

Enhancing students' intercultural communication competence: evidence from an Indonesia–Malaysia partnership program

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ABSTRACT

International community service (ICS) is increasingly recognized as an effective approach for strengthening students' global and intercultural competence. This study examined the impact of an ICS program conducted between State Islamic University of Kiai Ageng Muhammad Besari Ponorogo and Madrasah Utsmaniyah ABIM Penang, Malaysia, on students' intercultural communication competence (ICC) and soft skills. Employing a mixed-methods convergent design, the study involved 12 participating students, faculty supervisors, ABIM coordinators, and local community leaders. Quantitative data were obtained through pre–post assessments using validated ICC and soft-skill scales, while qualitative data were collected through interviews, participant observation, and reflective journals. The findings indicate significant improvement across all ICC dimensions, including cultural awareness, sensitivity, communication skills, and reflective competence. Students also demonstrated notable enhancement in soft skills such as leadership, teamwork, adaptability, and empathy, supported by qualitative evidence of increased confidence, communicative flexibility, and ethical awareness during community engagement. Perspectives from supervisors and community stakeholders further corroborated the program's effectiveness. Overall, the study highlights the value of culturally proximate international service-learning in fostering global competence within Islamic higher education and offers implications for developing sustainable cross-border community service initiatives in the ASEAN context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has reshaped higher education by demanding graduates who are able to navigate cultural diversity, communicate effectively across borders, and participate in international collaboration. As a result, global competence, including intercultural communication, adaptability, and collaborative capacity, has become a central learning outcome in universities worldwide [1], [2]. Scholars argue that students in Muslim-majority higher education institutions also need these competencies, given the increasing mobility of Islamic

scholars, transnational *da'wa* (Islamic religious outreach and educational activities) networks, and regional academic integration in Southeast Asia. Intercultural communication competence (ICC) [3] is widely recognized as a core attribute for students engaging in multicultural environments, while soft skills such as leadership, empathy, and teamwork are essential for navigating culturally diverse communities. Service-learning and international community service (ICS) programs have been shown to play a significant role in cultivating these competencies by immersing students in real-world cultural and social contexts where they must interpret norms, negotiate meaning, and build interpersonal relationships [4]–[6]. In this perspective, international service-learning serves not only as experiential pedagogy but also as a platform for shaping globally engaged graduates capable of contributing to cross-cultural understanding and cooperation.

Within the ASEAN region, academic mobility initiatives have expanded significantly as universities seek to strengthen regional integration, cultural literacy, and shared educational agendas [7], [8]. Indonesia and Malaysia share deep historical, linguistic, religious, and socio-cultural ties, yet research shows that intercultural differences still emerge despite a shared Islamic identity, particularly in communication style, educational traditions, and social etiquette [9], [10]. These subtle distinctions make Indonesia–Malaysia collaboration a unique arena for studying intercultural learning: proximate enough for rapport-building, yet distinct enough to generate meaningful adaptation. The ICS program between UIN Kiai Ageng Muhammad Besari Ponorogo and Madrasah Utsmaniyah ABIM Penang represents one such initiative, offering students structured engagement in educational, youth, and family empowerment activities. However, few empirical studies have examined how culturally proximate, faith-informed cross-border programs contribute to ICC development or soft skills formation among students in Islamic higher education. Existing research on international service-learning largely focuses on Western contexts [3], [11], leaving a gap in ASEAN-based, Muslim-majority collaborations. This program therefore provides a timely case for investigating how Islamic universities can leverage regional partnerships to promote global competence while maintaining cultural and religious alignment.

The ICC serves as the central theoretical foundation of this study, drawing on intercultural speaker model [12] and developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) [13], which explain key components of intercultural engagement and the progression from ethnocentric to ethnorelative orientations. These frameworks are complemented by experiential learning theory [14] and service-learning scholarship, emphasizing reflection, authentic interaction, and the development of leadership, empathy, teamwork, communication, and adaptability. Despite their relevance, empirical research integrating these perspectives within ASEAN-based, Muslim-majority higher education, particularly through multi-stakeholder analysis remains limited. Addressing this gap, the present study evaluates the ICS collaboration between UIN Ponorogo and ABIM Penang, examining its effectiveness in enhancing students' ICC and soft skills while exploring intercultural learning experiences and stakeholder perceptions to generate theoretically grounded and regionally contextualized insights for strengthening ICS models in Islamic higher education.

2. METHOD

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to evaluate the effectiveness of an ICS program in enhancing students' ICC and soft skills [15], [16], integrating quantitative measures of behavioral change with qualitative insights into experiential learning. The research was conducted within a collaborative program between UIN Ponorogo (Indonesia) and Madrasah Utsmaniyah ABIM Penang (Malaysia), which provided a multicultural Muslim setting for authentic intercultural engagement through educational, youth, and community-based activities. Participants were selected purposively to represent key stakeholders, including 12 student participants, two faculty supervisors, two ABIM coordinators, and three community leaders (N=19 for qualitative data), with all students included in the quantitative assessment through total population sampling. Although the number of student participants was limited (n = 12), it represented the total population of students involved in the program, ensuring full cohort coverage. However, the small sample size may limit broader generalizability, and future research should include multiple cohorts or cross-institutional samples to strengthen external validity.

The ICC instrument comprised four dimensions: cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, communication skills, and reflective competence, measured on a 5-point Likert scale, adapted from established intercultural learning frameworks and validated through expert judgment, with triangulation across data sources, methods, and time enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings. Items were reviewed by experts in intercultural communication and piloted with students to ensure clarity and contextual relevance. The second quantitative instrument assessed students' soft skills, consisting of five core dimensions relevant to international service-learning: leadership, teamwork, communication, adaptability, and empathy. The items were adapted from the institutional soft skills rubric and aligned with indicators commonly used in service-learning and intercultural engagement research [17], [18]. Items were adapted from the soft skills rubric used by the institution and aligned with observations of intercultural engagement activities conducted at ABIM Penang.

Qualitative data were collected through interviews, observations, reflective journals, field notes, and a social interaction rubric to capture students' authentic intercultural engagement [19], [20]. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and pretest–posttest comparisons (paired t-tests or Wilcoxon). Beyond statistical significance, Cohen's d was calculated to show the practical magnitude of ICC and soft-skill improvements. Qualitative data were analyzed through an iterative process of data reduction, categorization, and thematic interpretation to ensure a triangulated and credible evaluation of intercultural competence and soft-skill development [21], [22]. Because ICC gains were measured immediately after the program, long-term retention was not assessed. Future longitudinal studies are needed.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Improvement in intercultural communication competence

To evaluate how the ICS program improved students' ICC, pretest and posttest scores were compared across four dimensions: cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, communication skills, and reflective competence. The post-program scores shown in Table 1 are taken directly from the empirical findings in the field report. For non-normal data, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test (Z) was applied. All four ICC dimensions showed statistically significant improvement ($p < 0.05$), indicating that participation in the ICS program had a meaningful effect on students' intercultural competence. Qualitative evidence from reflective journals and observations supports these findings, revealing students' progressive adjustment to linguistic variation, interactional norms, and community expectations. Overall, the convergent results confirm that immersive international service-learning effectively promotes holistic development of intercultural competence.

Table 1. Pre–post ICC scores and Δ -score

ICC dimension	Indicators	Pretest (mean)	Posttest (mean)	Δ score (post–pre)
Cultural awareness	Awareness of local values, norms, and cultural practices	3.6	4.6	+1.0
Cultural sensitivity	Respect for cultural differences; avoidance of stereotypes	3.4	4.4	+1.0
Communication skills	Verbal and non-verbal communication effectiveness	3.3	4.2	+0.9
Reflective competence	Ethical and scientific reflection	3.2	4.1	+0.9

3.2. Development of soft skills

To evaluate the program's contribution to students' non-academic development, five soft skills: leadership, teamwork, communication, adaptability, and empathy were measured using pretest–posttest Likert-scale assessments supported by qualitative evidence. As shown in Figure 1, all dimensions improved, with the largest gains in adaptability and empathy ($\Delta = +1.2$), reflecting greater flexibility in unfamiliar cultural settings and deeper emotional sensitivity toward the Malaysian Muslim community. These gains are reinforced by interviews, journals, and field notes indicating increased confidence, leadership in teaching activities, improved teamwork, and more effective communication. As one student reflected, “*at first we were unsure about how to divide tasks, but by the second week, we naturally supported each other and worked like a solid team.*” Together, these findings confirm the program's meaningful impact on students' behavioral competence and collaborative growth.

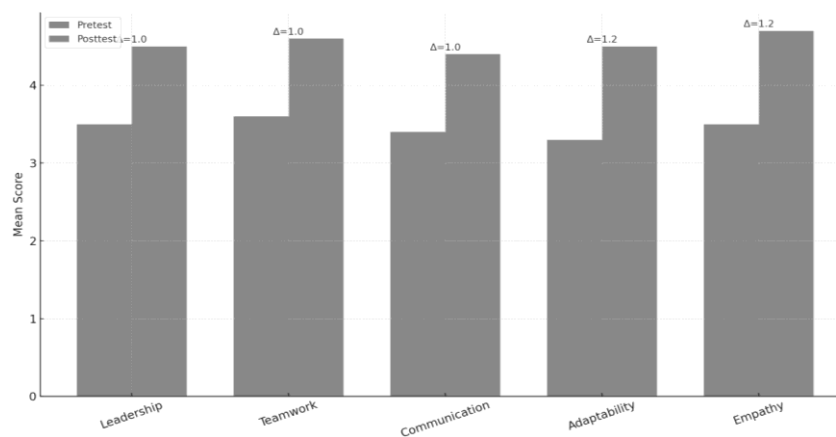


Figure 1. Pre–post soft skills scores and Δ -score

3.3. Qualitative insights on intercultural learning experiences

Qualitative findings explain how students developed intercultural competence during the ICS program, identifying four key themes: cultural adjustment, communication adaptation, religious–cultural alignment, and interpersonal engagement at ABIM Penang. These themes clarify the mechanisms behind quantitative gains in ICC and soft skills, showing how immersive cross-cultural experiences enhanced awareness, adaptability, communication strategies, empathy, and reflective capacity. As summarized in Table 2, triangulated evidence from interviews, journals, and observations demonstrates that authentic community engagement fostered deeper intercultural understanding and behavioral competence.

Table 2. Matrix of themes and supporting qualitative evidence

Theme	Evidence from interviews	Evidence from reflective journals	Evidence from field observation
Cultural adjustment	“At first we were unsure about local norms, but by the second week we felt more comfortable interacting with the community.”	Students write about initial confusion with dialect, schedule, and etiquette, followed by gradual adaptation.	Observers note students modifying teaching pace and activity structure to align with community expectations.
Communication adaptation	“Penang residents are very open, but we have to understand their local norms and communication styles.” (Student interview)	Students describe using simpler language, more visuals, and collaborative facilitation styles.	Students were observed adjusting tone, gestures, and turn-taking patterns in response to community members.
Religious–cultural alignment	“The program is more effective if it starts with a dialogue with residents, rather than directly from the Indonesian module.” (ABIM Coordinator A1)	Journals reflect moments of aligning Indonesian Islamic practices with Malaysian cultural preferences.	Supervisors observed students engaging local leaders to co-design religious and educational sessions.
Interpersonal engagement	Community leaders appreciated students’ empathy and initiative during family visits and youth programs.	Students express emotional connection with local families and children, noting increased empathy.	Observers documented consistent informal interactions: house visits, after-class conversations, assisting parents and children.

3.4. Perceived impact of the program by stakeholders

Findings show strong convergence regarding the program’s contributions to intercultural learning, community engagement, and institutional collaboration, while differences in emphasis emerged. Supervisors highlighted pedagogical growth, ABIM partners emphasized cultural alignment and communication, and community leaders underscored relational and social contributions. Together, these perspectives demonstrate the program’s multidimensional value beyond student outcomes, as summarized comparatively in Table 3.

Across stakeholder groups, the program was widely regarded as impactful due to the meaningful cross-cultural engagement it fostered. Students reported transformative learning marked by increased confidence, adaptability, and cultural understanding, while faculty supervisors observed improvements in professional conduct and pedagogical responsiveness linked to the program’s immersive design. ABIM partners viewed the collaboration as mutually beneficial particularly in education and youth development, while recommending more dialogic, community-driven planning, and community leaders highlighted the positive social and emotional influence on children and families.

Table 3. Comparative perspectives of key stakeholders

Stakeholder group	Perceived impact	Illustrative evidence
Students	Development of ICC and soft skills; increased confidence; improved adaptability and empathy	Students reported becoming “more confident leading activities” and better able to understand local norms after two weeks. Reflections noted improved teamwork and communication.
Faculty supervisors	Enhanced student professionalism, classroom management, and cultural sensitivity; improvement in pedagogical creativity	Supervisors observed students adjusting teaching methods, using visual aids, and collaborating effectively. They noted “students learned to negotiate differences and design context-appropriate activities.”
ABIM coordinators	Strengthened cross-border collaboration; contributions to educational, youth, and family programs; need for stronger cultural alignment	Coordinators appreciated students’ initiative but emphasized that programs “should begin from community dialogue rather than imported modules.” They valued students’ flexibility and willingness to adapt.
Community leaders	Positive social connection; increased support for children’s education; improved community–campus relations	Leaders highlighted students’ empathy and interpersonal warmth during home visits and youth mentoring. Some stated that students’ presence “motivated children and strengthened community ties.”

4. DISCUSSION

The significant increase in students' ICC, across cultural awareness, sensitivity, communication skills, and reflective competence, aligns with foundational theories of intercultural learning. The process model of intercultural competence [12] emphasizes interaction, reflection, and adaptation as drivers of intercultural growth, all of which were embedded in the program's immersive design, helping explain the notable gains in reflective competence, often considered the most challenging dimension to develop [23], [24]. Similarly, improvements in cultural sensitivity resonate with the DMIS [25], [26], which describes progression from ethnocentric to ethnorelative orientations through guided exposure and dialogue. Compared to prior studies, the findings both confirm and extend existing evidence. While short-term programs have been shown to enhance intercultural awareness [27], they often report limited communication gains; in contrast, the sustained community engagement in this study appears to have strengthened communicative development. Moreover, contrary to claims that cultural proximity may reduce intercultural challenge [28], the Indonesia–Malaysia context demonstrates that meaningful ICC growth can emerge from structured reflection and community-based responsibilities, underscoring that depth of engagement, not cultural distance alone drives intercultural development.

The development of soft skills observed in this study, particularly leadership, teamwork, adaptability, and empathy, corresponds strongly with experiential learning theory and service-learning scholarship. The experiential learning cycle emphasizes that learning is maximized when individuals engage in concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation [14]. Students in this program participated in all four stages: implementing activities, reflecting through journals, adjusting strategies based on feedback, and reapplying new approaches in subsequent sessions. This iterative process explains the marked improvement in adaptability and empathy, which are typically shaped through direct social interaction rather than classroom instruction [29], [30].

Comparative findings from prior studies reinforce the results of this research. For example, Valencia-Forrester and Backhaus [31] demonstrated that service-learning significantly enhances empathy and social skills, consistent with the present study's strong posttest gains. Meanwhile, Donahue and Wise [32] argue that international service-learning accelerates leadership development by placing students in unfamiliar contexts requiring initiative and decision-making, supporting the observed increases in leadership and teamwork in this project. However, several studies caution that transformative learning in short-term programs is often uneven or temporary [33], [34]. The present findings partially diverge from this concern, as both qualitative and quantitative data show consistent improvement across all measured soft skills. A likely explanation is the program's integration of cross-cultural activities (teaching, family visits, and youth mentoring) and its close collaboration with ABIM, which ensured deeper interpersonal engagement than is typical of short-term mobility programs.

Contextual factors significantly shaped the program's outcomes. Shared religious and cultural foundations between Indonesian and Malaysian communities facilitated rapid rapport-building and empathy development, while subtle differences in communication norms and social practices required active adaptation, contributing to notable gains in adaptability. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings [35], [36] strengthens the validity of the results, as improvements in ICC (awareness, sensitivity, communication, and reflection) align with themes of cultural adjustment and interpersonal engagement. Similarly, enhanced soft skills, particularly adaptability and empathy are supported by observations of modified teaching strategies and responsive community interaction. Together, these findings indicate that transformative learning occurred not only cognitively but also behaviorally and relationally through immersive community engagement.

The findings offer important implications for strengthening cross-border community engagement within Islamic higher education in Southeast Asia. The Indonesia–Malaysia collaboration demonstrates that culturally proximate international service-learning can generate meaningful intercultural, ethical, and relational growth when structured around active participation and guided reflection. Shared religious foundations enabled rapport-building, while subtle cultural differences fostered critical thinking, empathy, and adaptive communication. For UIN Ponorogo and ABIM Penang, the program highlights the strategic potential of international ICS initiatives to enhance institutional visibility, support regional educational cooperation, and advance ASEAN academic mobility and global citizenship agendas. Stakeholder reflections further confirm the program's impact: students reported increased confidence and intercultural understanding; supervisors observed improved professionalism and pedagogical flexibility; ABIM coordinators valued students' initiative while suggesting closer community alignment; and local leaders appreciated students' empathy and interpersonal engagement. This multi-stakeholder convergence underscores the program's sustainability and positions it as a viable model for faith-informed international community engagement in Islamic higher education.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that culturally proximate ICS can generate substantial development in ICC and soft skills when structured through immersive engagement, guided reflection, and meaningful community responsibilities. Rather than cultural distance alone, the findings highlight the central role of depth of interaction, dialogic exchange, and role-based participation in driving intercultural and behavioral transformation. The Indonesia–Malaysia collaboration shows that shared religious and cultural foundations do not diminish intercultural learning; instead, when coupled with subtle contextual differences, they can create a productive space for adaptive communication, ethical reflection, and relational growth.

The study contributes theoretically by integrating ICC models, experiential learning theory, and service-learning scholarship within an ASEAN Muslim-majority higher education context, an area underrepresented in existing literature. By combining multi-stakeholder perspectives with mixed-method evidence, it advances understanding of how intercultural competence and soft skills develop simultaneously through faith-informed, community-based mobility programs. Despite contextual and sample limitations, the findings underscore the strategic potential of cross-border service-learning to strengthen regional academic collaboration and cultivate globally engaged graduates. Future research should adopt longitudinal and comparative designs to further examine sustainability, scalability, and long-term impact across diverse sociocultural settings.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [AF]. The data, which contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.




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