

Assessing Cultural Intelligence among UKM Students With and Without Short-Term International Mobility Program Experience

(Menilai Kecerdasan Budaya dalam kalangan Pelajar UKM Dengan dan Tanpa Pengalaman Program Mobiliti Antarabangsa Jangka Pendek)

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to interact effectively across cultures has become an essential skill for university students. This study aims to assess the Cultural Intelligence (CQ) of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia students who participated in a short-term international mobility programme compared to their non-participating peers. CQ, which encompasses metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural dimensions, is a critical competency for students navigating increasingly globalised educational and professional environments. Data was collected using the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) through a structured questionnaire administered to UKM students. The survey comprised demographic information, mobility participation status, and twenty questions assessing CQ dimensions. Results showed that mobility participants scored significantly higher in overall CQ and all CQ dimensions ($p < 0.05$). Findings suggest that students who participated in the mobility programme demonstrate relatively higher levels of cultural intelligence across most dimensions, particularly in the motivational and behavioural aspects, compared to non-participants, indicating greater confidence and adaptability in intercultural contexts. In conclusion, students who participated in short-term mobility programmes demonstrated higher levels of cultural intelligence than their non-participating peers, highlighting the effectiveness of such programmes in developing intercultural competence. These findings suggest that integrating structured international experiences into university curricula can be a valuable strategy to strengthen students' global competence and readiness for cross-cultural collaboration. This study adds to the understanding of how mobility programmes influence the development of intercultural skills and provides guidance for universities on designing programmes that enhance students' abilities to face challenges in a global context.

Keywords: Cultural Intelligence (CQ); Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS); short-term international mobility; intercultural competence

ABSTRAK

Dalam dunia yang semakin saling berhubung, keupayaan untuk berinteraksi secara berkesan merentasi budaya telah menjadi satu kemahiran penting bagi pelajar universiti. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menilai Kecerdasan Budaya (Cultural Intelligence, CQ) pelajar Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia yang menyertai program mobiliti antarabangsa jangka pendek berbanding rakan sebaya mereka yang tidak menyertai program tersebut. CQ, yang merangkumi dimensi metakognitif, kognitif, motivasi, dan tingkah laku, merupakan kecekapan kritikal bagi pelajar yang berhadapan dengan persekitaran pendidikan dan profesional yang semakin global. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan Skala Kecerdasan Budaya (Cultural Intelligence Scale, CQS) melalui soal selidik berstruktur yang diberikan kepada pelajar UKM. Soal selidik tersebut merangkumi maklumat demografi, status penyertaan dalam program mobiliti, dan dua puluh soalan yang menilai dimensi CQ. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa peserta program mobiliti mencatat skor yang jauh lebih tinggi dalam keseluruhan CQ dan semua dimensi CQ ($p < 0.05$). Dapatan ini menunjukkan bahawa pelajar yang menyertai program mobiliti mempunyai tahap kecerdasan budaya yang lebih tinggi dalam kebanyakan dimensi, khususnya dalam aspek motivasi dan tingkah laku, berbanding pelajar yang tidak menyertai program tersebut, sekali gus menunjukkan keyakinan

dan kemampuan menyesuaikan diri yang lebih tinggi dalam konteks antara budaya. Kesimpulannya, pelajar yang menyertai program mobiliti jangka pendek menunjukkan tahap kecerdasan budaya yang lebih tinggi berbanding rakan mereka yang tidak menyertai, sekali gus menonjolkan keberkesanan program sebegini dalam membangunkan kecekapan antara budaya. Dapatan ini mencadangkan bahawa pengintegrasian pengalaman antarabangsa berstruktur dalam kurikulum universiti boleh menjadi strategi yang berharga untuk memperkukuh kecekapan global dan kesiapsiagaan pelajar bagi kerjasama rentas budaya. Kajian ini turut menyumbang kepada pemahaman tentang bagaimana program mobiliti mempengaruhi pembangunan kemahiran antara budaya serta memberikan panduan kepada universiti dalam melaksanakan program yang dapat meningkatkan keupayaan pelajar menghadapi cabaran dalam konteks global.

Kata Kunci: Kecerdasan Budaya (CQ); Skala Kecerdasan Budaya (CQS); mobiliti antarabangsa jangka pendek; kompetensi antara budaya

INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected world, the ability to interact effectively across cultures is increasingly recognised as a vital skill for individuals. The rapid pace of globalisation has expanded cross-cultural exchanges in education, business and daily life, placing a premium on competencies that enable individuals to adapt and thrive in diverse environments (Dauber *et al.*, 2023). One competency is cultural intelligence (CQ), which refers to an individual's ability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings (Earley & Ang, 2018). Cultural intelligence is multidimensional, comprising metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural elements that together shape one's ability to engage meaningfully with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Higher education institutions play a vital role in nurturing students' cultural intelligence. International mobility programmes, such as study abroad, exchange programmes, and short-term immersion initiatives, provide students with valuable opportunities to experience other cultures firsthand. These programmes are believed to enhance students' intercultural awareness, adaptability, and openness by placing them in environments that challenge their perspectives and encourage cross-cultural interaction. Studies have shown that short-term mobility experiences, especially when accompanied by preparatory cultural learning, can significantly increase students' Cultural Intelligence across multiple domains (Alexander, *et al.* 2022). Alexander *et al.* (2022) reported significant improvements in all four

dimensions of cultural intelligence (metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural) following students' completion of a cultural development course and subsequent participation in a three to six-week study abroad program. Similarly, Wood & St. Peters (2014) demonstrated that an 11- to 12-day structured cross-cultural tour elevated the metacognitive, cognitive, and motivational dimensions of cultural intelligence.

Short-term international mobility programmes have become a key strategy for promoting global exposure among students. These programmes allow students to experience academic, cultural, and social environments beyond their home country, offering opportunities to strengthen intercultural skills and global perspectives without extending their study duration (Dauber *et al.*, 2023). However, not all students have the chance to participate, whether due to financial, academic, or personal constraints, leaving a substantial group (~90%) who continue their studies on campus without this form of exposure.

Given this context, it is essential to examine whether there are measurable differences in cultural intelligence between students who participate in short-term international mobility programmes and their peers who do not. Such an assessment not only provides insights into the actual impact of mobility initiatives but also helps the university to identify potential gaps in nurturing intercultural competence among non-participants (Anderson *et al.* 2006; McCann *et al.* 2019). Understanding these differences will guide the refinement of its strategies to ensure that all students, regardless of mobility experience, are equally equipped with the cultural intelligence necessary for global

citizenship (Ang et al. 2006; Iskhakova et al. 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Design & Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional design, which allows for the assessment of differences in cultural intelligence between groups at a single point in time. A total of 70 undergraduate students from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) participated in the survey.

Among them, 23 students had joined a short-term international mobility program to Manila, Philippines, organised by Kolej Tun Syed Nasir (KTSN). A comparison group of 47 students, who had not participated in any international mobility program or community outreach, was also included.

A purposive sampling technique was adopted to ensure representation from diverse demographics, including faculty, year of study, gender, and ethnicity. Random sampling was not feasible due to the limited availability of students who had participated in the mobility programme. This design allowed for a comparison of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) between students with and without short-term international mobility experience at a single point in time.

Inclusion criteria were registered undergraduate students of UKM who had either participated in the Manila mobility programme or had not participated in any international mobility programme. Exclusion criteria included postgraduate students, alumni, students who did not belong to either group, or incomplete questionnaire responses.

The sample size was determined based on the total number of students available from the mobility programme cohort. To balance this, purposive sampling was used to select non-participating students from different backgrounds. This approach ensured adequate representation while reflecting the actual distribution of students with and without mobility experience.

PROCEDURE AND INSTRUMENTATION

The data collection process was conducted through an online questionnaire distributed to UKM students after the completion of the short-term mobility programme to Manila, which lasted five days from 21 August to 25 August 2025. Students who did not participate in the programme were also invited to respond, to provide a comparison group. Prior to participation, students were provided with an information sheet and

consent statement, and they were required to agree before accessing the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that their answers would remain confidential and would be used solely for academic purposes.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections totalling 30 items. Part A 'Demographics' comprised five items collecting background information on participants, including gender, age, ethnicity, faculty, and year of study. Part C, 'CQS', included 20 items measuring four dimensions of cultural intelligence: metacognitive (e.g., 'I am conscious of the cultural knowledge I apply to cross-cultural interactions'), cognitive (e.g., 'I know the rules for expressing nonverbal behaviors in other cultures'), motivational (e.g., 'I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures') and behavioral (e.g., 'I change my verbal behavior when a cross-cultural interaction requires it'). All items were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The questionnaire was administered in English, and the language used was kept clear and simple to ensure ease of understanding. Completion of the questionnaire required approximately 5 minutes. The Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), originally developed and validated by Ang et al. (2007) and Van Dyne et al. (2008), has been widely applied in cross-cultural research and has demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients reported above 0.80 for each dimension in previous studies. In the present study, the standardised items were used without modification to maintain comparability with prior research findings.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Descriptive statistics, including range, frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, were used to summarise demographic information and CQ scores for both groups. Independent samples t-tests were performed to compare CQ scores between mobility and non-participating students across the four dimensions, which are metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural, as well as the overall CQ score. Statistical significance was determined at $p < 0.05$.

FINDINGS

Research Profile

A sample of 70 UKM students participated in the study,

of whom 23 were mobility students engaged in a short-term programme in Manila, Philippines, while the remaining 47 were non-participating students.

Regarding gender, the sample comprised 23 mobility students and 47 non-participating students. Among the mobility group, 14 were female (61%), and 9 were male (39%), while among the non-participating group, 24 were female (51%) and 23 were male (49%). Overall, the gender distribution between the two groups was relatively balanced, with a slightly higher proportion of female students in the mobility group.

For the age distribution, most mobility participants were aged 21–23 years (57%), followed by 18–20 years (43.5%). The non-participating group showed a similar pattern, with 18–20 years (51%) as the majority and 21–23 years (47.0%) as the remainder. Only one non-participating respondent (2.0%) was aged 24–26 years. The age profiles of both groups were therefore comparable, as shown in Table 1.

The faculty distribution also reflected similar trends between groups. Most mobility students were from the Faculty of Health Sciences (79%), with smaller proportions from the Faculty of Pharmacy (17%) and the Faculty of Dentistry (4%). The non-participating group showed almost identical representation: 83% from Health Sciences, 13% from Pharmacy, and 4% from Dentistry.

In terms of ethnicity, Malay students made up the majority in both groups, 61% among mobility students and 57% among non-participating students, followed by Chinese (26%) and Indian (13%) in both groups. For the year of study, half of both mobility and non-participating participants were Year 1 students (50%), followed by Year 2 (39%), with small numbers in Years 3–4. This indicates that the demographic distribution between mobility and non-participating respondents was generally well balanced, suggesting minimal bias due to background differences.

TABLE 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Variable	Mobility (n=23) n (%)	Non-Participating (n=47) n (%)	Total (n=70) n (%)
Gender			
Female	14 (61)	24 (51)	38 (54)
Male	9 (39)	23 (49)	32 (46)
Age (years)			
18–20	10 (43)	24 (51)	34 (49)
21–23	13 (57)	22 (47)	35 (50)
24–26	0 (0)	1 (2)	1 (1)
Faculty			
Health Sciences	18 (79)	39 (83)	57 (82)
Pharmacy	4 (17)	6 (13)	10 (14)
Dentistry	1 (4)	2 (4)	3 (4)
Ethnicity			
Malay	14 (61)	27 (57)	41 (59)
Chinese	6 (26)	12 (26)	18 (26)
Indian	3 (13)	6 (13)	9 (11)
Others	0 (0)	2 (4)	2 (4)
Year of Study			
Year 1	12 (52)	23 (49)	35 (50)
Year 2	9 (39)	18 (38)	27 (39)
Year 3	2 (9)	4 (9)	6 (9)
Year 4	0 (0)	2 (5)	2 (2)

TABLE 2. Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples t-Test for CQ Dimension (n=70)

Dimensions	Mobility (n=23) Mean (SD, Range)	Non-Participating (n=47) Mean (SD, Range)	t (70)	p-value
Metacognitive	6.25 (0.45, 5-7)	4.95 (0.60, 3-6)	8.12	< 0.001
Cognitive	5.10 (0.70, 3-6)	4.55 (0.72, 3-6)	2.92	0.005
Motivational	6.15 (0.50, 5-7)	4.70 (0.65, 3-6)	7.85	< 0.001
Behavioral	6.05 (0.48, 5-7)	4.85 (0.58, 3-6)	7.40	< 0.001
CQ Total	5.89 (0.44, 5-7)	4.76 (0.56, 3-6)	9.15	< 0.001

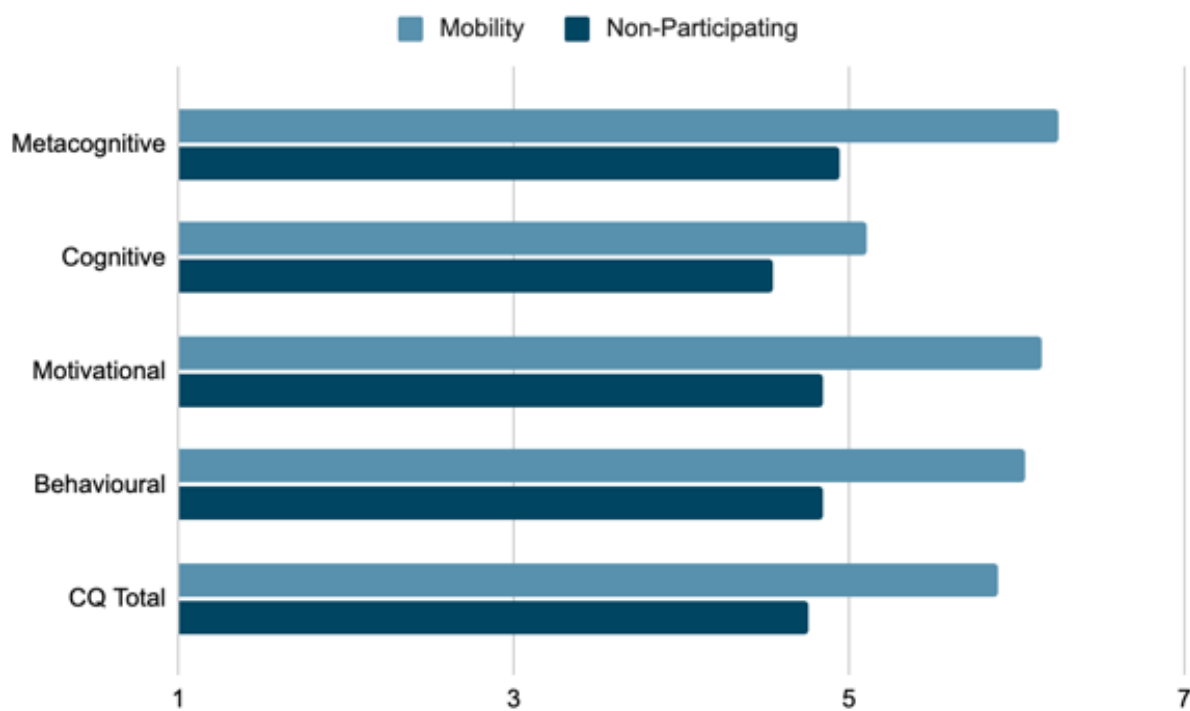


FIGURE 1. Mean CQ Scores by Dimension for Mobility and Non-Mobility Students

CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE (CQ) LEVELS BY DIMENSION

The study assessed four main dimensions of Cultural Intelligence (CQ), namely metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural, as well as the overall CQ score. To determine whether the observed differences were statistically significant, an independent-samples t-test was conducted in SPSS. The mean, standard deviation, group range and t-test results are shown in Table 2.

Mobility students scored higher across all four

dimensions of CQ than non-participating students. Independent samples t-tests confirmed that these differences were statistically significant across all dimensions (Table 2). Figure 1 illustrates the group comparisons.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that students who participated in the short-term mobility programme scored higher across all four dimensions of cultural intelligence than

their non-participating peers. The largest differences were observed in the metacognitive (6.25 and 4.95) and motivational (6.15 and 4.70) dimensions, suggesting that mobility students are better at planning, monitoring, and adjusting their cultural interactions, and are also more motivated to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds. These results indicate that exposure to an international setting such as the Manila programme provides students with opportunities to reflect on cultural assumptions, build confidence, and maintain enthusiasm in intercultural encounters. Consistent with this, *Alexander et al. (2022)* found that participation in short-term study abroad experiences led to significantly higher cultural intelligence across motivational, cognitive, metacognitive, and behavioural domains. Although the differences in the cognitive (5.10 vs 4.55) and behavioural (6.05 vs 4.85) dimensions were relatively small, they were still statistically significant. This suggests that mobility experiences have been shown to enhance students' intercultural understanding and adaptability, enabling them to better navigate diverse cultural contexts and develop greater personal and professional maturity (*Valls-Figuera, Torrado-Fonseca, & Borràs, 2023*). The consistently higher scores across all dimensions point to the positive role of mobility in strengthening overall cultural intelligence (5.89 and 4.76), highlighting the impact of international exposure in developing globally aware and adaptable students (*Pásztor, 2021*).

In addition to the quantitative findings, participants' feedback highlighted positive experiences, particularly through cultural immersion activities, including interactions with Ateneo de Manila University students, community engagement, and exposure to Philippine traditions and lifestyle. These experiences not only reinforced students' motivation and adaptability but also enhanced their communication skills and intercultural awareness, aligning with previous evidence that short-term study abroad programmes foster significant gains in intercultural competence and personal development (*Chieffo & Griffith, 2004*).

The success of the Manila mobility programme was also supported by effective collaboration between Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Ateneo de Manila University. According to *Knight (2011)*, strong institutional partnerships are essential to ensuring that internationalisation initiatives achieve their intended outcomes, and the careful planning of activities in this programme, which blended academic, cultural, and social elements, enabled meaningful intercultural learning.

While the programme was generally well received, some challenges were identified. Students

reported that adjusting to local cultural norms and managing time across tightly scheduled activities required effort and flexibility. *Jackson (2015)* has similarly noted that cultural adjustment and communication barriers are common in short-term mobility contexts. These reflections suggest that future programmes could further enhance the student experience by allowing more time for informal interaction, peer-led activities, and structured opportunities for reflection.

This study shows that short-term mobility programmes can play an important role in building students' cultural intelligence. *Alexander et al. (2022)* found that participation in short-term study abroad experiences significantly enhanced cultural intelligence across motivational, cognitive, metacognitive, and behavioural domains. Likewise, *Sousa et al. (2023)* observed generally strong levels of cultural intelligence among higher education students, highlighting the value of international and multicultural engagement.

For universities, this means that mobility programmes should not be treated as optional add-ons but as meaningful opportunities to prepare students for global challenges. *Jones (2013)* argued that intercultural experiences gained through mobility contribute directly to employability, as graduates with higher cultural intelligence tend to be more adaptable, confident, and effective in multicultural workplaces.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that participation in short-term international mobility programmes has a significant positive impact on the cultural intelligence (CQ) of students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Those who joined the Manila mobility programme scored higher across all four dimensions of CQ (metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural) compared to their non-participating peers. These findings highlight that international exposure not only enhances students' cultural knowledge but also strengthens their motivation to engage with diversity, adaptability in intercultural interactions, and readiness to face global challenges.

However, this study has several limitations. The relatively small sample size, reliance on self-reported measures, and focus on a single mobility programme limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should expand the sample to include more diverse participants, incorporate longitudinal or mixed-method designs, and examine different mobility contexts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural intelligence develops.

Overall, the results reaffirm the value of

international mobility as a vital platform for developing intercultural competence, while also emphasising the need for further research to strengthen universities' strategies in producing globally competitive and culturally adaptable graduates.

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