

# **‘Excel on campus’, a programme designed to increase international students’ participation in learning.**

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## **Abstract**

*Greater involvement of tertiary students in academic life enhances their knowledge and skills development (Tinto, 1997). International students new to a different education environment will sometimes lack understanding and skills necessary for effective engagement with their new academic environment. They are often provided with information about their new environment but not the skills they need to operate effectively in this new environment (Barker, Troth and Mak, 2002). ‘Excel on campus’, based on the Excell programme, is a skills-based programme designed to help international students understand the new academic expectations and the nature of the learning communities they have joined. Involving both newcomers and members of the host country, ‘Excel on campus’ enquires into participants’ different cultural behaviours and the values behind those behaviours. Newcomers learn skills to enhance their competency in the host culture, and all participants gain in multi-cultural awareness. Outcomes for all students are increased confidence, and outcomes for international students are increased contact and interaction with people from different cultures to their own. This session demonstrates how ‘Excel on campus’ operates in a New Zealand tertiary context. Participants will gain insight into its potential applications for their work environments.*

The ‘Excel on campus’ programme discussed in this ‘nuts and bolts’ presentation helps students engage with their learning communities. McInnis (2003, p.9) states that ‘engagement occurs where students feel they are part of a group of students and academics committed to learning’. ‘Excel on campus’ intentionally fosters a sense of belonging among incoming students, who, together with local students, form a supportive and cohesive group that often continues to meet after the programme ends. Krause, McInnis, and Welle (2003) state that there is a positive relationship between the amount of out-of-class interaction and perceptions of satisfaction with university experience and study. Students on the ‘Excel on campus’ programme fill out pre- and post-programme questionnaires. For most of our programmes, comparison of these questionnaires shows an increase in amount of out-of-class cross-ethnic interaction students have. However, further analysis is being undertaken to determine the significance of this increase. By the time of our presentation, we will have a clearer idea of the extent to which ‘Excel on campus’ is helping students engage with their learning communities on campus.

McInnis (2003, p.9) also argues that ‘engagement occurs...where students actively connect to the subject matter’. For students from diverse cultures, successful engagement is complex, and skills need to be taught and practised if this engagement is to be achieved. Kift (2004) states that ‘Students in their first year have special learning needs arising from the social and academic transition they are experiencing’. ‘Excel on campus’ helps meet these needs. It teaches students the requisite skills for successful engagement in their new academic environment. It gives incoming international students understanding of the academic environment they are entering and also the appropriate communication skills needed to

negotiate and operate effectively in their new learning communities. Incoming international students often come from education environments with different cultural behaviours and values. They need to understand the nature of the environment they have come from as well as the nature of the environment they are entering.

New Zealand research concurs with this literature on engagement. Ward and Masgoret (2004) state that there is evidence that increased contact with local students improves academic, social, and psychological outcomes for international students. However, their 2004 survey of 2736 international students in New Zealand found that international students experienced a lack of contact with local students. The 'Excel on campus' programme gives incoming international students the understandings and tools they need to make local student friends and participate effectively in local student communities. Ward (2001) warns that contact among international and local students does not happen by just putting students in the same classrooms. She believes that 'strategic interventions' are required on the part of institutions. The 'Excel on campus programme' is a possible strategic intervention.

The 'Excel on campus' programme is a six-session programme where incoming international students learn appropriate communication competencies for their new environment. It is based on the work of Michelle Barker, Griffith University, Australia; Anita Mak, University of Canberra, Australia; Marvin Westwood, University of British Columbia, Canada; and Ishu Ishiyama, University of British Columbia, Canada. Together, this group developed 'The Excell Program, Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership'. Our customised programme at Victoria University teaches six communication competencies recognised by the original developers as being difficult to perform when people move into a new culture. These competencies are:

- making social contact
- seeking help and information
- participating in groups
- disagreeing
- giving feedback
- refusing requests.

While teaching each of these competencies, our programme uses scenarios from the academic environment the incoming students are entering. These scenarios vary depending on the needs of the group doing the programme. While exploring each of these competencies and scenarios, students discuss the expectations and associated values of their new educational environment and institution. Local students provide the reference group and they roleplay appropriate communication for each competency and scenario. For example, when discussing the competency of help-seeking, we might choose the scenario of visiting a lecturer to ask for help with an assignment. The local students would roleplay a possible visit. Their words and body language would reflect the student behaviours valued on our campus: independence, assertiveness, respect for another's time, and other aspects of our relatively individualistic educational environment. International student participants observe, discuss and record in the form of a 'cultural map' (see Barker, M., Troth, A., & Mak, A. 2002). This cultural map records both words and body language. Later, participants use the cultural map to practise the competency in roleplays of their own. Thus, the programme relies on experiential learning to ensure skills are learned adequately.

### **How the programme works**

The programme is usually taught over six sessions. Students from throughout the university sign up voluntarily. The ideal group size is approximately 25 students: 20 international students and 5 local student volunteers. The international students should be from a variety of countries. The programme requires two trainers: preferably one is a local person and the other is a migrant who has successfully adapted into the host culture. The two trainers co-teach.

Each session takes one competency and explores it thoroughly. Near the beginning of a session, the trainers clarify the competency to be discussed during the session, and they elicit from the group some reasons why they might want to be expert in this behaviour. This creates 'buy-in' and motivation among the group. They also elicit from the group some scenarios where students need this competency. Next, students discuss (in small co-national groups) how they would perform this competency at home (using a particular scenario). This validates the students' already existing expertise in communication. All along, the trainers stress that the programme's intention is not to change behaviour, but simply to help participants learn some new behaviours that will maximise their success in the new culture.

Next, trainers ask the participants to watch the local student volunteers roleplay an interaction. They ask them to note down words as well as body language. Using the notes from the group, the trainers and students together create a cultural map of the interaction. This cultural map is very detailed and gives words, phrases, and body language.

Next, the students are divided into small groups and each group moves off into a breakaway room to practise the roleplay. Local student volunteers and trainers act as coaches. All students are trained to give feedback to their peers while they practise. Feedback covers 'what worked', 'what we want more of', and 'what we want less of'.

Finally, the group returns to the main room and each person 'contracts' to practise during the up-coming week. They state specifically when and where they will practise the newly acquired behaviour. At the beginning of the next session, students report back on this contract and state what went well and what they want to improve on.

At the end of the programme, a certificate ceremony is held and students are formally presented with a certificate of completion that they can use in their curriculum vitae. At this ceremony, most students make a short speech about their experience.

### **Outcomes of this programme**

We have been running 'Excel on campus' for six years at Victoria University. In our end-of-programme evaluations, data collected from international students indicates increased confidence in interacting with people from different ethnic groups. A comparison of 55 pre- and post-programme questionnaires for the five programmes we ran between March 2009 and September 2010 shows that students increased confidence in interacting with people from different ethnic groups by 14.6% over the course of their programme.

An increased sense of belonging is another outcome of the programme. The highly participatory nature of the programme means that students form a cohesive, supportive group very quickly. In the first week, students get to know each other and create ground rules for a safe and workable group. As the programme continues, students regularly share at a fundamental level: their thoughts, cultural backgrounds, fears, and personal triumphs. At the end of the course, students take multiple photos of their group and they often go on to create Facebook pages for their group. Some groups meet regularly for years afterwards.

Another outcome of the programme is increased time spent with students of other cultures—outside of the Excel room and outside of the classroom in general. It seems that as a result of doing the programme, students interact more frequently with students from other cultures in their free time. The comparison of pre- and post-programme questionnaires for our five programmes run between March 2009 and September 2010 shows that students increased their out-of-class interaction with people from other cultures by 12.4% over the duration of the programme. Research by Krause, McInnis and Welle (2003) has found a positive relationship between the amount of out-of-class interaction and perceptions of satisfaction with university experience and study. We expect that our Excel students will benefit from their increased interaction and achieve similar satisfaction.

It is not only the international students who benefit from ‘Excel on campus’. Local student volunteers on the programme also report increased inter-cultural awareness. A comment from such a volunteer reads:

*Thank you for the opportunity. I gained a lot of understanding and insight. (local student volunteer)*

Other quotes from student participants are:

*Excel was a good start for me to get involved in Victoria life (student from Iran)*

*Excel answers questions I am too shy to ask (student from the Philippines)*

*Now I have more confidence to talk with Kiwi people (student from China)*

*I studied at high school in New Zealand and I thought I was fine coming to university, but I was struggling to get involved as university is totally different. Now I don't feel shy and I know how to study with my friends. (student from Vietnam)*

*I like roleplay because usually I don't listen well. They repeated carefully so we could analyse the behaviours. (student from Japan)*

*It's fun, interesting and practical (student from Germany)*

These quotes reflect several of the benefits of the programme. However, a key theme comes through: ‘Excel on campus’ seems to help with transition into the university environment.

### **How this programme could be applied more broadly**

The ‘Excel on campus’ programme outlined above is used to help international students adapt to New Zealand culture and to transition into our educational environment. However, this programme could be adapted to cater for any students who are transitioning into higher education. It could be used to teach students effective behaviours relating to help-seeking, tutorial participation, and networking with other students.

Elements of ‘Excel on campus’ can be used to facilitate effective internationalisation of campuses. It can be used across all first-year classes to enable all students to benefit from the cultural diversity that exists on our Australasian campuses. At Victoria University of Wellington, we are currently trialing an initiative that uses elements of ‘Excel on campus’ in our commerce faculty classes. One of Victoria’s graduate attributes relates to ‘global citizenship’, and we are using elements of ‘Excel’ to help students understand their own

cultural identities as well as those of their international student classmates. We are also using the programme to help students interact in a more effective and inclusive manner with a view to enabling them to communicate well with people from other cultures—both while they study on campus and once they have finished their study and joined the workforce. We have implemented ‘Excel on campus’ initiatives in classes of over 100 students as well as in smaller tutorials.

Elements of ‘Excel on campus’ can also be used in training campus staff in cross-cultural awareness. Presenting various roleplays of the same competency in different cultures can be an effective way of increasing awareness among staff of the fact that people from different parts of the world can behave very differently. For example, while watching roleplays of people from different cultures seeking help and information, staff will learn that this competency generally requires more eye contact, open body language, and speaking volume in a western country than in an Asian country.

Elements of ‘Excel on campus’ can be used in one-to-one advising by counsellors, pastoral carers, and learning advisers. Roleplays with cultural maps are a useful way of preparing a student for a difficult interaction. They enable a student to practise for success and they enable the adviser to coach in a skills-based manner. During roleplay practice, Excel trainers give feedback in a carefully constructed manner. This type of feedback works just as well in one-to-one settings as in large groups.

Thus, potential applications are varied and relevant within higher education institutions: not only for first year students, but also for those who work with them.

### **Session plan for nuts and bolts presentation**

5 min: brief explanation of type of programme and its objectives

1 min: acknowledgement of source of programme

8min: description of how the programme works

5min: discussion in groups of how programme could be used (record ideas on butcher’s paper)

5min: reporting back from each group

5 min: further suggestions for use of programme, concluding comments

**Question for audience:** How could you use this type of programme in your work?

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