



# Beyond communication courses: Are there benefits in adding skills-based EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> sociocultural training?

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## Abstract

Being in a multicultural classroom can present difficulties in social interactions as well as provide opportunities for developing social self-efficacy and friendships with people from other ethnic backgrounds. The present study investigated whether adding a skills-based sociocultural competency training module—the excellence in cultural experiential learning and leadership (EXCELL<sup>TM</sup>) program—to a general communication course, would yield additional social benefits for students. Participants were 142 undergraduates enrolled in a first year academic course on communication at an Australian university. A group of 26 students completed the EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> sociocultural competency training, comprising 6 weekly 2-h workshops, as an additional module in their curriculum. The remaining students acted as a comparison group. Participants completed questionnaires assessing interaction skills and cross-ethnic social self-efficacy and friendships, 6 weeks apart. A small effect in increase in social self-efficacy, and a large increase in overall interaction skills, were observed for the EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> group. This contrasts with no change in social self-efficacy and a small increase in overall social interaction skills in the comparison group. Significant group  $\times$  time interactions in SPANOVAs suggest that EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> participants indicated greater increases in social interaction skills over time, relative to the comparison group. Only the EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> group reported increase in the amount of time spent with friends from other ethnic backgrounds. Implications for theories and future research on acculturation and intergroup contact, and for intercultural training applications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In major immigrant receiving countries where international education has become a top export industry, such as North America, Australia and New Zealand, there are now increased opportunities for face-to-face contact among students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds in higher educational settings (Mak & Barker, 2004; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). For example, the percentage of international students, mostly Asian-born, on Australian university campuses has increased from 9.5% in 1999 to 16.9% in 2004 (IDP Education Australia, 2005).

Multicultural classrooms have become a prominent reality in the Australian higher education sector. They can pose difficulties in social interactions as well as provide opportunities for building social confidence and friendships with people from different ethnic backgrounds. The present study sought to investigate the social utility in incorporating an experiential, skills-based sociocultural competency-training module in a general communication course on an Australian university campus.

## 2. Students on multicultural university campuses

In a study with local Australian university students, Pittaway, Ferguson, and Breen (1998) found that while many acknowledged potential personal and career benefits from having an increasing number of overseas-born students on campus, there was also a considerable amount of overt and covert racism expressed against them. Moreover, nearly all of the local students interviewed commented that there was insufficient time and opportunity for informal interaction between the two groups of students.

Cross-cultural social encounters can be confusing and challenging for international students and recent immigrant students who are unfamiliar with the unwritten social rules of the host culture (Batorowicz, 1999; Furnham & Bochner, 1982). Australian studies have found that Asian-born international and migrant students are more likely than their local-born counterparts to experience difficulties within academic and everyday social interactions, and have lower levels of self-efficacy beliefs in socialising with host nationals (Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones, & Callan, 1991; Fan & Mak, 1998; Mak & Tran, 2001; Pe-Pua, 1994).

Ward and Masgoret's (2004) national survey with 2736 international students in New Zealand has identified a lack of social contact with local people, a belief that locals held negative attitudes towards international students, and a concern about discrimination against international students. Seventy percent of the students surveyed wanted more New Zealand friends, and findings confirmed that increased contact with locals was related to positive academic, social and psychological outcomes for international students.

## 3. Social learning as the basis for sociocultural adjustment

According to Ward (1996), sociocultural adjustment for acculturating individuals—such as international students—depends on the amount of interaction with host nationals, knowledge of the host culture, length of residence, language proficiency, and cultural identity. Culture-specific knowledge may come from previous cross-cultural experience and/or training, whereas the development and training of the requisite behavioural competence can best be understood within Bandura's (1977b, 1986) social learning

framework (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Following a meta-analysis on cross-cultural training (mainly conducted with managers prior to their overseas posting), Black and Mendenhall (1990) have also advocated Bandura's social learning theory as a useful theoretical framework for the delivery and evaluation of the effectiveness of cross-cultural training.

Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama, and Barker (1999) have proposed that sociocultural competencies training developed from an integrated instructional model based primarily on Bandura's (1986) social cognitive learning, can facilitate the development of intercultural behavioural competence and social self-efficacy, enhancing migrants' and international students' sociocultural adjustment. The collaboration between Marvin Westwood and Ishu Ishiyama (University of British Columbia, Canada), Anita Mak (University of Canberra, Australia), and Michelle Barker (Griffith University, Australia) has resulted in one such skills-based intercultural group training program, called the EXCELL™ program. The application of the program with international students was first described by Mak, Westwood, Barker, and Ishiyama (1998).

#### **4. The EXCELL™ program**

The EXCELL™ program aims to provide optimal conditions for newcomers to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills for successful social interactions with host nationals (Mak & Barker, 2004). To date, the group program has been applied mostly in the international education sector to provide international students with the social competencies needed to cope with academic and personal challenges on a foreign campus (Mak, 2000). EXCELL™ consists of four to six 3-h sessions, offering systematic training in key sociocultural competencies enabling newcomers to access the new culture (e.g., making social contact, seeking help, and participation in a group) and also to negotiate with others in the new culture (e.g., expressing disagreement and giving feedback).

Unlike cross-cultural information-giving and sensitivity training programs, EXCELL™ focuses on behavioural competence training involving observational learning and guided practice, while addressing various potential psychosocial barriers, such as interpersonal anxiety in intercultural encounters and threats to one's own cultural identity (Mak et al., 1999).

Participants in the EXCELL™ training are given explanations of what micro behaviours will be appropriate in certain common scenarios and why things tend to be done the way they are (referred to as cultural mapping). Then participants watch credible models perform desired behaviours, practise the micro actions themselves, receive corrective feedback (referred to as coaching), and over time master the requisite skills and develop relevant self-efficacy beliefs. The group processes underlying each of the stages of teaching an EXCELL™ sociocultural competency are explained by Westwood, Mak, Barker, and Ishiyama (2000). Appendix A provides additional information on suitable participants, trainer requirements, the learning process, and group procedures in the EXCELL™ program.

#### **5. Previous EXCELL™ program evaluation**

Shergill (1997) conducted an evaluation of the EXCELL™ program with 36 migrant and Canadian-born students at Vancouver Community College (VCC) in Canada, using a

training group and a delayed training group design. Evaluation measures included “blind” observers’ assessments of behavioural skills in simulated role-play, and participants’ self-reports. Data were collected prior to training, at completion of training, and at 4 months’ follow-up. The results showed that the program brought about significant improvement in social skills valued in Canada and reduction in social avoidance, and in encouraging participants to apply the competencies acquired in the program to real life situations beyond the training period.

In another EXCELL™ evaluation with VCC students (five Canadian-born and 19 migrants), Wong (2001) found a post-training increase in social self-efficacy in interacting with Canadians in 23 trainees. The most common source of social self-efficacy came from mastery experiences of practising, learning, and applying skills (mentioned by 12 interviewees), and from physiological and affective states such as feeling less anxious, less stressful, and feeling good about themselves (mentioned by 11 interviewees).

In an Australian EXCELL™ evaluation reported by Mak, Barker, Logan, and Millman (1999), one sample consisted of 45 overseas-born students (33 being Asian-born) completing the EXCELL™ Program as a personal development course at Melbourne University or the University of Southern Queensland. The second sample ( $N = 30$ ) had a mix of two subgroups—14 Australian-born (all from an English-speaking-background or ESB) and 16 (14 from a non-English-speaking background) overseas-born students from the University of Southern Queensland, who did the training either as part of their academic curriculum in cultural studies or communication, or as a personal development program for on-campus college residents.

Results obtained indicate that for both the overseas-born and the mixed samples, there were significant self-reported increases in (1) social interaction skills, and (2) social self-efficacy in interacting with locals on completion of the training. Both the ESB Australian-born and the overseas-born subgroups in the mixed sample reported significant increase in social self-efficacy in interacting with locals.

## 6. Fostering positive intercultural contact

Research on intergroup contact shows that contact between individuals of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds alone is insufficient for disconfirming negative stereotypes or increasing acceptance (Allport, 1954; Brewer, 1996; Pettigrew, 1998). Contact with members of an unfamiliar outgroup is favourable for the formation of a common group identity and the reduction of prejudice, negative stereotypes, and covert racism only if members work together in the pursuit of common goals, have equal status and if there are egalitarian social norms for cross-cultural interaction (Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996; Hewstone, 1996). The opportunity for members of differing ethnic backgrounds to get to know each other and become friends can also foster more positive cross-ethnic attitudes (Brewer, 1996; Levin, Van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003; Nesdale & Todd, 2000).

Mak and Barker (2004) have suggested that offering EXCELL™ training in the mixed group model could enhance the amounts of intercultural contact and inter-racial comfort. These changes could indeed be the basis for building intercultural social self-efficacy for both local and international students.

## 7. The present study

The literature reviewed above suggests the need for research on whether students in a multicultural university campus, including locals (who are members of the majority group) and visibly different minority groups (such as the Asian-born in Australia), will become more competent in social interaction skills, more self-efficacious about cross-ethnic interactions, and develop more cross-ethnic friendships, as a result of completing an experiential social learning module such as EXCELL™ in an ethnically mixed group.

For students who already have access to a general communication course that covers effective oral and written communication for university studies, it would be interesting to examine whether they will further benefit from completing a behaviourally oriented action-learning EXCELL™ Program as an additional module. Students who only attended the communication course could provide a comparison group for a more rigorous evaluation of the program than previous Australian research reported by Mak et al. (1999).

The present study therefore aimed to investigate if adding a skills-based sociocultural training module—the EXCELL™ program—to university curriculum on communication, would render additional social benefits in improvements in (a) social interaction skills, (b) cross-ethnic social self-efficacy, and (c) amounts of cross-ethnic friendships.

## 8. Method

### 8.1. Design

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design involving a sample of 142 undergraduates enrolled in a first year academic unit on communication at an Australian university. Among the respondents, 26 students volunteered to complete the EXCELL™ Sociocultural Competencies Training Program that comprised 6 weekly 2-h workshops, as an additional module in their curriculum, to obtain 5% of their course credit. The remaining 116 students who undertook only the knowledge-based general communication course acted as a comparison group.

### 8.2. Participants in the EXCELL™ and comparison groups

The EXCELL™ group ( $N = 26$ ) consisted of 18 female and eight male students, with age ranging from 17 to 54 years ( $M = 24.8$ ,  $SD = 8.94$ ). Fourteen participants in this group were Australian-born. Among the 12 overseas-born in this group, 10 were international students and two were Australian citizens born overseas and in Australia for under 6 years. In terms of country of birth, seven were from Asian countries, two from the Pacific Islands, one from Africa, and one from Europe.

The comparison group ( $N = 116$ ) consisted of 69 female and 47 male students, with age ranging from 17 to 45 years ( $M = 20.5$ ,  $SD = 6.27$ ). Among the 17 overseas-born in this group, two were international students who had resided in Australia for approximately one month, and the remainder were overseas-born Australian citizens—four were Asian-born, one from the Pacific Islands, three from Africa, seven from Europe, and two from North America.

### 8.3. Measures

Both the first and second survey questionnaires comprised measures of interaction skills, cross-ethnic social self-efficacy, items on cross-ethnic friendships, and socio-demographic information, including an item requesting the recording of a personal three-digit code used to link times 1 and 2 questionnaires.

Ishiyama's (1996) 33-item interpersonal skills checklist (ISC), developed in Canada, was utilised to assess social interaction skills overall as well as in six subscales or domains. The domains assess skills in processing social exchanges (which include feedback skills, altogether six items), active engagement (six items), self-enhancement (six items), approaching other people (six items), being assertive (five items), and interrupting for seeking clarification (four items). Respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of a range of their skills in their present social and cultural environment on seven-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (*not at all effective*) to 7 (*extremely effective*). In this study, ISC Total Scale and Subscales scores were determined by summing responses to all the relevant items and then dividing by the number of items in each scale, yielding possible scale scores ranging from 1 to 7, with a higher score indicating greater social effectiveness. In the present study, the total ISC attained a high Cronbach  $\alpha$  of .95 at time 1, and .96 at time 2. Moreover, present alpha coefficients for subscale scores were all satisfactory, ranging from .80 to .85 at time 1, and from .84 to .89 at time 2.

The 13-item measure of cross-ethnic social self-efficacy was adapted from Fan and Mak's (1998) 20-item social self-efficacy scale for students. The instrument assesses individuals' perceived confidence in interacting with people from different ethnic groups in a range of social contexts, including taking initiatives in friendships, sharing common interests with others, and absence of social difficulties. The present items used are presented in seven-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 7 (*very strongly agree*), with six items requiring reverse scoring. An individual's scale score was determined by averaging the item scores after any necessary reverse coding, and could possibly range from 1 to 7, with a higher score reflecting greater social self-efficacy. In this study, the 13-item scale used had a satisfactory Cronbach alpha of .82 at time 1, and .84 at time 2.

Two questions on cross-ethnic friendships were developed for the present study. Participants were asked to indicate the number of close friends they had from other ethnic groups on five-point ordinal scales, where 1 = "none", 2 = "only one", 3 = "a few", 4 = "some", and 5 = "many". Participants were also asked to indicate the time spent with friends from other ethnic groups in the last week on five-point ordinal scales, ranging from 1 (0–1 h), through 3 (> 5–10 h), to 5 (> 15 h).

### 8.4. Procedure

University tutors explained the purpose of the study and administered the first survey to consenting participants in the EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> and comparison groups in a tutorial setting in the first week of the EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> training, and the second survey to the same classes at the final week of the EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> training, 6 weeks apart. Each of the survey questionnaires took approximately 15 min to complete.

Students were assured that their participation in the study was voluntary, that individual responses would remain confidential, and that only group analysis would be conducted

and reported. To ensure anonymity, participants were instructed not to record their names on the questionnaires. In order to match up individuals' first and second surveys, participants were requested to supply the same personalised three-digit code on both questionnaires.

## 9. Results

### 9.1. Changes in scale scores in EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> and comparison groups

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of ISC scale and subscale scores, and cross-ethnic social self-efficacy scores for the EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> group and the comparison group at times 1 and 2. A series of independent-samples *t* tests show that the two groups did not differ on any of the scale scores at time 1.

Table 1 also lists Hedges' *g* values (standardised mean differences based on pooled standard deviation) for estimating effect sizes of changes over time for each of two groups, where *g* values of at least .2, .5, and .8 can be interpreted as suggesting a small, medium, and large effect size, respectively, over time that may be attributed to the intervention received (see Resenthal & Rosnow, 1991). Using these as the criteria, the EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> trainees would appear to have made a large improvement in total interaction skills and a small degree of improvement in cross-ethnic social self-efficacy. By contrast, the comparison group only reported a small improvement in total interaction skills.

In order to assess more rigorously the relative effectiveness of incorporating an additional EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> module in the curriculum on communication, we conducted a series of 2 × 2 (group × time) split plot analyses of variance (SPANOVA) procedures to examine group differences and changes over time in scale scores. Our decision to conduct SPANOVA in favour of analysis of covariance was due to the non-randomised assignment of research participants to the two groups within the quasi-experimental design.

For each of the SPANOVAs, the assumption of normality was met on examining the ratio of the skewness and kurtosis of the distributions of univariate scale scores to the relevant standard error. Results from Levene's tests of equality of error variances showed that, for all the dependent variables except for time 2 Approach ISC Subscale ( $p = .03$ ), the error variance was equal between the EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> and comparison groups. However, results

Table 1  
Mean scale scores at times 1 and 2 and Hedges' *g*'s by group

Scale	EXCELL <sup>TM</sup> group			Comparison group		
	Time 1	Time 2	Hedges' <i>g</i>	Time 1	Time 2	Hedges' <i>g</i>
Interaction skills	4.32 (0.91)	5.11 (0.92)	0.86	4.47 (0.93)	4.77 (0.89)	0.33
Processing	3.83 (1.15)	4.85 (1.07)	0.92	4.20 (1.00)	4.50 (0.95)	0.31
Active engagement	4.87 (0.96)	5.65 (0.92)	0.83	5.08 (1.02)	5.29 (0.95)	0.21
Self-enhancement	4.23 (0.97)	4.82 (1.01)	0.60	4.09 (1.10)	4.49 (1.19)	0.35
Approach	4.50 (1.02)	5.19 (0.97)	0.69	4.38 (1.23)	4.70 (1.16)	0.27
Assertion	4.19 (1.16)	4.93 (1.11)	0.65	4.55 (1.22)	4.80 (1.04)	0.22
Interruption	4.32 (1.03)	5.22 (0.99)	0.89	4.55 (1.07)	4.87 (1.02)	0.31
Social self-efficacy	4.31 (1.03)	4.65 (0.77)	0.38	4.53 (0.89)	4.55 (0.95)	0.02

Note: Values enclosed in parentheses represent standard deviations.

from Box's *M* tests showed no violation of the assumption of homogeneity of the variance–covariance matrix for each of the dependent variables. The assumption of homogeneity of variance for SPANOVA was deemed tenable. Given the non-random assignment of participants, the relatively small size of the group receiving the treatment of interest, and the substantial discrepancy in sample sizes of the two groups, caution is still warranted in the interpretation of the SPANOVA results.

Table 2 lists a summary of the SPANOVA results obtained. The consistent lack of a main effect of group shows that the two groups did not differ on the dependent measures

Table 2  
Summary of SPANOVAs of scale scores for EXCELL™ and comparison groups

Source	<i>F</i>	Partial $\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
<i>Interaction skills—total</i>			
Group	0.28	.002	.595
Time	64.98*	.32	.001
Group × time	12.98*	.09	.001
<i>Processing skills</i>			
Group	.003	.001	.957
Time	57.87*	.29	.001
Group × time	17.21*	.11	.001
<i>Active engagement skills</i>			
Group	.13	.001	.724
Time	39.20*	.22	.001
Group × time	13.26*	.09	.001
<i>Self-enhancement skills</i>			
Group	1.14	.01	.287
Time	23.66*	.15	.001
Group × time	.96	.01	.33
<i>Approach skills</i>			
Group	1.63	.01	.204
Time	41.31*	.23	.001
Group × time	5.57*	.04	.02
<i>Assertion skills</i>			
Group	2.64	.002	.61
Time	25.79*	.16	.001
Group × time	5.97*	.04	.016
<i>Interruption</i>			
Group	.09	.001	.759
Time	38.85*	.22	.001
Group × time	8.70*	.06	.004
<i>Cross-ethnic social self-efficacy</i>			
Group	.08	.001	.778
Time	4.31*	.03	.04
Group × time	3.61	.03	.059

Note. Hypothesis df = 1 and error df = 140.

\**p* < .05.

averaged over the two time points. The consistent main effect of time indicates that there were improvements in social skills and social self-efficacy over time. Of particular interest is the pattern of significant interaction effects of group and time, which indicated that the amounts of change in the scale scores were different between the EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> and the comparison groups.

Table 2 reveals a significant group × time effect for total ISC and five of its subscales—processing, active engagement, approaching, assertion, and interruption, at  $p < .05$ . The corresponding magnitudes of the interaction effects, in terms of partial  $\eta^2$  values, ranged from .04 (representing small effect sizes of group differences) to .11 (for total interaction skills, representing a medium effect size). The only ISC subscale where no group × time interaction was observed was self-enhancement skills. The group × time interaction for cross-ethnic social self-efficacy scores was associated with a two-tailed  $p = .059$ , with  $\eta^2 = .03$  (or a small effect size of the group difference).

Taken together with the results listed in Table 1, the EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> trainees have reported greater social benefits over the 6-week training period than the comparison group.

### 9.2. Changes in friendships in EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> and comparison groups

Table 3 summarises the participants' number of close cross-ethnic friends at two points in time, for EXCELL<sup>TM</sup> and comparison groups separately, whereas Table 4 summarises the corresponding results for the amount of time spent with cross-ethnic friends in the last week.

Table 3  
Number of close cross-ethnic friends at times 1 and 2 (% of respondents)

Group and time	None	Only one	A few	Some	Many
<i>EXCELL<sup>TM</sup></i>					
Time 1	19.2	3.8	46.2	11.5	19.2
Time 2	3.8	7.7	50.0	15.4	23.1
<i>Comparison</i>					
Time 1	16.4	11.2	39.7	19.0	13.8
Time 2	16.4	12.1	41.4	17.2	12.9

Table 4  
Amount of time spent with cross-ethnic friends at times 1 and 2 (% of respondents)

Group and time	0–1 h	1–5 h	5–10 h	10–15 h	> 15 h
<i>EXCELL<sup>TM</sup></i>					
Time 1	34.6	26.9	23.1	3.8	11.5
Time 2	19.2	38.5	11.5	3.8	26.9
<i>Comparison</i>					
Time 1	36.2	25.9	19.8	6.0	12.1
Time 2	25.0	37.1	17.2	5.2	15.5

We conducted a total of four Wilcoxon signed-ranks tests to examine change over time in (a) the number of close cross-ethnic friends, and (b) the amount of time spent with cross-ethnic friends, for EXCELL™ and comparison groups, respectively.

Subsequent results obtained show no significant change over time in number of close cross-ethnic friends for either group. Yet there was a significant increase in time spent with cross-ethnic friends for the EXCELL™ group (but not the comparison group), at  $z = 2.285$ ,  $N$  of ties = 10, 2-tailed  $p = .022$ .

## 10. Discussion

In discussing the present research findings, we will relate them back to previous research, especially that on acculturation, intergroup contact, self-efficacy, and training of sociocultural competencies. We will also highlight the implications for practice aimed at enhancing international and other overseas-born students' sociocultural adjustment. As well, we will offer suggestions for future practice and research on sociocultural competencies training.

### 10.1. *Social interaction skills*

Current findings on the bigger improvements of overall social interaction skills in the EXCELL™ group, relative to the comparison group, suggest the additional benefits of incorporating a skills-based sociocultural competency-training module in a general communication course for students in the multicultural higher educational environment. This is despite the lack of differences in pretest levels of interaction skills. These findings have extended the results reported by Mak et al.'s (1999) Australian study through the use of a comparison group. The present inclusion of a comparison group indicates that the improvements reported are not due to test–retest effects or progress in interaction skills over time. However, it may be argued that students who were willing to volunteer to undertake the additional training could be particularly motivated to improve their social competencies.

On examining ISC subscale results, we found that EXCELL™ trainees reported greater improvements in interaction skills in processing social exchanges, active engagement, approaching others, assertion, and interruption than students in the comparison group. No difference in self-enhancement skills between the EXCELL™ group and the comparison group was observed. The latter finding is not surprising as the training did not specifically cover such self-enhancement skills as talking about personal qualities, achievements, or focussing on personal and cultural background.

### 10.2. *Cross-ethnic social self-efficacy*

Analyses of effect sizes suggest a small improvement in cross-ethnic social self-efficacy over time among the present EXCELL™ trainees, but not the comparison group. A plausible interpretation of this finding is that simply being in a multicultural classroom or attending a general communication course does not ensure that students will increase their social confidence and efficacy expectancies in interacting with fellow students from other ethnic groups. Rather, consistent with Bandura's (1977a) theory of sources of self-efficacy, the main source of enhanced social self-efficacy will very likely come from the cumulation

of mastery experiences (in this case successes in applying social skills in intercultural situations) following observational learning and skills rehearsals. Moreover, this would appear to apply to both international and domestic students.

### *10.3. Cross-ethnic friendships*

We found partial support for the expectation that EXCELL™ would foster increased friendships with members from other ethnic groups, something that had not been tested in previous program evaluations. Present EXCELL™ trainees (but not the comparison group) reported a significant increase in the amount of time spent with friends from other ethnic groups on completion of the training.

These findings attest to the benefits of going beyond an academic communication course and engaging a culturally diverse class in sociocultural competencies training, where newcomers and host nationals would have the opportunities to develop personal acquaintances over a period of several weeks, as they work together on equal grounds towards the shared goals of being more culturally aware and becoming more socially effective. For international students, increased friendships with local students could mean improved access to local knowledge, more opportunities for practising the host language, greater social integration, and additional sources of social support, all of which are beneficial to the international students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment in the acculturative process (Ward, 1996). On the other hand, local students can also reap personal and career rewards from friendships with international students, including a better understanding and tolerance of other cultures and the opportunities for building professional networks and paving the way for later overseas travel and work.

When the positive intergroup contact is supported by norms for egalitarian intergroup interaction within the module and in the class itself, the conditions are conducive to the formation of a common student identity, as well as reduction in intergroup bias and ethnic prejudice (Gaertner et al., 1996; Hewstone, 1996). Ward and Masgoret (2004) have emphasised that increasing the quantity and quality of intercultural contact between international and local students would enhance international students' adjustment, and therefore merit high priority in educational institutions.

### *10.4. Implications for practice and future research*

The present study has shown that the EXCELL™ Program, which incorporates cultural mapping and behavioural competence training in a mixed group, represents an effective approach to fostering positive intergroup contact and developing self-efficacy in interacting with other ethnic groups in a multicultural educational environment. Traditionally, cross-cultural training is mainly offered to managers and other personnel as part of pre-departure preparations for overseas postings (Ward et al., 2001), and often lacks a coherent theoretical framework (Black & Mendenhall, 1990).

The present program evaluation results, while derived from social competencies training with students, are consistent with Harrison's (1992) finding that combining both behaviour modelling and cultural knowledge learning in cross-cultural management training was more effective than either individual method for bringing about changes in attitudes and behaviours. Adaptations of the EXCELL™ Program for cross-cultural management training and for business purposes are currently under way. The focus on understanding

and modelling generic social competencies in the host culture can potentially be useful for fast-tracking expatriates' sociocultural adjustment on arrival in the new country.

Similarly, adaptations of the EXCELL™ Program for mixed group training in a multicultural work environment may bring about improvements in interaction skills, social confidence, and cross-ethnic attitudes. These improvements may in turn promote racial harmony as well as productive diversity in a multicultural work force. In a related form of application, EXCELL™ could be adapted for training of human services personnel (e.g., health professionals), public servants, and counter staff, with a view for more effective interactions with ethnic clients and customers in a multicultural society.

The present study has various implications for future evaluations of the EXCELL™ Program in the education sector. Further evaluations conducted with larger samples of trainees can enable more rigorous subgroup analyses, for example, for comparing program effectiveness for local versus overseas-born students, or for international students from different regions of the world. Future research can include a follow-up design to investigate whether gains in intercultural social skills and confidence and cross-ethnic friendships can be maintained over time, and document the trainees' application of the various social competencies in real life using self- and significant others' reports. Where possible, research designs utilising randomised control trials and groups of similar sizes should be implemented. Future evaluations can also compare the efficacy of the EXCELL™ Program against some other cross-cultural training approach (e.g., using a culture assimilator). Ideally, such comparative evaluations can be conducted using a modified Solomon Four-Group design, similar to the experimental design reported by Landis, Brislin, and Hulgus (1985).

Further investigations can also consider other acculturative outcomes, such as international students' psychological adjustment, perceived racial discrimination, and intentions for applying for immigrant visas on completion of their studies. Follow-up research with local students who have undertaken EXCELL™ training can examine changes in cross-ethnic attitudes and social efficacy, possible broadening of informal intercultural social networks, and intentions for working in overseas countries.

## 11. Conclusion

Skills-based sociocultural competency training can provide additional social benefits when incorporated in a general communication course for first year students in a multicultural university environment. Further to a perceived improvement in social interaction skills, the benefits can include a boost in social self-efficacy and spending more time with friends from other ethnic backgrounds.

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## **Appendix A. Additional information on the EXCELL™ program**

### *A.1. Suitable participants*

EXCELL™ is designed to be offered, ideally by two trainers (co-facilitators), to groups of between 8 and 20 participants, all or many of them: being students, immigrants, refugees, or expatriates from diverse cultural backgrounds; who have been in the new country long enough to have dealt with their initial “survival” needs, and are now seeking ways of engaging with the new culture; who have enough fluency in the host language to participate in a group program, and are motivated to improve their intercultural social competencies for attaining academic, professional, and personal goals.

### *A.2. Trainer requirements*

EXCELL™ trainers who deliver the program must have successfully completed a 3-day EXCELL™ Trainer Course. The intensive course is suitable for counsellors, and academic and international office staff members who work with immigrants, expatriates, or international students, or other “transition” or special needs students, or locals who want to increase their cross-cultural awareness and/or their social effectiveness. Candidates for the trainer course will have group facilitation skills and have experience in the field of cross-cultural service delivery. At the time of writing this article, delegates from over 60 educational institutions have completed the trainer course in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK, and the Netherlands.

### *A.3. Learning process in EXCELL™*

EXCELL™ focuses on behavioural competence training derived from the following established learning paradigms (Mak et al., 1999):

1. *Operant conditioning*: Early attempts are shaped towards the desired behaviours by rewarding successful trials.
2. *Classical conditioning*: Social anxiety is reduced by pairing successful performance of the behaviours in a non-threatening environment.
3. *Social cognitive learning*: Participants watch credible models perform desired behaviours, and develop social-efficacy beliefs that they too can take specific actions to bring about a positive social environment.
4. *Role-based group learning*: Participants observe others’ behaviours and perfect skills in a supportive environment with like people.

### *A.4. Group procedures in EXCELL™*

Below is a summary of the group procedures in teaching each sociocultural competency (Westwood et al., 2000).

1. *Alliance building and assessment*: The trainers create an environment in which the unique cultural backgrounds of participants are acknowledged and validated, making it safe to share personal experiences with challenging intercultural social encounters (e.g.,

- in having to interrupt to participate in a group discussion, or in putting a request to an authority figure).
2. *Cultural mapping*: Explanations of what behaviours will be appropriate in certain types of social encounters and why things tend to be done the way they are.
  3. Modelling of a practice scenario to replicate the social situation by the trainer then follows, with the participants observing the interaction and commenting on it.
  4. Participants are then invited to practise the same exchange in pairs with a third person as an observer, with the trainer coaching and giving feedback and mini-demonstrations of how to change the approach if required. This process is repeated if necessary until participants master specific micro-skills.
  5. Goal-setting and contracting to apply learning in a real situation. Participants are helped to create realistic and specific action plans, and write them down as a homework activity in the relevant section in their individual copies of the EXCELL™ Participant's Manual. Participants are encouraged to report back to the group the outcomes of their actions in the following session.

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