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# **RSSS002 - ENHANCING CROSS-CULTURAL LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: A STUDY OF INDERALOKA INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As global societies become increasingly interconnected, effective leadership requires not only decision-making skills but also cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and inclusive collaboration. This study examines the impact of experiential learning on cross-cultural leadership competencies through the Inderaloka International Festival. A total of 458 students from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan participated in a pre- and post-festival assessment measuring self-perceived attributes including communication, teamwork, adaptability, and cultural awareness. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, with results indicating statistically significant improvements across all domains. Regression analysis further demonstrated that pre-festival confidence was a strong predictor of post-festival leadership development. Complementing these findings, qualitative reflections underscored the importance of real-time multicultural collaboration in shaping leadership outcomes. Overall, the study affirms the transformative potential of experiential learning in cultivating cross-cultural leadership competencies essential for the next generation of global leaders.

***Keywords – Cross-Cultural Leadership, Experiential Learning, Inderaloka***

## **INTRODUCTION**

In today's interconnected world, leadership extends beyond managing tasks or making decisions; it also requires the ability to engage across cultural boundaries with empathy, adaptability, and purpose. Cross-cultural leadership has thus become a critical competency for students preparing to enter globalized professional and community environments (Chiu et al., 2013; Goodman, 2020). While many universities integrate multicultural content into curricula, few provide immersive opportunities that allow students to actively develop these skills through practice (Mohamad et al., 2024). The Inderaloka International Festival was established to address this gap in traditional education. Conceived as a cultural and leadership immersion program, the festival brought together students from Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, and regional partners to collaboratively plan, execute, and reflect on a large-scale international event. Participants were challenged to co-lead multicultural teams, coordinate logistics, make time-sensitive decisions, and adapt to diverse communication styles and cultural norms. Grounded in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning framework, the festival's primary aim was to use hands-on, real-world

engagement as a transformative approach to strengthen cross-cultural leadership competencies.

The motivation for the Inderaloka Festival emerged from two interrelated challenges. First, while many young leaders possess technical capabilities, they often lack exposure to intercultural environments that cultivate adaptability and emotional intelligence (Pierre, Rathee, & Rathee, 2021). Second, higher education institutions have increasingly recognized the limitations of conventional classroom-based leadership training, particularly in multicultural contexts (Bennett, 2019). To bridge this gap, the festival was designed as a real-world leadership laboratory where students could learn, reflect, and grow in a diverse and dynamic setting. This study therefore examines the extent to which participation in the Inderaloka International Festival enhanced students' self-perceived leadership and cultural competencies, drawing on both quantitative assessments and qualitative reflections.

## OBJECTIVES

- i. To analyze changes in leadership competencies among participants before and after the festival.
- ii. To examine the relationship between pre-festival confidence and post-festival leadership development.
- iii. To explore students' reflections to understand which cross-cultural leadership lessons were most impactful.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the impact of the Inderaloka International Festival on the development of cross-cultural leadership competencies among undergraduate students. Data were collected through a structured, self-administered questionnaire administered before and after the festival, enabling pre-post comparative analysis of students' perceived leadership growth. The sample comprised 458 students from higher education institutions in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan, representing a range of academic disciplines and levels of study. The inclusion of participants from three culturally distinct contexts enriched the analysis by capturing a wider spectrum of intercultural learning outcomes. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents completed both the pre- and post-assessment sections of the instrument. The questionnaire was organized into four major sections, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of the Survey Instrument

| Sec | Description                     | No. of Items | Scale Type                                                   |
|-----|---------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| A   | Demographic Information         | 5            | Categorical                                                  |
| B   | Pre-Festival Self-Assessment    | 10           | 5-point Likert (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) |
| C   | Post-Festival Reflection        | 12           | 5-point Likert                                               |
| D   | Open-ended Reflection Questions | 3            | Open response                                                |

Sections B and C were designed to evaluate core leadership competencies such as communication, decision-making, team collaboration, adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and time management. Items were developed based on prior leadership development frameworks and intercultural competency literature (Chiang, 2013; Kolb, 1984; Pierre, Rathee, & Rathee, 2021). Internal consistency of both sections was confirmed during pilot testing, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.80, indicating high reliability. The instrument was administered in two phases: the pre-festival survey was completed during participant onboarding, while the post-festival survey was conducted immediately following the completion of the festival. The surveys were distributed digitally through Google Forms, and participants used personal devices to submit their responses. Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participant characteristics and item-level trends. A paired-sample t-test was applied to compare pre- and post-festival competency scores and assess the statistical significance of the change. To further explore the influence of initial perceptions on post-festival outcomes, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted using mean pre-festival scores as predictors for post-festival leadership development. In addition, the qualitative responses collected from open-ended questions were subjected to thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. This enabled triangulation of data and deeper insight into the specific experiences and leadership lessons students reported as most valuable.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the pre- and post-festival assessments. The results are discussed in relation to the study objectives, theoretical framework, and relevant literature on cross-cultural leadership and experiential learning.

### Descriptive Overview of Participant Responses

A total of 458 valid responses were analyzed. While the demographic data in full were not extracted from the form output, participants represented three primary nationalities which are Malaysian, Indonesian, and Japanese with balanced gender distribution and varied academic disciplines. This diverse sample enabled the study to assess leadership development in authentically multicultural contexts, consistent with the aims of the Inderaloka International Festival. The pre-festival and post-festival items were aggregated to generate individual mean scores for each participant. Descriptive analysis indicated an upward shift in all assessed competencies following the festival.

### Pre- and Post-Festival Competency Comparison

A paired-sample t-test was performed to determine whether the changes in leadership competencies were statistically significant. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Paired-Sample T-Test of Leadership Competencies

| Assessment Phase | Mean Score | Standard Deviation | t-value | p-value |
|------------------|------------|--------------------|---------|---------|
| Pre-Festival     | 3.20       | 0.70               |         |         |
| Post-Festival    | 3.80       | 0.70               | 44.36   | < 0.001 |

The test revealed a highly significant difference ( $p < 0.001$ ) between pre- and post-festival mean scores, with post-festival perceptions of leadership competencies showing marked improvement. This suggests that the experiential learning embedded in the Inderaloka

Festival had a measurable and positive effect on participants' self-perceived leadership development. This outcome aligns with prior studies highlighting the transformative effect of international experiential programs on leadership and intercultural skills (Chiu et al., 2013; Pierre et al., 2021). Specifically, it reinforces Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, which posits that learning through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation leads to meaningful growth.

### Regression Analysis: Predicting Post-Festival Competency

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether initial confidence predicted leadership development, using the mean pre-festival score as the independent variable and the mean post-festival score as the dependent variable. The regression results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Linear Regression Predicting Post-Festival Leadership Score

| Predictor               | $\beta$ Coefficient | t-value | p-value | R <sup>2</sup> |
|-------------------------|---------------------|---------|---------|----------------|
| Constant                | 1.54                | 21.56   | < 0.001 |                |
| Mean Pre-Festival Score | 0.70                | 37.47   | < 0.001 | 0.75           |

The regression model was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), accounting for 75% of the variance in post-festival scores ( $R^2 = 0.75$ ). These results suggest that participants with higher initial confidence in their leadership abilities were more likely to demonstrate greater growth. A plausible interpretation is that such individuals tend to engage more actively and assume initiative in cross-cultural contexts, conditions regarded as critical for leadership development (Goodman, 2020).

### Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Reflections

Thematic analysis of over 300 participant reflections identified five key leadership themes developed through the festival experience:

- i. **Adaptability:** Participants highlighted the need to remain calm and flexible when managing unexpected changes and logistical challenges.
- ii. **Communication:** Many reported improved skills in articulating ideas clearly and resolving misunderstandings across language and cultural barriers.
- iii. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Respondents gained greater appreciation for diverse values, traditions, and social norms, fostering empathy and global awareness.
- iv. **Teamwork:** Cross-cultural collaboration emphasized the importance of inclusivity, mutual respect, and shared responsibility.
- v. **Confidence:** The festival environment encouraged students to lead proactively, take initiative, and engage outside their comfort zones.

These emergent themes reinforce the value of experiential learning in cultivating intercultural leadership, consistent with prior research (Bennett, 2019; Deardorff, 2006) and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. They also validate the role of reflection in transforming experience into leadership insight.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of the Inderaloka International Festival on students' cross-cultural leadership development through an experiential learning approach. The findings revealed a significant improvement in participants' self-perceived leadership

competencies, particularly in areas such as communication, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data suggests that real-life multicultural engagement can effectively strengthen leadership confidence and intercultural awareness. Overall, the festival served not only as a cultural exchange platform but also as a practical training ground for emerging leaders in a global context. These results highlight the importance of integrating experiential and international learning opportunities into higher education to prepare students for leadership in diverse and dynamic environments.

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