UNIVERSITY STUDENTS’ ATTITUDES TOWARD TEAMWORK: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY

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Abstract

Team work has been highly encouraged among University students of Higher Education Institutions. However, little is known about students’ attitudes regarding this practice. The present study attempts to examine whether university students actually like to work with their colleagues and which advantages and disadvantages of team work they perceive. Students of the Faculty of Economics from two Universities participated in the study: University of Valencia in Spain and University of Split in Croatia. The empirical research was conducted in November-December 2016 and April 2017. A qualitative research was first performed to understand students’ general opinions regarding team work. A quantitative research was conducted then in order to get insights on their attitudes toward team work. Students from different cultural backgrounds participated in the research, as at both Universities national and international, i.e. Erasmus students were approached. This allowed us to obtain a holistic understanding on students’ attitudes toward team work and to compare the results from a cross-cultural point of view.

Keywords: Teamwork, university students, attitudes, cross-cultural study.

1 INTRODUCTION

“Teamwork is the success key to every organization in today’s economy”. This statement of Tom Carroll, president of the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future [1] highlights the high relevance of teamwork practice for each organization. In other words, it means that the business sector has created an imperative for higher educational institutions to modify study programs and prepare students to be effective team players.

The teamwork presents one of the main pillars in each project management and is closely related with project final outcome [2]. In the university context, project-based teamwork [3] is an example of one teamwork option in which student teams are engaged in designing and planning complex activities. The collaboration emerges over time as each team member develops an understanding of his/her own part of the project and provides information that allows others to progress.

Generally, regarding the team categorization, the researchers [4, 5, 6] discussed the following types: (i) action teams characterized by low familiarity between team members which mostly start to work when faced with unexpected events/emergencies, (ii) (top) management teams, characterized by readiness to frequent internal communication development, stronger engagement in task coordination and solving problems collaboratively, and (iii) virtual teams, whose members are engaged in teams virtually with different level of team's interaction synchronicity. Similarly, LePine et al. (2008) perceived the team performance through three different processes, namely (i) action processes, which include monitoring, progress toward goals, systems monitoring (i.e., tracking team resources), team monitoring and backup behavior and, finally, coordination, (ii) transition processes, i.e. activities that teams conduct between performance episode, and (iii) interpersonal processes, which embrace activities that are focused on the management of interpersonal relationships [7].

According to West (2012), an effective teamwork requires an adequate team size of about six to eight members with clearly defined team roles [5]. The team members actually participate in a common work with clearly defined and measureable goals provided with autonomy, authority and necessary resources. By participating in teams, students can receive a number of benefits [8], such as: (i) improve their communication skills and mix them occasionally, (ii) respect and understand particular roles in group and be more concerned about its final outcome, (iii) develop a clear vision of the team culture, (iv), increase individual leadership and management skills related to cooperation, collaboration and mutual team member understandings, (v) and become more flexible both on the individual and group level. At the same time, all these benefits present challenges for each team member to perform
better over time. Together with the study of Molyneux (2001) [9], the authors identified three indicators for positive teamwork, namely: (i) personal qualities and commitment of staff by improving interpersonal skills, (ii) communication within the team, and (iii) the opportunity to develop creative working methods within the team.

Practicing teamwork provides better outputs if team members are successors of the previous common working experiences, based primarily on coordination and communication [10]. Henneman et al. (1995) argued that an appropriate collaboration requires competence, confidence, commitment, respect, and trust between all team members [11]. Working in team mainly directs student activities toward mapping the problems and solution space, synergy of multidisciplinary solutions, and documentation of product evolution and process [3]. Additionally, upon the introduction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) supporting tools in this process, the improvements are evident in evolution from synchronous to asynchronous communication, which furthermore provides an added value to collaborative dimension of teamwork. In the digital context, Powel et al. (2004) pointed out that students’ positive perception of virtual online teamwork increased as they attended more online courses and thus participated more actively in associated virtual teams [12]. Moreover, Goold et al. (2006) found that students mainly used discussion forums for working online, together with email, chat and face-to-face meetings. Students perceived benefits of online teamwork, namely: (i) flexibility of time and place; (ii) possibility to record communication and participation; and (iii) an ‘efficient’ way of working [13].

From the student perspective, the literature also evidences different perceptions related to teamwork competencies. Katinka et al. (2005) examined organizational skills and teamwork among graduate students from schools with problem-based learning (PBL) and non-PBL study programs without teamwork practice. The results revealed that students from PBL schools showed better preparation with respect to several of the competencies, especially profession-specific methods, communication skills and teamwork [14].

In a study on different employment skills [15], international students ranked teamwork as the most important among 15 identified skills needed to obtain a job after graduation, while US students placed it on the third place, after management and interpersonal skills. On the other hand, faculty members ranked it as the fourth, after interpersonal skills, critical thinking, and problem solving. In addition, when analyzing perceptions of employment skills among students and employers, Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) found that students acknowledged employers’ expectations in terms of communication, analytical, professional and teamwork skills. However, both students and employers stated that university programs do not encourage sufficiently ‘essential’ non-technical and professional skills [16].

However, literature also suggests that students do not always have positive attitudes toward teamwork, owing to the perceived relationship between teamwork and effective performance. McCorkle et al. (1999) claimed that although most students were aware of the teamwork importance, some still preferred to work alone when the goal was achieving a good performance [17]. Moreover, Peslak (2005) examined emotions of the students who participated in a long-term project and found that, although team emotions in the beginning of the project were more positive than negative, the negative emotions prevailed over time [18].

2 METHODOLOGY

The objective of this paper is to understand student’s perceptions of teamwork, and more specifically, perceived benefits and risks, form the cross-cultural perspective. To accomplish this, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed. Data were collected among national and international students of two Universities: University of Valencia in Spain and University of Split in Croatia during November/December, 2016 and April, 2017.

The cross-cultural analysis was adopted in two ways. Firstly by comparing opinions of students from two Universities located in two different countries, i.e. University of Valencia in Spain (N=146) and University of Split in Croatia (N=60). Secondly, by comparing the two most representative groups of students according to their national culture, i.e. Spanish students from the University of Valencia (N=70) and Croatian students from the University of Split (N=50).
As presented in Table 1, the sample consisted of 206 students, 146 from the University of Valencia and 60 from the University of Split. Among the students from the University of Valencia, 52 (35.6%) were male and 94 (64.4%) female. With respect to their national culture, 70 (47.9%) students were Spanish, while 76 (52.1%) were international students. Among international students, the most representative group was composed by German students (10.3% of the total sample), followed by Italian (4.8%), Dutch (4.8%), French (4.8%), Polish (5.3%), British (2.7%) and Austrian (2.7%) students. Students from the University of Split were also mainly female (75%), while 25% were male. They were mostly from Croatia (83.3%), while others were from Spain (6.7%), Italy (3.3%), Germany (3.3%), Ireland (1.7%) and Lithuania (1.7%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UNIVERSITY OF VALENCIA (N=146)</th>
<th>UNIVERISTY OF SPLIT (N=60)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>GENDER</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>35.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>64.4</td>
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<td><strong>NATIONALITY</strong></td>
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<td>National</td>
<td>70*</td>
<td>47.9*</td>
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<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>52.1</td>
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</table>

Note: * Spanish, **Croatian.

3 DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

3.1 Qualitative analysis

Qualitative analysis, more specifically the focus groups technique was conducted to understand students’ general opinions regarding teamwork. A focus group normally brings together between four and 12 participants to discuss research objectives [19]. Among different qualitative approaches, focus group is “particularly useful tool for engaging culturally and linguistically diverse populations”. The literature suggests the use of a minimum of three to four focus groups to obtain relevant findings [20].

Thereby, four focus groups were selected for the purpose of this research, two conducted at the University of Valencia and two at the University of Split (see Table 2). Students were asked about their general opinions about teamwork and perceived benefits and risks.

The first focus group, composed of eight Spanish students from the University of Valencia (six female and two male), observed two benefits related to teamwork: a) meeting and knowing people and b) colleagues’ support for clarification of doubts generated from lack of understanding of the topic. In addition, they pointed out that they feel more motivated if they get along with the other team members. They also identified the risk of “being embarrassed by doing nothing” as an incentive to participate more actively. However, they stressed that these benefits depend on attitudes of other team members. On the basis of her previous experience of studying abroad, one participant claimed that team members should be auto-evaluated “by giving a sheet of each partners’ name and evaluating him/her”. Preferably, this evaluation should be anonymous and only the teacher should receive the final scores of all the team members.

The second group consisted of six international students attending a course at the University of Valencia, more specifically three female students from France, two female students from Poland and one male student from Italy. The group perceived the following benefits of teamwork: enhanced cooperation, higher involvement, and an opportunity to become more-open minded and more creative. The main disadvantage that emerged from the discussion is complete lack of involvement of some member(s).
The third focus group consisted of seven Croatian students from the University of Split, five female and two male. One male student identified the development of communication skills and making friendships as main benefits. Female participants mostly stressed one negative aspect of teamwork, i.e. unfair work overload on one person only.

The final group was composed of four female participants studying at the University of Split, two from Germany, one from Lithuania, and one from Ireland. A number of benefits of teamwork emerged such as: a) “when you are struggling you can ask somebody of the group to help and explain it”, b) “you are not alone, there are some people who can help you and you don’t need to do it on your own”, c) “everybody has his own strengths and you can combine it to good results” d) “when you are scared to talk alone, you have support of the people of your team”. On the other hand, different education levels of team members, difficulties related with meetings outside the classroom, different levels of motivations which lead to different levels of efforts, unclear role definition, and social conflicts were perceived as risks. This group has proposed an evaluation system to encourage higher involvement of all team members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Focus group participants</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>FOCUS GROUP</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>UNIVERSITY OF VALENCIA</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT</td>
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### 3.2 Quantitative analysis

A total of nine aspects of teamwork were identified by students as highly relevant. These items were considered then for quantitative data analysis:

1. I prefer teamwork rather than individual work.
2. I find teamwork less time consuming than individual work.
3. Teamwork leads to better results than individual work.
4. Teamwork makes me understand other persons’ perspectives.
5. Teamwork helps me to improve my interpersonal skills.
6. Teamwork helps me to identify my personal strengths and weaknesses.
7. Working with my friends encourages my attendance to practical lessons.
8. Teamwork makes me feel more motivated than working on my own.
9. Grading/evaluation of teamwork is unfair if everyone receives the same grade.

To address the research aim, descriptive statistics analyses was performed, using SPSS software. Data were collected through an online structured questionnaire that students were asked to complete during their classes. The identified items were assessed using a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The results presented in Table 2 suggest that all students of the sample (N=206) assigned rather moderate scores to most of the items of teamwork. The items that received the highest score are the perceived benefits of understanding other persons’ perspective (M=4.07), identifying personal strengths and weaknesses (M=3.97), and improving interpersonal skills (M=3.95). On the other hand, the items that received the lowest scores are “I find teamwork less time consuming than individual work” (M=2.84) and “I prefer teamwork rather than individual work” (M=3.03).
Table 3. Teamwork: Descriptive statistics – University of Valencia vs. University of Split

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEAMWORK</th>
<th>Total sample (N=206)</th>
<th>University of Valencia (N=146)</th>
<th>University of Split (N=60)</th>
<th>U test</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I prefer teamwork rather than individual work.</td>
<td>Mean 3.03 (\pm) 1.261</td>
<td>Mean 3.01 (\pm) 1.226</td>
<td>Mean 3.07 (\pm) 1.351</td>
<td>.773</td>
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<tr>
<td>I find teamwork less time consuming than individual work.</td>
<td>Mean 2.84 (\pm) 1.267</td>
<td>Mean 2.86 (\pm) 1.252</td>
<td>Mean 2.80 (\pm) 1.312</td>
<td>.778</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teamwork leads to better results than individual work.</td>
<td>Mean 3.16 (\pm) 1.224</td>
<td>Mean 3.05 (\pm) 1.242</td>
<td>Mean 3.40 (\pm) 1.153</td>
<td>.048**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teamwork makes me understand other persons' perspectives.</td>
<td>Mean 4.07 (\pm) .908</td>
<td>Mean 4.03 (\pm) .989</td>
<td>Mean 4.15 (\pm) .936</td>
<td>.256</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teamwork helps me to improve my interpersonal skills.</td>
<td>Mean 3.95 (\pm) .931</td>
<td>Mean 3.92 (\pm) .936</td>
<td>Mean 4.03 (\pm) .920</td>
<td>.301</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teamwork helps me to identify my personal strengths and weaknesses.</td>
<td>Mean 3.97 (\pm) .921</td>
<td>Mean 3.95 (\pm) .900</td>
<td>Mean 4.03 (\pm) .974</td>
<td>.381</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Working with my friends encourages my attendance to practical lessons.</td>
<td>Mean 3.72 (\pm) 1.094</td>
<td>Mean 3.68 (\pm) 1.082</td>
<td>Mean 3.83 (\pm) 1.122</td>
<td>.262</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teamwork makes me feel more motivated than working on my own.</td>
<td>Mean 3.20 (\pm) 1.338</td>
<td>Mean 3.11 (\pm) 1.293</td>
<td>Mean 3.42 (\pm) 1.430</td>
<td>.099*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Grading/evaluation of teamwork is unfair if everyone receives the same grade.</td>
<td>Mean 3.39 (\pm) 1.216</td>
<td>Mean 3.38 (\pm) 1.205</td>
<td>Mean 3.40 (\pm) 1.251</td>
<td>.931</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. To ensure a better readability of the results, mean values are reported instead of mean ranks for the two subsamples. * Significance level = 90%, ** Significance level = 95%.

In order to observe whether significant differences exist among students from the two Universities we divided the sample in two subsamples. When comparing them, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was first performed in order to check the normality of data distribution. The results showed that the data were not normally distributed, owing to the fact that almost all the examined items had critical values lower than .05.

The Mann-Whitney U test was completed, comparing two independent samples, to determine whether the obtained differences between the two compared subsamples are statistically significant. Significant differences are found for only two items: a) “teamwork leads to better results than individual work”, with the significance level of 95% and b) “teamwork makes me feel more motivated than working on my own”, with the significance level of 90%. Both items scored significantly better among the students from the University of Split. In general, these students assigned higher scores to all items than the students from University of Valencia, except for one – “I find teamwork less time consuming than individual work” (see Table 2).

4 CONCLUSIONS

Results from the qualitative analysis suggest a number of benefits of teamwork, namely: opportunity for meeting new people, open-mindedness, creation of synergies through cooperation, clarification of doubts, moral support, and increase of communication skills. The most frequently mentioned risks were complete lack of involvement of some students and unfair overload of work. Students stressed the importance of evaluation of individual work of each of the team members to address this disadvantage.

From the quantitative analysis, results suggest that students don’t seem to prefer that much teamwork over individual work and that they do not feel much more motivated working in team than working alone. In general, students attending their study programs at the University of Valencia and University
of Split evaluated teamwork aspects rather similarly. However, future studies are needed to re/examine the cross-cultural perspective of college students teamwork perceptions.

The implication for teachers is that they need to identify factors that motivate students to work with their colleagues. This might be accomplished by making them care more about their outcomes, creating a group whose members have similar interests and providing an effective system of evaluation to ensure an equal share of responsibilities, among others.

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