

Evaluating a Virtual Team Assignment in a Distance Education Course

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ABSTRACT

An assignment in an undergraduate, International Management course was designed to use teams to simulate the complexities of being in a virtual team of persons from diverse backgrounds and countries. The paper describes the design of the task for distance education students to compare and contrast two countries by using discussion boards, email and resources to cooperate to write a coherent report. It documents the students' pre-course experiences, how the teams attempted to deal with the task and their post course feedback on the communication and technological difficulties of virtual teams in a distance education context.

Key words: virtual teams, distance education, assignment design.

Introduction

The use of cross-national teams on undergraduate level has been trailed by Universities of Saarbrucken, Tennessee and Vienna in the Globally Distant Multicultural Teams project (Academy of Management 2002) and also by the Cross Cultural Internet Project with participants from George Washington University, New School University, University of North Carolina, University of Tillburg (Netherlands), Stockholm University and Grenoble (European), Thammasat University (Thailand), Sherbrooke and McGill (Canada) and Chinese University of Hong Kong (IFSAM 2002). The author attended the demonstrations of these universities and then questioned how an Australian university that uses distance education, online and oncampus methods to deliver undergraduate education, can use teams to achieve learning outcomes. The University of Southern Queensland student groups usually represent various countries in the Asia Pacific region and worldwide. For example the 4688 undergraduate external course enrolments in semester 1 2004 in the Faculty of Business, included 3,400 domestic course enrolments from the diverse Australian population and the rest was international external enrolments from especially the Asia Pacific region. The assumption was made that students who are interested in international management may in future be joining companies who require managers to work in dispersed teams. Therefore the undergraduate international management course was selected as a course which could incorporate the design of a team assignment.

The paper first provides an overview of challenges to distance management education as well as the relevance of specific theories for the basis of the design of the task. It discusses the design of the task for distance education students to compare and contrast two countries by using discussion boards, email and resources to cooperate to write a coherent report. It documents the students' pre-course experiences, how the teams attempted to deal with the task and their post course feedback on the communication and technological difficulties of virtual teams in a distance education context.

Challenges in distance management education

Traditionally distance education implied that students are assisted in achieving learning outcomes by course leaders or lecturers communicating by means of study materials, emails, teletutorials and video conferencing. The detractors of distance education note that it is a passive learning format and students feel isolated because of a lack of interaction. The more recent prevalence of courses offered via the Internet sparked a debate as to the contrast between web-based courses and face to face classroom discussions and the assumption is that web-based courses create fundamental shifts in the role of the instructor or dynamics among students (Bowers, 2003). Anecdotal evidence suggest that some students find on-line discussions or chat rooms or discussion boards acceptable as they believe that dominant students could not monopolise the discussion, reserved students would be able to voice their opinions and students would have time to analyse statements before responding. Kilpatrick and Bound (2003) distinguish between online delivery which refers to a range of delivery modes of where being online is a component of the processes designed for learning whereas online learning is defined as a learning process which uses online delivery.

Further difficulties that emerge in virtual teams are participation, team development, and building trust. Wenger (2001) deals with the concept of non-participation in a community of practice and notes that a member may be an outsider, a peripheral participant, or be marginalized – these experiences influence the identity of the member and the group. Learning within these communities is a matter of engagement, imagination, and alignment. Chang, Bordia and Duck (2003) confirm that integrative and punctuated equilibrium models of group development are complimentary and advise that early developmental issues such as building trust can be given attention so that the groups' ability to cope with interruptions in the task may be enhanced. Trust and social bonding could be of critical importance to the functioning of such teams and these barriers could impede satisfactory performance in virtual teams (Kimble, Li & Barlow 2003).

Choice of network-, group-, virtual team or communities of practice theory

In order to design a learning experience one can draw on research on the use of teams in organisations (for example see Champoux 2003; Harrison, Price, Gavin & Florey 2002; Yukl 1998), boundary spanning business networks and teams (Erwee in Wiesner & Millett, 2000; Hastings 1993), team development (Chang, Bordia & Duck, 2003; Mallon & Kierney 2001), teams in knowledge creating companies (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Poh 2001), the creation of global virtual teams (Montoya-Weiss, Massey & Song 2001) and cross-cultural knowledge management (Holden 2002). However, there are fewer references to the use of virtual teams in management education (Bowers 2003), knowledge networks and communities of practice (Allee 2000) and effective virtual teams through communities of practice (Kimble, Li & Barlow 2003).

Researchers debate whether the entities that they study can be defined as groups, virtual teams, business networks, virtual organisations, communities of practice or similar concepts. Communities of practice refer to a specific kind of community who is focused on a domain of knowledge, accumulate expertise in this domain, develop shared practice by interacting around problems, solutions, and insights, and build a common store of knowledge (Wenger 2001). In contrast virtual teams are often classified in terms of physical proximity, organisational membership or communication synchronicity. For example Kimble, Li and Barlow (2003) present a framework for categorising virtual teams and argue that these teams operate in 'two spaces' simultaneously namely the physical space and the electronic space.

The differences between communities of practice and different types of teams or networks can be highlighted. In teams in organizations, the membership, task, objectives and structure of the team are prescribed by the organization whereas these are negotiated among members of the community of practice. Allee (2003) points out that members of a community of practice participate because they personally identify with the topic and enterprise of the community, are more like volunteer organizations and redefine itself in an emergent, organic way. She postulates that the focus in informal knowledge networks

is on building or expanding relationships continuously, that such networks could have a short term existence with the aim to collect and share information or they may develop a set of tools or conventions for knowledge dissemination. She states that networking does not make for a community of practice as communities require a 'sense of mission' based on their shared understanding, but do concede that 'communities of practice emerge in the social space between project teams and knowledge networks'. However, Kimble, Li and Barlow (2003) believe that the use of a community of practice in a virtual team may provide one mechanism for overcoming some of the barriers in virtual teams.

In this pilot study the aim was not to explore some of the key issues in team dynamics such as work styles, group development, and the factors that might move a dispersed group toward a community of practice.

From this section the 'virtual team' can be described as a small group whose members a) are undergraduate students in international management studying by external study mode, b) have been assigned to the team by a course leader, c) are geographically dispersed, d) do not belong to the same organisation, e) do not necessarily operate in the same time periods, f) are provided with a defined task to be completed within six weeks and g) use information and communication tools to complete this task.

The team assignment in the international management course

The aim of the research was to use virtual teams in an International management undergraduate, distance education course to build a few international management competencies (Rhinesmith 1993) and to simulate the complexities of being in a team of cross-national persons (Adler 1997; Bowers 2002). Two assignments were designed to achieve this aim namely a team and an individual assignment. This paper concentrates on the team assignment and the specific aims of this team assignment were to

- Simulate the complexity of being in a team of cross-national persons, while recognising and using its diversity;

- Compare and contrast two countries on their economic, and socio-political background; legal frameworks; national cultures and strategies to manage the diversity in their workforces during the team assignment; and
- Deal with the communication and technological difficulties that international managers could experience with electronic media to complete a team task.

The students in this research are studying by distance education and their hard copy study packs are supplemented by learning materials on a WebCT platform. They have access to a teletutorial, a discussion board for each team and global or individual emails from the course leader. The team had to use all the resources provided, search for new resources and cooperate to write a coherent report. The distance education students were advised that as they move into a career in international management, it is a reality that they cannot physically meet team members, but need to cooperate in some way as a team to reach an organizational goal. They were made aware that similar cases occur in the public or private sectors in Australia and other countries. However technology makes it possible for a dispersed team to ‘meet’ via discussion boards or via email and this is incorporated into USQ’s delivery strategies. The assumption was not made that these teams could develop into communities of practice or that online learning could take place.

Virtual team management

Students received a list of their team members two weeks before the start of semester. The aims were to enable team members to have sufficient time to contact each other, give attention to social bonding and disclose personal information in order to build trust (Kimble, Li & Barlow 2003) and to finalize the research tasks for the assignment. Each group was assigned two countries to contrast and compare based on the chapters in Patrickson and O’ Brien, (2001) and selected readings.

Detailed guidelines for the aims of the team assignment, structure of the assignment, the countries to be studied, textbook and web resources, a schedule of team tasks over a six week period and how the assignment will be marked were provided to enable teams to

plan their completion of the assignment (Erwee 2003). Resources were placed in a Study Book and a book of Selected Readings. A discussion board for each group was set up as part of the distance education platform for the course.

The distance education students were advised of the type of communication and related problems that they could encounter when working in cross-national and dispersed teams. Each team member needed to anticipate and contribute to solving and managing the typical problems encountered in such teams. If students had problems, they had to consult the team members for assistance to solve it. If they had a problem with a team member, they had to find a way to work with that individual rather than assuming that the course leader will manage the problem on their behalf. A chapter from Adler (1997) was inserted in their selected readings to assist them to understand the dynamics in their teams.

In this section the objectives of the team assignment and its study resources were described. The actions taken by a course leader in managing the virtual teams were noted.

Method

Compiling the teams

The teams were derived from the class list that existed two weeks prior to the start of the semester. Due to privacy requirements, the USQConnect system only displays limited information about a student that could be accessed for this study and gender and state or country were used as variables to group students into teams. Gender and geographic dispersion are surface level types of diversity based on demographic characteristics (Harrison et al 2002). The course leader attempted to achieve gender balance and geographic dispersal in the twelve teams. The teams were requested to analyse diversity in the team and discover what resources each person has that could be made available to the team.

The sample. The sample consisted of 44 distance education students who enrolled for the undergraduate International Management course and functioned as a member of a team. The ten students who enrolled late or chose not to participate in teams are excluded from this study. The sample consisted of 64% females and 36% males and 86% of the sample reside in various states in Australia with 5% residing in Singapore, 2% in Malaysia and 7% in other countries. The age range indicates the maturity of the distance education students: 23% of respondents were younger than 24 years, 27% were between the ages of 25 to 30, 23% were between 31 and 37 years of age and 27 % were older than 39 years.

Data collection

Surveys: A **pre-course survey** was constructed based on the aims of the course and it was sent for peer review to the moderator and instructional designer of the course as well as a recent graduate. The moderator and recent graduate provided valuable feedback regarding the content of the questions. The survey was emailed to the enrolled students at the start of the course and a reminder was sent out to a few students who had not submitted their survey.

The pre-course survey gathered data on the student's experience in study groups during academic studies that may be relevant to the international management course. Section 1 established what experiences the student had of teams during their studies. Section 2 asked questions about their use of online discussion groups and emails during their studies, whereas Section 3 requested information on how they used electronic media as an individual student. Section 4 questioned them to what extent they had demonstrated general competencies in their work or study. In Section 5 students were asked to assess to what extent they encountered concepts such as diversity in workforces or how diversity in a company is linked to macro issues in a country.

A **separate post-course survey** was emailed to students by an administrator to discover the experiences of the students at the conclusion of the course. Although there

are some similar questions in both surveys, the surveys were not designed to be compared and contrasted as this was a pilot study. Therefore no attempt at comparative analysis of responses was made beyond a preliminary exploration of gender differences in both surveys. As the survey was sent prior to the exam period, only 30 of the 47 students responded.

Other sources of information were the student's comments on discussion boards and feedback in the teletutorial. Teams were also requested to email a section of their assignment noting the pressures that they experienced and how they managed it. Further in-depth thematic analyses of the discussion board, teletutorial sources or assignment sections are beyond the scope of this paper.

In this section the ways in which the teams were compiled, how the convenience sample was structured and the data collection by means of the two surveys were discussed.

Results

Discussion boards

Of the 12 teams, three posted 25, 16 and 14 messages respectively, two posted three and one message and the rest did not make use of their discussion board but chose to use email. The course leader only had access to the discussion boards and not to personal emails between students. As can be seen from the table below, there is no relationship between the use of the discussion board and the teams' marks.

Table 1 Use of discussion boards

Team: Countries studied	Messages posted on discussion board	Group mark
2A China Phillipines	0	37
2 China Phillipines	0	43
3 Hong Kong Thailand	3	30
4 Malaysia Taiwan	14	40
5 India Singapore	1	38
6 New Zealand Japan	16	34
7 Japan NZ	0	37
8 Singapore India	0	41
9 Malaysia Taiwan	0	Variable 36
10 Malaysia Taiwan	0	27
11 China Phillipines	0	35
12 Australia & Indonesia	25	31

Pre-course survey results

Tables 2.1 to 2.5 summarise the results of analysis of responses to the pre-course survey. Frequency analysis about experiences in types of teams indicates that the sample has ‘almost never’ (46%) or ‘seldom’ (25%) worked in *study teams* with people from different geographical areas (see Table 2.1). However up to thirty percent of the sample noted that during their studies, they ‘often’ had experience of working in teams with different genders, or had experienced differences in work styles in study teams, but have ‘almost never’ had any experience in guiding study teams to compile reports or accommodate diverse communication styles. The only significant difference between males and females in this section was males having less experience than females in working in study teams from different geographical areas ($F=5.06$, $p= 0.03$).

Table 2 International Management
Pre-course Survey Results (n=44)

Table 2.1. Types of teams during studies

Experiences in teams	Almost always	Often /to a large extent	Neutral	Seldom	Almost never
1.1 I have worked in study teams with people from different geographical areas	4.5	11.4	13.6	25.0	45.5
1.2 I have worked in study teams with people of all genders	15.9	31.8	18.2	9.1	25.0
1.3 I have experienced differences in work styles among team members during my studies	15.9	31.8	27.3	4.5	20.5
1.4 I have experienced how to build mutual respect and tolerance in a study team	15.9	1.4 36.4	20.5	6.8	20.5
1.5 I have guided study teams to compile reports	6.8	29.5	25.0	6.8	31.8
1.6 I guided team members on how to accommodate other people's diverse communication styles and beliefs	4.5	29.5	29.5	9.1	27.3

Almost all respondents use email at home (98%) or at work (77%), are familiar with the use of discussions boards or chat rooms (64%) and teleconferences or teletutorials (59%), but not with the use of videoconferencing (84%) or Lotus notes (91% - see Table 2.2). Most students use electronic media to search the Internet to compare issues for assignments (86%). Most of the respondents have experience in structuring assignments (89%), but relatively few have experience in structuring assignments based on team input via electronic media (25% - see Table 2.3). Significantly more females than males indicated that they use internet and email at home ($F=8.18, p=0.01$), but more males state that they are familiar with teleconferencing than females ($F=8.91, p=0.01$).

Table 2.2. Online discussion groups and use of email during your studies

2.1 To date, I have used the following during my studies:-	Yes	No
2.1.1 Internet and Email at work	77.3	22.7
2.1.2 Internet and Email at home	97.7	2.3
2.1.3 Chat rooms or discussion boards	63.6	36.4
2.1.4 Video conferencing	15.9	84.1
2.1.5 Teleconferencing or teletutorials	59.1	40.9
2.1.6 Lotus notes	9.1	90.9
2.1.7 Other (please specify)	Nil	Nil

Table 2.3. Use of electronic media as student

2.2 Whilst using electronic media as an individual student, I have:-	Almost always	Often / to a large extent	Neutral	Seldom	Almost never
2.2.1 Searched the Internet to compare issues	47.7	38.6	4.5	6.8	2.3
2.2.2 Experience in structuring assignments	36.4	52.3	11.4	Nil	Nil
2.2.3 Developed strategies to deal with personal and life pressures affecting my work	27.3	63.6	9.1	Nil	Nil
2.2.4 Compiled assignments based on team input	6.8	18.2	22.7	20.5	31.8
2.2.5 Experience in structuring assignments or reports into sections according to guidelines	29.5	54.5	13.6	2.3	Nil

Students made an assessment of the competencies that they have on entry into the course. Their perceptions are that during their work life they had experienced the challenges of management teams (82%), dealt with ambiguity and complexity (77%) and functioned in multicultural teams (64% - see Table 2.4). In contrast their competencies in completing analyses of human resource practices (45%), making related recommendations to companies (42%) or reflecting on their international career (25%) are less developed. Regarding the concepts in the international management course, eighty percent stated that they understand the concept of diversity in workforces, whereas

sixty six percent understand how diversity in a company is linked to macro issues in a country. Only thirty six percent stated that they have previously contrasted and compared countries on various dimensions (see Table 2.5). There were no significant differences between male and female responses in these sections.

Table 2.4 General competencies during studies or work life

During my studies or work life, I have:-	Almost always	Often / to a large extent	Neutral	Seldom	Almost never
3.1 Functioned in multicultural teams	18.2	45.5	13.6	15.9	6.8
3.2 Dealt with ambiguity and complexity	31.8	45.5	20.5	2.3	Nil
3.3 Experienced the challenges of study teams or management teams	27.3	54.5	13.6	Nil	4.5
3.4 Completed analyses of human resource practices	13.6	31.8	27.3	27.3	Nil
3.5 Made recommendations to a company	18.2	29.5	25.0	20.5	6.8
3.6 Reflected on my international career	4.5	20.5	34.1	13.6	27.3

Table 2.5. Concept development

Regarding the concepts in this course, I:-	Almost always	Often / to a large extent	Neutral	Seldom	Almost never
4.1 Have contrasted and compared countries on various dimensions	11.4	25.0	22.7	29.5	11.4
4.2 Understand the concept of diversity in workforces	27.3	52.3	20.5	Nil	Nil
4.3 Understand how diversity in a company is linked to macro issues in a country	15.9	50.0	27.3	4.5	2.3

Post-course survey results

Table 3 which appears at the end of the paper summarises the results of analysis of responses to the post-course survey. Responses to questions about the outcomes of the three major learning objectives of the course indicate that the majority (86%) regard the team assignment as a significant learning experience, feel more confident in dealing with the challenges of virtual teams (87%) and gained insight into diversity management in two societies (87%).

More than fifty percent of the respondents noted that the age, gender and geographic diversity in the teams did not affect its outcomes. However eighty six percent commented on the difference in work styles among members. Only forty percent of the respondents agreed that ‘the diversity in the group lead to breakthrough thinking’ whereas thirty percent submitted a ‘neutral’ response and thirty percent disagreed with the statement. More females than males agreed with this statement ($F=4.82$, $p=0.04$).

Seventy three percent of the respondents argued that work pressures had a significant impact on their contribution to the team. More males than females agreed with this statement ($F=4.99$, $p=0.03$).

With regard to team processes, the majority noted that their teams developed a strategy for assigning responsibilities to members (70%), monitored progress on a regular basis (67%) and critiqued each other’s contributions (57%). Fifty percent of the respondents noted that one member took a lead to coordinate the compilation of the assignment and forty percent confirmed that a few members in the team did most of the work. Only thirty percent stated that they tried to guide members to accommodate each other’s diverse communication styles and beliefs. Members also admitted that they did not use the discussion boards effectively (90%), believed that they learnt to use email more effectively (60%) and thirty percent stated that the lack of verbal communication had a negative effect on the team. The majority of team members feel positive about

working in a virtual team (68%) with males reacting more positively than females ($F=5.34, p=0.03$).

In this section the results from the pre-course and post surveys were noted separately. It must be noted that the two surveys were not designed to be compatible.

Discussion

This pilot study to use virtual teams to simulate the working experience of international managers for an undergraduate distance education course for mature age students was successful. It was noted in the pre-course survey results, the participants had already had rather high understanding of the concept of diversity in workforces and in a company linked to macro issues in a country. Although these mature age students previously experienced the challenges of management teams and dealt with ambiguity and complexity in their careers, they now developed a competency and feel more confident in dealing with assignments in and related challenges of virtual teams. This confirms that the students' initial understanding and experience were further enhanced by participating in the course.

The post course survey indicated that after completing the course, they gained greater insight into diversity management in two contrasting societies, and more extensive understanding of the concept of diversity in workforces as well as the linkages between diversity in a company to macro issues in a country. The results seem to confirm that the respondents acted as members of virtual teams (Brower 2003; Harrison et al 2002; Kimble, Li & Barlow 2003) rather than a network (Erwee 2002) or a community of practice (Allee 2000). These mature age distance education students confirm that their work pressures had a significant impact on their contribution to the virtual team. The practical implications are that the students' competency in acting as members of virtual teams are enhanced and their increased understanding of diversity management can be used in their current workplaces.

The general difficulties of participation, team development, and building trust that occur in virtual teams also emerged in this study. Although the pilot study could not explore models of group development (see Chang, Bordia & Duck 2003), members indicated that over the time period they developed strategies for assigning responsibilities to members and to monitor progress. As team members feel positive about working in a virtual team and were able to critique each other's contributions, it suggests that a level of trust and some social bonding developed (see Kimble, Li & Barlow 2003). With regard to participation and engagement (see Wenger 2001), there is evidence of variable participation and potentially social loafing. Respondents noted that specific members coordinate the compilation of the assignment and a few members in the team did most of the work. Only a relatively small group tried to guide members to accommodate each other's diverse communication styles and beliefs. The practical implications are that the mature age students again experienced and had to manage the complexities of participation, team development, building trust and social loafing that occur in virtual teams as well as teams in organisations.

An issue that was not adequately addressed in this pilot study is the effects of surface and deep-level diversity on group functioning. In this study age, gender and geographic diversity in the teams did not affect its outcomes, but differences in work styles among members could have affected the teams' functioning and outcomes. The course also did not seem to provide sufficient guidance to assist the virtual teams on how to exploit the diversity in the team to attempt more 'breakthrough thinking'. The results point to students accepting this method of course delivery and the students believing they learnt from the experience. There should have been more investigation into how the students felt about being put into groups and being allocated assessment topics (countries to study) without having any choice.

Further attention in course design could be given to assist students to use the discussion boards more effectively to overcome the negative effects of lack of verbal communication and in structuring assignments based on team input via electronic media. Given the virtual context, the forms of communication whether synchronised,

asynchronised, visual, voice and the influence of elearning tools like WebCt would play a role in future investigation. However, a contrary argument could be that the dominant message for educational research has focused on pedagogy not technology and some may argue that focusing on the technology would be a backward step. The next step in similar research could therefore be aimed at investigating work styles, group development, and the factors likely to move a dispersed group toward a community of practice.

Acknowledgements:

The contributions of the course moderator, Cec Pedersen in commenting on the pre-course survey and Erin White in commenting on the post-course survey and data analysis are gratefully acknowledged.

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Table 3 International Management: Post-course Survey Results (n=30)

Code	During this course	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.1	We experienced differences in work styles among team members	23.3	63.3	6.7	3.3	3.3
1.2	Team members' work pressures impacted on their contribution	43.3	30.0	13.3	10.0	3.3
1.3	The gender diversity in the team affected its outcomes	-	3.3	43.3	43.3	10.0
1.4	Our team learnt to use the discussion boards effectively	-	10.0	43.3	30.0	16.7
1.5	Our team developed a strategy for assigning responsibilities to members	26.7	43.3	23.3	-	6.7
1.6	I guided the team to accommodate other people's diverse communication styles and beliefs	6.7	23.3	53.3	16.7	-
1.7	The lack of verbal communication had a negative effect on the team	3.3	33.3	26.7	26.7	10.0
1.8	Members were concerned about letting the team down	13.3	43.3	30.0	13.3	-
1.9	Our team's diversity lead to breakthrough thinking	10.0	30.0	30.0	26.7	3.3
1.10	Some team members did not reply to communications on time	26.7	46.7	13.3	6.7	6.7
1.11	The team was homogeneous in terms of cultural background	6.7	33.3	30.0	26.7	3.3
1.12	I gained insight into diversity in two societies	43.3	43.3	10.0	-	3.3
1.13	Our team process appeared to be quite ad-hoc and unstructured	6.7	10.0	23.3	43.3	16.7
1.14	A few members of the group did most of the work	16.7	23.3	26.7	33.3	-
1.15	Team members contacted each other before the start of semester	6.7	46.7	6.7	30.0	10.0
1.16	Members are positive about working in the team	10.0	56.7	23.3	6.7	3.3
1.17	We critiqued each others' contributions	13.3	36.7	26.7	23.3	-
1.18	I feel more confident about dealing with the challenges of virtual teams	16.7	70.0	6.7	6.7	-
1.19	We monitored our progress on a regular basis	10.0	56.7	20.0	10.0	3.3
1.20	The geographical dispersion of the team had a negative effect	6.7	16.7	20.0	46.7	10.0
1.21	One member in the team coordinated the compilation of the assignment	10.0	40.0	20.0	26.7	3.3
1.22	Members freely offered advice to others to improve their work	10.0	46.7	23.3	13.3	6.7
1.23	Our team learnt to use emails more effectively	13.3	46.7	26.7	13.3	-
1.24	I regard this team assignment as a learning opportunity	43.3	43.3	10.0	3.3	-
1.25	The age diversity in the team affected its outcomes	3.3	16.7	26.7	40.0	13.3
1.26	During my studies or work life, I have reflected on my international career	20.0	63.3	6.7	10.0	-