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**Abstract**

This paper describes an experimental social learning program that has recently become available to help immigrants and international students extend their social skills for quick adjustment to the foreign country. The EXCELL™ (Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership) program is a practice-focussed group program designed to enhance foreigners' confidence and skills in workplace, academic and other interpersonal contexts. The paper reviews the conceptual framework behind the EXCELL™ program and how this leads to the group process for teaching each sociocultural competency. There is a summary of the evidence of the effectiveness of the program when undertaken by immigrants, international students, and mixed groups of overseas-born and local-born students. The evidence drawn from evaluation studies conducted in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, shows that the program enhanced the social interaction skills and social self-efficacy of both overseas – and local-born. The latter finding shows that EXCELL™ also serves well as a general social effectiveness program. The theoretical and practical implication of these findings for facilitating newcomers' cross-cultural adaptation and enhancing cross ethnic relations are discussed.

As the trend towards globalisation continues, it has become increasingly common for people to move across countries as immigrants, international students, and expatriate workers. Australia, for example, is an immigrant nation that has received hundreds of thousands of immigrants (main sources including New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Asia) in the past decade, and a host country to large numbers of international students (mainly from Asia). There were over 63,000 higher education students undertaking onshore international education in Australia in 1999 alone (Fell, 1999).

For immigrants, international students, and expatriate workers from a culturally dissimilar background to adjust to an unfamiliar educational system and workplace, they will need to establish interpersonal relations and communicate effectively with host nationals (Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones, & Callan, 1991; Fan & Mak, 1998; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988; Mak, 2001). Their initial experiences in the new country are often analogous to those of strangers being lost in a new city, and who are in need of a map to help them reach their destinations.

### **Intercultural Social Learning: Overcoming Psychosocial Barriers**

The sociocultural adjustment of immigrants and sojourners comprises culture-specific skills, the ability to negotiate the host culture, and general behavioural competence (Searle & Ward, 1990). It can best be interpreted within a social learning context, and is influenced by knowledge about the new culture, amount of contact with host nationals, length of residence in a new culture, cultural identity, and cultural distance (Ward, 1996). They should be able to benefit from social competence training presented as an intercultural program that will enable them to make quick adjustments and increase their chances for academic and social success in the host country (Bochner, 1986).

Intercultural training can enhance newcomers' culture-specific knowledge and facilitate their understanding of cross-cultural experiences and observations. Reviews by Black and Mendenhall (1990) and Deshpande and Viswesvaran (1992) have shown that intercultural training confers positive effects on affective, behavioural, and cognitive domains. Currently, individuals receiving cross-cultural training tend to be expatriate workers, such as diplomats, business executives, and peace corp workers, but not international students or immigrants. Where training is available to international students, it is likely to be in the form of a cross-cultural awareness program, that is, a cognitive program rather than a skills-based, practice-oriented, experiential program that is more in line with the social learning approach advocated by Bochner (1986) and Ward (1996).

Recently, collaboration between the authors and Marvin Westwood and Ishu Ishiyama of the University of British Columbia, Canada has led to the development of EXCELL™ (Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and

A Social Cognitive Learning Program for Facilitating intercultural Relations Leadership), an innovative sociocultural competencies training program designed to facilitate the adjustment of newcomers to a culture, using a social learning theoretical model. Consisting of four to six three-hour sessions,

EXCELL™ is an action-oriented, systematic group program designed to help newcomers become effective and confident participants in the new society, thus increasing their chances of academic and occupational success (Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1998).

Currently implemented in Canada, Australia, the UK, and the Netherlands, the EXCELL™ Program aims to provide optimal conditions for newcomers to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills for successful social interactions with host nationals while maintaining their original cultural identity. EXCELL™ is designed to facilitate the development of social confidence and skills through recognizing and addressing the existence of potential psychosocial barriers that may impede the development of sociocultural competence in newcomers (Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1999), and facilitates.

One potential barrier pertains to adult newcomers' limited access to coaching and practice opportunities in sociocultural skills. People will benefit from being exposed to role models and coaching in effective micro social skills. In the initial period of arrival, newcomers may be overwhelmed by the number of adjustments to make, while grieving over being away from family members, friends, and a familiar lifestyle (Anderson, 1994; Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Pederson, 1991; Stening, 1979). Not surprising, recent newcomers often lack the energy and motivation to focus on intercultural learning. Instead, Ishiyama (1989; 1995) has suggested that they tend to have heightened initial needs for self-validation, including the affirmation of their sense of self through interacting with co-ethnics and conducting familiar, rather than novel, activities.

Newcomers may experience considerable interpersonal anxiety as they begin to interact with host nationals (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988), and attempt to cope with their anxiety by minimising contact with host nationals. Newcomers may become particularly resistant to developing sociocultural competence when their original cultural pride is threatened (Bond, 1992; Mak, Westwood, & Ishiyama, 1994). They may react negatively to a perceived pressure to abandon their own customs and replace them with customs of the new country. However, if these cultural adjustment tasks are presented as additions to the newcomers' existing repertoire of social skills that are highly advantageous for performing the new roles in a foreign country, most people will be motivated to develop social competencies leading to educational and career successes in the host society to be attractive.

Previous works (e.g. Brislin, Landis, & Brandt, 1983; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983) have delineated different approaches to intercultural training, but have not presented a theoretical discussion of what makes cultural learning effective despite various potential psychosocial barriers. Although Taylor (1994) has argued for a significant link between becoming interculturally competent and Mezirow's (1991) theory of perspective

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transformative learning, he has not provided a specific explanation of how sociocultural competencies can be acquired or trained.

This paper will review the theoretical bases of learning sociocultural competencies, leading to the rationale for the group learning process involved in EXCELL TM. The special features of the EXCELL TM Program, introduced to facilitate this learning process, will be identified. There will also be a summary and discussion of the evidence of the effectiveness of the program when undertaken by immigrants, international students, and mixed groups of international and local-born students. The evidence reviewed has come from recent program evaluations conducted in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

### **Theoretical Bases of Learning Sociocultural Competencies**

Gudykunst, Guzley, and Hammer (1996) have identified that a major problem in the literature of intercultural training is the lack of an articulated theory underlying the various designs and techniques in use. EXCELL TM, however, focuses on behavioural competence training, utilising an integrated model combining instructional implications from established paradigms of operant and classical conditioning and especially social cognitive learning in a group setting, while simultaneously addressing the potential psychosocial barriers (details in Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1999). The learning paradigms are not presented as being fundamentally adversarial, but have evolved over decades of research to explain aspects of the complex processes of human learning. The theoretical discussion summarised below will advance the case that intercultural competence training with an experiential social cognitive learning orientation is likely to be more effective than other types of training programs (e.g., cultural awareness training without skills development, observational learning without corrective feedback, or peer pairing without coaching and group support).

### **Operant and Classical Conditioning**

The principles of operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953, 1972) for shaping new behaviours and changing the likelihood of behaviours are well-established and widely applied in educational and therapeutic settings. Following these principles, recent immigrants and sojourners can be trained to develop micro social skills for career and educational success appropriate to the new culture if the following conditions are met. First, the learners' responses to specific social cues are repeatedly rewarded by praises and successes. Second, the learners' appropriate social behaviours are reinforced by reduction of embarrassment and anxiety about unfamiliar social interactions. Third, coaching and practice opportunities are available to facilitate corrective feedback and perfection of new skills, plus generalisation to other appropriate situations in future.

The established paradigm of classical conditioning that can be traced back to Pavlov's (1927) experiments is useful for understanding some foreigners' conditioned social anxiety in interacting with hosts. Initially neutral stimuli (e.g., a foreign accent, visibly different facial features, and unfamiliar gestures) may become associated with a high level of anxiety. However, counter-conditioning procedures -such as systematic desensitisation -can be implemented to help individuals extinguish conditioned anxiety through repeatedly pairing the anxiety-provoking stimuli with the relaxation response (Wolpe, 1958, 1973).

Applied to dealing with anxiety in cross-cultural encounters, this would involve providing opportunities for newcomers to interact with hosts in a supportive and relaxed atmosphere with potentially rewarding outcomes. The acquisition of a few simple but effective micro social skills (e.g., introducing oneself, and making a request appropriate to the new culture) through the operant conditioning procedures described above is likely to increase the chances of having a rewarding social interaction.

### **Social Cognitive Learning**

Bandura's (1977a) theory of social learning, refined in 1986 as the theory of social cognitive learning, is not adversarial to the fundamentals of classical and operant learning paradigms, but has greatly broadened the understanding of the processes of human acquisition and maintenance of complex social behaviours. Based on Bandura's theory, an individual will be likely to imitate the behaviours of someone who appears to be similar in an important way, is respectable, and is observed to have earned rewards for some specific behaviours. Through observations alone, trainees will develop expectations that specific behaviours in certain social situations will lead to desirable consequences, a process known as vicarious learning. After watching demonstrations of effective social behaviours in strategic social situations by credible role models, trainees are likely to perform those behaviours when opportunities arise, especially if an explanation of the underlying rationale of the behaviours is given (Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1999).

Observing successful social performances by others similar to oneself (e.g., a visibly different minority group member in the host country) enhances the trainee's perceived self-efficacy, or belief in one's ability to carry out a particular behaviour. Increased self-efficacy in a strategic action in turn increases the probabilities of appropriate goal setting, as well as attempting and eventually mastering the task (Berry & West, 1993). According to Bandura (1977b, 1989, 1997), efficacy beliefs can regulate human functioning through integrated cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection (of activities and environment) processes. In contrast to the experiences of newcomers who are shown effective micro social skills and given praise and corrective feedback for their practice, newcomers without the observational, shaping, and coaching opportunities may become discouraged and believe that they will never be socially effective in the new country (Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1999).

Another important concept within Bandura's social cognitive learning theory (1986) is reciprocal determinism, which means person variables, situation variables, and behaviours continuously impact on and interact with one another. This represents an important augmentation to classical and operant conditioning theories focussed on the effect of the environment on behaviours. Reciprocal determinism recognises that individual behaviours can have an impact on the situation as well as on personal variables (e.g., self-esteem). Hence, changes to more effective intercultural social behaviours can result in a more congenial and receptive social environment as well as a more socially efficacious person. Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama (1999) have proposed that Bandura's idea of a self-generated environment is congruent with Anderson's (1994) model of cross-cultural adaptation, which views

the individual as an active agent in choosing how to respond in a foreign environment and in so doing creates his or her own adjustment.

Human agency and self-regulation represent the cornerstones of Bandura's (1992) recent conceptualisation of social learning. Relevant efficacy beliefs and self-regulation processes, including self-reinforcement, will facilitate the acquisition and maintenance of social skills (both generically or interculturally).

### **Role-Based Training in Groups: An Integrated Instructional Model**

Implications for developing sociocultural competence from the three models of learning reviewed above are integrated in an instructional model for role-based group training in the EXCELL™ program (Mak, Westwood, Barker, & Ishiyama, 1999 for details). The group setting provides a safe and supportive setting for observing multiple models and obtaining feedback from practising the new role behaviours in the presence of people with similar needs.

The safety and inclusiveness of the group can help trainees relax, reducing social anxiety and defensiveness. Being with others with similar needs also provides trainees with opportunities for mutual validation. Newcomers can affirm their original cultural uniqueness, recognise common struggles and frustrations due to their unfamiliarity with the new culture and language difficulties, and share a common desire for career and educational success in the host country.

When a climate of trust is formed in the group, members will be more willing to undertake "risk-taking" inherent in confronting new social situations and adopting novel social behaviours. Group-based learning opens up opportunities for contributions and feedback from multiple group members, who can help each other by being either role models or role partners in simulated role-plays. The group is also effective in reinforcing goal setting and contracting for action outside the group meetings, as accountability to peers is often very motivating for trainees.

A Social Cognitive Learning Program for Facilitating intercultural Relations Mak, Westwood, and Ishiyama (1994) have further explained how role-based learning in intercultural training groups represents an augmentational approach to acquiring sociocultural competencies rather than an assimilationist or replacement approach. Recent immigrants and sojourners are encouraged to view social challenges as part and parcel of novel social roles. To navigate successfully in the host country will hence require finding out what the new roles entail and then to practise the new role behaviours required for rewarding encounters with host nationals. At the same time, trainees can choose to retain their customary social skills for interacting with co-ethnics. This way, the training is unlikely to threaten newcomers' original cultural identity.

Experiential learning through practising novel social roles has a behavioural focus; cognition and affect are of secondary importance in the early learning stages (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Nevertheless, once mastered, the

new behaviour contributes to increased self-efficacy in sociocultural competence, which may enhance self-esteem generally. Integration of the newly acquired skills therefore facilitates changes in how individuals feel and think about themselves and their training group.

### **The EXCELL™ Group Process**

The benefits of adopting an integrated instructional model of experiential intercultural training in groups have informed the design of the EXCELL™ program, aimed at optimising the development of strategic generic social competencies. The program targets the shaping of key social competencies useful for accessing a new culture (including participating in a group, seeking help and making social contact) and for negotiating with host nationals (such as expressing disagreement, making and refusing requests, and seeking and giving feedback). The EXCELL™ group process in teaching each sociocultural competency consists of five stages: (1) alliance building and assessment, (2) cultural mapping, (3) demonstration, practice, feedback, and coaching, (4) goal setting and contracting, and (5) transfer of learning (see Westwood, Mak, Barker, & Ishiyama, 2000 for details). Below is a summary of this teaching process.

1. Alliance building and assessment: The trainers create an environment in which the unique cultural backgrounds of participants are acknowledged with respect, making it safe for trainees to share their personal experiences with challenging intercultural social encounters in one particular area of key competency (e.g., seeking help).
2. Cultural mapping: After identifying a challenging specific context (e.g., request for an extension to submit an assignment), the trainer guides the group to come up with a succinct description of one effective and appropriate way of behaving in this specific context. The trainer also provides a cultural explanation of why these behaviours are preferred in the host setting. For example, time is valued in a Western university setting, and so straight talk in a set consultation timeslot with an academic staff

A Social Cognitive Learning Program for Facilitating intercultural Relations member is preferred. An illustration of the cultural mapping process is given in Mak et al. (1998). While a cultural map describes precise and specific behaviours (that is, micro skills) in sequential steps, it is not intended to be prescriptive; alternative supportive strategies relevant to specific scenarios are also discussed.

3. Demonstration, practice, feedback, and coaching: Trainer models a practice scenario to replicate the social situation, with trainees observing the interaction and commenting on it.

They 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 trainees master specific micro-skills.

4. The next stage consists of goal setting and contracting to apply learning in a real social situation. At the conclusion of each session, trainees are encouraged to create realistic and specific action plans, and are invited to report the outcomes at the following group session.

5. Transfer of learning is observed if trainees can apply their cultural maps and recently developed behavioural competencies to their own particular educational, work, or social setting. It is at this juncture that trainees begin to experience feelings of success and self-confidence by doing. If some trainees were not so successful in applying the competencies as they had hoped, the trainers may need to provide further feedback and perhaps explore alternative strategies with the trainees.

### **Special Features of the EXCELL™ Program**

It follows from the above discussion that a number of special features characterise the delivery of the EXCELL™ program. They include the replacement of social anxiety of efficacy beliefs, focus on key social competencies, having both minority and mainstream trainers to co-facilitate the group, cultural mapping, coaching and practice over several sessions, having a participant's manual, allowing newcomers to settle in first, special requirements for trainers course, and having a trainer's manual with a section on program evaluation.

The EXCELL™ program recognises that social anxiety in intercultural interactions among newcomers is a common experience. The training aims to replace that anxiety with efficacy beliefs reinforced by mastery of the key social competencies and the associated cultural maps. The social skills taught represent discrete competencies applicable in a range of social situations common in accessing a new culture and negotiating with host nationals.

EXCELL™ recognises the advantages of having multiple role models and the program should ideally be delivered jointly by a trainer from the mainstream background and a trainer from a minority background. Role models from the mainstream cultural background can provide an authentic explanation of the host cultural code

A Social Cognitive Learning Program for Facilitating intercultural Relations (especially useful in cultural mapping), whereas role models from minority backgrounds that immigrants and sojourners can identify with are particularly credible and encouraging for the development of efficacy beliefs.

EXCELL™ provides opportunities for observing live and videotaped role-plays of social situations, followed by coaching of appropriate social responses. These are then refined through repeated practice and corrective feedback. The training program is delivered in four to six three-hour sessions to allow for practice in real-life social situations to ensure transfer of learning. Trainees are also encouraged to complete relevant prescribed activities in a participants' manual between sessions.

The EXCELL™ program caters for the developmental needs of newcomers who will have to be in the host country for long enough (at least a few weeks) to have dealt with their initial "survival" needs, and are now seeking effective ways of engaging with the new culture. They will need to have an adequate fluency in the host language to participate in a group program, and will have to be motivated to achieve mastery of intercultural competencies.

Accredited trainers delivering the EXCELL™ program should have experience in cross-cultural human service delivery, have well-developed group training skills, and be familiar with the cultural maps of successful interactions and the accompanying relevant behaviours. In order to be eligible for enrolling in a three-day intensive EXCELL™ Trainer Accreditation Course (for details please contact the authors), people should normally possess a tertiary qualification in psychology, social work, education, or other relevant fields of study. Another special feature of the EXCELL™ program is that its trainer's manual has a section on quantitative program evaluation, which enables pre- and post-training assessment of participants' social interaction skills (using Ishiyama's 1996 Interpersonal Skills Checklist), and their social self-efficacy (using an instrument adapted from Fan and Mak, 1998). These measures, together with a brief program evaluation questionnaire in the trainer's manual, allow and encourage trainers to evaluate their own program delivery. As the research findings reviewed in the following sections will show, the empirical results accumulated from various sources to date have indicated the evidence-based nature of the EXCELL™ program. The evaluation studies summarised included two Canadian studies where the program was offered as part of a community college academic curriculum to classes attended by Canadian -as well as immigrant students (a mixed training group approach). Next a summary of findings from two British studies conducted with international students will be given. This will then be followed by a summary of an Australian study involving (1) a sample of overseas-born students who received the program as a personal development course at two universities, and (2) a mixed sample of Australian-born and overseas-born students receiving training as either part of their academic courses, or as on-campus college residents at an Australian university. The evaluation tools included various indicators of social interaction skills, social situational avoidance, intercultural social self-efficacy, and ratings of different aspects of the program delivery. Qualitative information on changes in social confidence and experiences with the program was also obtained in some evaluation studies.

## **Program Evaluation in Canada**

For his doctoral dissertation in counselling psychology at the University of British Columbia, Shergill (1997) conducted an evaluation of the EXCELL™ sociocultural competencies program with 36 students in a community college in Vancouver, Canada. The research design incorporated an experimental and a delayed experimental group (which doubled as a control group), and used both "blind" observers' ratings of behavioural skills in simulated role-play, and participants' self-reports. Training was provided as part of a Licensed Practice Nursing Program to (1) an experimental group with eight Canadian-born and 12 overseas-born students, and (2) a delayed experimental group with seven Canadian-born and nine overseas-born students. The delayed experimental group doubled up as a control group in the first part of the evaluation. Across the two groups, the overseas-born included nine Indian-born and seven Filipinos. Data were obtained prior to training, at completion of training, and at four months' follow-up.

The first part of the evaluation took place at the end of the training for only the experimental group. Independent raters unaware of whether individuals were from the experimental or the delayed experimental group, were asked to rate individual subjects' interjection and clarification skills in a simulated role-play. Subjects in the experimental group were given significantly higher ratings in the behavioural skills than those in the delayed experimental group.

The second part of the evaluation was based on self-reports from both groups of subjects. Individuals' pre- and post-training self-reported scores on Ishiyama's (1999) Situational Social Avoidance Scale and Ishiyama's (1996) Interpersonal Skills Checklist were compared. The data showed significant decreases in participants' social avoidance tendency and increase in their social interaction skills following the completion of the training program.

Results for the third part of the evaluation were obtained at four-months, follow-up with 27 participants from the two training groups. Self-reports on applying four core social competencies (interjection, clarification, social conversation, and conflict management) taught in the training program to real life situations, alongside the effectiveness of the applications, were assessed. All the respondents had applied interjection, clarification, and social conversation skills, while 81.3 % had also applied conflict management skills to real-life situations. Respondents reported mixed effectiveness in interjecting in real life. Two thirds of respondents had experienced successful applications, 34% had experienced unsuccessful applications, and 44% had obtained positive feedback from other people in applying this competency.

In contrast, all the respondents were successful in seeking clarification, with 96% receiving positive feedback from it, and only 15% experienced unsuccessful applications.

Likewise, almost all the respondents (97%) reported successfully engaging in social conversations, with 93% obtaining positive feedback from other people, and only 19% experienced unsuccessful applications.

A very high 81 % of respondents reported applying conflict management successfully, while 52% had received positive feedback for the applications. Forty-four per cent of respondents had experienced unsuccessful application of conflict management skills.

Overall, Shergill's (1997) evaluation clearly showed the efficacy of the program in enhancing the trainees' social interaction skills (based on independent ratings as well as self-reports). This is despite the rather small sample sizes and the mixed composition of the groups (some Canadian-born and some overseas-born), and in encouraging trainees to transfer their learning to real-life situations beyond the period of training. Moreover, the applications were mostly successful, eliciting positive feedback from other people.

In a more recent Canadian study with community college students receiving the EXCELL™ program as part of their course on Health Sciences, Wong (2001) has reported qualitative feedback obtained from post-training interviews with 19 immigrant and five Canadian-born trainees. Nine immigrants were from a Southeast Asian or Filipino background, and seven originally from India or Pakistan. Interviewees indicated that making social contact (14 mentions) and seeking help (10 mentions) were the two most useful competencies taught in the training program. Moreover, 23 interviewees reported a post-training increase in confidence in social situations, with the remaining person reporting being confident at both points of time. On analysing the information on sources of changes in self-confidence, the most common source 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). The activities described as especially useful were (a) demonstration, observation, and modelling (11 mentions), and (b) practice of skills (nine mentions). These benefits would appear to be consistent with Bandura's (1977b, 1986) ideas about the utility of observational learning and the various sources of self-efficacy, particularly the importance of mastery experiences.

### **Program Evaluation in the United Kingdom**

A Social Cognitive Learning Program for Facilitating intercultural Relations Mak, Barker, Logan, and Millman (1999) have reported findings from two British studies on the effectiveness of the EXCELL™ program with international students. In the first evaluation, 10 postgraduate international students (from Asian and African countries) enrolled in a course on Hospital Management at Leeds University, completed Ishiyama's (1996) Interpersonal Skills Checklist and Ishiyama's (1999) Situational Social Avoidance Scale prior to and on completion of training. The results indicated a significant increase in interaction skills and a significant reduction of social avoidance tendency. The second evaluation was conducted in Southbank University, London, with eight international students (seven Europeans and one Asian). Self-reports on an intercultural social self-efficacy measure adapted from Fan and Mak (1998) were collected before and after training. The data showed a significant increase in the international students' social self-efficacy in interacting with the British people on completion of the training program.

### **Program Evaluation in Australia**

Evaluations of the program with two different Australian student samples, have been reported in Mak, Barker, Logan, and Millman (1999). The first sample consisted of 45 overseas-born students (43 were international students, and two were immigrants) who completed the EXCELL™ program as a personal development program at Melbourne University or the University of Southern Queensland at Toowoomba. The students' countries of origin were diverse. Eight overseas-born students were from Indonesia, seven from Malaysia, four from Hong Kong, 14 from eight other Asian countries, and 12 from nine non-Asian countries.

The second or mixed sample (N = 30) comprised 14 Australian-born with an English-speaking background (ESB) and 16 overseas-born, trained in two mixed groups at the University of Southern Queensland. Among the overseas-born, 14 were from non-English-speaking background (NESB) - including nine Asian-born, and two from ESB. Twenty students completed the EXCELL™ program as part of the requirements of one of two academic units (one in cultural studies, and the other in communication), whereas ten students undertook EXCELL™ training as a personal development program for on-campus college residents.

Group participants in both samples were invited to complete a questionnaire prior to training in the first session and a post-training questionnaire on completion of the program in the sixth session. Both questionnaires assessed (1) students' social self-efficacy in interacting with local Australians in various academic and general social situations (adapted from Fan & Mak, 1998), and (2) students' social interaction skills using Ishiyama's (1996) Interpersonal Skills Checklist. The post-training survey further contained a program evaluation sheet, which included an item on the overall relevance of the program, and five items seeking participants' evaluation of aspects of the program.

Results obtained indicate significant increases in social self-efficacy scores on completion of the training, for both the overseas-born and the mixed sample. Detailed analyses further suggest that, within the mixed sample, the

A Social Cognitive Learning Program for Facilitating intercultural Relations sub-sample of 14 NESB overseas-born reported a significant increase of social self-efficacy (SSE) in interacting with locals; significant increase in SSE was also observed in the sub-sample of 14 ESB Australian-born.

Similarly, participants in both (1) the overseas-born only sample and (2) the mixed sample reported a significant increase in social interaction skills on completion of the training. Further analyses show that, within the mixed sample, the sub-sample of NESB overseas-born reported a significant increase of interaction skills; there was also some increase (albeit not statistically significant) in social interaction skills among the sub-sample of ESB Australian-born.

At the end of the EXCELL™ training, students were asked to rate the program overall in terms of the relevance to their needs. In the overseas-born student sample, 42% rated the program as "very relevant", 49% as "relevant", 9% as "not very relevant". In the mixed sample, 66% of students rated the program as "very relevant", 31% as "relevant", and 3% as "not very relevant".

Students' perceptions of various aspects of the program were assessed using 11-point scales, where 0 = of no value at all, and 10 = extremely valuable and useful. For the first sample, the ratings were generally very high (with mean scores from 8.04 for "Practice and coaching sessions" to 8.67 for "Demonstration by trainers"), except for a moderately high mean score of 6.77 for "Homework practice". For the second sample, all the ratings were consistently very high (with mean scores from 8.59 for "Homework practice" to 9.71 for "Practice and coaching").

Participants were also invited to indicate what they regarded as the most and the least useful parts of the program on the evaluation sheet. Most of the qualitative feedback obtained focussed on the effective aspects of the program, including the acquisition of cultural knowledge, the cultural mapping process, English language development, participation in role play, discovery and action-oriented learning, opportunities to deal with personal difficulties, safety in having practice sessions prior to real-life implementation, fostering of friendships, and confidence gains. Overall, the Australian evaluation study demonstrates the effectiveness of the program's experiential group learning approach and indicates multiple social benefits for both NESB and ESB participants.

## **Discussion of Findings from Program Evaluation**

The evaluation studies reviewed above sought to investigate whether EXCELL™, an intercultural social effectiveness training program developed from an experiential social learning approach, would bring about enhancement in interaction skills and social self-efficacy, and reduction in social avoidance. These benefits were indeed observed in samples of overseas-born university students in the United Kingdom and Australia. Self-report

A Social Cognitive Learning Program for Facilitating intercultural Relations surveys have shown that participation in the EXCELL™ program has resulted in a significant improvement in social interaction skills among international and immigrant students, as well as a significant increase in their self-efficacy in interacting with locals. The latter finding reflects an enhancement of the participants' beliefs that they can successfully perform or complete target social behaviours in academic and everyday situations. According to Bandura (1977b, 1997), self-efficacy expectancy enables individuals to produce the desired outcome by motivating them to try out the behaviour, set appropriate goals, invest substantial effort in practising the behaviour, persist in the face of difficulties, and finally achieve task mastery. For newcomers needing to access the host culture and negotiate challenging intercultural social interactions, having the requisite social self-efficacy is important for individuals to decide to attempt and gradually master the relevant competencies (a form of problem-focussed coping) instead of avoiding the potentially anxiety-provoking encounters (avoidance-focussed coping).

The Australian study further sought participants' ratings of different aspects of the program delivery, and found very favourable ratings of demonstrations and talks by trainers, practice and coaching, and group discussion in the overseas-born sample. These results suggest that the overseas-born welcomes an experiential group orientation in intercultural training, and appreciates the role modelling and corrective feedback components.

The implementation of the EXCELL™ program in mixed groups comprising both overseas- and native-born in Canada and Australia has shown some pleasant surprises. Despite the rather high initial levels of social self-efficacy and skills, participants in the mixed groups still reported significant improvements in social confidence and interaction skills, and lower levels of avoidance of social situations. The available ratings of program delivery were also consistently highly favourable.

Interview data obtained in the second Canadian study with a mixed group of participants (primarily immigrant trainees) have indicated that participants found demonstrations, observations, modelling, and practice of skills to be the most useful activities. Moreover, the most common sources of increases in self-confidence came from mastery experiences of practising, learning, and applying skills, as well as from physiological and affective states of feeling less anxious and stressful, and feeling good about themselves. These results are consistent with Bandura's (1977b, 1986) discussion of the sources of self-efficacy and the general principles of social or observational learning.

Based on detailed analyses of the Australian data, not only did international students report significant benefits in social self-efficacy and interaction skills from the training, so did the ESB Australian-born. This was despite the higher initial levels of efficacy and skills in the latter group.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the EXCELL™ program is a useful social effectiveness training program for newcomers to a culture, when implemented with either groups of overseas-born alone, or with mixed groups also attended by locals. Moreover, systematic training in key social competencies in accessing and negotiation has benefited both the local-born as well in mixed groups. These findings suggest the utility of EXCELL™ as a general social effectiveness training program. It is also possible that receiving the training in a culturally diverse group may have broadened the perspectives of all the participants and heightened the need for adopting a strategic approach while maintaining flexibility in interpersonal encounters.

Offering the program to mixed groups of locals and overseas-born is of practical and theoretical interest (Mak, Barker, Logan, & Millman, 1999). The overseas-born in a mixed group would have opportunities for cross-cultural contact with host nationals and have shared goals regarding the improvement of social competencies, and vice versa. Recent intergroup contact research (e.g., Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996; Hewstone, 1996) has delineated optimal conditions for intergroup contact that can result in reduction in ethnic prejudice. If the intergroup contact primarily involves cooperation, provides opportunities for personal acquaintance between participants from different cultural groups, accords cultural ingroup and outgroup members with equal status, and is supported by norms for egalitarian intergroup interaction within and outside of the contact setting, then the conditions are conducive to the formation of a common ingroup identity and the reduction in intergroup bias and ethnic prejudice.

Trainers' observations made of the mixed student groups have indeed indicated that the overseas-born in a mixed group had numerous opportunities for cross-cultural contact with host nationals while sharing goals pertaining to the improvement of social competencies. An enhancement of sociocultural competencies can trigger off a positive feedback loop, including increased cross-cultural contact that will provide more opportunities for honing foreign language and intercultural skills, building international professional networks, and fostering rewarding relationships with the locals (Mak, 2000). The enhanced social connectedness will increase the sources of social support available to international students and pose a direct challenge to negative cultural stereotypes. An ongoing evaluation of the EXCELL™ program is investigating whether it will increase the quantity and quality of cross-ethnic contact, thus enhancing intercultural relations.

## **Conclusion**

The empirical evidence reviewed suggests that group training that combines action-based learning with a social cognitive learning approach can be effective for enhancing the social efficacy and skills among both locals and

the overseas-born. The evaluation results have attested to the utility of the EXCELL™ program in enhancing international and immigrant students' intercultural social confidence and skills.

This evidence is congruent with Ward's (1996) view that the social learning approach is particularly useful for understanding sociocultural adaptation. The acquisition of cultural knowledge and behavioural competence can provide a useful resource for newcomers to cope with unfamiliar educational, workplace, and everyday social settings. This is expected to lessen perceptions of cross-cultural encounters as stressful, and to encourage social contact with rather than avoidance from host nationals. This will in turn fast-track cultural learning and foreign language development among newcomers, including sojourners with an expressed priority goal of learning about a foreign culture. Kemp, Madden, and Simpson's (1998) study with students in Indonesia and Taiwan has found that 85% of respondents considered gaining an understanding of Western culture as a reason for studying overseas.

In emphasising extension of the newcomers' repertoire of social skills through cultural learning, action-based social learning programs can be beneficial in strengthening coping resources available to newcomers and facilitate their adaptation without compromising their original cultural identity (see also Lin & Yi, 1997). The possibility that participation in sociocultural competencies training will enhance intergroup relations and reduce ethnic prejudice will merit future investigations.

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