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# CHALLENGES IN TEAMWORK: INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore students' perception of challenges in teamwork activities. This study avails a quantitative research design and the empirical analysis shows statistically significant results. The results of the analysis reveal that 'uncertain goals' is the most challenging factor in teamwork activities in comparison to 'over expectation' which is the least challenging factor. Similarly, the distribution of the challenging aspects in teamwork shows firstly that 'uncertain goals' to be the most or the second most challenging aspect and secondly that 'over expectation' to be the least or second least challenging aspect. This study finds statistically significant differences between the rankings of the challenges in teamwork activities highlighting that these pairs show statistically significant differences. The variable 'over expectation' stands out as the least challenging of the aspects. The study further shows that the male respondents ranked 'changing plans' to be more challenging factor than female respondents. Similarly, variable 'personality clash' is considered very challenging by African and American students. Our results provide insights related to the challenges in teamwork at higher education institute. This research contributes towards undergraduate student learning experience.

Keywords: challenges, teamwork, business students, higher education, international business.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the context of higher education including international business studies, students regularly participate in teamwork activities [1] for instance group tasks, assignments, presentations, and events. According to previous research, the main purpose of such teamwork activities is to create interesting learning avenues for higher education students [2] as well as to develop a sense of social responsibility and commitment to fairness among participating students [3] especially when such student teams are composed of a heterogeneous mixture of gender, culture, and language [4]. Research highlights that there are several challenges in student teamwork activities [1]. The aim of the present study is to explore students' perception of challenges in teamwork activities. This study avails a quantitative analysis of international business students' perception on the main topic area to highlight interesting and noticeable research findings. A brief review of the literature on the construct of teamwork is presented here under.

In this study, the construct of a team is considered as a '*social entity formed by its members with high task interdependency and shared common goals*' [5 p. 541]. Such classical proposition is based on the seminal work of Dyer [6] further highlighting that a team as a group or social entity adheres to a collective identity, shares commonly agreed objectives as well as possesses distinct roles [7,8]. In this sense, the teamwork deals with the performance or effectiveness of the entire group as a whole that refers to team's collective success [9]. In the words of Aguado et al. [10 p. 103] such effectiveness depends on the abilities of team members in terms of managing the relationships and directing respective actions. Similarly, a recent study by Awuor et al. [11] proposes that the teamwork competency is driven by individual team member's knowledge, skills and abilities to effectively participate and contribute to teamwork tasks.

Prevailing literature posits that teamwork has become a useful pedagogical method to influence student learning [12] highlighting that there are numerous potential benefits of teamwork in different educational contexts [13] as well as in various industrial contexts [13,14]. However, research, see for example [15], also highlights several challenges and difficulties students face while participating in teamwork activities. In this exploratory study, we focus on some of the challenges of teamwork activities faced by students including variables such as uncertain goals of teamwork, personality clash among team members, high workload given to team members, changing plans without prior notice or agreement, and over expectation by other team members as highlighted in a research by Salas et al. [5]. With the help of quantitative data analysis, this research contributes towards undergraduate student learning experience and connects itself to the prevailing discussion on the effectiveness of teamwork among higher education students.

The remaining study is structured as follows. As part of research methodology, the context of the study and the research design are presented in the next section. Later, the empirical data analysis and its results are illustrated. Finally, in the later part the conclusion of the research is presented with limitations and some potential recommendations for further research in this area.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

A brief description of the context of the study and research design are presented as follows. The present research explores international business students' perception of challenges in teamwork activities. The context of this study is a 10 ECTS course namely 'Introduction to International Business'. This course is part of a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) degree programme in one of the higher education institutes in Finland. The learning objectives of this course basically focus on a wider view of different dimensions of international business practicalities in general. This particular course 'Introduction to International Business' is designed mainly around teamwork activities including research, assignments, presentations, debates etc. performed by the student teams. The teams are usually made up of around 3 to 5 members, who work closely to complete the given tasks within rather short deadlines.

This study follows a quantitative research design. The data was collected via a survey questionnaire during Autumn and Spring semesters of year 2020 and year 2021 respectively, in four implementations of the course. For this specific research, a questionnaire was created using Webropol 3.0 survey tool. This study avails a sample of 130 international business students (73 female and 57 male students), who represented multi-cultural nationalities. As part of the data sample, students participating in the survey were also asked about their own profile and to answer quantitative questions related to their perception of challenges in teamwork activities. The variables used in the survey questionnaire were based on the literature review.

Five variables pertaining to the challenges in teamwork activities were used in the questionnaire including (1) uncertain goals, (2) personality clash, (3) high work-load, (4) changing plans, and (5) over expectation. The respondents answered the questions of the survey questionnaire at the end of the first class of these respective course implementations. To enrich the empirical analysis, this research also incorporates the participating student profile data including the 'age', 'gender', and 'nationality' of the respondents.

The respondents were asked to rank the challenges in teamwork from most challenging to least challenging. The ranks have been modified into scores, where the least challenging aspect is scored as 1 and the most challenging is scored as 5. The researchers carefully reviewed the submitted questionnaire and included the responses in the data analysis. Participants were informed that their participation in the research was voluntary and that their answers shall remain anonymous and confidential.

The researchers analyzed the data with the help of SPSS and MS Excel software. The empirical data was entered into IBM SPSS statistical tool for the analysis. The data analysis was carried out by first applying Friedman non-parametric statistical test to detect the differences in the respondents' ranking orders and Wilcoxon non-parametric statistical hypothesis signed-rank test to compare two related samples. Additionally, the Kruskal-Wallis test and Mann-Whitney U test were applied to find statistically significant differences based on 'gender' and 'nationality' of the respondents.

The empirical analysis of the study sheds light on students' perception of challenges in teamwork activities. The results of the empirical analysis are discussed in the following section.

## 3 RESULTS

The students represent both genders. However, the proportion of female respondents is somewhat higher than that of males. (Table 1.)

*Table 1. The respondents' genders*

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Male	57	43,8 %
Female	73	56,2 %
Total	130	100,0 %

The students are relatively evenly distributed into three age groups. Majority of the respondents are over 25-year-old. (Table 2.)

*Table 2. Age distribution of the respondents*

<i>Age</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
17 - 20 years	41	31,5 %
21 - 25 years	41	31,5 %
26 years or older	48	36,9 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>100,0 %</b>

The male respondents are mostly 21 years or older. The youngest respondents are mostly females. (Table 3.)

*Table 3. Age distribution based on the respondent's gender*

<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	
17 - 20 years	10	31	41
	17,5 %	42,5 %	31,5 %
21 - 25 years	26	15	41
	45,6 %	20,5 %	31,5 %
26 year or older	21	27	48
	36,8 %	37,0 %	36,9 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>130</b>
	<b>100,0 %</b>	<b>100,0 %</b>	<b>100,0 %</b>

The students represent 22 nationalities and nine students have double nationalities. However, majority of the students are Finnish. (Table 4.)

*Table 4. The respondents' nationalities*

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Finnish	77	59,7 %
European	25	19,4 %
Americas	5	3,9 %
Asia	9	7,0 %
Africa	4	3,1 %
Double nationality	9	7,0 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>100,0 %</b>

Almost all students have prior experience of teamwork. Only one tenth of the students do not have experiences of it. (Table 5.)

*Table 5. Prior teamwork experience*

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Yes	118	90,8 %
No	12	9,2 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100,0 %</b>

### 3.1 Challenges in teamwork activities

The respondents were asked to rank the challenges in teamwork from most challenging to least challenging. The ranks have been modified into scores, where the least challenging aspect is scored as 1 and the most challenging is scored as 5.

The respondents assessed the 'uncertain goals' as the most challenging aspect in teamwork. The least challenging aspect on the respondents' opinion was 'over expectation'. However, there was considerable variation in the respondents' opinions. (Table 6.)

Table 6. Rankings of challenging aspects in teamwork

	<i>Over expectation</i>	<i>High workload</i>	<i>Changing plans</i>	<i>Personality clash</i>	<i>Uncertain goals</i>
Mean	2,53	2,95	3,07	3,13	3,31
Std. Deviation	1,21	1,46	1,31	1,34	1,62

About 55% of the respondents considered the 'uncertain goals' to be the most or the second most challenging aspect. Yet, 24 %found it to be the least challenging issue. On the other end, over 50% considered the 'over expectation' to be the least or second least challenging aspect, and only 5% ranked it as the most challenging aspect. (Fig. 1.)

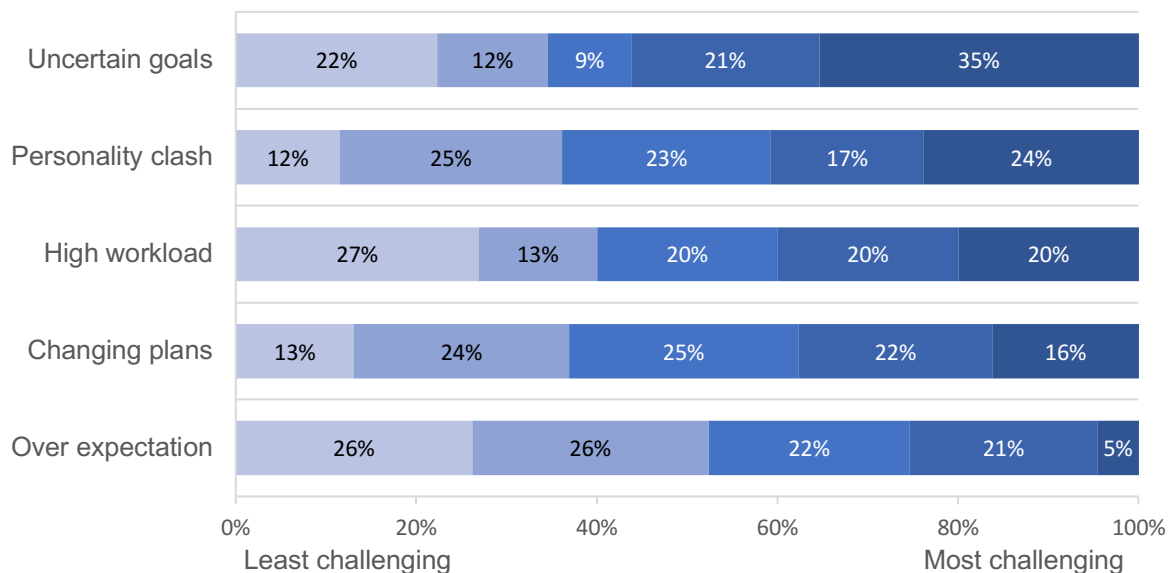


Figure 1. Distribution of the rankings of challenging aspects in teamwork

There are statistically significant differences between the rankings (Friedman test,  $\chi^2 = 14.970$ , Sig = 0.005). For further analysis, the challenging issues were paired and Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Tests was used to study which of these pairs show statistically significant differences. The 'over expectation' stands out as the least challenging of the aspects. However, the ranking orders of the other aspects are not significantly different. (Table 7.)

Table 7. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test on challenges of teamwork

Test Statistics	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Personality clash - High workload	-,890 <sup>b</sup>	0,373
Over expectation - High workload	-2,088 <sup>c</sup>	<b>0,037</b>
Changing plans - High workload	-,567 <sup>b</sup>	0,570
Uncertain goals - High workload	-1,251 <sup>b</sup>	0,211
Over expectation - Personality clash	-2,964 <sup>c</sup>	<b>0,003</b>
Changing plans - Personality clash	-,278 <sup>c</sup>	0,781
Uncertain goals - Personality clash	-,813 <sup>b</sup>	0,416
Changing plans - Over expectation	-2,613 <sup>b</sup>	<b>0,009</b>
Uncertain goals - Over expectation	-3,467 <sup>b</sup>	<b>0,001</b>
Uncertain goals - Changing plans	-1,190 <sup>b</sup>	0,234

b Based on negative ranks.  
c Based on positive ranks.

There was a difference in the rankings of 'changing plans' based on the respondents' gender. The male respondents ranked this issue to be more challenging than female respondents (U = 1073.000, Sig = 0.025, Fig. 2).

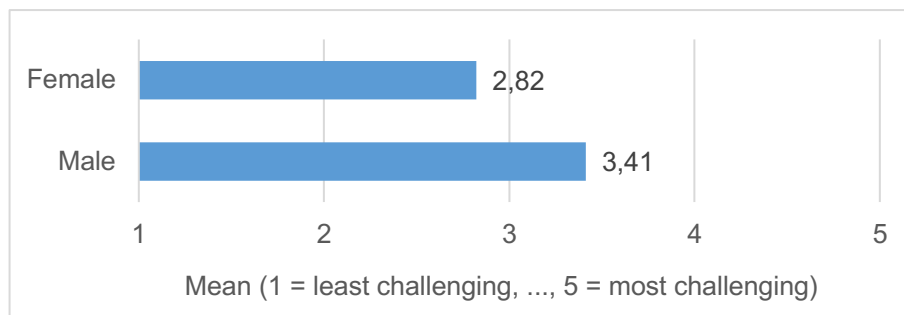


Figure 2. Assessment of 'changing plans' by gender

The nationality effects on students' perception on teamwork challenges. Personality clashes are considered very challenging by African and American students. On the other hand, Finnish students as well as student with double nationality assess this challenge significantly lower (H(5) = 11,288, p = 0,046, Fig. 5).

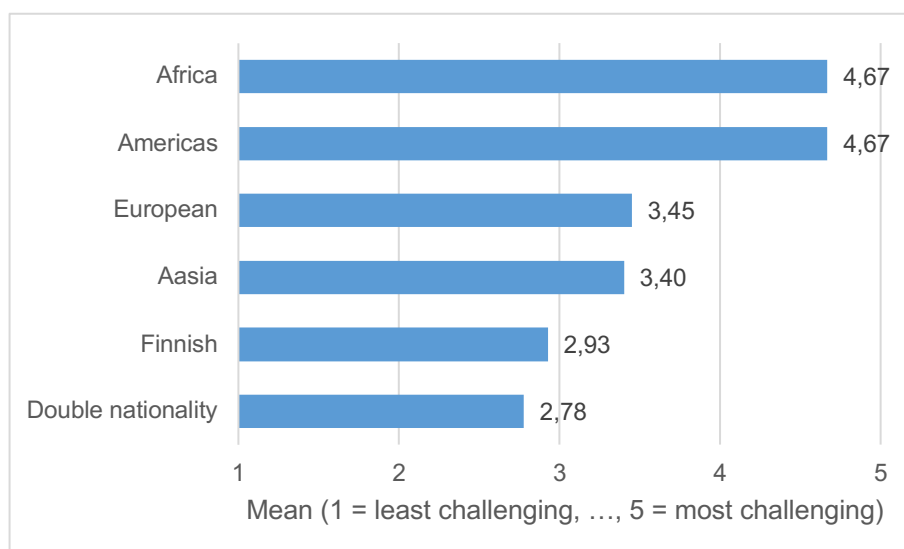


Figure 3. Assessment of 'personality clash' based on nationality.

The conclusion of the research is presented in the following section.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this research is to explore students' perception of challenges in teamwork activities. This study avails a quantitative research design and the empirical analysis shows statistically significant results related to five variables that influence challenges in teamwork activities including (1) uncertain goals, (2) personality clash, (3) high work-load, (4) changing plans, and (5) over expectation. The respondents were asked to rank the challenges in teamwork from most challenging to least challenging. While ranking about the challenging aspects of the teamwork, the respondents assessed the 'uncertain goals' as the most challenging aspect in teamwork. The least challenging aspect on the respondents' opinion was 'over expectation'. However, there was considerable variation in the respondents' opinions.

The distribution of the challenging aspects of the teamwork reveals that about half of the respondents considered the 'uncertain goals' to be the most or the second most challenging aspect. A quarter of the respondents considered it to be the least challenging issue. On the other end, over half of the respondents considered the variable 'over expectation' to be the least or second least challenging aspect, and only a few of the respondents ranked it as the most challenging aspect.

This study found that there are statistically significant differences between the rankings of the challenges in teamwork activities. As part of the analysis, the challenging issues were further analysed to shed light on which of these pairs show statistically significant differences. The variable 'over expectation' stands out as the least challenging of the aspects. However, our analysis shows that the ranking orders of the other aspects are not significantly different.

The study further assesses the variable 'changing plans' by participants' gender and found that there was a difference in the rankings of 'changing plans' based on the respondents' gender. The male respondents ranked this issue to be more challenging than female respondents. Similarly, the nationality effects on students' perception of challenges in teamwork activities. The variable 'personality clash' is considered very challenging by African and American students. On the other hand, Finnish students as well as student with double nationality assess this challenge significantly lower.

With the help of empirical analysis, this study sheds light on international business students' perception of challenges in teamwork activities at a higher education institute. Hence, this study is directly connected with the current body of knowledge related to student engagement and learning in the higher education. Our research avails a limited empirical sample for data analysis. This aspect of the research is considered as a research limitation, thus care should be taken in generalizing the findings of this exploratory study. A further detailed comparative research study could be conducted using a larger data sample as a potential future direction of the research.

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