

“Bright Lights: Internationally educated female students and their approach to managing their study commitments”.

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Abstract

An often-held view in education is that female students might be less confident than their male counterparts, in high demand academic programs. So too is the impression that international students also struggle to match their home country educated classmates. This paper presents preliminary findings from an ongoing doctoral study into academic behavioural confidence, indicating that international students do not lack confidence, nor do female international students fare worse than their locally educated classmates. Rather, the findings suggest that female international students have a far more buoyant level of confidence, particularly in their perception of ability to manage their study workload.

Paper Outline

Acquiring a good education is considered the gateway to future career and social success. As university student populations continue to swell with eager undergraduates keen for the prospect of expanding their opportunities and gaining a certain level of knowledge and experience, educators and program designers are equally keen to develop a deeper understanding of how students perceive themselves as learners. In looking at academic confidence, aspects of students understanding of themselves can be further understood.

As universities student populations continue to diversify, a deeper understanding of differing aspects of these populations may also better inform teaching and learning frameworks. The doctoral research from which this paper is drawn explores whether differences in academic confidence exist between locally and internationally educated students and, what factors might influence such differences.

Using the Academic Behavioural Confidence (ABC) scale, developed by Sander and Sanders in 2003, new and commencing students at an Australian university were asked to complete the survey as to their perceived confidence regarding their studies before the commencement of their taught classes. Academic confidence is situated in the positive psychological literature, bridging the gap between self-efficacy and self-concepts. Studies by Pajares (2002), Michie *et. al.*, (2001), Alfassi, (2003) and Cassidy and Eachus, (2000) indicate the benefits of continuing research into the understanding of the beliefs and perceptions students hold as to their abilities and performance capabilities. Increasing the awareness of how students perceive themselves and their abilities is of great benefit to educators and curriculum designers as student experiences may reflect positively on the overall involvement in university life and any future undertakings as a result of those experiences.

In fact, internationally educated women demonstrated a better level of coping with the requirements of academic study, that is, the ability or practices to deal with the physical practicalities of studying. This effect was not as evident with the local or internationally educated male students. In comparison, locally educated females scored similarly to their male counterparts. It is posited that this result relates to the overall requirements of residing in other than one's home country and the associated daily living requirements necessary to manage one's day-to-day obligations.

Honeywell suggests this might be so as women tend to have greater levels of social intelligence defined as: "the ability to successfully negotiate complex social relationships and environments" (2014: Social Intelligence Lab, accessed May 2014). Goleman (2006, cited in Wawra, 2006: 166) maintains social intelligence has a double component comprising social awareness and social facility. Social awareness can be considered to be the sense that a person has about others, while social facility is the knowledge one has about others based on empathy, understanding and concern. Wawra further speculates that individuals from what Hall (1976, cited in Wawra, 2006: 167) term high-context cultures such as East Asian countries like Japan, Korea, India and China, which rely on non-verbal communication, are more adept at empathetic behaviour and thereby more likely to be able to adjust more readily into a culture which requires careful observation and language assimilation for which to feel a degree of comfort.

Preliminary data analysis indicates that the international females reported higher levels of workload management confidence than their local educated counterparts. The data indicates the chance of this occurring with no other influences was unlikely, with a probability of $p = .009$. On the other hand, no significant difference was apparent when the locally educated males were compared with their international equivalents and also with locally educated females.

In addition to the quantitative data the paper will present interview findings, which suggest that internationally educated women did feel that by watching and listening they were able to absorb the essence of behaviours demonstrated by the classmates in more commonplace settings. For example, a female respondent from an East Asian country stated: "

You get talking in slang and the words can't catch up what they are talking..., so when we are having a meeting in the class and I do realise that I'm the only one so I can't, feel isolate..."

The respondent went on to state that by listening, they were able to think about how words and phrases went together to form more natural conversational tones. This observation helped her to adjust to the rhythm and cadence of the different language and improved her level of confidence for future interactions. The respondent also felt that age had a bearing on their level of confidence. She felt a younger sibling with deeper exposure to the new culture had an advantage, as their ability had been easier to develop due to a longer immersion within the new environment.

She also stated that confident people had specific characteristics:

“I think in personal opinion they’re very talkative, even they are talk to like they call kiddies or like use humour ... someone who is good-looking... be smart, smarter than others... like even in the class they know about, they question, they make very good points on the questions to tutors ... even they are not talking about studies, they are expressing how their emotions.”

The respondent was quite aware that she needed to develop different traits in order to assimilate more readily:

“Maybe if I got all these characteristics of this kind of maybe I got many occasions from other people. Maybe even I walking on the street maybe other people might say ‘Oh there is that girl walking’.

I think could be, not sure, but actually when I’m talking to another International student I would be trying to be talkative and I use a lot of gestures but when I talk to a person who speaks English ... I lose my confidence very quickly”.

The paper will explore these issues and consider whether workload management as demonstrated by internationally educated women as an aspect of academic behavioural confidence can be seen as a construct of several factors. In choosing to plan and manage their studies as an overall part of the general assimilation into a new culture, it would appear international women have an advantage over their internationally educated male classmates because they are more willing to observe, test and trial new behaviours with a conscious recognition that the process involves time and effort.

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