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Instructional Preferences of Students in Transnational Chinese and English Language MBA Programs

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Abstract

This paper reports on Stage 1 of a learning and teaching project focused on students studying in the Chinese and English language delivery of transnational Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs of an Australian university. The programs are delivered using limited and intensive face-to-face teaching augmented by self-directed and web-based learning, and ongoing (mainly email) contact with lecturers before and after they have returned to Australia. The aim of this stage of the project is to provide a greater understanding of students' instructional preferences so that, where appropriate, lecturers can better scaffold learning and teaching arrangements (Stage 2 of the project) to assist them to meet the learning objectives of the MBA program. Survey data was collected from students studying the MBA in Hong Kong and Singapore in English (EMBA), and in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan in Chinese (CMBA). Findings demonstrate that whilst students ranked teacher directed, face-to-face instructional delivery highly, they also indicated that an independent, web-based learning environment was their least-preferred approach to learning. These findings put lecturers in a more informed position when it comes to them planning how to best assist students from Confucian-heritage backgrounds to work productively and successfully in their studies.

Keywords

graduate management education, transnational education, student learning preferences, transnational students

Introduction

Whilst transnational education (TNE) has been a significant feature of the international education landscape for over a decade, the related literature is scant in terms of accounts of research into the experiences of both staff and students in this medium of delivery (Dunn & Wallace 2008; Ziguras & Hoare 2009). This research paper, which highlights the importance of lecturers better understanding their students' preferred approaches to learning in ways other than relying on stereotypical views alone, makes a contribution to the body of knowledge on learning and teaching in TNE. It investigates the instructional preferences of students in two modes of a transnational MBA program; one taught in Chinese (Mandarin) to non-English speaking students, and the other taught in English to students who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL). Data about the teaching and learning environment (in this case, students' instructional preferences) are gathered to inform lecturers of areas in which students may require more structured assistance in their studies. Such reflective teaching practice is highly regarded by leading scholars in teaching and learning in higher education, for example Biggs (2003) and Ramsden (2003), and demonstrates a commitment to student-centred learning.

Whilst the research is focused upon documenting students' instructional preferences, this is not done so that lecturers will offer them the same sort of approaches to education that they have previously experienced in their home countries and are perhaps used to and comfortable with. Indeed, Biggs (2003) views such accommodation strategies as a deficit model of 'education which cannot be justified empirically or in principle' (p138). Instead, the central aim is to understand students' instructional preferences in the English and Chinese language delivery of the MBA so that lecturers can assist them from the point of view of curriculum *process* in the program (for example, orientating their learning more strongly around the web-based learning and teaching arrangements and working independently and collaboratively with other students).

Initially, some background is provided about the transnational MBA programs to help contextualise the investigation. The literature review then outlines a complementary, two-step conceptual framework which sets the scene for the research. The first step outlines the importance of lecturers understanding their students. Biggs's (1996) Presage-Process-Product model of teaching and learning is used to establish this element of teaching. The second step of the conceptual framework provides a concise outline of work advanced by Sadler-Smith (1996) and Sadler-Smith and Riding (1999) on cognitive styles and instructional preferences. This second step of the literature review informs the research framework of this investigation in terms of providing concepts that underpin the focus of the questionnaire items. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of the research results. The paper concludes by revisiting the three research questions that underpin the investigation:

1. What does the research indicate about students' learning preferences in the EMBA and CMBA programs?
2. Does the research illuminate similarities and/or differences between the EMBA and CMBA students in terms of their learning preferences?
3. Can the research inform lecturers about likely areas of assistance required by the EMBA and CMBA students in order for them to meet the learning objectives of their MBA program?

Background to the MBA

The Graduate School of the Australian university involved in this research has been teaching transnational MBA programs in English (EMBA) and in Chinese (CMBA) for the past 11 years. The EMBA has been delivered to students in Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Switzerland and Malaysia. The CMBA has been taught in Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Entry criteria require students to have completed a recognised professional qualification, for example, at the bachelor degree level, have at least two years of managerial experience and demonstrate a command of the language of tuition. Holders of a diploma or equivalent qualifications with substantial work experience are also considered for entry.

Although the transnational MBA programs have the same requirements as the MBA taught in Australia, there are some differences between the two in terms of scheduling of classes and availability of Australian lecturers in the transnational locations. For example, the transnational MBA which uses the same delivery model for the EMBA and CMBA is an intensive program which targets managers who work full-time and who want to complete an MBA in 18 months. Transnational students enrol in double the load of subjects per semester compared to the MBA students in Australia. Further, the intensive face-to-face delivery of the transnational MBA occurs in a single block of four consecutive days in each 11 week subject, with four hours of teaching on both Thursday and Friday evenings, and eight hours of teaching on both Saturday and Sunday. The intensive face-to-face delivery is scheduled at either around the beginning (second week) or middle (fourth or fifth week) of the subject. Delivery time depends on the nature of the subject. Subjects with concepts which are difficult for students to understand are delivered early (half of the subjects in the MBA) while the rest are delivered later. No local tutorial assistance is available in between visits of Australian lecturers to the offshore locations. Whilst students in the CMBA have voiced a preference to increase the number of hours of face-to-face teaching in each semester, the existing teaching model is unlikely to be modified for reasons beyond the control of the program teaching team.

Students in both programs are provided with opportunities to learn through a number of modes. Besides the use of subject web sites and face-to-face lecturing, they are required to work in groups to analyse cases, use role plays to improve concept understanding, and complete a group project. Students are also encouraged to work in groups outside the face-to-face period to assist in their learning. Materials, readings and exercises are posted on the subject web site, and students have web access to library resources. Email communication between students and lecturers is a feature of the program delivery, apart from the block teaching days. This teaching regime, when considered in association with the cultural, language and educational backgrounds of the transnational MBA students, gives cause for lecturers to pause and carefully consider the 'presage' characteristics (see Biggs's 3P model discussed in the next section) of the students and what these might mean for their learning in view of the particular TNE learning and teaching arrangements.

Review of related literature

Biggs (2003) and Ramsden (2003) hold that developing an understanding of students is perhaps the most important activity lecturers can engage in to assist learners to meet educational objectives in higher education. By understanding their students, particularly in terms of their approaches to learning and their responses to learning and teaching arrangements (and assessment), lecturers can

better assist them to adjust to the demands of the academic program. Given that this research is interested in understanding what students bring into the classroom with them in terms of learning preferences, the literature review is divided into two complementary parts. The first describes Biggs's (1996) Presage-Process-Product (3P) model of teaching and learning, as well as commonly encountered, culturally-situated views of students as learners. The interests of this paper clearly reside with the Presage element of the 3P model and how an understanding of students can help lecturers plan appropriate support for the teaching and learning arrangements (the Process element of the model). This, in turn, can support the Product element of the model, or the learning outcomes of the MBA subjects. The second part of the literature review mobilises concepts advanced by Sadler-Smith (1996) and Sadler-Smith and Riding (1999) that focus on cognitive style and instructional preferences. This theory largely informs the research framework of this paper and the development of the survey instrument (questionnaire) in particular.

Biggs's Presage-Process-Product Model

The rationale for this investigation is provided through Biggs's (1996) Presage-Process-Product, or 3P model of teaching (see Figure 1). As indicated earlier, the researchers believe that it is important to understand their students' approaches to teaching and learning. Further, given that they are teaching students with Confucian-heritage backgrounds, they have to particularly acknowledge that students may enter the classroom with different expectations of teaching and learning and of the lecturers themselves. The lecturers need to respond to students' different social and learning needs with supportive curricula. This resonates with Caffarella's (2002) view that it is not sufficient to merely recognise how different people communicate, regard lecturers, or take part in the educational process; lecturers have an obligation to design their education offerings to 'fully engage people in learning who might have very different cultural traditions and expectations' (p27). A model of university teaching and learning that is useful in relation to this is Biggs's (1996) 3P model which was designed to express the interactions between lecturers and students with regard to the expectations that both would have of the teaching and learning process.

The Presage stage refers to an individual learner's state of being that foreshadows the educative process. At the level of the individual student, it describes the worldview of each participant in the MBA classroom. For example, the student Presage state describes the learning-related characteristics of the student in terms of prior knowledge, abilities, preferred approaches to learning, values, expectations, and competence in the language of instruction (Biggs 1996). The teaching and learning literature supports this view. Prosser and Trigwell (1998) argue that students' approaches to learning reflect their prior experiences in teaching and learning environments. Ramsden (2003) indicates that a student's approach to study would be influenced by their previous experiences. Ballard and Clancy (1997) believe that all students enter university with 'expectations, knowledge and behaviour' (p10) which can be attributed to their individual personalities and their educational experiences. Melton (1990) confirms that student approaches to learning differ according to the number of years students have studied English and the number of semesters they have spent studying with a foreign teacher. Having lecturers gain an insight into the Presage states of the MBA students, then, is an important step in their understanding of learners and how this might inform support for teaching and learning arrangements.

Views of Students as Learners and the Danger of Stereotyping

Whilst there is broad acceptance in the literature that a student's Presage state is determined by their previous experiences, most discussions around this are usually couched in terms of culturally-based interpretations of approaches to education, for example, the 'Western', Socratic

approach and the 'Eastern' Confucian approach. Often, students who come into Western academe from non-Western backgrounds are thought to have educational experiences that are not only different, but somehow deficient and perhaps even inferior. This 'negative' view, according to Doherty and Singh (2005, p53), is prevalent in higher education in Western countries.

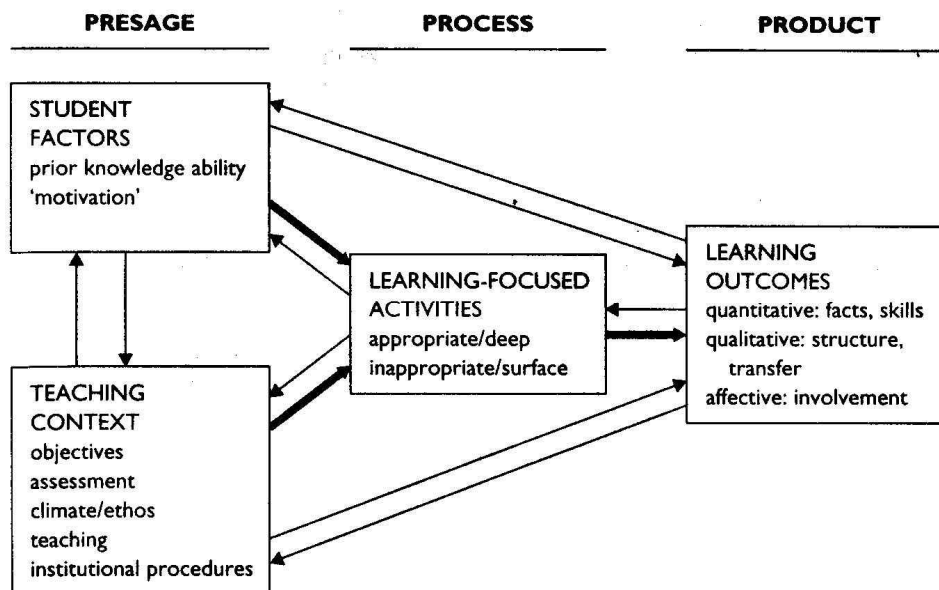


Figure 1: The Presage-Process-Product (3P) Model of Teaching and Learning (Source: Biggs 1996, p62)

Students from countries which venerate Confucian ideals are often claimed to view the lecturer as a source of wisdom, think that their own opinions are not as correct as those of their teachers, repeat what they have been told, and reproduce the words of their teachers and texts rather than create their own arguments (Kenyon & Amrapala 1991). They can appear to lack confidence, be dependent upon lecturers for direction, and struggle with independent learning (De Fazio 1999). They are said to be very quiet and shy, yet also particularly demanding, and they do not critique anything (Nichols 2003). Cannon and Newble (2000) describe the stereotypical view of students from Confucian heritage cultures in Eastern and Southeast Asia as 'rote learners' (p5). Biggs (2003), too, outlines some stereotypes of international students from Asia. He says they are often perceived as rote learners, do not think critically, are passive and will not communicate in class, do not respond to progressive Western teaching methods, focus excessively on assessment, do not understand what plagiarism is, form ethnic enclaves, do not adjust to Australian academe easily, and consider lecturers to be gods. Biggs (2003) suggests that whilst some of these stereotypes are supported by evidence, others are also features of the local students and others, still, 'are simply wrong' (p125).

The lecturers in the MBA program are aware of such stereotypical views of students from Confucian-heritage backgrounds and realise the danger in relying on them to inform practice. Cranton (2001) says that it is important to distinguish the individual student with their unique and complex characteristics from the social construct of the typical student. Reynolds and Skilbeck (1976) suggest that although cultural stereotypes are useful for interpreting experience, this is a

fairly superficial way of understanding difference, which goes little deeper than simply noting what is typical of one group. Instead, lecturers (and students) need to recognise that 'each is an individual within a different cultural setting' (p6). Khalidi (1997) says that general descriptions of a culture cannot account for the diversity of individuals within that culture, due to the way that factors such as 'age, education, socio-economic class, religion, gender and personal experiences would influence a person's values and behaviour' (pi). Kenyon and Amrapala (1991) suggest that international students prefer to be treated as unique individuals in their own right, with their own personalities, interests, and abilities. They have, as Mezger (1992) suggests, their own personalities, past experiences, needs, and desires and the lecturers in the MBA program recognise the importance of finding out some of their education-related Presage characteristics, particularly how they map against the nature of the MBA program. That is, an education environment where the stated objective is to promote a student-centred, collaborative model of learning and teaching designed to foster academic writing, independent and collaborative learning, discipline-specific academic literacy, and critical and analytical thinking.

Using Instructional Preferences to Understand Students' Presage States

Now that good reasons have been provided for having lecturers understand their students, the remainder of the literature review refines the focus on student Presage states by concentrating on their instructional preferences. A number of writers, for example Biggs (2003), Prosser and Trigwell (1998), Ramsden (2003) and Sadler-Smith and Smith (2004), have argued that such preferences (or, more correctly, approaches to learning) differ amongst individuals. To ignore individual instructional preferences may ultimately lead to reduced motivation and engagement with the learning process. Again, it needs to be stressed that the interest in understanding students' instructional preferences is so that appropriate assistance can be provided to help them meet the learning objectives of their programs; not so that lecturers should orient their teaching towards such preferences. Further, given the cautionary note expressed in the previous section about using stereotypes to inform lecturers' conceptions of the students' Presage states, the information below canvases a range of instructional preferences, for example, from being dependent on lecturers to favouring autonomous work.

The research framework of this investigation focuses on three elements of student learning. The first is based on Sadler-Smith and Riding's (1999) *instructional preference inventory* which describes specific modes of teaching and learning such as face-to-face lecturing, reading, learning in groups, and web-based learning. Teaching and learning arrangements such as these characterise the transnational MBA programs in this investigation. The second element, by Sadler-Smith (1996), relates to how learners might respond to particular modes of teaching and learning. Sadler-Smith (1996) calls these *learning preferences* and identifies three categories which allow lecturers to observe 'the favouring of one particular mode of learning over another' (p30). They are *dependent learners*, *collaborative learners*, and *independent learners*. A dependent learner prefers 'teacher-directed, highly structured programmes' (Sadler-Smith 1996, p30), in contrast to independent learners who view the teacher as a resource to influence their learning whilst they largely pursue self-directed learning. Collaborative learners are the third category and they favour social interaction, discussion and working in groups. The final element of the research framework relates to the instructional preference for 'experiential learning, that is, total physical involvement, with a learning situation' (Reid 1987, p89). This learning style encourages learning through the use of exercises. How it manifests itself in the subject is through case studies, role plays and problem-solving tasks so as to improve student skills in managing organisations (Saunders 1997). The resulting 'hands on approach' encourages retention of information (Poon Teng Fatt 2000). For

Sadler-Smith (1996) teaching environments that foster *dependent learners* typically conjure up images of teacher-directed, didactic, and highly structured programs. For (Reid 1987) teaching environments that promote significant learning outcomes typically involve experiential learning or learning by doing. Experiential learning or 'physical involvement in learning activities' (Ramburuth & McCormick 2001, p337) is encouraged so that learners may 'develop expertise related to their life purpose' (Kolb and Kolb 2005, p208).

Method

The method that was used to gather data was an anonymous, hard-copy questionnaire distributed in class, filled out and returned at the end of the session. In its developmental phase, items in a draft questionnaire were evaluated by faculty members who teach in the EMBA and CMBA programs. Translation of the questionnaire into Chinese for the CMBA students was completed using the 'back translation' method as advocated by (Brislin 1980, p431). Translation took note of the accuracy of the information as well as the cultural context. Subsequent to having gained ethics approval, the draft questionnaire was then piloted on two groups each with five MBA students in Hong Kong. One group was studying the EMBA and the other was studying the CMBA. The final iteration of the questionnaire was distributed in class during the intensive face-to-face teaching session to 90 students in the EMBA in Hong Kong and Singapore, and 150 students in the CMBA in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Students did not have to identify themselves in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire initially required the research participants to provide some demographic information including age and gender. The next section sought to identify students' preferences for instructional modes by asking respondents their preferred modes of instruction. The instructional modes included face-to-face lecturing, reading, learning in groups (which included doing project in group, working in groups in class, discussions of subject material in groups outside class), web-based learning (online exercises provided by lecturers) and experiential learning (case studies, role plays and problem solving exercises).

Results and Discussion

In total, 236 out of the 240 questionnaires that were distributed were returned by students in the EMBA and CMBA programs. Eighty-eight were returned from students in the EMBA (61 from Singapore, 27 from Hong Kong) and 148 were returned from students in the CMBA (29 from Taiwan, 61 from Hong Kong, and 58 from Singapore). The extremely high response rate can be attributed to the students filling in the anonymous questionnaires in the classroom at the completion of the lesson. The questionnaire responses were analysed with descriptive statistics tools in SPSS. In order to examine any statistical differences between the two language groups, the Contingency Table technique is utilised by using the Cross Tabulation function in SPSS (Field 2006). Student profiles are presented in Table 1 as background to the main findings. Responses to questions on instructional preferences are presented in Table 2.

There are several features in Table 1 that have implications for the students as learners and for the MBA teachers. Most students in both programs are working full-time which, along with likely family commitments of many, would limit the amount of time they can devote to their studies. All students have Chinese ancestry which might suggest to some observers that at least some of their prior educational experiences (student Presage states) are likely to have been shaped by Eastern values and Confucian virtues.

TABLE 1: Student Demographic Details

| Description | CMBA | EMBA |
|---|----------------|----------------|
| Age range | 22 to 63 years | 22 to 63 years |
| Average age | 36.4 years | 37.4 years |
| Percentage of male students | 54.6% | 73.9% |
| Percentage of students working full-time | 89% | 88.6% |
| Percentage of students with Chinese ancestry | 100% | 100% |
| Percentage of students with English as an additional language | 0% | 100% |

n = 236

TABLE 2: Students' instructional preferences

| Instructional preference / Cohort | EMBA | CMBA |
|------------------------------------|--------|--------|
| Face-to-face lecturing | 16.3%* | 45%* |
| Online exercises | 3.5% | 1% |
| Self-directed reading | 58%* | 30.2%* |
| Experiential learning | 10.6% | 7% |
| Discussion in groups outside class | 5.8% | 7.5% |
| Working in groups in class | 3.5% | 6.2% |
| Doing project in group | 2.3% | 3.1% |

Note: * = $p < 0.001$

Table 2 provides an indication of the students' instructional preferences. The discussion of the data is approached in two ways. One way is by taking note of the statistically significant differences between the two cohorts of students for any given learning and teaching arrangement, regardless of whether a higher or lower preference is ascribed to it. The other is in terms of the relative percentage of students in both cohorts and the preference that is expressed for any given learning and teaching arrangement.

There are two areas where statistically significant differences exist between the EMBA and CMBA students. One is in relation to face-to-face lecturing as the preferred medium of instruction. The other concerns their stated preference for self-directed reading. In the case of the former, approximately half the CMBA students (45%) primarily prefer face-to-face lecturing as a medium of instruction than did the EMBA students (16.3%). Whilst the CMBA result was not so surprising to the researchers, the quite low percentage of EMBA students who expressed a preference for face-to-face tuition was. Although the data does not provide an explanation for this, it is possible that although Singapore's culture is significantly characterised by the Chinese roots of nearly 80 per cent of its population (CIA World Fact Book n.d.), its contemporary student-centred education system (Singapore Ministry of Education 2010) is based on a British model (Sanderson 2002) and this may well provide students with the skills and dispositions to feel more comfortable with undertaking self-directed learning activities. Whilst this may hold most EMBA students in good stead given the very limited face-to-face teaching in the transnational MBA program, the data is

useful for the lecturers in both programs because it provides a reflective space on what they might need to do to better support students in the largely self-directed learning environment.

The second statistically significant difference between the two groups of students is that whilst approximately six out of every ten EMBA students primarily prefer independent reading, only 30.3 per cent of CMBA students indicated a preference for this. Whilst the data suggest that EMBA students prefer reading to face-to-face classes, other possibilities cannot be discounted, for example, they may be more proficient at reading English than listening to English. In addition, the CMBA students may prefer face-to-face because discussions with the students have illustrated that they prefer this option as listening to the lecturer explain course concepts and asking questions that clarify the concepts is easier than reading the material and trying to work out the concepts on their own. Again, given the limited face-to-face teaching that is carried out in the EMBA and CMBA, there is a real requirement for students in both cohorts to take responsibility for their own learning by, for example, working through the online readings. If this is not the preferred medium of instruction for many students, particularly in the case of the CMBA students (but also for four out of every ten EMBA students), then lecturers have to think about how to encourage and support students to value independent study through reading. What becomes important is making sure the students are not only familiar with the learning, teaching and assessment arrangements of their program, but also that time is taken to explain that these arrangements are important in the context of the outcomes of the program, for example, to assist them to develop skills and dispositions related to independent, critical and analytical learning.

Other results from the student survey also indicate that student Presage states might not necessarily sit well with the learning and teaching arrangements in the two MBA programs. Very few EMBA and CMBA students expressed a preference for online exercises (3.5% and 1% respectively) group-related work and experiential learning. Both of these are integral to the EMBA and CMBA programs. Given the limited face-to-face teaching and no tutorial sessions, the online environment is critical for students and lecturers, not only in terms of the online exercises but also to access the readings for their courses and to communicate with other students and their lecturers. The very low preference for group-related work is evident in Table 2 in the final three instructional preference categories, namely 'discussion in groups outside class', 'working in groups in class' and 'doing a project in a group'. Yet, group work is an important part of the MBA as it encourages a transfer of learning to other situations. In particular it assists in the development of interpersonal skills and collaboration (Sweeney et al. 2008). Working collaboratively in groups, students learn through discussion, reflection and exploration of different points of view simultaneously developing their interpersonal skills and new ways of thinking (Mazen et al. 2000). This is important given the strategic intent of most western universities is to inculcate effective team membership. Preference for experiential learning or use of exercises was also low. This learning style which uses case studies and role-plays manages the gap between theory and practice. Cases provide skills that influence future real world practice (Williams & Dickson 2000; Georgiou et al. 2008). Role-plays stimulate reality, intensifying student understanding of theoretical concepts and developing 'practical skills for professional practice' (Manorom & Pollock 2006, p3). These experiential learning methods enhance students' skills in managing organisations.

Overall, the data in Table 2 confirmed the researchers' impressions of students in both cohorts in some regards and surprised them in others. In terms of the significant differences in instructional preferences between the EMBA and CMBA students, the lecturers' teaching experiences over time is that the students in the latter group are more dependent learners than the EMBA students. This is despite the Confucian heritage of all learners in both groups which might lead some observers to

hypothesise that all students in the EMBA and CMBA are bound to be dependent learners given their ancestry. So the data are confirmatory in this case, that is, many CMBA students indicate they prefer face-to-face teaching and fewer prefer independent reading, and this is the perception of the lecturers. Perhaps the biggest surprise the data have for the lecturers is the very low preference expressed by both groups of students for online and group-related work. This is especially so in the case of the EMBA students who the lecturers surmised would probably feel quite comfortable with such learning preferences because they appealed to the more independent type of student that was represented in the Singapore-based MBA program. In this case the data are useful because they demonstrate to the lecturers that things are different than they anticipated.

Conclusion

This investigation was designed to help lecturers better understand their EMBA and CMBA students' instructional preferences in terms of favoured approaches to learning. The first and second research questions focused on (1) what the research indicates about students' learning preferences in the EMBA and CMBA and (2) whether or not it illuminates similarities and/or differences between the two cohorts. In relation to (1) certainly the questionnaire responses indicate the relative preferences that students from each cohort ascribe to certain learning and teaching arrangements. In relation to (2) the data illustrate interesting findings like, for example, that very few students in both groups prefer to learn via online or through group work. The data also show that from the point of view of statistical significance, less EMBA students have a preference for face-to-face lectures than the CMBA students, and more EMBA students prefer self-directed reading than the CMBA students. Whilst the data do not explain the reasons for these differences, they are nevertheless interesting and useful to the teaching team who are mindful of not only supporting these activities more, but also taking a step back to explain to the students why such importance is attached to activities like online quizzes and group-based project work and the development of associated knowledge and skills.

In response to the third research question (the usefulness of the investigation in informing lecturers about likely areas of assistance required by the EMBA and CMBA students in order for them to meet the learning objectives of their MBA program), the standout findings around students' low preferences for online and group learning suggest that the teaching team needs to think about how to best support students in these areas which are important features of the learning and teaching arrangements in the respective programs. Unless the students are supported to acquire new skills so they feel comfortable working in these environments the possibility of doing well academically in the MBA program will most likely be limited.

As a preliminary study, the investigation provides a useful glimpse of the current EMBA and CMBA transnational student cohorts and opens the door for future research. The limitations of the research notwithstanding, it allows lecturers to consider their learners' Presage states and think about the implications this has for their teaching and the students' learning. In a practical way, the research allows the lecturers to now move to the next stage of the project which is to redesign the curriculum process element of the subject (how teaching and learning occurs) so that the learning and teaching arrangements are suitably scaffolded to better assist students to operate in the learning and teaching, and assessment environment of the MBA program.

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