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Intercultural group work in higher education: Costs and benefits from an expectancy-value theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural group work (IGW) is a promising learning strategy to enable university students to benefit from diversity among their peers. However, cultural diversity does not automatically lead to student engagement in intercultural collaboration. To explore the costs and benefits students attribute to IGW, we conducted focus groups across six universities in the Netherlands. The expectancy-value theory provided a valuable framework to gain novel insights into the nature of these costs and benefits. Identified costs are time, effort, negative psychological states, and compromising at the expense of personal values. Benefits can be categorized as attainment, intrinsic, and utility value. Results suggest that costs and benefits may be viewed as three dimensions, instead of the traditional four components featured by expectancy-value theory.

1. Introduction

Ongoing globalization and societal diversity have made the internationalization of higher education a growing reality. In the past four decades, the number of international students has increased tremendously, currently representing 5.6% of all students enrolled in higher education (OECD, 2017). Western, mostly English-speaking countries host the majority of these international students (Project Atlas, 2017); for example, in Australia and the United Kingdom, international students account for up to 24% of the total student population. Among non-English-speaking countries, France and the Netherlands have the largest share of international students, who represent around 12% of their total student population (Project Atlas, 2017).

An international learning environment offers great potential to enhance student learning and to develop key competences that enable students to adapt flexibly to a rapidly changing and highly interconnected world (Denson & Zhang, 2010; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Leask, 2009; The European Parliament & the Council of the European Union, 2006). Technological developments and growing international mobility result in extensive interaction between people from very diverse backgrounds and cultures. Addressing global issues like climate change and international conflicts requires collaborative effort and understanding across countries and cultures (European Commission, 2018). Education can fulfill its societal and economic roles by equipping students with the interpersonal, intercultural, and collaboration competences needed to participate effectively and constructively in social and working life (British Council, 2013; The European Parliament & the Council of the European Union, 2006).

A particular way that students can benefit from diverse learning environments is by participating in *intercultural group work* (IGW)—a collaborative approach to learning in which three or more students from different cultural or national backgrounds work together on set tasks, in or outside the classroom. Group work in higher education is an effective tool to promote learning (Almajed, Skinner, Peterson, & Winning, 2016; Gaudet, Ramer, Nakonechny, Cragg, & Ramer, 2010; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Strauss &

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Young, 2011; Sweeney, Weaven, & Herington, 2008; Teo et al., 2012); it also can increase social-emotional outcomes, such as people-related skills, self-confidence, self-esteem, and attitudes toward others (Denson & Zhang, 2010; Lei, Kuestermeyer, & Westmeyer, 2010; Slavin, 1980, Slavin, 2009; Sweeney et al., 2008). Students' diverse cultural backgrounds introduce varied perspectives and approaches to the group, which can increase learning and decision-making quality. Prior research indicates that working in a multicultural, heterogeneous group ultimately leads to enhanced creativity, teamwork skills, performance, and problem solving, relative to working in a homogenous group (Curşeu & Pluut, 2013; De Vita, 2002; Denson & Zhang, 2010; Strauss & Young, 2011; Watson, Kumar, & Michaelsen, 1993).

However, the presence of multiple cultures does not automatically result in intercultural collaboration (Lee, Poch, Shaw, & Williams, 2012; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Reid & Garson, 2016; Summers & Volet, 2008). When students may choose with whom they collaborate, they tend to select peers from their own culture, even if they have had positive, successful intercultural experiences in the past (Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Moore & Hampton, 2015; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Strauss & Young, 2011; Volet & Ang, 2012). This preference for mono-cultural group work appears stronger among students studying in their home country than among international students (Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Moore & Hampton, 2015; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017).

To leverage student diversity as a rich resource for learning and a tool for developing global competences, more insights are needed, regarding which factors hinder or encourage students to engage actively in IGW. This study accordingly explores the positive and negative aspects of IGW, from a student perspective.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Previous research on group work

In order to facilitate student learning, group activities and assignments, whether specifically multicultural or not, need to be carefully planned, supported, and assessed (Hassanien, 2007; Volet & Ang, 2012). For all group work it is important that the assignment fosters interdependence; when group members are truly dependent on each other to successfully complete the task there will be a greater commitment to the collaboration (Brame & Biel, 2015; Fransen, Kirschner, & Erkens, 2011). Teachers can prepare students for group work by creating awareness of the diversity present in the group and its value for the group project, by familiarizing students with possible group dynamics, and by aiding students in developing important interpersonal and small group skills (Hassanien, 2007; Moore & Hampton, 2015; Reid & Garson, 2016). Creating opportunities for students to reflect on the group process, progress, and their own learning will increase their learning (Killick, 2018). Formative peer- and teacher feedback will help students adapt and correct where needed (Brame & Biel, 2015; Hassanien, 2007). An assessment that consists of a group grade, an individual grade, and peer-assessment will promote positive group interdependence and will increase individual accountability thus preventing students from 'free-riding' (Brame & Biel, 2015; Winchester-Seeto, 2002).

Previous research that specifically focused on IGW has shed light on a variety of aspects that can be seen as challenges to IGW. Ineffective communication and insufficient language skills are major challenges to IGW (Popov et al., 2012). International students may have a hard time understanding English accents or feel insecure about speaking English; home students may experience difficulty understanding the international students (Volet & Ang, 2012). Some home students also express a fear of offending international students, were their communication to be misinterpreted (Osmond & Roed, 2010). Moreover, home students may worry that international students cannot live up to the desired academic standards; they complain that they must rewrite work produced by international students to compensate for their lack of language ability or poor knowledge of academic requirements and thus to avoid lower grades for the group (Moore & Hampton, 2015; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Turner, 2009).

Several studies also identify challenges relating to students' distinct educational backgrounds, views on time and punctuality, work ethics, and expectations about contributions or commitment to the group (Osmond & Roed, 2010; Turner, 2009; Volet & Ang, 2012). Popov et al. (2012) identify free riding as a key challenge for IGW, and Volet and Ang (2012) conclude that students prefer to work with "their own" because they feel a cultural-emotional connectedness with these peers. That is, they feel more comfortable, think along the same lines, and share similar communication styles and senses of humor. Pragmatic reasons also might keep students from collaborating, considering that home students may have work or family commitments outside of school (Volet & Ang, 2012).

Yet prior literature also notes multiple benefits of participating in IGW, including being exposed to different perspectives and ideas, developing awareness of the interaction styles of other cultures, improving intercultural collaboration skills, developing friendships, overall enjoyment of the intercultural experience, and fostering collaborative exchange relationships among students from different cultures (Montgomery, 2009; Moore & Hampton, 2015; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Rienties, Hernández Nancloares, Jindal-Snape, & Alcott, 2012; Sweeney et al., 2008). Still, the majority of research has focused on negative components or effects of IGW; the bright side seems less investigated, even though positive aspects could serve as motivators to engage students in IGW.

2.2. Expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation

According to the expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation (EVT), people's choices, persistence when they face barriers, and actual performance can be explained by their expectations about whether they will do well on the activity and the extent to which they value that activity (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Feelings of not being equipped for IGW or denigration of the value of such work can lead students to avoid engaging or persevering in IGW and to perform badly on the assigned task (Eccles, 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Eccles (1983) distinguishes three major components of value related to this theory: attainment, intrinsic, and utility. *Attainment*

value refers to the importance of doing well on the task, in terms of individual self-schema and personal values. *Intrinsic value* is the inherent enjoyment a person experiences from doing the task. *Utility value* pertains to the usefulness of a task in helping the person achieve other short- or long-term goals that may be somewhat unrelated to the task itself (Barron & Hulleman, 2014; Eccles, 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 1995; Wigfield, Tonks, & Eccles, 2004). These three major value components can contribute to student engagement and perseverance, but the overall value of an activity also depends on the perceived costs of engaging in it. The three major cost components are (1) the amount of effort needed to succeed, (2) the loss of time that could be used to engage in other valued activities, and (3) negative psychological states that result from struggling or failing in the activity (Barron & Hulleman, 2014; Eccles, 1983). Eccles (1983) thus proposes that individual choices involve a cost–benefit analysis. An increase in costs signifies a decrease in the overall value a person attributes to an activity, whereas an increase in benefits (value) signifies an increase in the overall value (Barron & Hulleman, 2014).

Previous research has identified several costs and benefits of IGW, with an emphasis on the former. However, most of them are framed according to the perspectives of home versus international students, and almost all previous studies have taken place in English-speaking countries, where the separation between native English speakers and non-native English speakers might be more distinct than in non-native English-speaking countries. This study therefore considers students in the Netherlands, a non-native English-speaking country that features considerable cultural diversity among both international and home students. With a purposeful consideration of this heterogeneous group, this study avoids a dichotomous perspective (i.e., home versus international students). We identify costs and benefits that students attribute to participating in IGW and explore their nature in depth, by reviewing them from an EVT perspective. Furthermore, though costs are important components of the EVT, empirical research often focuses on benefits (Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). Recent research suggests revisiting the cost construct, with revised measurement approaches (e.g., Barron & Hulleman, 2014; Flake, Barron, Hulleman, McCoach, & Welsh, 2015; Perez, Cromley, & Kaplan, 2014). Accordingly, we seek to elaborate on both cost and benefit components of the EVT, by also reconsidering the EVT in light of our findings.

2.3. Research questions

This study builds on previous research by looking at both the costs and benefits that students attribute to participating in IGW, from a motivational theory point of view. Because costs and benefits likely affect students' engagement, persistence, and performance, this study seeks insights that can aid in developing a motivating learning environment, on the basis of two main questions:

1. Which costs and benefits do students attribute to engaging in intercultural group work?
2. How do these costs and benefits align with the value and cost components of expectancy-value theory?

3. Method

3.1. Focus groups

To provide in-depth explorations of the costs and benefits that students attribute to engaging in IGW, we conducted focus group interviews. Interactions in focus groups allow participants to reflect on their own experiences, leading to a deeper level of discussion and more nuanced data and insights (Finch, Lewis, & Turley, 2014).

3.1.1. Participants

We conducted 14 focus groups, with two to six students each, among participants enrolled in internationally oriented, English-taught bachelor's programs in different Dutch universities, faculties, and programs. They represent different learning environments that likely lead to distinct group work experiences. A total of 54 students of 23 different nationalities participated; their ages ranged from 18 to 38 years, with an average of 21.2 years. Table 1 contains further demographic and study information about the participants, and Table 2 details the number of participants and nationalities represented in each focus group. Because the programs were taught in English, the majority of both international and Dutch participants had to study in a second language. Dutch universities generally require an English language test for international students and a high school diploma for Dutch students as proof of a sufficient level of English proficiency. Participants were recruited by teachers or coordinators of the programs in which they were enrolled, online message boards, or directly by the researchers.

3.1.2. Procedure

To ensure consistency in the data collection, we developed a protocol to guide the group discussion. After a short introduction of the topic, we informed students about the purpose of the research and noted that their participation was voluntary. They were asked to sign an informed consent form; after receiving permission, we started the audio and video recording. In preparation for the group discussion, we asked students to write down all the costs and benefits of IGW that they had experienced individually. The subsequent group discussion addressed the costs and benefits separately. Students were encouraged to share additional ideas and experiences as they came to mind. The discussion continued until students had shared every cost or benefit they had written down, thus ensuring every student was heard. During the discussion, one of the researchers tracked all cost and benefits that were discussed. To confirm this listing correctly described what each student shared, we conducted member checks at the end of the focus group.

Table 1
Demographic and study data.

	<i>n</i>	%
<i>N Total</i>	54	100
<i>Faculty</i>		
Economics & Business	25	46
Tourism & Leisure	8	15
Behavioral & Social Sciences	6	11
Law	6	11
other	9	17
<i>Type of University</i>		
Research University	28	52
University of Applied Sciences (vocational)	26	48
<i>Year of study</i>		
1 st year	20	37
2 nd year	24	44
3 rd year	7	13
4 th year	3	6
<i>Nationality</i> ^a		
European (Dutch)	11	20
European (other)	22	41
Asian	13	24
African	5	9
Latin America & Caribbean	2	4
North American	1	2
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	40	74
Male	14	26

^a Classification of countries according to [United Nations Statistic Division \(2018\)](#).

3.2. Analysis

In the first step of the analysis, we classified the costs and benefits, as verified by the students, into the main EVT categories, cost (time, effort, negative psychological states) and value (attainment, intrinsic, utility). We consulted the recordings to clarify and provide additional context, then continued with a thematic analysis of the items in each EVT category. Through this step-by-step process of gaining in-depth *familiarization* with the data, constructing an *initial thematic framework*, *indexing and sorting* the data, and *reviewing data extracts* ([Spencer, Ritchie, O’Conner, Morrell, & Ormston, 2014](#)), several IGW-specific subcategories within the main EVT categories emerged. Next, we reevaluated the initial categorization of items according to EVT categories. We applied thematic analysis to the costs that could not be classified into any of the main EVT categories to establish possible new main and subcategories. Any costs and benefits subject to any ambiguity with regard to how to categorize them were discussed and the classification determined by the research team.

4. Results

In this section, we present the results of the categorization and thematic analysis of costs and benefits. We describe costs that reflect three EVT categories, namely, *time*, *effort*, and *negative psychological states* ([Barron & Hulleman, 2014](#); [Eccles, 1983](#)), illustrated with the students’ own words. Then we note a new cost category that emerged during our focus groups, *compromising at the expense of personal values or standards*. Students also noted the decreasing intensity of costs as their collaborations continued. Next, we explore the benefits that students attributed to IGW, according to the three EVT value categories of *attainment value*, *intrinsic value*, and *utility value* ([Barron & Hulleman, 2014](#); [Eccles, 1983](#)), which effectively comprise all the benefits listed. Both the costs and the benefits section conclude with an overview of the proportion of listed costs and benefits according to the EVT categories and specific IGW related subcategories.

4.1. Costs

4.1.1. Time

Two aspects emerged from the discussions about a loss of time, which students could have used to engage in other valued activities. First, they invested extra time in the collaboration process and outcome to bridge the educational and cultural differences in the group:

Table 2
Participants per focus group.

Focus group	Nationalities of participants	Number of participants
FG1	Dutch (2) Italian (1) Lithuanian (1)	4
FG2	British (2)	2
FG3	British (1) German (1) Namibian (1) Portuguese (1) South Korean (1)	5
FG4	Chinese (1) Russian (1)	2
FG5	Chinese (1) Dutch (1) Malaysian (1)	3
FG6	British (1) French (1) German (2) Irish (1)	5
FG7	Canadian (1) Mexican (1) Zimbabwean (1)	3
FG8	Chinese (2) Dutch (1) German (1) Macedonian (1)	5
FG9	Chinese (1) Dutch (1) Zimbabwean (1)	3
FG10	Chinese (1) Dutch (2) Bulgarian (1)	4
F 11	Chinese (1) Dutch (3) German (1) Latvian (1)	6
FG12	Dutch (1) German (3) Indonesian (1) Romanian (1)	6
FG13	Indonesian (3)	3
FG14	British/Motswanan (1) Cameroonian (1) Mexican (1)	3

When there is too many different sort of ideas, methods ... that can slow the group down and yeah, just make it like less efficient, makes it harder, then it will take longer to actually finish the project. (FG3)

Trying to find common ground in how to approach the task, communicate effectively, and collaborate properly took a lot of time, at the expense of time spent on the actual task:

We just took so much time to figure out how to work together that we didn't have enough time to put our attention towards the actual result of what we were supposed to do. (FG1)

As this quote implies, students felt the focus should have been on the end product, but difficulties in group dynamics got in the way of successfully fulfilling the task.

Second, students devoted more time to compensating for the lack of skills of team members, which they partially attributed to cultural and educational backgrounds. For example, they mentioned correcting the low quality contributions of group members, aligning these contributions with the assignment requirements, and helping team members who lacked computer skills.

4.1.2. Effort

Trying to make sense of different cultural perspectives and collaborating with people with different levels of language proficiency and communication styles required not only time but also a lot of effort. A heartfelt statement by one student summarized the experience as described in two thirds of the groups:

An awful lot more of effort goes into the communicating when there are more cultures. (FG2)

Native English speakers might find it challenging to understand non-native speakers; for the latter, it requires effort and patience to make themselves understood:

I have a—oo, English [expressing her difficulty with explaining ideas in English]—correlation between patience and comprehension, because our group work we are doing it in English and sometimes when you try to say something, maybe you don't say the right way or they don't understand you the right way. So you have to be patient, restart your phrases, trying to make them understand you. (FG14)

4.1.3. Negative psychological states

Students also described a variety of negative emotions they experienced while participating in IGW. Some of the emotions related to identity. When one student shared that being in a multicultural environment for a longer time might cause disconnect with one's own culture, another student responded:

...loss of identity in the sense of losing your culture but also being like, if people associate you with a certain culture and that they make that who you are then you kind of lose your own identity and then they try to represent you by your country. (FG6)

This discussion illustrates the complex struggles surrounding cultural and personal identity; students do not like being stereotyped according to their culture, because they feel they cannot be themselves. At the same time, their identity is tied to their home culture, resulting in stress due to their sense that they need to represent their culture properly.

Students also expressed feeling disconnected from the group, as well as their efforts to be accepted by the group by changing their ways:

When you are in a place and you are trying to integrate and adapt, so you adapt certain mannerisms and things that you wouldn't necessarily do, just so that you don't offend the people that you are with so you can be accepted. (FG14)

In addition to emotions relating to identity, students indicated that the setting of IGW resulted in negative emotions associated with their contributions:

You might have a bit of worry that perhaps this person's method is not as effective or it doesn't convey the ideas well and you feel maybe that you are inadequate in their method, so you can't perform as well as you like to, because you just are not accustomed to do it that way. (FG2)

As this example illustrates, cultural and educational differences may cause students to move outside their comfort zone. They feel out of control, because they are unsure whether certain approaches will work or not and feel insecure about how to contribute effectively when using the new approach. Students also felt demotivated to engage, afraid to communicate, and stressed about their contributions:

Our English skill is worse compared with the European students. So when we work for the group assignments we will put in more effort in order to ensure certain quality, to meet the standard and do not affect the final grade. So, it makes us very stressful. (FG5)

4.1.4. Compromise at expense of personal values and standard

Not all costs that students attributed to IGW could be assigned to one of the EVT categories. Students indicated that they frequently confronted a dilemma between adhering to their standard, known approaches or compromising to facilitate group processes. Students described this compromise as a cost, because they sensed they did not have a choice other than to give up on what they valued. Negative psychological states refer to personal, experienced emotions that influence how a person feels and acts in the group; the cost of compromising at the expense of personal values or standards instead entails the person's view on how the group should collaborate and what it should produce. With these costs, the emphasis is on cognitive rather than emotional elements.

In the context of students' culturally defined educational background, certain task approaches have proven effective, and certain formats for the end product were approved. Having to submit an assignment they felt was not up to par would go against their standards. Students defined acceptable standards not only by the person's preferences but also his or her culture; some cultures are perceived as generally being satisfied with just passing, whereas other cultures might seem to strive for the highest grade possible:

Sometimes, if you work in a group that just doesn't want to work, I think the cost might be knowledge ... in the end there won't be the results, you are sacrificing those results or you might not even be passing.... They just did things for just the deadline, just to complete it in time for the deadline, not to really educate yourself. With my culture it is a must to pass, there is no tolerance of not knowing.... I think it is cultural. Some people are more relaxed because to them it is about passing, not about being educated. (FG9)

These compromises involved the quality of the end product but also the collaboration process, which might not have lived up to their standards:

So I think, maybe due to the limitation of language also,... some of the people cannot express things properly and that may cause some problems with understanding of people's perspectives, and then some group members will disagree about their opinion only because they can't understand you. And that is, it is caused by your language. (FG5)

One student shared how the hierarchical educational system she grew up in affected her contribution to the group:

...you might have things you wish to say but because you are not used to expressing your opinion (your opinion isn't as validated in our culture when you are not someone who ... has some kind of prestige), you tend to hold back a lot even when you are given the opportunity. (FG2)

Such differences in educational backgrounds and language proficiency can prevent students from being heard equally. Students from cultures where active verbal participation in class is expected tend to take the lead in group work. Students from cultures where limited verbal participation is the norm might not get or use the opportunity to contribute. Although many different perspectives are present in multicultural groups, time constraints might not allow for everyone to share. Students also asserted that group members from cultures that strongly emphasize the importance of high grades put in more time and effort than group members from cultures that find “just passing” grades acceptable.

Along with unequal contributions, students commented on frequent conflicts and miscommunications. They attributed this lack of team unity and equality in the collaboration process to the (cultural) diversity of the group. Finally, students pointed out that stereotypes formed too quickly. Working in a group with one person from a certain culture led the other group members to draw conclusions about the culture as a whole. Those opinions were based on very limited exposure to a certain culture, which contradicted the values of many students.

4.1.5. Change of costs related to duration of collaboration

In several groups, students described how they initially experienced a lot of struggles with IGW, but after having participated several times, the process became easier, because they found a common way to work:

Many of the things we were talking about, about the negative effects are mostly ... at the start of the group work.... Because starting to get to know each other takes time, and then interpreting, but I guess you grow closer over the time of—I don't know how long the group work is—six months, a year, and somehow you kind of develop your own culture in the group then, your atmosphere, how you are used to you are getting used to how the group acts and works. (FG12)

The amount of time a certain group has worked together thus seems to affect the collaboration. One student, in response to a direct question about whether effectiveness increases with more IGW, answered:

It depends if you work with the same group or you work with people that come from similar cultures. But every time you are thrown into different groups with different people then every time it just starts at the bottom and you have to make you way up there. (FG1)

Although some participants mentioned struggles with a certain person at first, IGW put them in the position of getting to know and understand that person better, which also resulted in their voluntary collaboration on later projects.

4.1.6. Proportion of listed costs according to categories

Table 3 shows the extent to which the different EVT categories and IGW-related subcategories were addressed by the groups. The most prominent concern was that students felt they had to compromise at the expense of personal values and standards, with an emphasis on costs relating to the process of collaboration. Almost one third of the listed costs referred to the negative psychological states students experienced and one fifth referred to the extra time they needed to invest. The cost of effort was addressed the least of all categories.

4.2. Benefits

4.2.1. Attainment value

Attainment value—or the importance of doing well on an activity to affirm a self-schema and core personal values—appears in several of the benefits that students shared. For example, IGW helped students become global citizens, as they aspire to be. Exposures to different cultural perspectives and approaches induced self-reflection, which then led to positive character traits, such as open-mindedness, tolerance, and empathy:

It kind of widens your horizon in a way ... sometimes you don't even realize how narrow you are, like having a view on something and then someone else from a complete different culture says 'have you ever considered that or this' and then you just like, you keep questioning yourself and your opinion. (FG6)

It breaks your mind inside and you actually start accepting the fact that there are different ways of doing one thing ... not that yours is the only right one. Now I am trying to influence my friends back in [home country], to make them more open. (FG4)

This statement illustrates the process of change students underwent, such that open-mindedness and acceptance became such important personal values that they wanted to pass on to others.

Collaborating with a culturally diverse group also led to a better, broader, and more applicable end product, according to several students:

Table 3
Percentages of listed costs referring to EVT categories and IGW-related subcategories.

EVT Category	Subcategories	%
Time	Total	20.6
	Time invested in the process and product due to differences	13.0
	Time invested to compensate for lack of skills of team members	2.1
	General ^a	5.5
Effort	Total	8.9
	More effort needed because of differences	6.2
	General ^a	2.7
Negative psychological states	Total	29.4
	Person related – referring to own position in the group	11.6
	Process related – referring to contribution to the group	11.6
	General ^a	6.2
Compromise at expense of personal values and standards^b	Total	41.1
	End product not according to own standard	6.1
	Collaboration not as desired (lack of team unity and equality)	23.0
	Rash stereotyping	1.4
	General ^a	9.6
Total		100

^a Costs that could not be assigned to one of the other subcategories because participants used broad terms or combined elements of the different subcategories.

^b Additional category – not part of EVT.

You have different opinions, you see things from different sides and in the end your work is more creative, more interesting and perhaps even more right ... that's why I actually chose different peoples, different cultures in my group. (FG4)

The variety of ideas, approaches, solutions, and talents present in a culturally diverse group can offer a rich resource on which group members may draw. Together, students produce something they are happy with and proud of, which contributes to their desire to produce high-quality outcomes and also feeds their need for excellence.

Finally, students regarded the IGW context as a good opportunity to correct inaccurate stereotypes—both those that they hold personally about other cultures and the stereotypes that peers might have about them or their culture:

So, just knowing that people aren't being bad, they are being normal considering their cultural context, it's absolutely normal, so I kind of stopped looking at things as good and bad, and just looked at it as just different. (FG7)

I always assume that people are gonna stereotype, I just think it is something everyone does ... so I see it [IGW] as a chance to give a good impression. (FG2)

4.2.2. Intrinsic value

Intrinsic value, or the inherent enjoyment a person experiences from engaging in a task, was mentioned by only one third of the groups as a benefit of IGW:

Besides all of the hard work you have done ... skills you gained, it is also just fun to work with international people. (FG1)

Students experienced fulfillment working with a culturally diverse group and enjoyment when others expressed interest in their culture. One student explained why working in a multicultural group was more enjoyable than collaborating with peers from her own culture:

When I work with internationals I don't have the pressure that I get if I am working with people from my home country ... because then we are under the same cultural context and they expect that you act in a certain way, and in an international setting you are less bounded by certain cultural rules. (FG6)

4.2.3. Utility value

Students identified four ways IGW was useful in helping them achieve other short- or long-term goals: developing positive character traits, producing a high-quality end product, developing skills and competences, and expanding their international network. First, character development represented besides attainment value also utility value; developing positive character traits appeared instrumental for collaborating with a culturally diverse group of people and valuable for their future careers. The examples that students gave of personal character development included how they view the world around them (more open-minded, tolerant, and curious), how they respond to others (more empathy, understanding, and consideration and less judgmental), and how they work with others (more flexible, patient, and adaptable).

Second, another aspect also represented both attainment and utility value, namely, producing a high-quality end product. In some

cultures more than others, high grades are important to ensure scholarships and future educational and professional opportunities. When IGW can lead to higher grades, it can contribute to students' future goals.

Third, every group considered IGW a good opportunity to develop their skills and competences:

Your personal experience with other cultures is good for later if you have to work with people from the other side of the world, so you know how to handle different situations and it is better to experience that before than you have to do it then and find it online. (FG11)

Students mentioned a variety of skills such as study skills, collaboration skills, leadership skills, and intercultural competence.

Fourth, another way IGW contributes to students' goals outside of the task is by helping them establish a network of international friends:

You establish really good ties with people through group work, because actually most of my friends they come from groups where I worked with because that's really tight—how do you say it—tight working, you really understand people, you get this connection through group work. (FG4)

Since there are all these different cultures and you learn about all these new people and you realize they are different from you but you can still be friends I think is a benefit. (FG11)

During IGW students got to know peers they otherwise might not have connected with, which often developed into long-term friendships. Students valued both the personal side of these friendships and the possibility that this network might help them in their future careers.

4.2.4. Proportion of listed benefits according to categories

Table 4 shows the extent to which the different EVT categories and IGW-related subcategories were addressed by the groups. During the focus groups, students addressed both attainment and utility aspects of character development and producing a high quality end product. As this distinction was not made explicit in the listed benefits, the percentages of the subcategories *character development* and *high quality end product* represent both attainment and utility aspects together.

More than one third of the listed benefits referred to the utility value of developing skills and competences. Character development and a high quality end product were also identified as major benefits. Intrinsic value did not emerge as a prominent benefit.

5. Discussion and conclusion

During the focus group interviews, students put forth a variety of costs and benefits that they attributed to participating in IGW. In addition to the existing EVT categories, one new cost category emerged: compromising at the expense of personal values and standards. Although not recognized as a category in previous research, the idea of having to give up on one's own values or standards lines up with the general definition of costs from Eccles and Wigfield (1995, p. 216): "Cost is what is lost, given up, or suffered as a consequence of engaging in a particular activity." Forty-one percent of the listed costs referred to this cost category which implies that having to give up one's own values and compromise in group work has great impact on student engagement in IGW. The most mentioned benefits were developing skills and competences (36%) and character development (29%) illustrating that students value the fact that IGW contributes to both personal and professional development. Negative emotions students experienced during IGW (29% of listed costs) are more prominent than positive emotions (3% of listed benefits) and are therefore most likely a stronger force in affecting student engagement in IGW. Costs and benefits students attribute to IGW are shaped by their previous experiences with IGW, group work in general, and also by the preconceived ideas they might have about IGW. Negative experiences with previous

Table 4

Percentages of listed benefits referring to EVT categories and IGW-related subcategories.

EVT Category	Subcategories	%
Attainment value	Character development: developing & expressing themselves as open-minded, global citizens	^a
	Producing a high-quality end product affirms value for excellence	^a
	Correcting existing stereotypes	4.2
	General ^b	2.8
Intrinsic value	Enjoying IGW	3.5
Utility value	Character development: developing positive character traits that are instrumental for working in multicultural setting	^a
	Producing high-quality end product leads to good grades, which is important for future opportunities	^a
	Developing skills & competences	36.3
	Expanding international network of friends	4.9
	General ^b	1.4
Attainment & Utility value	Character development	^a 29.4
	High quality end product	^a 17.5
Total		100

^a Percentages of attainment and utility aspects of character development and producing a high quality end product are presented jointly.

^b Benefits that could not be assigned to one of the other subcategories because participants used broad terms or combined elements of the different subcategories.

Fig. 1. Perceived costs and benefits of IGW according to main EVT categories and IGW-related subcategories.

group work that did not promote effective collaboration, e.g., due to assignments that did not evoke interdependence, a lack of preparation for and support during the group work, and unfair assessment, will contribute to a more negative view of IGW. Past IGW experiences that did promote effective collaboration would prompt students to attribute more benefits to IGW.

When asked about the costs and benefits of IGW, students frequently mentioned different communication styles, varied perspectives, and distinct approaches to the task as a result of the diversity in cultural and educational backgrounds. These elements were mentioned in the context of both costs and benefits, illustrating clearly that differences are not necessarily costs or benefits in themselves. The approach to this diversity instead seems more crucial for determining whether the differences have positive or negative consequences. Students indicated that several costs and benefits also apply to mono-cultural group work, but the greater differences represented in a multicultural group make both the costs and benefits more extensive. Previous research showed that preparing students for and supporting them during the collaboration process is key for aligning their team and task expectations in order to effectively collaborate towards a common goal (Fransen et al., 2011; Hassanien, 2007; Moore & Hampton, 2015). In a multicultural group expectations are more diverse compared to a mono-culture group which suggests that preparation and support for IGW is of even greater importance. Fig. 1 provides an overview of how the perceived costs and benefits of IGW line up with the EVT categories, as well as how they relate to diversity in the group.

The perceived costs were mainly short term; benefits ranged from short to long term. Students specifically mentioned only two long-term costs: Bad grades might have long-term consequences for their scholarship and future educational and job opportunities, and the feeling of being disconnected from their own culture became especially prevalent when they went home during school breaks. The short-term costs might have longer-term impacts though, if the time and effort invested in IGW causes them to fail to meet other goals.

The short-term benefits of IGW include the enjoyment it can bring and ability to fulfill a need for excellence. Most benefits serve a long-term purpose, such that students feel prepared to pursue a successful career in an international, multicultural society. The benefits that students highlighted, such as developing study skills, intercultural competence, and an international network, appeared to be side products, not specified learning outcomes.

Students generally believed they learned a lot from IGW and that the benefits were worth the (mainly short-term) costs. That is, our findings indicate that students actually weigh the costs and benefits when they consider their view on IGW. Costs are not by definition bad; only when students sense that there is no gain is the cost viewed as a negative factor. The impact of IGW is vast; it goes beyond discipline-specific learning by touching on students' personal and cultural values and pushing them out of their educational comfort zone.

5.1. How EVT sheds light on the findings

Considering IGW from an EVT perspective is a useful approach. A high-quality end product can be valuable to students because it feeds their drive for excellence, and the good grade resulting from this high-quality end product contributes to their future educational and professional opportunities. It thus provides both attainment and utility value. Developing positive character traits such as open-mindedness and empathy involves an expression of who the students want to be and affirms their self-schema, reflecting attainment value. These character traits also can have very high utility value. The costs and benefits that span more than one EVT category might have a more powerful impact on the overall value of an activity, such that they may be more influential when it comes to student engagement. Previous research has shown that effective communication is a substantial challenge and frustration in IGW (Popov et al., 2012; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017; Turner, 2009). Reasoning from the EVT, communication problems affect not just one but all the cost categories; they cause negative emotions, take a significant amount of time and effort, affect the quality of the end product, and hinder equal contributions from all group members.

Looking through an EVT lens at students' discussions of stereotyping also underlines the complexity of this topic. They regard correcting cultural stereotypes as a benefit of IGW, but students also experience stress and pressure to represent their culture well. That is, there is a cost to the benefit. Students also point out that though IGW can provide a way to correct cultural stereotypes, it also could have the opposite effect if it contributes to rash stereotyping or generalizing individual behaviors to the whole culture.

5.2. How the findings shed light on EVT

Multiple topics were described as both costs and benefits: stereotyping, emotions, product quality, and personal values. Students identified rash stereotyping as a danger of IGW but considered IGW a good opportunity to correct stereotypes and be well informed about other cultures. Negative emotions were attributed to participating in IGW, but it could also be fun and enjoyable. In some cases, IGW could result in a low-quality end product, or it could produce a high-quality product. Students felt they had to compromise at the expense of their personal values, but they also referred to IGW as an expression of their self-schema as global citizens. These examples point to the possibility that costs and benefits represent opposite ends of the continuum of dimensions, in contrast with a traditional view of EVT in which costs and benefits are separate subcomponents that together define the overall value (Eccles, 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 1995). A dimensional structure of costs and benefits also differs from the view of Barron and Hulleman (2014), who propose that the cost component is not a subcomponent of overall value but rather should be considered a major component that complements the value and expectancy components. We identify dimensions that range from very high value/benefit on one end to very high cost on the other. As detailed in Fig. 2, this perspective would lead to three dimensions that reflect the main EVT categories: from high *attainment value* (supporting personal values) to severe *compromise on personal values*; from strong *intrinsic value* (positive emotion of enjoyment) to severe *negative psychological states* (negative emotions); and from high *utility value* (contributing to short- and long-term goals outside of the specific activity) to wasting time and effort (preventing the student from reaching short- and long-term goals beyond the specific activity).

5.3. Comparing results to extant international research

In addition to confirming previous research findings as described in 2.1, this study uncovers some novel aspects that have not been elaborated on previously, thus providing deeper insights into students' IGW experiences. In particular, some aspects of IGW can result in both benefits and costs and are not, in themselves, automatically positive or negative. Prior research frequently identifies communication as a major challenge in IGW (Popov et al., 2012; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017; Turner, 2009). We go a step further to reveal that differences in communication style and language proficiency are sources of not only communication problems but also certain benefits. Students' language proficiency increases when they get to practice their language skills in a situation in which they

BENEFIT/VALUE	←	→	COST
Attainment value Importance of doing well on an activity in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - self-schema - core personal value 			Compromising at expense of personal value or standard Activity goes against one's personal values and self-schema
Intrinsic value Inherent enjoyment or pleasure from engaging in an activity			Negative psychological states resulting from struggle with the activity or fear of failure
Utility value Value of an activity because it is instrumental for reaching a variety of long- and short-term goals			Activity prevents person from reaching other long- and short-term goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time invested in activity that could be used to engage in other valued activities - Effort invested in activity that could be used for other activities

Fig. 2. Benefit/value – cost dimensions.

“must” communicate. Differences in communication styles also induce self-reflection about their own ways of communicating and help students develop their intercultural communication skills. Prior research suggests that the variety of perspectives, ideas, and learning practices available are benefits of IGW (Moore & Hampton, 2015; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017; Sweeney et al., 2008). We again add nuance to this point by showing that in addition to the benefits, a plethora of ideas can lead to costs, such as extra time and effort needed to share the different perspectives or a sense of insecurity about being confronted with different learning practices.

The emotional impacts of IGW have appeared in some previous studies (Frambach, Driessen, Beh, & van der Vleuten, 2014; Moore & Hampton, 2015; Volet & Ang, 2012). In this study, the wide variety and intensity of these emotions stood out: fear of offending, feeling hurt, stress from having to represent a culture, utter frustration trying to make people understand, uncertainty about what other students expect, being overlooked, and feeling overwhelmed by the whole process. Students clearly sensed that they were outside their cultural and educational comfort zone. The requirement to learn and work together with a multicultural group can be very confusing and emotionally draining at first. After a while though, students found a way to make the process work for them and the group. Similarly, Rienties et al. (2012) conclude that mandatory participation in IGW can lead to strong mixed-nationality team learning relations.

Free-riding is commonly identified as a problem in IGW and group work in general (Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Hall & Buzwell, 2013; Popov et al., 2012). Our focus group participants attributed free-riding behavior to the individual and cultural backgrounds. Some students were just considered lazy, irrespective of their cultural background. But certain cultures also were considered low achieving, because they generally regard “just passing” as acceptable, whereas high achieving cultures strongly emphasize the importance of high grades. Although some “high achieving” participants did not agree with accepting a lower standard, they also did not necessarily feel taken advantage of by students from “low achieving” cultures, probably because these peers did not expect the others to do the work for them.

Finally, IGW emerges as an effective tool to develop intercultural competence. Many of the benefits mentioned by the students reflected the pyramid model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). Developing positive character traits such as open-mindedness and tolerance are required attitudes for intercultural competence. Acquiring cultural knowledge and skills reflects the categories of knowledge and comprehension and skills. Students express empathy and adapt their behavior depending on the cultural context, which is a desired outcome. Therefore, the different elements of intercultural competence development can be part of the IGW process. Students noted their appreciation that IGW helped them develop a more international perspective.

5.4. Practical implications

In light of the costs and benefits that students identified, some recommendations for practice also are possible. When initially participating in IGW, students realize they cannot simply rely on previous group work experiences. They find themselves out of their educational, cultural, and personal comfort zones. Trying to navigate their personal and academic learning in uncharted territory can be a daunting process, especially when accompanied by strong negative emotions. Creating a safe, motivating, and enabling learning environment might reduce the costs and enhance the benefits of IGW. Fruitful intercultural collaboration does not happen by itself, but results from a deliberate endeavor. Carefully considering the design of the assignment, preparation for and support during the collaboration, and assessment in light of the diverse cultural and educational backgrounds of the students, can contribute to a positive learning environment. An assignment that evokes interdependence by employing the diverse cultural and educational backgrounds as a resource instead of viewing these as a hindrance will encourage intercultural interaction (Strauss & Young, 2011). Teachers can make students aware of the different short- and long-term benefits by specifying them in the assignment and then including these in the evaluated learning outcomes (Sweeney et al., 2008). Due to differences in communication styles, language proficiency, approaches to the task, and perspectives multicultural groups will need more time to establish effective collaboration than single-culture groups. To make IGW more effective, teachers can dedicate time to developing intercultural collaboration and communication skills, then include this factor in students' evaluations. With such an approach, students should not sense that time spent on the collaboration and communication comes at the expense of the quality of the end product. According to the EVT, decreasing costs and increasing benefits will contribute to the overall value a student attributes to IGW, leading to enhanced engagement, perseverance, and academic performance.

6. Limitations and further research directions

We purposely recruited a wide variety of students, in terms of their university, program, nationality, and gender, to represent diverse perspectives and experiences. The voluntary nature of their participation resulted in a sample that included more female students and students from western European countries. Some perspectives thus may remain underrepresented. The recruiting also might have favored participants with a particular interest in the topic. Although we planned for three or more participants for all the focus groups, two of them had only two participants each. We included them, because the discussions did not appear hindered by the limited number of participants and provided valuable insights.

During the focus group discussions, students did not always specify whether they were comparing IGW to mono-culture group work or to working individually, nor whether their statements specifically applied to IGW or to group work in general. In several instances, the interviewer asked for clarification about whether a cost or benefit would apply to group work in general or specifically IGW. Often the response indicated that the costs and benefits applied to both, but the intercultural dimension made them more prevalent or pronounced. In hindsight, asking for clarification more often would have provided richer data. On a related note, this study provides an inventory of costs and benefits that students attribute to IGW. More detailed research into the specific contribution

of the intercultural aspect, and the extent to which it differs from the contributions of other forms of diversity such as gender, educational background, or talents, is needed.

All groups stated that IGW requires a substantial amount of time and effort to establish effective collaboration. Previous literature notes that the benefits of a diverse team only start emerging after the team has worked together for a while (Watson et al., 1993). Further research into the importance of time and other factors for establishing trust and effective communication in a diverse student group can aid in developing a safe and effective learning environment.

A larger-scale, quantitative research approach also might provide insights into the importance that students attribute to different costs and benefits; the extent to which it affects students' levels of engagement, persistence, and performance in IGW; and the extent to which these variables differ depending on additional factors such as cultural backgrounds, previous group work experience, or educational programs. Finally, to validate the dimensional nature of value/benefits and costs, further research in different contexts is needed.

Declarations of interests

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