

**Title:** How are cultural influences reflected in perceptions of Vietnamese students studying at Australian universities?

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**Introduction**

Going overseas for study is becoming a prevalent tendency in many Asian countries. Students coming from Asian nations not only have to handle different teaching and learning styles but also face a different culture. Some studies have investigated the influences of the various cultures which international students encounter during studying in western environments (Kato, 2001; Pho, 1999; Ha, 2001; Le, 1992; Phuong, 2001; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Ellis, 1995; and Biggs, 1996). These studies identify the understandings of international students in general and Vietnamese students in particular regarding the cultural influences to which they are usually exposed to western universities including Australia.

Asian students usually bring their own cultural traditions with them when they study overseas. Ballard & Clanchy (1997) question "Why should the cultural and social backgrounds of international students make such a difference to the ways they study when they enter Western universities?" (p10). Consistent with Ballard & Clanchy, Te (2000) gives typical evidence of the experience of Vietnamese students to demonstrate the incompatible cultures:

A Vietnamese student who sits quietly and listens attentively to the teacher wants to express respect to his teacher. This behavior has often been misinterpreted by the American teacher as passivity and non-responsiveness. It is also out of respect that the Vietnamese student avoids eye contact with the teacher when speaking or being spoken to. By American standards, a person acting in this way would appear suspicious, unreliable, or mischievous. In Vietnamese culture, however, looking into somebody's eyes, especially when this person is of a higher status (in age or in social or family hierarchy) or of a different gender, usually means a challenge or an expression of deep passion. The proper respectful behavior is to avoid eye contact in talking who is not an equal or the same sex. (p1)

The above examples would be convincing evidence to indicate the cultural influences towards Vietnamese students who are studying in Australia.

In an article titled "Exploring 'Cultures of Learning': a case of Japanese and Australian classrooms" in *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2001, Kato discussed the influences of different cultures in learning. In this study, Kato argued and described the differences in the perceptions of local students and international students arising from different cultures. The author mentioned "culture" in educational contexts; "Cultures of Learning" in a cross-cultural context; the differences in the 'culture of learning'; differences in teaching approaches; and teacher-student relationship.

This paper will elaborate on some relevant points from Kato's argument which would fit the Vietnamese context. The focus of this article is to examine and describe the cultural influences which are reflected in perceptions of some Vietnamese students studying in an Australian tertiary institution. First, the literature review of Vietnamese and Australian contexts will be drawn. Second, the perceptions of Vietnamese students will be highlighted with regard to cultural influences. Finally, there will have some discussions of the implications for Vietnamese students and Vietnamese education, and also the directions for further research.

### **What is going on: A review of the literature Vietnamese context.**

In the past, Vietnam was dominated by China for thousands of years, and parallel with the influences in culture, language or political, education is still impacted by Confucianism. Confucianism is a progressive ideology which heightens the values of morals, humanity and tolerance among humans. Furthermore, Confucian ideology praises peace and condemns inhuman wars. These ideas are valuable and true in any circumstances and in any society. The Confucian influence in education has been quite apparent until now. However, in the educational field, some ideas of Confucianism are not suitable and outdated in current societies, especially in Vietnam – one of the countries which are on the way to integrate with the world.

Importantly, Phuoc (1975 cited in Ellis, 1995) indicated that “the Confucian model is teacher-centered, closed, suspicious of creativity, and predicated on an unquestioning obedience from the students” (42). Generally, traditions may contain elements to hinder progress and create inappropriate attitudes towards improvement (Tong 2000, cited in An, 2001). One aspect of Vietnamese tradition is reflected in the hierarchy of both the society and education systems (An, 2001). This hierarchy makes the traditional Vietnamese teaching-learning style a teacher-centered one-way form of communication. In recent years, these traditional styles are changing towards student-centered approaches. However, the changes are not yet very effective, as embedded thoughts of Vietnamese generations towards the traditional education remain very strong.

In the classroom, students are only allowed to speak or ask the questions with the permission from their teacher. Otherwise, questioning the teacher is considered to be rude and unacceptable. The students' responsibilities are to obey teachers and show good behavior towards their teachers. They are trained to be thankful to the teachers. Hoang Tuy (2000:54) said that owing to the hierarchical system and the notion that “the teachers know the best”, the teaching becomes dictatorial and the learning becomes forced and passive. Consequently, this is the reason why the Vietnamese student “finds it easy to imitate, but difficult to do creative works” (Nguyen, 1998, p20).

Regarding the teacher-student relationship, it can be said that teacher-student relationship in one of the most important factors contributing to the success of educational outcome. Nguyen (2000: 68) states that “the relationship between teachers and students in the most important to the classroom environment” (21). However, the connection between teacher and student in Vietnam has tended to be ignored. As mentioned above, this flaw comes from Confucian ideology which teaches the young generations to always keep harmony

with their elders and teachers. According to Irwin (1996), in Vietnam, the hierarchical structure of society according to Confucian ideology was emphasized in three main relationships: king/subject, teacher/pupil and father/children. In this model, the role of women is apparently ignored and neglected.

**Australian context**

In Anglo-Australian higher education there is a notion that tertiary education emphasizes the potential for extending the students’ knowledge base, and for the creation of “new” knowledge. This notion is rooted in the relationship between teaching and learning strategy, and the relationship of cultural attitudes to knowledge which inform them. Ballard & Clanchy (1997) believe that higher education in Australia is based on an extending attitude to knowledge; therefore, the teaching strategy directs the students to independent and critical thinking, the development of a capacity for abstraction, and the expansion of knowledge.

Western education in general and Australian education in particular often requires from the teacher a combination of “the theoretical, the personal and the political” (White, 2006). Moreover, White indicates that, teachers not only equip themselves but also know what should be required from students. For example, teachers would “require students to focus on their own educational experiences and identity, and demands the articulation and documentation of beliefs, values and philosophy” (16). White (2006) establishes five key elements of learning:

- Creativity derived from risk-taking and daring.
- Support and encouragement for students, especially when working in unfamiliar ways.
- Collaboration and collegiality in dealing with challenges, negotiating and solving problems.
- Encouragement and inclusion of innovative thinking and ideas (including the personal and the political).
- Exploration of ideas and learning through the creation of performance rather than learning about ideas through discussion and reading only.

Hofstede (1986) reveals that, in Australia, along with most other Western societies, education is designated as having small power-distance relationships. Hofstede indicated that the power-distance flexibility impacts the nature of the teacher-student relationship (see Table 1)

**TABLE 1**

**Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction Related to the Power Distance Dimension**

SMALL POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES	LARGE POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stress on impersonal “truth” which can in principle be obtained from any competent person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stress on personal “wisdom” which is transferred in the relationship with a particular teacher (guru)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a teacher should respect the independence of his/her students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a teacher merits the respect of his/her students</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• student-centred education (premium on initiative)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teacher-centred education (premium on older)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teacher expects students to initiate communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students expect teacher to initiate communication</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teacher expects students to find their own paths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students expect teacher to outline paths to follow</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students may speak up spontaneously in class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students speak up in class only when invited by the teacher</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• student allowed to contradict or criticise teacher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teacher is never contradicted nor publicly criticised</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• effectiveness of learning related to amount of two-way communication in class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• effectiveness of learning related to excellence of the teacher</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• outside class, teachers are treated as equals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• respect for teachers is also shown outside class</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the student</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the teacher</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• younger teachers are more liked than older teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• older teachers are more respected than younger teachers</li> </ul>

**Re-printed from:** Hofstede, G. (1986). Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 10, pp. 301-320.

It is quite apparent to see the the nature of teacher/student interaction in western education which includes Australia. This is exhibited as “small power distance societies” with the characteristics such as “student-centred education”, in which teachers expect students to find their own paths”, “students may speak up spontaneously in class”, and “student allowed to contradict or criticize teacher”.

### **The reflections of cultural influences on the perceptions of Vietnamese students**

Ballard & Clanchy (1997) showed in their study of *Teaching International Students* that “All our students enter university with expectations, knowledge and behaviors which have been shaped not merely by their individual personalities but, more fundamentally, by their previous educational experiences and their own cultural experiences” (p9).

In order to establish whether the above idea is true or not, it will be discussed as follows. I will use as evidence my personal experiences in Vietnam as well as in Australia. Moreover, some further evidence will involve informal discussions with Vietnamese students, who are studying

master of coursework in different faculties at La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia. Beside, these ideas will be consolidated by a variety of the relevant resources.

### **Regarding learning styles**

Hong, Huong and Cuong all said that they are puzzled in approaching the independent learning styles. They revealed that, in Vietnam they were trained to be obey teachers, and the outcomes of their work mostly depended on the instructions from teachers. An (2002) made a comment that, because of the effect of the Confucian ideology, Vietnamese learners are usually dependent and passive. Complementing this point, Lee (2001) said that “based on Confucian values, students usually follow their teachers’ instructions without any criticism” (p6). These ideas reflect exactly the learning styles of many Vietnamese students. According to Hofstede (1986) in western classrooms “teacher expect students to initiate communication”. This point is quite compatible with our own experiences during studying at La Trobe University. In the first semester, some other Vietnamese students and I enrolled the unit Intercultural and Communication in Education. During the lecture, teacher often divided class into different groups which were mixed with local students. In the group discussions, the Vietnamese students – myself included – did not feel confident in expressing our own opinions, and we usually followed opinions from the local and other international students. We recognized that, local students were very self-reliant in their study, and they paid more attention in their own ideas rather than meeting the expected answers for their teachers.

Vu reported that, in class activities such as group discussions or group presentations, Vietnamese students usually eluded being presenters. I also realized that Vietnamese students seem to avoid arguing and debating with others about conflicting ideas. If they think differently from other students, especially with teachers, they often do not write or say their own thinking, and they seemed to be expected to do what the majority think and value. Engholm (1991, cited in Irwin, 1996) comments the influences of traditional culture on behavior of each other of Vietnamese people that (Confucianism) “...is a practical code of conduct to follow in everyday life, a manual for managing human relationships harmoniously”(p7). I suppose that the above characteristics not only occur on Vietnamese students but also on international students, especially Asian students. These are quite unlike with the “small power distance societies” described by Hodstede “students allowed to contradict or criticize teachers”. Bigg (2003) founded that “Many university teachers report difficulties in teaching international students” (p121). These teachers complain about international students that:

- ‘They rote learn and lack critical thinking skills’
- ‘They are passive; they won’t talk in class’
- ‘Progressive western teaching methods won’t work with Asian’
- ‘They appear to focus excessively on the method of assessment’
- ‘They don’t understand what plagiarism means’
- ‘They stick together... won’t mix with locals’
- ‘They do not easily adjust to local conditions’
- ‘They tend to look on lecturers as close to gods’

Bigg did not agree to the above points. He asserted that “teach better, and you’ll address the problems presented by international students” (p139) In my opinions, I also do not

totally agree with some above points. Typically, Asian students in general and Vietnamese students in particular almost recognized that western teaching styles are progressive and better than educational framework in their host nations. Furthermore, Asian students are still getting used to this process. It is easy to understand that Asian students are often immersed in the culture of their own countries, so they usually find it difficult to adapt immediately with teaching styles in western environment.

Regarding the commenting on student's learning outcomes, Vu, Hung and Thanh all reported that, during the course, Vietnamese students frequently took great pride in the teacher's rare compliments. These are implied as an affirmation of their genuine success in studies. Due to the influence of Vietnamese culture, like many other international Vietnamese students, Vu revealed that "I am occasionally suspicious of the sincerity of complimentary comments that Australian teachers usually employ in class and wonder whether their praise is a bit hackneyed and whether my work is actually excellent or not so as to further endeavor in the future". This is actually different from our culture, in Vietnamese culture, the teacher appears to give compliments only to students who richly deserve to be justifiably praised.

The following comparative information of Mezger (1992) would give a conclusion of learning style in term of different cultures.

**Table 4 Cultural Shift Required in LEARNING STYLES**

OTHER CULTURE	WESTERN CULTURE
Reproductive rote learning is dominant.	▶ Analytical and sometimes speculative learning is expected.
Passive reception of information is expected.	▶ Critical reception of information is expected in reading, writing and verbal interactions.
Memorisation and imitation is expected.	▶ Analytical and critical thinking and sometimes speculating and hypothesing.
Learning all information given.	▶ Selective learning of keys concepts and details.
Activities of summarising, identifying, describing and applying formulas and information.	▶ Activities of questions, judging, recombining ideas and information into an argument. Sometimes research activities.
Characteristic question is What?	▶ Characteristic questions are Why? How? How valid? How important and sometimes What if?
Aim of learning is 'correctness'	▶ Aim is 'simple' originality and reshaping material into a different pattern. Sometimes 'creative' originality.
Reading source usually limited to one	▶ Reading widely is expected.

text and teacher notes.	
Reading the text at great depth in great detail.	▶ Skim and selective reading of many texts, articles and reports.
There may be limited resources available for student use in some countries eg. libraries.	▶ Extensive use of library and other resources (eg. media, experts, colleagues) is expected.
Circular patterns of thinking and reasoning.	▶ Logical linear patterns of thinking and development of logical arguments and opinions is expected.
The written word is seen as the truth and the goal of learning.	▶ The written word is seen as a tool for learning.
Learning and studying in one's own language.	▶ Learning and studying in a second language.

(p157)

These are the comments made by a Vietnamese postgraduate student in the USA. They are not necessarily Mezger's interpretations – she cautions the reader against believing too much in these generalizations. These are very broad generalizations that do not necessarily apply to all international students in general and Vietnamese students in particular or to all Western students in Universities

There are several Vietnamese sayings which imply the sacrosanct role of the teacher such as:

*Khong thay do may lam nen*

You would do nothing without a teacher

Or

*Nhat tu vi su, ban tu vi su*

Whoever teaches me a letter, he should be my teacher

Or

*Cha me sinh con, thay cho cuoc song*

My parents give me birth, but my teacher made a man of me

These above sayings mostly draw the teacher-student communication regarding cultural influence in Vietnam.

### **With respect to teacher-student relationship**

Hung, Thanh and Huong revealed that the teacher-student relationship in Australian class is equal, opened and approachable. Hung said that, in his first few classes, he did not dare to make eye contact with the teacher as he thought it was rude. Complementing these thoughts, Ballard & Clanchy (1997) judge that:

*Many international students feel shocked and embarrassed at the disrespectful behaviour of Australian students in the presence of their teachers. They also feel awkward with the informality displayed – calling a lecturer by his or her first name, remaining seated when the professor enters the room, walking through a door ahead of a tutor. (p18)*



Actually, I realize that almost all Vietnamese students felt shock when they saw the behavior and communication between local students and teachers. As mentioned above, the teachers in Vietnam are always seen as being superior. Thus, when talking or addressing the teacher, Vietnamese learners always say “*thua thay*”, “*thua co*” to show their great respect. “*Thua*” is a very polite form which is used before a personal pronoun to talk to someone superior. Like other Vietnamese students, I felt reluctant to call teachers by their first name which I only used to call my friends in Vietnam. Moreover, the form of address between the teacher and Australian students gave me the impression that they seemed not to show reverence to the teacher.

Another thing I have discovered is that Australian teachers often treat students like their friends rather than their students. Dr. Peta, a lecturer at La Trobe University stated that ““We are not teachers – we are facilitators of learning developing lifelong learners”. Vu and Huong said that in their class, teachers usually encouraged them to express their own thinking and personal experiences no matter wrong or right. After that, teachers often made a comment or suggestion about the mentioned issues. The most important thing I have realized is that teachers always respect our personal ideas and experiences. This is worth noting that teachers said they are interested in our own experiences. Bigg (2003) shows that some characteristics of international students, especially students come from Confucian heritage societies make teaching them easier rather than difficult. To be influenced by host culture, we are often not confident to express our own ideas to teachers as we are afraid being wrong. Wei (1977) said that Vietnamese students usually avoid showing problems to outsiders because that is a revelation of their weakness. We concern more about *losing face or saving face*.

In addition, rest of the Vietnamese students – myself include - usually thought that in class the more we keep quiet the more we showed respect toward our teachers. The lecturers realized that, and they tried to change our approach in various ways, such as: encouraging us to discuss and sharing opinions; seating us with local students; asking us to engage in group discussions. Moreover, teachers required students in general and Vietnamese students in particular to say “My understanding is ...” or “in my personal experience, I think/suppose that ...”, instead of saying “I do not know” or “I have no idea”. To sum up, the usefulness I have learnt from teacher-student relationship in Australia are:

- A close distance between teachers and students
- The empathy and encouragement from teachers towards students
- The casual and informal environment in class
- Respect of teacher toward our own experience
- No avoidance in term of exposing the weaknesses in front of teachers

However, it is worth noting that, all of the teachers are different. Some are more strict and more formal, some not so. Some focus on content, some on relationships, some on learning facts, some on learning general principles, some on solving problems, some on theoretical frameworks. Generally, the teachers in Australian universities are easier to communicate than the teachers in Vietnam.

### **What are implications for Vietnamese students who are going back Vietnam after studying in Australia?**

It can be asserted that, almost all Vietnamese students, who are studying in Australia, could understand and appreciate the positiveness of the new teaching and learning approaches in term of holistic education. However, this does not mean that holistic education could apply immediately to Vietnamese situation upon return. There is a meaningful proverb in Vietnamese that “Chuoi dao bang vang khong the lap vao mot luoi dao bang sat” (A golden knife handle cannot fit in a metal knife). In other words, we cannot bring the entire holistic contents in education to Vietnamese education. Furthermore, Vietnamese students, who return to Vietnam, is only a small number, so we should not be able to change the education system in Vietnam overnight as this is impractical and infeasible. We should try our best to incorporate new approaches to teaching and learning in some ways.

One of the most important things which Vietnamese, who will return to Vietnam as teachers will try and implement, is to replace the step by step teacher-centered approach by the student-centered approach learnt in Australia. Teachers should respect the feedbacks from students, and students should be free to express what they understand or what their confusion about the lecture material is. In addition, teachers should not impose and enforce their ideas on students' study. Instead of saying “Do your homework tonight”, we should say “Try and do your homework tonight”. In this way, we might reduce the pressure and enforcement on students, and students themselves would appreciate the encouragements from teachers rather than the orders. However, to successfully apply this way, the consensus of a small number of people is not enough, it really needs cooperation from other teachers, students and parents. Moreover, we should try to organize the class to become a cooperative learning environment. There should be more discussions in classes which now rarely happen in Vietnamese schools. However, the attempts of a few people are not strong enough. It needs a consensus of a whole society especially from the educational administrators of Vietnam.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has taken up some ideas from Kato (2001). It has continued and developed the idea of cultural influences of international students during studying overseas. It includes challenges, hurdles, cultural shock and different teaching and learning approaches. The paper explored the range of feelings of Vietnamese students regarding coping with cultural differences, from puzzled, unconfident, passive, and isolated to be coming confident, active, interested, cooperative, and independent learners.

This paper based on reliable direction in the study of Kato in term of intercultural learning. However, the paper used the data from several discussions with a number of Vietnamese students who are studying in Australian universities. Most of the information comes from my personal experiences and other Vietnamese students in both Vietnamese

and Australian contexts, especially at La Trobe University. Moreover, data has also been included from other Vietnamese scholars who have already conducted the studies about the perceptions of Vietnamese students, such as Pho (1999); Phuong (2001); Ha (2001) and Le (1992) Thus, the drawn information would be not highly representative for all Vietnamese students who are studying in western countries in general and in Australia in particular.. In the next studies, I will attempt to give a more comprehensive and adequate analysis to consolidate the idea of cultural influences of international students during in studying overseas.

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