

UTeM Winter School 2024: An impetus to inter-cultural experience among multi-racial university students

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Abstract: Inter-cultural disengagement among the younger generations, especially engineering and technology students, has been worsened by the technological evolution, which supplants traditional methods. The growing need to nurture cultural awareness is not necessarily to only be catered through a semester abroad program, but also a short-term one. Hence, the purpose of this study is to present a case study on how a student exchange program can promote inter-cultural experience among multi-racial students. UTeM Winter School (UWINS) 2024 offered traditional games, guided tour to craft complex with tie-dye activity, cooking demonstration and direct engagement with local communities. These activities aim to lively immerse both local and international participants from Indonesia, Brunei and Yemen, in Malaysian culture and heritage. A set of questionnaire was crafted and later responded by 22 respondents from the previously mentioned countries. From the results of a questionnaire, those activities receive promising feedback towards encouraging inter-cultural experience among participants. In overall, there are significantly high level of agreements on the effectiveness of the organized culture-related activities in the embracement of the local culture among the multi-racial university students.

Key words: *student exchange; inter-cultural experience; traditional games; traditional craft; cooking demonstration*

1.0 Introduction

Working abroad among the local graduates of a certain nationality has been a big trend upon graduation. For instance, there was approximately 150,000 high-skilled and experienced Malaysians being employed in the United States, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom (Zainol et al. 2020). At the same time, Malaysia has been the preferred option for expatriates in particularly from South Asia to spend their professional undertaking across various sectors and industries (Tan and Ho 2014). The challenging part of living and working abroad is one's adaptability to the cultural norms and customs among the nation of the host country (Halmi et al. 2020). Fairly mentioned, insufficient mental and physical preparation have been the main root cause to cross-cultural adaption difficulty among the expatriates (Abdul Rohman et al. 2023).

On top of technical working environment, the cultural point of view in dealing with certain engineering projects are crucial in making sure that all parties converging to the same context of understanding (Hoshino and Sanders 2007). Having cultural misinterpretation on important matters related to a project would contribute to higher failure rates when the expatriates fail to adapt to the host culture (Hamzah et al. 2020). For multinational companies to hire employees among different nationalities and cultural backgrounds, a university degree alone would not be a guarantee to secure the job employment (Sisavath 2021). In fact, some companies have started to include cross-cultural communication as one of the important criteria during the job interview session (Shurke and Shurke 2008).

Hence, universities should play an important role in fostering intercultural competence to overcome prior stereotypes and broaden cross-cultural awareness among their students (Tomasi, Paviotti, and Cavicchi 2020). The need on this appears to be more demanding with having diversifying engineering student cohorts of various nationalities (Goldfinch, Layton, and McCarthy 2010), even more with the escalating number of international students in different countries from one year to another (Yassin et al. n.d.). On top of going for a semester or a year student exchange (Torre and Perez-encinas 2022), short-terms programs can be an effective solution in enhancing inter-cultural experience and raising awareness of other cultural contexts among multi-racial university students (Celeste Gaia 2015) (Bohman and Borglin 2014), for example the UTeM Winter School 2024 organized by the Faculty of Electrical Technology and Engineering, Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM).

2.0 Methodology

Taking place in February 2024, UWINS 2024 outlined several culture-related activities for two weeks such as a series of traditional (folk) games, guided tour to national craft complex, cooking demonstration and direct engagement with local communities. These activities were aimed to lively expose both local and international participants from Indonesia, Brunei and Yemen to Malaysian culture and heritage.

The folk games include coconut bowling, *ceper* and *capteh*. Coconut bowling is just another version of regular tenpin bowling game with a coconut being used to replace the ball. Meanwhile, *Ceper* game comprises five bottle steel caps that needs to be spin and must not overlap with each other. After taking out one of the scattered caps, other players will have to decide which caps should be flipped (Fadly, Zulhilmy, and Bazilah 2016). As for *capteh*, it requires players to use their heel to kick up a feathered shuttlecock while keeping it in the air as long as possible.

During a half-day visit to Kuala Lumpur Craft Complex, the participants first engaged with a guided tour around the Craft Museum that showcases ancient artifacts with detailed enlightenment on the civilization of local arts and crafts. It also exhibits the evolution of technology and technique in producing and manufacturing the craft products. The climax of the visit was the tie-dye (Kurniastuti and Arumsari 2023) activity which provided opportunity for the participants to not only learn from the demonstration but also try to design the plain t-shirts or tote bags provided, which they can bring homes afterwards.

During the cooking demonstration, participants had the chance to learn on how to make buah Melaka (*onde-onde*), which is originated from Melaka (Kamaruzaman et al. 2020), as well as kuih lopes that is also made of glutinous rice, coconut and palm sugar. Participants then had a chance to experience some new culinary experience by making their own *onde-onde* from scratch; first by kneading the dough, shaping it into a small ball, wrapping the palm sugar with it, boiling and finally coating it in grated coconut. Meanwhile for *kueh lopes*, the glutinous rice was already steamed beforehand due to time constraint. Participants only got the chance to shape it to triangular shape and wrap it with aluminum foil before coating it in grated coconut.

Finally for the CSR activities, the participants has involved as facilitators during *Hello Talk!*, which a program that laid out some fun games and activities to improve English

communication skill among the primary school students at Sekolah Kebangsaan Tanjong Tohor. This school is categorized as under-enrolled school and located in the rural area of Muar, Johor. Not only with the school students, the participants also got the chance to interact directly with the school teachers and parents involved throughout the program. On top of that, participants has also participated as volunteers in beach clean up activity around Taman Laut Melaka that consists of Pulau Nangka, Pulau Undan and Pulau Dodol. Local participants from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability (NRES) and Department of Fishery Melaka were also involved in the same program, that opened door for the international participants into some direct interaction with the locals.

There were a total of 22 participants from Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and Yemen who have attended UWINS 2024 and participated in this survey study, as summarized in Table 1. A set of five-point Likert scale and multiple choice questionnaires was given to the participants during the reflection session on the last day of the event. For the former, each scale is numerically represented by a score as depicted in Table 2, for the purpose of finding the ranking. The questionnaires were set up using Google Form, of which each question was properly crafted in the direction of accomplishing the aim of this paper, which is to evaluate the inter-cultural experience gained by the participants throughout the whole program. The list of questions is listed in Appendix I.

Table 1: Summary of data

Respondent	University	Country of Origin
Respondent 1-14	Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember	Indonesia
Respondent 15-16	Universiti Teknologi Brunei	Brunei
Respondent 17	Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka	Yemen
Respondent 18-22	Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka	Malaysia

Table 2: Score for each scale

Scale	Score
Strongly agree	5
Agree	4
Neutral	3
Disagree	2
Strongly disagree	1

3.0 Findings

As shown in Figure 1, 81.8% of the respondents agreed that they have learnt and experienced on how to play *ceper*, *capteh* and coconut bowling, which are the local folk games in Malaysia. The rest of the respondents could have been familiar with all the games beforehand. Among those three games, coconut bowling appears to be the most unfamiliar game among the respondents, followed by *ceper*, as shown in Figure 2. Meanwhile, 59.1% of the respondents have played *capteh* before.

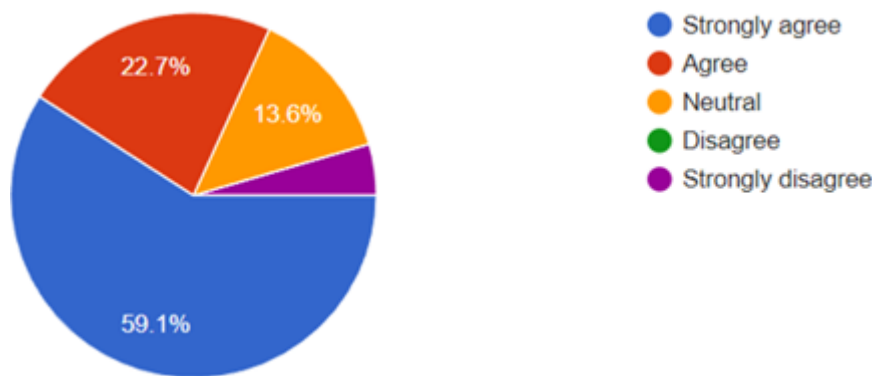


Figure 1: Responses for Q1

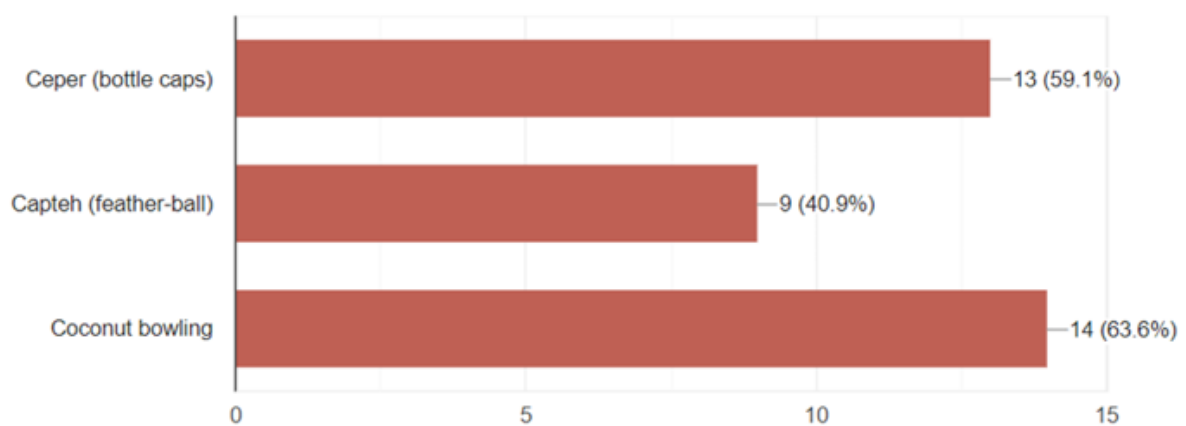


Figure 2: Responses for Q2

As shown in Figure 1, 81.8% of the respondents agree that they have learnt and experienced on how to play *ceper*, *capteh* and coconut bowling, which are the local folk games in Malaysia. The rest of the respondents could have been familiar with all the games beforehand. Among those three games, coconut bowling appears to be the most unfamiliar game among the respondents, followed by *ceper*, as shown in Figure 2. Meanwhile, 59.1% of the respondents have played *capteh* before.

From Figure 3, a majority of the respondents (72.7%) have never experienced tie-dye activity before they came to Kuala Lumpur Craft Complex. It shows how underrated this activity is for youngsters of age between 20 to 25 years old who did not have any chance to participate in tie-dye activity prior to this program. Meanwhile, 81.9% of the respondents agree that their visit to Kuala Lumpur Complex Craft has opened up opportunity for them to learn about the local traditional crafts, as depicted in Figure 4. This positive response is due to the guided tour organized around the museum that was conducted by a senior staff who seemed to own massive knowledge and experience in local arts and crafts.

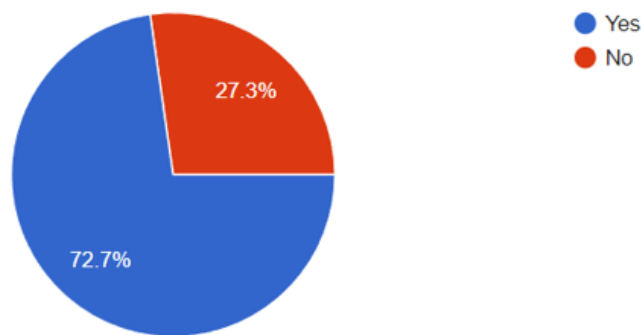


Figure 3: Responses for Q3

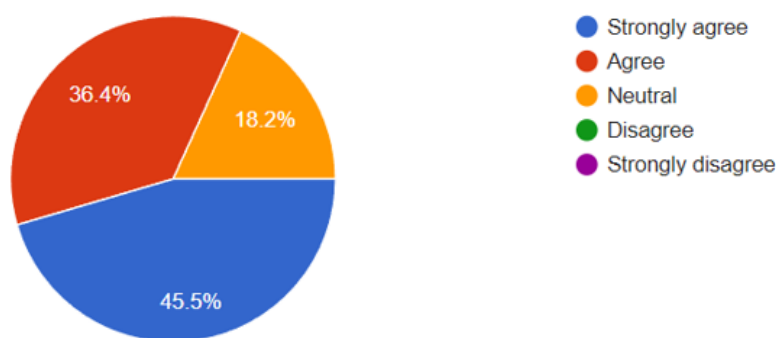


Figure 4: Responses for Q4

An overwhelming response has been received on the cooking demonstration that featured two authentic dishes, i.e., *onde-onde* and *kuih lopes*. From Figure 5, A large majority of the respondents (90.9%) have gained new culinary skills in making these two delicacies especially *onde-onde*, which comprises multiple steps that require a bit of artistic touch and patience. Meanwhile from Figure 6, the same percentage also agrees that they have expanded their cooking ability after completing the task in preparing *onde-onde* even in a group of three. As an indirect impact from this cooking demonstration activity, 90.1% of the respondents agreed that it has significantly broadened their understanding on local food and culinary culture, as depicted in Figure 7.

As shown in Figure 8, through the CSR programs that also involved local agencies and communities, 95.5% of the respondents agreed that they have earned valuable opportunity to engage with the locals who indirectly portray their daily norms throughout the programs. In fact, when comparing among the other events such as traditional game, cooking demonstration and visit to the craft complex, CSR programs top the chart in terms of the ranking as depicted in Table 4. It shows that direct interactions with the school teachers and students, as well as the local agencies has left the participants with more impression on observing the local culture.

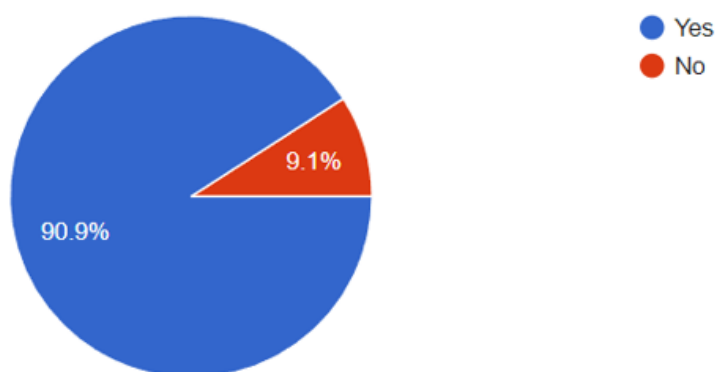


Figure 5: Response for Q5

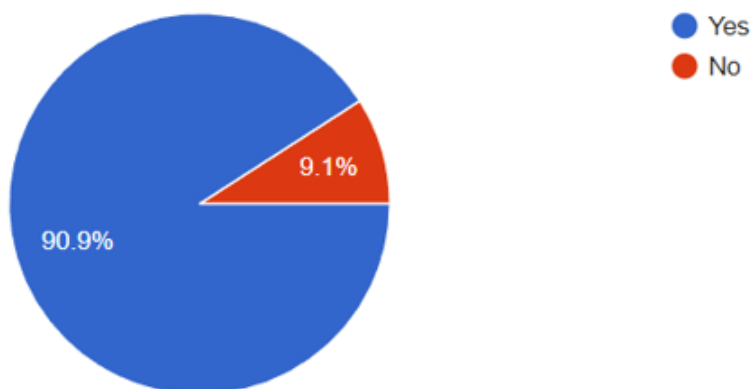


Figure 6: Response for Q6

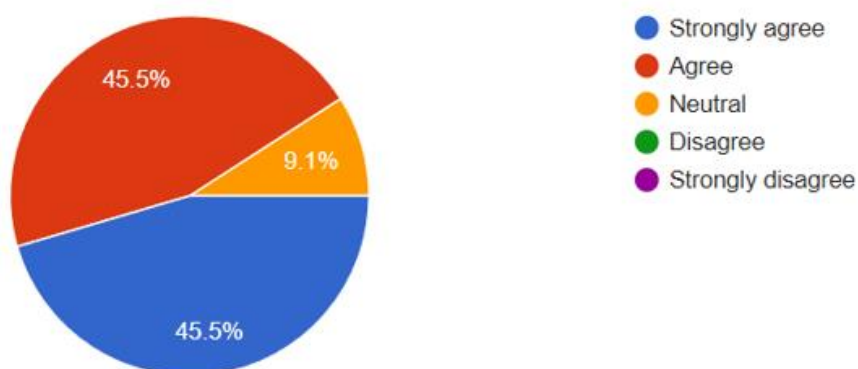


Figure 7: Response for Q7

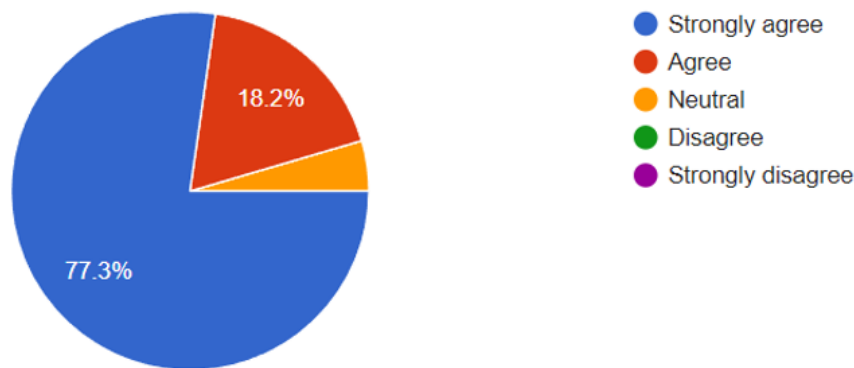


Figure 8: Response for Q8

Table 4: Ranking among five Likert scale questions related to different programs

Question	Average score	Ranking
UWINS 2024 provides me an opportunity to engage with the local community through CSR programs	4.7	1
The traditional game session provided me an opportunity to learn and experience some folk games played by the locals.	4.45	2
The cooking demonstration significantly contributed to my understanding of local traditional food and culture.	4.35	3
The visit to Kuala Lumpur Craft Complex has provided opportunity for me to learn about the local traditional crafts.	4.25	4

4.0 Conclusions

This paper concludes that the cross-cultural experience among the university students can also be catered through short-term student exchange program like UWINS 2024. All the four programs organized in conjunction to it achieve average score of above 4 out of 5. It shows that, at least 80% of the respondents agree that the student exchange program has provided them an enhanced cross-cultural experience.

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Appendix I

List of questionnaires

Question No.	Question	Choice of answers
Q1	The traditional game session provided me an opportunity to learn and experience some folk games played by the locals.	Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree
Q2	Which of the following game(s) did you encounter for the first time in your life? (Can tick more than one)	Ceper (bottle caps) Capteh (feather-ball) Coconut bowling
Q3	Was it your first-time experiencing tie-dye activity during the visit to Kuala Lumpur Craft Complex?	Yes No
Q4	The visit to Kuala Lumpur Craft Complex has provided opportunity for me to learn about the local traditional crafts.	Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree
Q5	Did you gain new culinary skills during the cooking demo?	Yes No
Q6	Did you expand your cooking abilities by preparing "onde-onde" (or a similar dish back home) from scratch during the cooking demo?	Yes No
Q7	The cooking demonstration significantly contributed to my understanding of local traditional food and culture.	Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree
Q8	UWINS 2024 provides me an opportunity to engage with the local community through CSR programs	Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree