



Approaches to Learning of European Business Students

Marann Byrne , Barbara Flood & Pauline Willis

To cite this article: Marann Byrne , Barbara Flood & Pauline Willis (2002) Approaches to Learning of European Business Students, Journal of Further and Higher Education, 26:1, 19-28, DOI: [10.1080/03098770120108275](https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770120108275)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03098770120108275>



Published online: 03 Aug 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 72



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 9 View citing articles [↗](#)

Approaches to Learning of European Business Students

MARANN BYRNE, BARBARA FLOOD & PAULINE WILLIS

DCUBS, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland

ABSTRACT *Several reports on higher education have identified the need to improve the quality of student learning. Higher education research identifies the approach to learning as a significant factor affecting the quality of learning. If educators are to find ways of improving the educational experience of their students, they must understand how students learn and the effects of the learning environment on their learning approaches. This study examines the approaches to learning adopted by Irish and overseas students studying on the BA in European Business at Dublin City University (DCU) [1].*

Introduction

There is an increasing emphasis today on the quality of the educational experience being provided to business and management students. Businesses now operate in a global marketplace, with increasing competition, increasing technological change, and increasing emphasis on intellectual capital and innovation (Candy, 1998; Bromwich & Bhimani, 1994, p. 1). Business education must equip students to survive and hopefully thrive in this environment; it must foster among students an understanding of change in organisations and the capabilities to be able to adapt to, and embrace change (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2000, par 3.2; Longworth & Davies, 1996, p. 26). Thus it is essential to create an educational environment that develops students as active, independent and lifelong learners (Hodgkinson, 1998; Candy, 1998). This involves students acquiring skills and strategies, which allow them to learn effectively throughout their lives (Stephens *et al.*, 1998; Kelly *et al.*, 1999). To achieve these high quality learning outcomes educators need to understand student learning, in particular, how students set about their learning tasks, their intentions and strategies and how these impact on the quality of their learning outcomes.

The higher education literature identifies the approach to learning as a significant factor affecting the quality of student learning (Marton & Saljo, 1976; Biggs, 1979; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Ramsden, 1992). Research to date on student learning in business and management education is limited, despite a clear need for research to be conducted within specific disciplinary settings (Lucas, 2000). One such setting is international business education as provided by the partnership programme of the International Partnership of Business Schools (IPBS) and indeed there has been a

call for research on student learning in this 'potentially rich context' (Ó'hÓgartaigh, 1999, p. 16). This partnership programme is innovative, international, multicultural and experiential in character. Students undertake two years of the programme in their home institution and two years in one of the partner institutions. All programme modules are designed in conjunction with the partnership institutions to form a cohesive programme. The programme facilitates students to study languages, culture and business in an international environment and through their time at a partner institution they are immersed in the cultural and academic life of another country. Students of the programme are also afforded opportunities to complete work placements both in their home country and the partner country. On completion of the programme students are awarded two degrees, one from their home institution and one from a partner institution.

The objective of this study is to measure the approaches to learning adopted by students on the partnership programme at Dublin City University (DCU) and to identify if differences exist in the approaches of Irish and overseas students. The paper begins by presenting a model of student learning from the higher education literature. It continues with a discussion of the research instrument used to measure students' approaches to learning. The results and main findings are then presented and the paper concludes by discussing possible reasons for the findings and suggesting areas for further research.

Student Learning and the Learning Environment

Gaining an understanding of student learning is a necessary prerequisite to devising strategies which will improve learning. As Ramsden (1985) states:

Tinkering with what are assumed to be necessary skills without considering the learning context and the meaning of learning to the students is worse than useless. (p. 65)

Ramsden (1992) provides a model of the context of student learning in higher education. This model, as outlined in Figure 1, shows that the quality of student learning (learning outcome) is influenced by students' approaches to learning. Learning approaches are affected by students' perceptions of the requirements of the learning task which, in turn, are affected by the learning context (teaching, curriculum and assessment) and students' general orientations to studying. Their orientations to studying are influenced by both the learning context and prior educational experiences.

Ramsden (1992, p. 39) contends that the approach to learning is one of the most influential concepts to have emerged from research into teaching and learning in higher education. An approach to learning concerns both a student's intention and how s/he relates to and organises a learning task (Ramsden, 1985, 1987). It is not something inside a student; it is not a personal characteristic; it is a way of describing how a student responds to a task; it is dynamic, and is highly sensitive to the context in which the learning occurs (Ramsden, 1987; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999, pp. 58–82; Lucas, 2000).

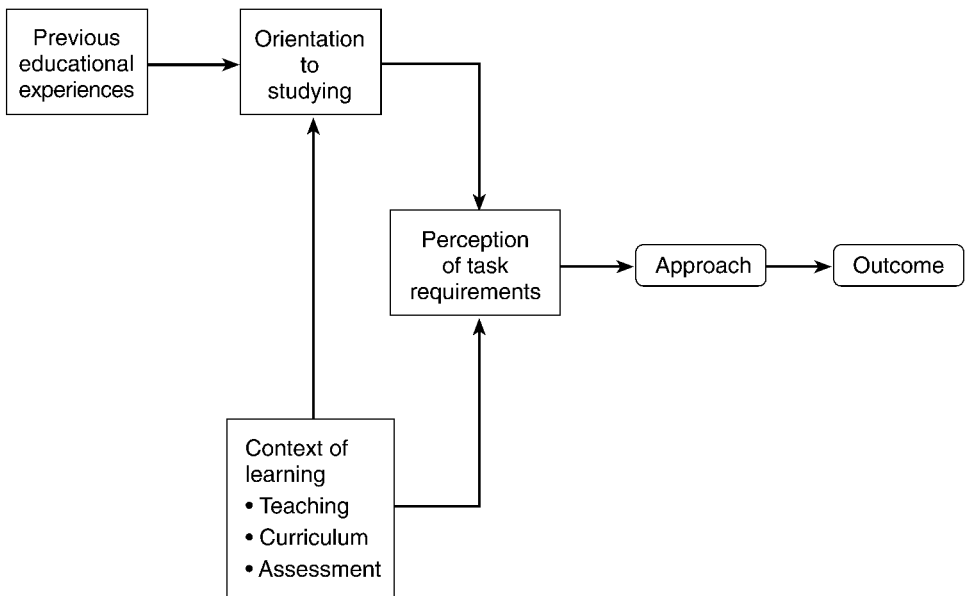


FIG. 1. Student learning in context.

Early research on student learning, using text reading experiments, was led by Marton at Gothenburg University in the 1970s. Students were asked to read an article and were then interviewed to assess their level of understanding and to determine how they approached the task (i.e., the *process* of learning). Marton and Saljo (1976) identified two main levels of processing which were clearly related to the qualitative differences in the levels of understanding achieved (a high or low level of understanding). They called these levels of processing *deep* and *surface*. In a study at Lancaster University, Entwistle, Hanley and Hounsell (1979) recognised that Marton and Saljo were describing both the student's intention and process and hence concluded that the term 'level of processing' was too narrow. The Lancaster group preferred to use the term *approach* which was accepted by the Gothenburg group and is now widely accepted as the most appropriate descriptor for the qualitative differences in how students respond to a learning task (Marton & Saljo, 1997, p. 47).

Students adopting a deep approach to learning set out with the intention of understanding the material. They interact critically with the arguments put forward, relate them to their own prior knowledge and experience, and evaluate the extent to which conclusions are justified by the evidence presented. The process is internal to the student. In contrast, a surface approach is associated with students who orient their learning towards meaningless memorisation and reproduction. They rote learn in an unrelated way, they fail to interact personally with the material and are constrained by the specific learning task. In this instance the process of learning is external to the student. A deep approach is more likely to result in a high level of understanding while a surface approach is likely to lead to a low level of understanding (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983, p. 18).

Ramsden (1979) identified a third approach, which he called a strategic approach. This describes students who are primarily concerned with achieving the highest possible grades. They use both deep and surface approaches as appropriate and have a competitive and vocational motivation.

Measuring Approaches to Learning

Standardised questionnaires have been developed to measure the learning approaches of large groups of students. The *Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI)* which was developed by Entwistle and his colleagues (Entwistle *et al.*, 1979; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983, pp. 35–55) is probably the most widely used questionnaire on student learning in higher education (Richardson, 1994). It was influenced by the work of Biggs (1976 and 1979), Marton and Saljo (1976) and Pask (1976). A number of revisions were made to the original ASI (e.g., Gibbs *et al.*, 1988; Watkins, 1984) but the developers of the ASI were concerned that these revisions resulted in its conceptual integrity being sacrificed. This led them to revise the ASI, taking current literature on student learning into account (Tait *et al.*, 1998). This latest inventory is incorporated within a longer questionnaire called the *Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST)*, which also contains sections relating to other aspects of learning in higher education. This study only focuses on the inventory section of the questionnaire.

The ASSIST measures students' approaches to learning on three dimensions referred to as main scales: deep; strategic; and instrumental. Tait *et al.* (1998) define instrumental as 'surface apathetic'. The inventory contains 52 statements and respondents indicate their agreement with each statement, using a five-point Likert scale where 1 = *disagree* and 5 = *agree*. The statements are combined into 13 subscales each containing four statements and are then grouped into the three main scales. The subscales have been designed to cover the main defining characteristics of the main scales and are described in Table I.

Richardson (1994) asserts that when employing a questionnaire in a situation different from that in which it was originally developed, factor analysis should always be carried out to check that its intended constituent structure can be reconstructed in the new context. The ASSIST was validated for use in an Irish context in a prior study with DCU students (Byrne *et al.*, 1999).

Data Collection

The population consisted of students from all four years of the BA in European Business (BAEB) programme at DCU. This group comprises students recruited by DCU and students recruited by the French, German and Spanish partner institutions. The questionnaire was administered to each class at the start of a lecture and students were asked to describe their general approach to studying on the BAEB programme. Before completing the questionnaire, the purpose of the study was verbally explained to the students and they were reassured that the focus of the study was not their individual responses but to draw inferences from the total responses.

TABLE I. ASSIST: Approaches to learning scales and characteristic elements

Deep Approach	Meaning
Seeking meaning	Intention to understand
Relating ideas	Relating to other topics and courses
Use of evidence	Relating evidence to conclusions
<i>Related Motives</i>	
Interest in ideas	Interest in learning for learning's sake
Collaborating	Consultation and discussion with others
Strategic Approach	
Organised studying	Able to work regularly and effectively
Time management	Organise time and distribute effort to greatest effect
Monitoring effectiveness	Checking progress to ensure achievement of aims
<i>Related Motives</i>	
Achieving	Committed to performing well
Instrumental Approach (Surface Apathetic)	
Lack of understanding	Not understanding material and relying on memory
Lack of purpose	Lack of direction
Syllabus-boundness	Studies confined to assessment demands
<i>Related Motives</i>	
Fear of failure	Pessimism and anxiety about academic outcomes

TABLE II. Sample by group and gender

Group	Male	Female	Total
Irish	18	40	58 (55%)
Overseas	28	19	47 (45%)
	46	59	105
	(44%)	(56%)	

For statistical analysis there were insufficient numbers from each of the individual institutions, so the sample was divided between those students who were studying in their home country (Irish students) and those who were studying overseas. There was a potential population of 135 students, comprising 74 Irish students and 61 overseas students. Completed questionnaires were received from 58 Irish students and 47 overseas students, yielding a 78% response rate. Table II shows the sample, analysed by gender and split between Irish and overseas students.

Results

The scores for the 13 subscales on the ASSIST were derived by summing each student's response to the individual statements. The relevant subscale scores were combined to compute the scores for the main scales. As there are five subscales in

TABLE III. Mean scores of main scales

	Total	Irish	Overseas	Difference in mean scores
Deep	14.37	14.09	14.73	− 0.64
Strategic	13.03	12.41	13.81	− 1.40**
Instrumental	11.64	13.17	9.79	3.38**

Note: * significant at 5% level. ** significant at 1% level

the deep approach and four subscales in both the strategic and instrumental approaches, for ease of comparison each main scale was divided by the number of constituent subscales to standardise the scores. This resulted in a maximum score for each scale of 20. Table III shows the mean scores for the main scales for the full sample and for each group.

While the mean scores have no absolute meaning, they can be used for comparison within a group and between groups. As shown in Table III the deep approach has the highest score for the full sample, while the instrumental approach has the lowest score. To identify differences between the mean scores on each scale within each subgroup, paired sample t-tests were carried out. For the Irish students, the only significant difference is between the deep and strategic mean scores (t-value = 4.25), showing that these students tend to favour a deep approach over a strategic approach. An examination of the differences in the mean scores for the overseas students shows a highly significant difference between the deep and instrumental approach (t-value = 10.63), and between the strategic and instrumental approach (t-value = 7.25), indicating that these students are less inclined to adopt an instrumental approach.

Independent sample t-tests were carried out to compare the mean scores of the Irish and overseas students and to identify any significant differences in their approaches to learning. The results of these tests are incorporated in Table III. Significant differences were revealed between the scores of the two groups on the strategic and instrumental scales. The Irish students are much more instrumental than the overseas students are, while the latter are more inclined to adopt a strategic approach than are the Irish students.

To gain a better understanding of the similarities and differences in Irish and overseas students' approaches to learning, the mean scores of the individual subscales are presented in Table IV.

The *Relating Ideas* is the only subscale on the deep scale to show a significant difference for Irish and overseas students. The Irish students have a significantly lower score on this subscale, suggesting they are less likely to relate and integrate new information to other topics and courses. The results for the strategic main scale (Table IV) show that Irish students are less inclined to use this approach. They have significantly lower scores on three of the strategic subscales, indicating that they are less effective at organising and managing their study time and are not as committed to achieving high grades. Conversely, overseas students tend to have more efficient

TABLE IV. Mean scores of subscales

	Total	Irish	Overseas	Difference in subscale mean scores
Deep				
Seeking meaning	14.56	14.72	14.36	0.36
Relating ideas	13.94	13.33	14.72	-1.39*
Use of evidence	14.62	14.34	14.96	-0.62
<i>Related motives</i>				
Interest in ideas	13.58	13.04	14.30	-1.26
Collaboration	15.06	15.01	15.11	-0.10
Strategic				
Organised study	12.55	11.88	13.39	-1.51*
Time management	12.14	11.36	13.11	-1.75*
Monitoring effectiveness	13.78	13.49	14.13	-0.64
<i>Related motive</i>				
Achieving	13.95	13.22	14.85	-1.63**
Instrumental				
Lack of understanding	10.97	12.48	9.11	3.37**
Lack of purpose	9.66	10.39	8.79	1.60*
Syllabus boundness	12.70	14.14	10.94	3.20**
<i>Related motive</i>				
Fear of failure	13.15	15.44	10.32	5.12**

Note: * significant at 5% level; ** significant at 1% level.

studying techniques and are more committed to performing well in their examinations. In the case of the instrumental scale, Irish students have significantly higher scores, than the overseas students, on all the subscales. This suggests that more Irish students may lack purpose and direction in their studies, they memorise information without understanding it, confine their studies to what is required to pass assessments and are highly anxious about their studies. The overseas students have a better sense of purpose; they strive to understand and integrate the subject content, are not constrained by assessments and are less anxious about their studies.

Richardson (1993) observes that most research measuring approaches to learning has ignored gender as a social variable. Generally, those studies which tested for gender differences failed to find any consistent evidence (e.g., Richardson & King, 1991). In this study no gender differences were found in either group.

Discussion of the Results

Given the goals of tertiary education, it is encouraging to find that a deep approach to learning is the dominant approach for students on the partnership programme and an instrumental approach is their less favoured approach. It is interesting to note that the scores on the deep scale for both Irish and overseas students in this study

were higher than those reported in a prior study for students on the BA in Accounting and Finance and BBS programmes at DCU (Byrne *et al.*, 1999). Thus, it appears that the partnership programme encourages students to develop an understanding of the course content, to interact critically with the material, to relate ideas to their previous knowledge and experiences and to evaluate the evidence before reaching conclusions. However, while the deep approach is the preferred approach for the full group on the partnership programme its dominance is not as strong for the Irish students. The evidence shows that Irish students are more inclined to adopt an instrumental approach to learning than overseas students are. This is likely to be attributable to a combination of factors, such as, age, prior educational experience and year of study.

Some prior research (Watkins, 1982; Sadler-Smith, 1996) has found that older students are more likely to adopt a deep approach to learning than are recent school leavers. In the current study, Irish students are in years 1 or 2 of the programme, while overseas students are in all four years. The mean age is 18.60 for Irish students and 20.91 for overseas students. A Mann-Whitney test confirmed that the difference in age of the two groups is significant at the 1% level. A correlation of age to students' approaches to learning revealed a significant (at the 1% level) negative relationship between age and the instrumental approach, indicating that older students are less inclined to adopt this approach.

Ramsden's (1992) model of student learning (Figure 1) clearly shows that previous educational experience influence students' learning. He recognises that students with different previous educational experiences are predisposed to certain approaches to learning. It is his belief that orientations towards personal meaning (associated with a deep approach) or towards reproducing (associated with an instrumental approach) are shaped by experiences in school, in particular experiences associated with formal examinations (Ramsden, 1985). Prior research, by Byrne and Willis (1997, 2000) found that Irish second level public examinations encourage students to adopt an instrumental approach to learning in the final years of secondary education. Similarly, informal feedback from lecturers on the partnership programme at DCU suggests that many Irish students tend to have a reproducing orientation to their studies, while lecturers frequently comment that overseas students are more likely to engage in questioning and critical analysis of the course material. These latter activities are synonymous with a deep approach to learning.

The current study combines data from all four years of the programme to derive a workable sample size, but it is likely that year of study influences students' approaches to learning. The course content in the final years of the programme is more conceptual and challenging, thus encouraging students to adopt a deep approach to learning. 38% of the overseas students are in years 3 or 4 of the programme, whereas all of the Irish students are in years 1 or 2. Unfortunately, given the relatively low number of students in each year of the programme it was not possible to perform the analysis on a year-by-year basis.

The variables of age, prior experience and year of study are unlikely to be the only factors contributing to the differences in the approaches of the Irish and overseas students. Other factors such as academic ability and cultural differences may also

impact on students' approaches to learning, highlighting the need for further research.

Conclusions

This study sought to identify the approaches to learning adopted by students on the European Business programme at DCU. The study revealed that for both Irish and overseas students the highest scores were on the deep scale. A significantly lower number of overseas students adopted an instrumental approach compared to a deep or strategic approach. The Irish students' score on the instrumental scale is significantly higher than the corresponding score for overseas students. Possible explanations offered for this difference were students' ages, their prior educational experiences and their year of study.

The current study is exploratory in nature and its findings are tentative and must be interpreted with caution. The small number of students on the programme at DCU limited the analysis which could be undertaken. To address these limitations the survey approach used in this study will be extended over time at DCU and to other partner institutions. In addition, students from the different international groups will be interviewed to identify and explore the factors which influence their learning approaches. At a time when many educators face an increasingly international student body, this research project will enhance educators' understanding of the learning of international students in different countries.

Note

- [1] The BA in European Business at Dublin City University is a partnership programme which is run jointly with the following members of the International Partnership of Business Schools (IPBS),
 - (a) the Centre d'Études Supérieures Européennes de Management (CESEM) in ESC Reims, France
 - (b) ESB-Reutlingen, Germany
 - (c) ICADE at the Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid, Spain
 - (d) Northeastern University, Boston, USA

References

- BIGGS, J.B. (1976) Dimensions of study behaviour: another look at ATI, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 46, pp. 68–80.
- BIGGS, J.B. (1979) Individual differences in study processes and the quality of learning outcomes, *Higher Education*, 8, pp. 381–394.
- BROMWICH, M. & BHIMANI, A. (1994) *Management Accounting: Pathways to Progress* (London, CIMA).
- BYRNE, M., FLOOD, B. & WILLIS, P. (1999) Approaches to learning: Irish students of accounting, *Irish Accounting Review*, 6(2), pp. 1–29.
- BYRNE, M. & WILLIS, P. (1997) An analysis of accounting at second level, *Irish Accounting Review*, 4(1), pp. 1–26.
- BYRNE, M. & WILLIS, P. (2000) The revised second level accounting syllabus: a new beginning or old habits retained?, paper presented at the Irish Accounting and Finance Association Annual Conference, Dublin Institute of Technology, May 2000.
- CANDY, P. (1998) Knowledge navigators and lifelong learners: producing graduates for the information society, in: C. RUST (Ed.) *Improving Student Learning: Improving Students as Learners* (Oxford, The Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development).

- ENTWISTLE, N., HANLEY, M. & HOUNSELL, D. (1979) Identifying distinctive approaches to studying, *Higher Education*, 8, pp. 365–380.
- ENTWISTLE, N. & RAMSDEN, P. (1983) *Understanding Student Learning* (London, Croom Helm).
- GIBBS, G., HABESHAW, S. & HABESHAW, T. (1988) *53 Interesting Ways to Appraise your Teaching* (Bristol, Technical & Educational Services).
- HODGKINSON, M. (1998) A rationale for an introduction of lifelong learning skills: business, management and accounting undergraduate awards, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 22(2), pp. 151–162.
- KELLY, M., DAVEY, H. & HAIGH, N. (1999) Contemporary accounting education and society, *Accounting Education*, 8(4), pp. 321–340.
- LONGWORTH, N. & DAVIES, W.K. (1996) *Lifelong learning* (London, Kogan Page).
- LUCAS, U. (2000) Deep and surface approaches to learning within introductory accounting: a phenomenographic study, paper presented to the BAA SIG Accounting Education Annual Conference, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, May 2000.
- MARTON, F. & SALJO, R. (1976) On qualitative differences in learning: I—Outcome and process, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 46, pp. 4–11.
- MARTON, F. & SALJO, R. (1997) Approaches to learning, in: F. MARTON, D. HOUNSELL & N. ENTWISTLE (Eds) *The Experience of Learning* (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press).
- Ó'HÓGARTAIGH, C. (1999) 'Of things being various': counterpoint and harmony in international business education, in: K. THEILE & C. Ó'HÓGARTAIGH (Eds) *International Business Education* (Dublin, Oak Tree Press).
- PASK, G. (1976) Styles and strategies of learning, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 46, pp. 128–148.
- PROSSER, M. & TRIGWELL, K. (1999) *Understanding Learning and Teaching* (Buckingham, SRHE and Open University Press).
- QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (QAAHE) (2000) *Subject benchmark standard for General Business and Management* (Gloucester, QAAHE).
- RAMSDEN, P. (1979) Student learning and perceptions of the academic environment, *Higher Education*, 8, pp. 411–427.
- RAMSDEN, P. (1985) Student learning research: retrospect and prospect, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 4(1), pp. 51–69.
- RAMSDEN, P. (1987) Improving teaching and learning in higher education: the case for a relational perspective, *Studies in Higher Education*, 12, pp. 275–286.
- RAMSDEN, P. (1992) *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* (London, Routledge).
- RICHARDSON, J.T.E. (1993) Gender differences in responses to the approaches to studying inventory, *Studies in Higher Education*, 18(1), pp. 3–13.
- RICHARDSON, J.T.E. (1994) Using questionnaires to evaluate student learning, in: G. GIBBS (Ed.) *Improving Student Learning through Assessment and Evaluation* (Oxford, The Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development).
- RICHARDSON, J.T.E. & KING, E. (1991) Gender differences in the experience of higher education: quantitative and qualitative approaches, *Educational Psychology*, 11, pp. 363–382.
- SADLER-SMITH, E. (1996) Approaches to studying: age, gender and academic performance, *Educational Studies*, 22, pp. 367–379.
- STEPHENS, J., HALL, R., KNOWLES, V. & STEWART, J. (1998) Exploring business skills: an innovative approach to promoting lifelong learning, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 22(3), pp. 329–341.
- TAIT, H., ENTWISTLE, E & MCCUNE, V. (1998) ASSIST: A reconceptualisation of the approaches to studying inventory, in: C. RUST (Ed) *Improving Student Learning: Improving Students as Learners* (Oxford, The Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development).
- WATKINS, D. (1982) Identifying the study process dimensions of Australian university students, *Australian Journal of Education*, 26, pp. 76–85.
- WATKINS, D. (1984) Student learning processes: an exploratory study in the Philippines, *Human Learning*, 3, pp. 33–42.