is positively related to intercultural interactions. In line with the Expectancy-Value theory (Rosenzweig et al., 2019), our findings indicate that individuals' positive attitudes towards diversity and IGW are important in intercultural learning. Intercultural group work is featured as challenging socially-constructed environment, and positive diversity perceptions may help individuals' striving for success, regulation learning, and persistence.

Compared to GVD, perceived task-specific value in diversity (TVD) did not show a reliable direct link with the quality of intercultural interactions in international groups. However, it has a clear indirect effect on intercultural interactions, as it enhances the strength of students' GVD. The results of our mediation analysis suggest that if students see value in diversity for specific task achievement, this may also make the general value in diversity more tangible. In other words, TVG may feed into a sense-making process helping students to develop a general appreciation of diversity value. In line with the assumption that working in diverse environments can enhance the development of students' intercultural competences, our study may provide a more accurate picture of the complex dynamics of cultural diversity in student groups.

In line with previous research on internationalisation in higher education (Barradell et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2021), this study is able to provide and contribute to some practical suggestions for instructors in the diverse classroom. Firstly, educators are encouraged to get to know their students and their diverse backgrounds before deciding

how to intentionally use these student experiences as classroom resources (Mittelmeier et al., 2018) for embedding different perspectives into task and curriculum design. Previously, Leask and Carroll (2011) stated the importance of an authentic group task when ensuring cross-cultural work as logical and necessary for successful completion of the task of facilitating intercultural interactions. Our mediation model and the theoretical explanations may help educators to understand why a well-designed authentic group task is important for intercultural learning. Given the transient nature of group work in terms of limited collaborative periods in teaching blocks, teachers' efforts to make students understand why the task is designed for intercultural group from the outset is crucial to facilitate intercultural learning.

While previous research (e.g. Wright & Lander, 2003) suggested that international students were much less engaged in verbal exchanges in cross-cultural groups than local students, in our study international students engaged in intercultural interactions at a higher rate than local students. Meanwhile, international students also reported a relatively higher TVD. These combined findings support previous studies (Colvin et al., 2014; Tsang & Yuan, 2021) revealing a significant difference in intercultural experiences among the local students and their international peers, which implies a further challenge for teachers. A second practical suggestion would therefore be for educators to employ a sensitive approach to identify local values, rituals, and perceptions and to carefully balance this with the needs of their internationalised education. To create a learning environment for optimal international competences development, educators are also encouraged to ensure that student diversities are relevant for group tasks whenever possible.

Finally, it has been observed that different cultural beliefs and world-views impact social interactions, and that individuals have to update their skills, attitudes and behaviour in order to function in an intercultural context (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Gudykunst & Mody, 2001). It appears unlikely that the goal of intercultural education will be fully achieved if students themselves are not committed to value diversity. Going beyond the educational wish that benefits of student diversity will naturally develop when students are put into groups, our findings shed light on the importance of students' diversity perceptions in intercultural learning and we encourage educators to embed student diversity into task design and to communicate diversity value explicitly and tangibly.

Limitations and future directions

This study has a couple of limitations and, relatedly, asks for further research. Firstly, this study was conducted in two bachelor programmes of in Dutch universities. The Netherlands is a highly globalised country with a high proportion of immigrants and a sizeable number of residents who only speak English. Due to this globalised context, we speculate that Dutch students may already show high diversity openness and intercultural awareness before enrolling for their programmes. In contrast, Tsang and Yuan (2021) found that local students in Hong Kong, unlike the Dutch students reported in this study, perceived only limited value in international contexts and competence development. At the same time, research (e.g. Heffernan et al., 2019) indicated that different programmes and the institutional culture may reshape students' attitudes and openness to internationalisation and that disciplinary

differences may also exist regarding students' view of internationalisation. Therefore, more research exploring contextual differences (e.g. country, institution, and discipline) would be valuable.

Second, in this study we measured the perceived value in diversity (GVD and TVD) with a focus on diversity in nationalities. It is recommendable to replicate our findings regarding the predictive utility of TVD and GVD with respect to specific international learning situations and other sources of diversity (discipline, gender, socio-economic background etc.). In addition, prior studies indicated that students may also perceive costs when they evaluate participation in multicultural activities (Jiang et al., 2018; Poort et al., 2019; Yang, 2021). Further investigations could therefore explore how both perceived benefits and costs contribute to the experience of intercultural group work.

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Appendix 1. Survey

Part 1. The items measuring the main concepts (value in diversity and intercultural interactions).

1. Exploratory factor analysis results of perceived value in intercultural group work

	Loadings	
	TVD Cron. α (0.83)	GVD Cron. α (0.79)
Perceived value in diversity		
1. It was helpful that we had a multinational group to get the task done.	0.56	0.49
2. The task gave group members a chance to share their national perspectives.	0.75	0.11
3. Different national perspectives, rather than personal abilities, were the most valuable resource to cope with this task.	0.79	0.01
4. Incorporating international perspectives improved my understanding of the task.	0.80	0.23
5. Considering group task completion, it would have been disadvantageous to work with group members from only one nation.	0.60	0.21
6. Considering group task completion, it was beneficial to collaborate with different nationalities.	0.62	0.46
7. I have benefited from interacting with the group members.	0.12	0.77
8. Group members' perspectives led me to learn something new.	0.24	0.72
9. The teamwork experience is helpful to develop my collaboration skills to work in an international context.	0.08	0.71
10. Interacting with the other group members enriched my knowledge and understanding.	0.22	0.80
Eigenvalue	4.37	1.46
Sum of squared % of variance	30.10	28.26

2. Exploratory factor analysis results of intercultural interactions in intercultural group work

Intercultural interactions Cron. α (0.82)	Loadings	
	Intercultural interactions integration Cron. α (0.79)	Intercultural interactions sharing Cron. α (0.69)
I shared my prior experiences related to this task with the other group members.	0.40	0.46
I expressed my understanding of the task to the group.	0.43	0.51
I shared my ideas about how the task can be done with the other group members.	0.21	0.71
I exchanged my expectations about how the task could be done with other group members.	-0.03	0.92
I did my best to express my ideas clearly for the other group members.	0.54	0.33
I was open to learning something new from each other in the group.	0.64	0.01
I tried to understand the perspectives of other group members.	0.67	0.12
I asked for clarification when a group member shared an idea I do not understand.	0.52	0.14
I tried to find some connections between different perspectives from group members.	0.68	0.17
I tried to use the opinions of others in the search for a task solution.	0.63	0.18
Views of other group members contribute to the development of my own ideas.	0.62	0.12
Eigenvalue	1.32	3.76
Sum of squared % of variance	27.70	18.54

Notes: Cron. α based on standardised items

Part 2 Socio-demographic information and group work information

1. Which country are you from? (Please select the country that you identify it as your home country)
2. Where is your university located?
3. Gender: Female/Male/others
4. Age
5. In which type of group learning did you participate most recently? One-nationality group/multinational group
6. How many people worked together in the group including yourself?