

Student Transformation and Cross-Cultural Community Empowerment: A Reflective Study of the International Community Engagement Program in Sungai Bongkok Village, Gurun, Kedah, Malaysia

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Abstract: The International Community Engagement Program (ICEP) is a strategic means for students to develop their capacities while contributing to cross-cultural community empowerment. This study aims to describe the transformation of students and the forms of community empowerment through a psychoeducation program in Sungai Bongkok Village, Gurun, Kedah, Malaysia. The research approach used was reflective qualitative with data collection techniques through student reflection journals, in-depth interviews, and participatory observation. The analysis was conducted using a thematic approach. The results showed that students experienced psychological transformations in the form of increased self-efficacy, cross-cultural communication skills, self-regulation abilities, and strengthened professional identity. This transformation is in line with the Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) and Psychosocial Development (Erikson, 1968) frameworks, which emphasize a change in self-perspective through real experiences. On the other hand, the community benefited from the psychoeducation program, particularly in terms of increased psychological literacy related to mental health, parenting patterns, and learning motivation. The impact of community empowerment can be explained through Community Development Theory (Rothman, 1995) and Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 1995), which emphasize the importance of participatory collaboration. This study confirms that ICEP is not only a medium for community service, but also a two-way learning space that encourages student transformation while strengthening community capacity.

Keywords: Student Transformation, Community Empowerment, Psychoeducation, International Community Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, university students are expected to possess not only academic competence but also cross-cultural skills, social empathy, and the ability to adapt

to international contexts. Experiential learning models, such as the International Community Engagement Program (ICEP), serve as a crucial strategy for developing these capacities. Through ICEP, students can integrate the theory acquired in the classroom with real-world practice in the community, while simultaneously fostering social and cultural sensitivity (McDowell et al., 2012).

ICEP offers students the opportunity to engage directly with communities across national borders, enabling them to understand differences in culture, language, and social values. This experience aligns with the framework of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991)—which emphasizes the importance of shifting perspectives through real-world interaction—and Psychosocial Development Theory (Erikson, 1968), which highlights the role of social experiences in shaping self-identity. Previous research indicates that student participation in international programs can enhance self-efficacy and cross-cultural communication skills, as well as strengthen professional identity (McDowell et al., 2012).

Beside students, this program also has a positive impact on the community. A notable contribution is made through psychoeducation, which focuses on enhancing psychological literacy. This is significant given that research in Malaysia indicates relatively low levels of public mental health literacy and high levels of stigma surrounding the pursuit of professional help. Psychoeducational session can increase knowledge, reduce stigma, and strengthen the community's readiness to handle everyday psychological issues (Chow et al., 2024).

One example of such implementation ISEP, conducted by the Psychology Faculty at UIN Ar-Raniry Islamic State University, in Sungai Bongkok Village, Kedah, Malaysia. Through this program, Indonesian students engaged in various activities with the local Malaysian community for 20 days, including psychoeducation on mental health, parenting, and learning motivation. These cross-cultural interactions fostered an exchange of knowledge and experience that strengthened the students' capabilities while delivering tangible benefits to the community.

Furthermore, this activity serves as a tool for transformative learning for students. According to Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), real-world experiences can shift students' perspectives regarding themselves and their environments. This process fosters enhanced self-efficacy, cross-cultural communication skills, and self-regulation abilities, while also strengthening professional identity. From the community's perspective, ICEP activity yields positive impacts, such as increased psychological literacy and social empowerment. This aligns with Psychosocial Development Theory (Erikson, 1968)—which emphasizes the role of social experiences in shaping individual identity—and Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 1995), which focuses on strengthening community capacity through active engagement and participatory collaboration.

Furthermore, ICEP strengthen ties between nations, particularly between Indonesia and Malaysia. Cross-border collaboration through education and culture not only enhances the quality of human resources but also fosters stable, mutually beneficial cooperation. Consequently, examining students' experiences in these international programs is crucial for understanding their contribution to the development of cross-cultural competence, social skills, and character building, as well as their impact on community empowerment across borders.

METHODS

International Community Engagement Activities Method

The ICEP of the UIN Ar-Raniry Faculty of Psychology was conducted in Sungai Bongkok Village, Gurun, Kedah, Malaysia, during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The program employed a participatory and psycho-educational approach, emphasizing active student engagement with the community throughout every activity. Students acted not only as facilitators but also as learners, gaining firsthand experience

through social and cultural interactions. Implementation focused on three primary areas: religious activities, socio-cultural engagement, and education/psycho-education. In the religious sphere, students collaborated with residents on communal mosque cleaning, participated in regular religious study sessions, and attended events such as *tahlilan* (prayer gatherings) and *kenduri* (communal feasts). These activities not only strengthened the students' spirituality but also fostered a sense of togetherness and closeness with the local community. Regarding socio-cultural engagement, students participated in various activities—ranging from home visits and outreach to the elderly to cooking *Nasi Arab* (Arab-style rice) with senior citizens and introducing Acehnese cuisine and coffee. These interactions were further enriched by a visit to the Silat Gayong Malaysia community, which provided insight into the philosophy of this traditional martial art while fostering an appreciation for cultural heritage.

Meanwhile, in the fields of education and psychoeducation, the students visited Sekolah Kebangsaan Santan and the PASTI As-Syabab preschool. Through interactive activities such as drawing, coloring, and sharing academic experiences, the students not only made educational contributions but also gained insights into the Malaysian education system and child development characteristics. Additionally, the students conducted Psychological First Aid (PFA) training as a means of sharing applied psychology knowledge. This activity aimed to raise public awareness regarding mental health and to provide basic skills for administering psychological first aid during crisis situations.

The final stage of the program involves a joint evaluation and reflection session between students and the community. This discussion aims to assess the extent to which the benefits of the activities were realized, identify any obstacles encountered, and formulate recommendations for sustainability. The evaluation also serves as an opportunity for students to engage in critical reflection on the experiences they have gained. This process can be understood through the framework of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), which emphasizes the importance of shifting perspectives through real-world experience. Meanwhile, the benefits experienced by the community align with the principles of Community Development Theory (Rothman, 1995)—which prioritizes participatory collaboration—and Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 1995), which highlights the importance of strengthening community capacity through active engagement.

Thus, the implementation method of this international Community Service Program (KPM) does not merely focus on one-way service; instead, it emphasizes the principles of cooperation, inclusivity, sustainability, and transformative learning. The program serves as a vital platform for students to develop cross-cultural competence, social empathy, and communication skills, while simultaneously strengthening international ties through mutually beneficial educational and cultural cooperation.

Aim The International Community Engagement Program

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On the other hand, the objectives of this activity also encompass cross-cultural community empowerment. Through the psychoeducation program, the community is expected to gain improved psychological literacy, particularly regarding mental health, parenting practices, and learning motivation. This enhancement in literacy is crucial, given the community's limited understanding of mental health in Malaysia and the persisting stigma surrounding help-seeking (Ibrahim et al., 2019; Munawar et al., 2021). This psychoeducation-based empowerment approach also aligns with Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 1995)—which emphasizes strengthening community capacity—and

Community Development Theory (Rothman, 1995), which highlights participatory collaboration.

Furthermore, this program aims to make a tangible contribution to the community by strengthening social capacity, expanding international educational and cultural cooperation networks between Indonesia and Malaysia, and shaping students into transformative, globally competitive individuals who remain rooted in local values and the spirit of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation). Thus, the ICEP is positioned as a sustainable, strategic, and relevant model of service for developing excellent human resources and an empowered society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on an analysis of student reflections, in-depth interviews, and participant observations, two key findings emerged. First, students underwent a psychological transformation characterized by enhanced self-efficacy, cross-cultural communication skills, and self-regulation abilities, alongside a strengthened professional identity. Direct interaction with the Malaysian community fostered a new awareness regarding the importance of social empathy, cultural adaptation, and the application of psychological knowledge in real-world contexts. Second, from the community's perspective, the psychoeducational activities conducted by the students yielded positive impacts, specifically by increasing psychological literacy. Community members reported a better understanding of mental health, parenting practices, and learning motivation. Psychological First Aid (PFA) training, for instance, was valued as providing practical knowledge useful for managing crisis situations. Furthermore, socio-religious and cultural activities strengthened the sense of community and deepened the bonds between the students and the local population across national borders.



Figure 1. Psychological First Aid (AID)

The results of the community service activity indicate that student participation in international community service programs fosters a transformative learning process. This aligns with Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), which emphasizes the importance of critical reflection on real-life experiences as a means of shifting an individual's perspective. Students who initially held limited views regarding other cultures were able to develop a more mature professional identity through their engagement in cross-cultural activities. These findings also support the framework of Psychosocial Development Theory (Erikson, 1968), which highlights the role of social interaction in shaping self-identity, particularly during the stage of early adulthood.



Figure 2. Introduce Aceh Cuisine (Acehnese Coffee)

From the community's perspective, the outcomes of the activities demonstrate a process of community empowerment characterized by active participation. The psychoeducation program played a role in enhancing psychological literacy and fostering collective awareness regarding mental health, parenting, and child education. This impact aligns with the principles of Community Development Theory (Rothman, 1995), which emphasizes the importance of collaboration between change agents and the local community. Furthermore, the enhancement of community capacity through active involvement in the activities is consistent with Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 1995), which highlights the importance of strengthening self-efficacy and community autonomy.



Figure 3. Malaysian Independence Day Celebrate

Beyond individual and community benefits, this program also encompasses a dimension of inter-nation relations. Cross-cultural interaction between Indonesian students and the Malaysian community strengthens social, educational, and cultural cooperation. This supports Marginson's (2010) view that the internationalization of education not only enhances individual competence but also strengthens social networks between nations. Thus, the international KPM program can be viewed as a strategic model for developing globally competitive human resources while simultaneously reinforcing bilateral relations between Indonesia and Malaysia (Abdullah & Kassim, 2011).



Figure 4. Meet With The Community Leader

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that the international Community Service Program (KPM) is not merely a community service initiative but also a space for two-way learning. Students gain a transformative experience that shapes their character and professional identity, while the community benefits from social empowerment that contributes to community sustainability. Through the integration of critical reflection and ongoing psychoeducation, this program has the potential to serve as a model for international community service that is inclusive, relevant, and impactful within a global context

CONCLUSION

The International Thematic Community Service Program (KPM) in Kampung Bongkok, Gurun, Kedah, Malaysia, has proven to be a transformative vehicle for students and a platform for cross-cultural community empowerment. For students, participation in the program fosters psychological transformation, encompassing enhanced self-efficacy, cross-cultural communication skills, self-regulation abilities, and a strengthened professional identity. This transformative process aligns with the frameworks of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) and Psychosocial Development Theory (Erikson, 1968). Meanwhile, the community derives tangible benefits from psychoeducational programs, particularly through improved psychological literacy regarding mental health, parenting practices, and learning motivation. This strengthens community capacity in accordance with the principles of Community Development Theory (Rothman, 1995) and Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 1995). Furthermore, the cross-cultural interactions within the international KPM contribute to strengthening transnational relations, specifically in the fields of education and culture between Indonesia and Malaysia. Thus, the international KPM serves as a model of learning and community service that not only equips students with global competencies but also supports cross-border social development.

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