# Exploring Education Beyond the Classroom: Experiences From the Malaysia-Indonesia Student Exchange

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Abstract: Student outbound activities offer unique opportunities for experiential learning beyond the traditional classroom setting. These activities, ranging from international exchanges to community projects, are instrumental in developing students' key skills such as cultural awareness, adaptability, and global citizenship. They foster a firsthand approach to education, encouraging students to engage with diverse environments and challenges, thereby enhancing their academic and personal growth in real-world contexts. This study explores the perceptions and experiences of students participating in a four-day academic exchange outbound program between the Faculty of Accountancy at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia, and the State Islamic University of North Sumatera Medan (UiNSU), Indonesia. Engaging 14 students with bachelor's in accountancy, five lecturers from Malaysia, and 40 students with 18 lecturers from Indonesia, the program encompassed community service, innovation projects, and cultural activities. These activities aimed to enhance cultural understanding, academic collaboration, and a platform for experiential learning, crucial in today's increasingly interconnected world. The study employs a mixed-method approach, utilizing questionnaires and interviews, to explore students' perceptions of short-term inter-country academic exchanges. The results of the independent t-test indicate no significant differences between the perception of respondents from UiTM and UiNSU in both categories assessed, community service and innovation competition. Additionally, outbound activities contribute to students' educational and personal development, fostering community service and encouraging cross-cultural interaction through innovation competition. The study highlights the potential of short-duration academic trips to educational contexts in Southeast Asia, underscoring their importance in enhancing the global readiness of university students.

**Keywords:** Experiential learning, outbound, student development, short-term academic exchange

## 1. Introduction

Education transcends the boundaries of traditional classroom settings, evolving into a dynamic and immersive experience that extends into various facets of life. In recent years, the concept of education beyond the classroom has gained significant traction, emphasizing the importance of experiential learning, cultural exchange, and real-world applications. This idea, supported by Yu (2023), stated that international student mobility, as an essential component of internationalization, has transformed the higher education landscape.

In this realm, global education is one of the important components of the educational experience that provides lasting influence and future benefits for learners. According to Fisher et al., (2022), global education is competence as a concept that informs how we encourage and train people to interact with and open themselves to other cultures and to build the relationship capital that makes global relationships possible. Students reap many benefits from exposure to different cultures such as improving students ability to communicate across cultural boundaries, as they learn to appreciate foreign linguistic nuances and idiomatic expressions (Chaika 2023). Graduates must be globally aware of and function effectively in a global environment. In other words, it is the process of weaving academic programs, institutions, and their quality into a global context (Kwon, 2013).

With this vision in line, the Faculty of Accountancy, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia (UiTM) has provided the opportunity for students to undergo an exchange program internationally with the State Islamic University of North Sumatera Medan, Indonesia (UiNSU). This exchange program focused on the growing relevance and influence of international academic exchange programs in the context of global education. These four-day programs offered students an opportunity to step outside their comfort zones and immerse themselves in the

cultural, social, and educational landscapes of a neighboring country. Through these experiences, students not only gained academic knowledge but also developed a deeper understanding of the diverse perspectives and shared histories between Malaysia and Indonesia. The program fosters cross-cultural communication, enhances global awareness, facilitates academic collaboration, and provides a platform for experiential learning through a variety of activities such as community service (visit to Panti Asuhan or independent orphanage center), innovation programs, sightseeing within the local historical and legendary places, interactive games within the students, and builds lasting connections among students, educators, and communities.

# Academic and Professional Advantages

Exchange students benefit from exposure to different educational systems, learning methodologies, and innovation competition among both universities. Sharing sessions and teaching methodologies were accomplished in the four days programmed by the accounting lecturers from UiTM. This can lead to a more well-rounded academic experience and inspire new interests or career paths for their future.

## Enhanced cross-cultural understanding

UiTM students have gained a deeper appreciation and understanding of the UiNSU country's culture, traditions, and societal norms. A visit to "Istana Maimon" gave a picture of the administration and cultural background of the community there. Besides that, the geographical factor influences their way of life and thinking when the visit to Lake Toba represents their community lifestyle. This exposure fosters respect and understanding of cultural diversity and helps students develop a global perspective.

#### **Contribution to Community**

UiTM lecturers and students serve as informal ambassadors of their home country, sharing their own cultures with the host community, which enriches the cultural diversity and understanding of the local population. In addition, many exchange programs encourage or require students to engage in community service or local activities, such as contributing to members of Panti Asuhan, which is an independent orphanage, while gaining valuable insights into local social issues, as what UiTM lecturers and students had accomplished.

These unique outputs demonstrated that the value of exchange programs extends far beyond traditional academic achievements. They play a crucial role in preparing students for the complexities of a globalized world, equipping them with the skills, perspectives, and networks necessary to succeed in a diverse and interconnected environment. As mentioned by Byun et al. (2022) in their study, students tended to participate in student exchange programs "to experience something new," "to grow personally," and "to learn about different cultures and meet new people.".

Whilst short-term outbound programs offer intensive and focused experiences, they also raise concerns about the depth and longevity of their influence compared to longer-term programs. According to Fisher et al. (2022), the extent to which short-term abroad programs provide the type of transformative learning necessary to enhance global learning outcomes and meet the needs of the evolving global economy remains underexplored in the research literature. To address this gap, this study is undertaken to assess the perceptions and experiences of students from both universities regarding a short academic outbound program, to improve future academic programs.

#### 2. Literature Review

The increasingly global face of business and borderless transactions nowadays has highlighted the importance of providing students with a global perspective in their education (Evans et al., 2008). Thus, the outbound mobility student program has received an enormous response among university students in the last decade. This outbound mobility, known as internationalization, has been related to different fields worldwide, including cultural, societal, and economic (Suhaimi et al., 2023). Thus, the initiatives of sending undergraduates to be involved in an outbound activity and physically traveling to another country have been conducted with many objectives, such as exposing students to the perspectives of the international environment, developing soft skills, increasing their motivations, and improving their knowledge and networks.

Only a few studies have been done to understand the correlation between outbound student mobility and its role in shaping students' employability (Lee and Tan, 1984). However, a study by King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) found that graduates who had spent time abroad were more successful in getting a job related to their type of degree and were less likely to have experienced a period of unemployment as compared to those who did not go abroad. It was supported by Van Hoof and Verbeeten (2005), who believe that an international experience will enhance students' positions in the job market and that their future employers will see it as an advantage. Thus, in taking advantage of the importance of outbound students' mobility in achieving the development of an "international perspective" or "global outlook," many universities have increasingly increased their activities of sending undergraduates to participate in an international study experience during their studies (Olsen, 2013). Bretag and Van Der Veen (2015), their studies, confirmed that students involved in short-term international study tours showed motivation in completing their coursework quickly, experiencing cultural immersion, expanding their networks, developing their soft skills, and setting themselves apart from other graduates in the future. In addition, research shows that an outbound program enhances networking and collaboration between students which can lead to facilitating exchange and co-creation, enhancing the entrepreneurial ecosystem for students (Martín, 2022).

As outbound programs vary in terms of the duration, objectives, and time spent for the program, there were issues related to the efficiency of the programs with the duration and objectives. The longer the duration of the programs, the more cost needs to be borne by the participants, while the more ambitious the program objectives, the more limitations and challenges there are to handling all the activities in a short-term period. Therefore, it is necessary and important, in the limited time resources, to balance the ideal programs that can meet the educational objectives. Developing programs that are perceived as useful and valuable will enhance the success of the program for the students (Evans et. al., 2008). However, the issue of whether a short study tour can benefit the students and faculty is still questionable. As Praetzel and Curcio (1996, p. 175) concluded, "Students in a professional program must be cognizant of international issues and possess the sensitivity to work in a diverse environment characterized by an alternative set of cultural, historical, political, social, religious, and economic issues".

The concept of internationalizing the curriculum at higher learning institutions can take several forms, such as overseas internships, exchange programs, faculty development, joint ventures, international outbound programs, or study abroad (Alber-Miller et al., 1999). Their study found that only 35.2 percent of the students would take an international course if it were required. The students believed that studying abroad would benefit them, is a good experience, and they prefer a short program to a longer one. Another study by Toncar and Reid (2004), who explored business students' preferences, also found that students preferred a short, several-week-long program under the supervision of the faculty rather than a long-term program. Besides that, Suhaimi et al. (2023) in their study of analyzing the short-term program (a one-month outbound mobility of students) to countries outside Malaysia found that the outbound student mobility program forces students to interact as their survival method in a foreign country on which they get the experience culture by just communicating with the locals. It will also improve their communication skills and create employment opportunities.

## Enhancing intercultural learning

The efficacy of short-term academic exchange programs in enhancing intercultural learning and collaboration has been a subject of considerable interest in educational research. Smith and Khawaja (2011) emphasize that even brief international experiences can significantly impact participants' cultural sensitivity and understanding. Another study by Bretag and Van Der Veen (2015) found evidence that students generally expressed increased confidence about their knowledge of the new culture, such as basic language skills and understanding of the host culture. They confirmed that the main benefits of the study tour centered on increased confidence from "pushing the boundaries", enhanced intercultural understanding, improved interpersonal skills, and the perception towards career goals.

Such programs, according to Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2019), are particularly effective in developing communication skills and fostering cross-cultural teamwork. In understanding other cultures, it is difficult to gain new perspectives if students never left their country (Sachau et al., 2010). Sachau et al. (2010) believed that students had greater knowledge of other cultures, and the overseas experience (that is, a short-term study

tour) combined with a cultural point (e.g., a "buddy" in the host country) may help them to increase their confidence levels and consider participating in a longer mobility program. When the students are involved with the outbound activities together with friends in the host country, they can guide students to empathize with the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the host culture. Furthermore, it will establish initial self-awareness and build the essential foundation for intercultural learning (Searle & Ward, 1990).

## **Duration of outbound program**

It was argued that a tour with a duration of only a few weeks (short-term outbound program) cannot give the student as much cultural exposure as a semester-long tour (Scharoun, 2016). This issue also had been highlighted by Donnelly-Smith (2009), who pointed out that the duration of these programs can influence the depth of cultural and educational experiences, suggesting a potential trade-off between program length and learning intensity. As has been argued by Pitman, et al. (2010), who perceive that short-term study tours are little more than tourism dressed up as education. Some scholars also challenged the widely asserted relationship between outbound experience and intercultural competence, regardless of the time spent (Salisbury et al., 2013). However, based on a study by Anderson et al. (2006) found the positive effect of the outbound study tour, that even on a short-term program, students improved their ability to accept and adapt to cultural differences. It was supported by Sachau et al. (2010), who found that even if the short-term overseas study tour does not allow enough time for students to become fully immersed in a culture, at least it can begin the process of self-reflection and trigger a lasting curiosity. Suhaimi et al. (2023) also found that students agree that even for a short-term outbound mobility program (e.g., a one-month program), this program gave benefits in terms of gaining new skills, intercommunication, adapting to the new environment, and enhancing graduate readiness in the labor market. Previous studies by Lipsett (2008) showed that graduates who have studied abroad, even for a short period, are more culturally adaptable, aware, and able to work more effectively in multicultural work environments than students without this experience. Thus, it is believed that a short-term experience from outbound activities to other countries is a viable option in enabling students to improve their soft skills, preparing them to adapt to a new environment, culture, and language, and at the same time exposing them to the importance of corporate social responsibility to society.

While previous studies have extensively explored the outcomes of outbound mobility programs, particularly in terms of employability, intercultural competence, and skill development, there is still a need to focus more specifically on understanding students' perceptions of these experiences, especially in short-term programs. Outbound programs can be costly. Hence, students' perceptions are primarily influenced by family, peers, and faculty, highlighting the importance of a supportive network. This study aims to fill this gap by providing insights into how students perceive the value and impact of short-term inter-country academic exchanges on their personal and professional growth. By focusing on the students' perspectives, this research will contribute to a clearer understanding of how these programs influence their learning experiences and intercultural competence, offering valuable implications for the design and implementation of future academic exchange initiatives.

#### 3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach to assess students' perceptions of the academic outbound program between UiTM and UiNSU. A total of 30 students, comprising 13 from UiTM Malacca and 17 from UiNSU, responded to the questionnaire. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires focusing on participants' satisfaction and learning outcomes across different program activities. The questionnaire was divided into five sections: Section A covered demographics; Sections B, C, and D focused on students' views regarding their learning experiences through various activities conducted during the outbound program; and Section E centered on students' overall experience participating in the academic outbound program. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with six students, three from each university. These interviews provided an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions.

As for analysis, a descriptive analysis is performed as well as a t-test to determine whether there is any difference in perception related to community service and innovation programs held between the students of UiTM and UiNSU. The data was run using the Excel 365 version.

# 4. Findings and Discussion

A total of 54 students from both universities participated in the outbound activities, with 14 from UiTM Malacca and 40 from UiNSU. Since the program took place at UiNSU, it is understandable that there were more participants from UiNSU. However, only 30 participants from 54 participants of the program, responded to the questionnaire. The distribution of the participants is shown in the table.

**Table 1: Demographic of respondents** 

	UiTM Malacca	UiNSU	Total
Gender			
Male	5	7	12
Female	8	10	18
Age			
20 – 21 years old	3	14	17
22 – 25 years old	10	3	13
Current year of study			
First year	1	1	2
Second year	1	4	5
Third year	8	6	14
Final year	3	6	9

From the above table, only 30 out of 54 participants (55.5%) have provided feedback on the program. The number of respondents is acceptable for analysis purposes (Yin, 2017). In terms of gender, the majority of respondents are female (18, 60%), aged in the range of 20 to 21 years old (17, 56.67%), and currently in their third year of study (14, 46.67%). Comparatively, both UiTM and UiNSU have slightly more female students participating in the program as compared to male students. However, the majority of UiNSU students (14/17, 82.35%) fall under the age of 20 to 21 years old while the majority of UiTM students (10/13, 76.92%). In terms of year of study, the majority of students from both universities are in their third and fourth year of study, towards the end of their degree program.

Table 2: Summary of Students' Feedback on the Program

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Satisfactory	Agree	Strongly agree(no,
	(no/%)	(no, %)	(no, %)	(no, %)	%)
Community service (n=30)					
The community service activities	Nil	1 (3.33)	4 (13.33)	13 (43.33)	12 (40)
were well-organized					
I felt that my participation in the	Nil				
community service was meaningful		1 (3.33)	4 (13.33)	9 (30)	16 (53.33)
The community service activities					
increased my understanding of	Nil	1 (3.33)	3 (9.99)	11 (36.67)	15 (50)
local issues in another country.					
I am satisfied with my involvement					
in the community service activities.	Nil	1 (3.33)	2 (6.66)	11 (36.67)	16 (53.33)
Innovation competition program (	-				
The innovation competition was a	Nil				
valuable learning experience		1 (3.33)	4 (13.33)	11 (36.67)	14 (46.67)
The competition encouraged	Nil				
		1 (3.33)	4 (13.33)	11 (36.67)	14 (46.67)
solving					
creative thinking and problem-	1411	1 (3.33)	4 (13.33)	11 (36.67)	14 (46.67)

I felt a sense of achievement participating in the innovation	Nil	1 (3.33)	4 (13.33)	12 (40)	13 (43.33)
competition. The competition fostered a spirit of collaboration between the two universities.	Nil	1 (3.33)	4 (13.33)	13 (43.33)	12 (40)

Table 2 summarizes the views of the respondents about the activities of community service, and innovation programs.

## Community Service

The community service activities were generally well-received by the participants. A significant majority (83.33%) agreed or strongly agreed that the activities were well-organized, with only a small percentage (3.33%) expressing dissatisfaction. Furthermore, 83.33% of the students felt that their participation in community service was meaningful, reinforcing the value of these activities. Additionally, the majority of participants (86.67%) agreed that the community service activities increased their understanding of local issues in another country. A majority (90%) are also very satisfied with their involvement in community service activities. These results suggest that the community service component of the program was effective in achieving its objectives and was perceived positively by the students.

## **Innovation Competition**

The students also reacted positively to the innovation competition. Most participants (83.34%) agreed or strongly agreed that the competition was a valuable learning experience, with only 3.33% disagreeing and 13.33% finding it satisfactory. Similarly, 83.34% of students felt that the competition encouraged creative thinking and problem-solving. A sense of achievement was reported by 83.33% of the participants, indicating that the competition was both challenging and rewarding. Additionally, 83.33% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the competition fostered a spirit of collaboration between the two universities, highlighting the program's success in promoting teamwork and cross-cultural interaction.

Overall, both the community service and innovation competition programs were successful in providing meaningful experiences, enhancing learning outcomes, and fostering collaboration among students from the two universities.

#### Analysis of the perception of university students of the programs

An analysis was performed to determine whether there is any significant difference between the perception of students from UiTM and UiNSU on their experiences in the programs organized between the students. The result is depicted in the table below.

Table 3: Independent t-test between Respondents from UiTM and UiNSU

Respondents	p-value	Results
Experience in community service	0.115	p-value is greater than 0.05, not significant
Experience in the Innovation competition program	0.202	p-value is greater than 0.05, not significant

The t-test analysis shows that there is no statistically significant difference between the perception of students from UiTM and UINSU on their experience in community service and innovation competitions. Hence, in both cases, the p-values suggest that the experiences of the respondents in these programs are statistically similar.

## Feedback from the interview

Table 4: Demographic of the interviewees

Respondents	UiTM Malacca	UiNSU	Total
Gender			_
Male	1	1	2
Female	2	2	4
	3	3	6

The interviews with three students from Indonesia and Malaysia provided insightful perspectives on their participation in outbound activities, their experiences, and suggestions for future programs, enriched with specific quotes from the participants.

Indonesian respondents (R1 and R3) highlighted their engagement in the Innovation competition. R2 added depth to this, mentioning involvement in innovation and other activities from an early stage of the program. The Malaysian respondents collectively emphasized their participation in an international program. R1 stated it was driven by an interest in lamenting,

"The university in Indonesia intrigued me to learn about their culture and learning environment"

Both groups described the outbound experience positively. Indonesian students (R1, R2, R3) shared enriching experiences, finding the program as R1 mentioned,

"It is interesting, I learned a new language"

R2 also described the experience as.

"Extremely interesting"

The Malaysian students (R1, R2, R3) reflected on deeper insights as R2 shared a moment of cultural respect, "As a student, learning how to deal with international parties requires respect and understanding how they conduct events"

For future activities, Indonesian respondents (R1, R2, R3) suggested ideas like

"I hope there will be a return visit there" and,

"A broader program with more advanced features"

On the other hand, the Malaysian participants (R1, R2, R3) proposed continuing such programs but recommended targeting more advanced countries for a richer learning experience, with R3 suggesting.

"Countries that are more advanced than us so that we learn more"

This interview highlights a shared appreciation for cultural exchange and learning across borders, with each group bringing unique perspectives based on their experiences. The Indonesian students focused on immediate program benefits like language acquisition and friendship, while Malaysian students viewed the program through a broader lens, considering its impact on future careers and the importance of international exposure. Both groups agree on the need to expand and deepen future outbound programs, albeit with different approaches to achieving these goals.

Past literature highlights the importance of community service activities in outbound programs for fostering intercultural competence and a practical understanding of global issues. Studies by Bretag and Van Der Veen (2015) and Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2019) highlight how these activities enhance students' appreciation of cultural and societal contexts besides contributing to their personal and professional development. This aligns with the findings from both the questionnaire and interviews conducted with students from UiTM Malacca and UINSU. The questionnaire's results revealed that a majority of students (83.33%) agreed that the community service activities were well-organized and meaningful, with many also reporting an increased understanding of local issues in the host country. The interviews further enriched these insights, with Indonesian students discussing how their participation in community service helped them learn a new language. Malaysian students emphasized the importance of respect and cultural understanding in international contexts, reinforcing the value of these activities in promoting global citizenship.

In addition to community service, the students have also embraced the innovation competition enthusiastically. The questionnaire results indicated that the majority of participants (83.34%) found the competition to be a valuable learning experience, encouraging creative thinking and problem-solving. This sentiment was reinforced in the interviews, where students from both universities expressed a sense of achievement and highlighted the competition's role in fostering collaboration. The participants' suggestions for future programs, such as including more advanced activities and targeting more developed countries, reflect their recognition of the program's benefits and their desire for further enrichment.

Overall, the combined results from the questionnaire and interviews underscore the significant role that well-designed community service and innovation activities play in academic exchange programs. These components are instrumental in creating meaningful, transformative learning experiences that contribute to students' intercultural competence, personal growth, and professional readiness. The positive feedback and constructive suggestions from the students provide valuable insights for enhancing future outbound programs, ensuring they continue to meet the evolving needs of learners in a globalized world.

#### 5. Conclusion

Based on the findings, this study concludes that short-term outbound academic exchange programs hold significant value in fostering educational and personal development among university students. Both countries can build stronger, more adaptable education systems. The program between the Faculty of Accountancy, MARA University of Technology, Malaysia, and State Islamic University of North Sumatera Medan, Indonesia, demonstrated that such exchanges enhance cultural understanding, adaptability, and global citizenship.

Engaging in community service, innovation projects, and cultural activities provided students with firsthand experiences that bridged theoretical knowledge and practical application. In addition, students reported gaining deeper insights into different educational systems and cultural practices, which enriched their academic perspectives and people skills. The interaction with peers and lecturers from another country also helped to cultivate respect for diversity and encouraged collaborative learning. The short-duration programs can significantly boost intercultural competence and global readiness, preparing students for the complexities of the modern world. The study underscores the importance of integrating such outbound activities into the academic curriculum to produce well-rounded graduates equipped with the skills necessary to thrive in an interconnected global environment. The success of such initiatives lies in sustained government support, institutional collaboration, and inclusive policies that ensure all students can benefit from these valuable crossborder experiences. The policy implications derived from the Malaysian-Indonesian exchange experience suggest that both nations can significantly benefit from enhancing their collaboration in education beyond the classroom. By focusing on experiential learning, digital engagement, teacher development, and equitable access, these countries can create more dynamic and globally aware education systems that are prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century. To sum up, short-term academic exchanges are invaluable in providing a holistic education, promoting academic excellence, fostering essential life skills, and making students more competitive and adaptable in the global workforce.

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