

## Learners' Perspectives on Promoting Cultural Literacy via an Alternative Assessment: A Classroom Approach

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### Abstract

In the 21st century learning landscape, arguably few features of teaching and learning are void of technology. Palpably, the pandemic has made technology mandatory in remote teaching and delivery of assessments are no exception. Nonetheless, the significance of devising fitting online assessments is not only fundamental to achieving course outcomes but also focal to developing 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. One such assessment that was borne out of necessity is the Virtual Cultural Exhibition (VCE). Within this backdrop, the study explores the experiences of students who planned, proposed, designed, and staged the VCE as part of an alternative assessment initiative. Specifically, this study was designed to examine how the learners perceived the alternative assessment in helping them (a) develop social responsibility and respect for global cultural identities in line with the course learning objectives, (b) develop 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills and (c) identify the challenges and issues faced by them. To accomplish these objectives, a total of 100 students from five different groups were selected. Different data collection methods (student survey and semi-structured interviews) were used, and the data were analysed using mixed method approaches. The findings reveal that although the VCE is a promising approach to develop learners' cultural literacy and promote creativity and collaboration, it is time demanding. Adjustments were made to the VCE specifically in terms of task specifications in response to the learners' feedback. This study provides a foundation for improving the design and implementation of online assessments in intercultural communication courses to promote real world skills.

**Keywords:** *Cultural Literacy, Alternative Assessment, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills*

## 1.0 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has compelled educators all around the world to rethink and redesign teaching and learning approaches to suit the remote learning environment. Particularly, teachers have been obliged to re-evaluate assessment approaches to pave the way for novel and reliable methods that can support a diverse student population. In doing so, not only are they confronted with the challenges of meeting the needs of the students, but educators are also expected to devise assessments which are in line with course learning outcomes. In their effort to address these requirements, educators have had to think outside the box to examine best practices in their fields to create valuable learning experiences that will not only develop their content knowledge but also prepare them for the real world.

Despite the constraints of the pandemic, higher educators cannot waiver from the main purpose of assessments in higher education. It is evident that university assessments are intended to promote learning, fulfil accountability, and provide certification for undergraduates (Capism, 2020). Considering this and the challenges posed by the pandemic, designing assessments that can achieve these purposes is undoubtedly a demanding task for educators, especially for those who are grounded in traditional knowledge-based assessments. However, with the clarion call to university policy makers to reshape evaluation practices (McAleese et al., 2013) and focus on skills which are relevant to the real world, it is mandatory for educators to move away from focusing on testing what learners know rather than what they can do. In this context, the drive to bridge knowledge and performance and to meet the constantly changing demands for new skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have paved the way for innovative and learner-centred assessments in higher education. Nevertheless, the significance of devising fitting online assessments is not only fundamental to achieving course outcomes during the pandemic but also focal for the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century real world skills. Within this milieu, this study explores the experiences of students who were tasked to plan and design a virtual cultural exhibition (VCE) during the pandemic as part of an alternative assessment initiative for an undergraduate course offered to third semester students enrolled in English for Intercultural Communication program. The main aim of this study was to obtain feedback from the students and improve assessment practices. Specifically, this study was designed to examine (a) whether the alternative assessment (VCE) allowed the learners to demonstrate social responsibility and respect for global cultural identities in line with the course learning objectives, (b) the effectiveness of the VCE in promoting 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills and (c) the challenges and issues faced by the learners. Although the VCE was conceived out of necessity during the pandemic, the findings have significant implications for course instructors and designers as it clearly demonstrates that course learning outcomes which are designed for conventional classroom learners are achievable by infusing technology even in remote learning environments. Besides, the results of the study are highly significant for 21st century learners who have to be digitally competent and ready for the technology centric economy as it exposes them to different digital platforms. Overall, the findings have significant implications for the design and implementation of alternative assessments in higher education.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Assessments in all its forms, are integral to teaching and learning and for the most part they are known to play two key roles in the higher education context namely as a quality driver or indicator for institutions and as a measurement of student learning (Tunku Ahmad et al., 2014). In entirety, assessments link teaching and learning where they serve as tools to gauge learning. In other words, teachers use assessments to evaluate their learners' progress. The fact that assessments are developed and administered by teachers themselves, the

probability of them using assessments to guide their teaching is significantly greater (Geronimo & Estrella, 2021). In higher education, assessments play a pivotal role in signalling learners' preparedness for the workplace, as universities are the final stop for undergraduates before they join the marketplace. Hence assessments in this context serve the purpose of endorsing learning where the certification should reflect the learners' abilities to transfer knowledge and skills learnt to the workplace (Archer & Chetty, 2017). Evidently, assessments have a symbiotic relationship with teaching, thus it is obligatory that educators strive to select the best assessment practices that can optimise learning and allow learners to use the knowledge gained not only in factual form but also in the practical sense. With challenges like global competitiveness and disruptive innovation, the time is now for educators to seek assessment methods and strategies that will allow students to become lifelong learners.

As opposed to traditional assessments which focus on product, alternative assessments (AA) place a lot of emphasis on the processes in learning. AA approaches are couched in the constructivist paradigm where performance is measured by the learner's ability to carry out tasks informed by knowledge which they have acquired. Also referred to as authentic assessments, AA focuses directly on "performance" in which students are expected to complete real-world tasks that validate their knowledge and skills on specific content. According to Geronimo & Estrella (2021) AA is an alternative method which makes assessments an inherent part of the teaching and learning equation. Seemingly, AA has been touted to foster deep learning that enables students to make connections between content learnt and its application, as the basic tenet of AA is for students to create real meaning. Till date, many primary studies define AA in terms of its utility to promote active learning, creative thinking, problem solving and collaboration, which are necessary skills to function in the workplace (Yesilyurt, 2012; Gozuyesil & Tanriseven, 2017; Conijn et al, 2019; Tajularipin et al., 2020; Moore, Hansen & Heh, 2020). With AA being riddled with varying definitions, to agree on a concise working definition for AA, we need to look at it broadly to include any alternatives to standardised paper and pencil testing. To put it into context, alternative assessments share several traits which include (1) they are alternative to the traditional testing (2) they involve performance or tasks relating to real-life situations (3) they are process oriented. For the purposes of this study, the VCE was conceptualised based on these premises.

With the growing evidence that points to the necessity for educators to rethink assessments as mere tools to measure knowledge, AA can be acknowledged as an authentic vehicle that can drive curriculum to meet the ever-changing expectations of the 21st century workplace. According to Morrow, Shanahan, and Wixson (Morrow et al., 2010) the value given to assessments, especially in higher education, is to drive curriculum and learning as well prepare undergraduates for the marketplace. This in essence suggests that learning and any product of learning should not begin solely with the transfer of knowledge, instead it should put the learners in the driver's seat where they assume control and autonomy over the processes and outcomes

of their own learning. Evidently, AA in all its forms has been proven over the years to develop self-regulation among learners (Fathi et al., 2017). Thus, by providing learners with choices and insights into their learning process, AA can promote meaningful learning encounters. To that extent, exploring the learners' preferences in carrying out an alternative assessment can uncover better AA outcomes.

It must be reiterated that if university assessments only measure learners' ability to reproduce facts in tests and exams, learners will be trained to only memorise factual data to secure a good grade and the essence of learning for life will be missed (Leenknecht et al., 2021). Primarily, assessment objectives, as evident in AA practices, must capture the authentic aspect of the knowledge construct to allow learners to use it in the real world. In the real sense, university assessments should mirror and prepare students for real tasks awaiting them outside the classrooms (Mazur, 2014). For this reason, increasingly, traditional assessments have come under intense scrutiny. In fact, within the higher education circle, there has been a growing shift towards performance-based assessments that reflect authentic settings and tasks (Di Stasio et al., 2019). Whether the assessments are labelled authentic, criterion referenced, performance-based or alternative, they are all contextualised to invoke divergent thinking and produce workplace ready graduates for the 21st Century.

This study explored the perceptions of the students as student-perceived value has a huge impact on the success of any classroom initiative. Pallof and Pratt (2007) clearly states that student-perceived value is indispensable to ensure success in the classroom as they are central in the teaching and learning equation. Therefore, by exploring students' experiences and enquiring about their struggles, educators can make informed decisions to improve their teaching.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This study used a mixed methods research design in which quantitative methods function as the primary method and this is supported by qualitative research. Proponents of mixed methods research clarify that the justification for employing a mixed method is mainly to collect quality data that can effectively tackle the research problem which may not be otherwise possible if specific methods are used in isolation (Ivankova, Creswell & Stick, 2006). For this study, a mixed method approach was adopted to include a qualitative perspective which would have otherwise been difficult with a survey. Hence to increase the validity of the survey and to minimise bias, participants in the study were required to complete a google survey sheet and selected respondents were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview.

#### **3.1. Context**

The study was conducted in September 2020 among undergraduate students who were enrolled in the English for Intercultural Communication program. In this paper, we report the results of the study by exploring

the perceptions of students who produced a Virtual Cultural Exhibition (VCE) to fulfil their second formative assessment requirement within the Introduction to World Cultures course at the University Teknologi MARA. The course was conducted online for a period of 14 weeks. The VCE is a 40 percent group assignment designed based on the AA approach. The students were tasked to plan, design, promote and carry out a virtual exhibition that features a culture of their choice. The exhibition must feature separate sections that highlight cultural elements of a community, e.g., beliefs, folklore, metaphors, literary work, art, costumes, traditional games, language, festivals, and rituals. The students were given a thorough explanation on the meaning of social responsibility and respect by citing examples. The VCE was planned to achieve the specific learning outcome of developing social responsibility and respect for global cultures. Particularly, the objective of the VCE assessment is to develop 1) the students' cultural literacy and respect for world cultures, 2) their ability to perform real-world tasks, i.e., plan, promote and organise a virtual event and 3) their digital, teamworking, critical thinking and creative skills. The VCE was carried out in four phases:

- 1)Phase 1: Proposal Development Phase (Weeks1-3)
- 2) Phase 2: Proposal Pitching Phase (Week 3)
- 3) Phase 3: VCE Promotion Phase (Weeks 8-9)
- 4) Phase 4: VCE Staging (Week10)

### **3.2. Participants**

The participants involved in the study were third semester undergraduate students who were enrolled in the Introduction to World Cultures (WC) course, a 14-week course carried out online due to the Corvid-19 Pandemic. Two cohorts of students who undertook the WC course, registered between 2019 -2020 se-mester, took part in the study. A total of 92 students selected randomly from five classes completed the google survey while two students from each of the five classes were interviewed to get a qualitative perspective. The students for the interview were purposefully selected based on those who scored the highest and the ones that scored the lowest from each class. This was done to capture the preferences of students with varied abilities.

### **3.3. Data Collection Tools**

A google survey sheet was created by the researchers based on relevant existing knowledge on the constructs of social responsibility and cultural knowledge. The google survey comprised three parts, namely 1) Execution of the VCE, 2) Development Respect for Global Cultural Identities and 3) Development of 21st Century Skills. The survey instrument was designed according to the opinions of two experts from the field of assessment and evaluation. The instrument was not validated, as the opinions of the experts were accepted as adequate. The first section of the survey was composed of statements that enquired about the students' experience of doing the VCE. Statements on how the different tasks in the VCE enabled them to develop Universiti Teknologi MARA, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2022

social responsibility and respect for global cultures were listed in the second section. The third section comprised statements that tapped on how the different tasks helped them to develop real work skills like teamwork, collaboration, autonomy, creativity, critical thinking, and digital literacy. The statements in the survey were scored using a five-point Likert scale for the participants to indicate their agreement level. The Likert scale is as follows: “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neutral”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree”.

A semi structured interview protocol was also developed to add depth to the quantitative data collected via the survey. This included a set of questions which enquired about the students' experiences and challenges when they were doing the VCE.

### **3.3.1. Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the present study:

1. What perceptions did the learners have of the VCE in developing social responsibility and respect for global cultural identities?
2. What perceptions did the learners have of the VCE in developing 21st Century skills?
3. What challenges and issues did they face in completing the VCE assessment?

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

For the survey, Microsoft Excel was used to analyse the responses and to calculate percentages. To answer research question 1 and 2, the researchers categorised the students' responses and used bar charts to express the participants' agreement level on how the assessment developed the specific skills. Responses from the semi-structured interviews were categorised and reported according to themes to answer research question 3.

## **4.0 Findings**

Findings will be discussed according to the research questions.

### **4.1. Research Question 1**

Research question 1 required descriptive statistics that looked at the students' perception regarding the utility of the VCE in developing their sense of social responsibility and respect for global cultural identities. To highlight the learners' perceptions, the researchers displayed the data using bar charts [Figures 1-3].

Figure 1. Development of social responsibility

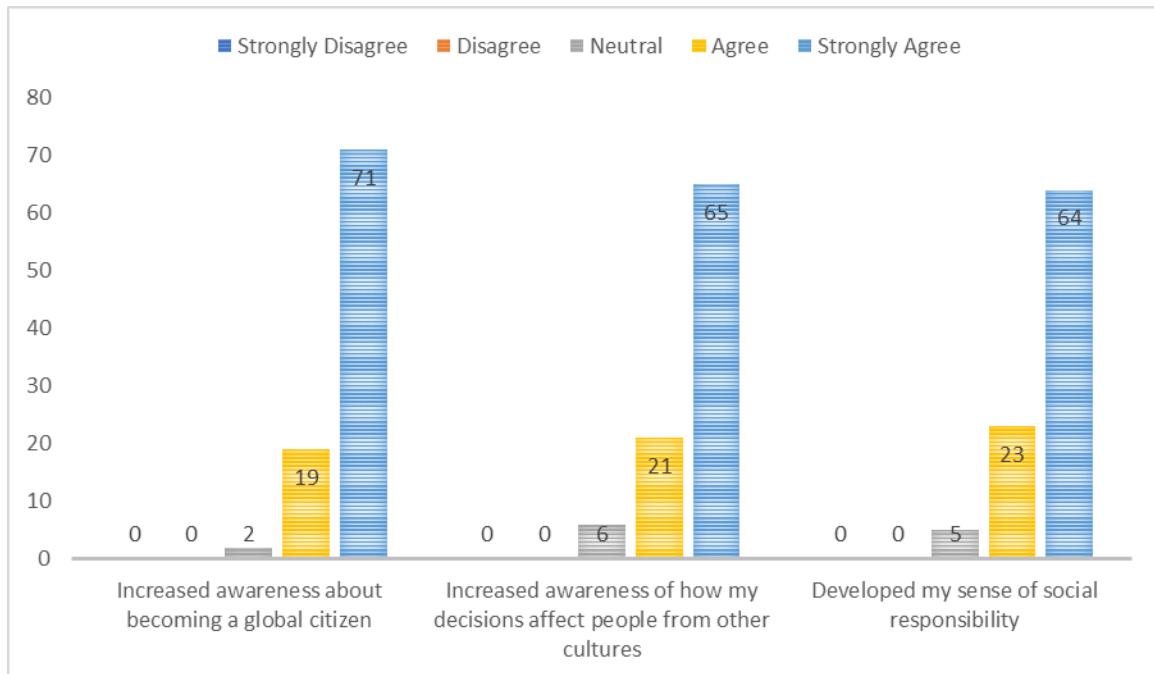


Figure 2. Development of knowledge in global cultural Identities

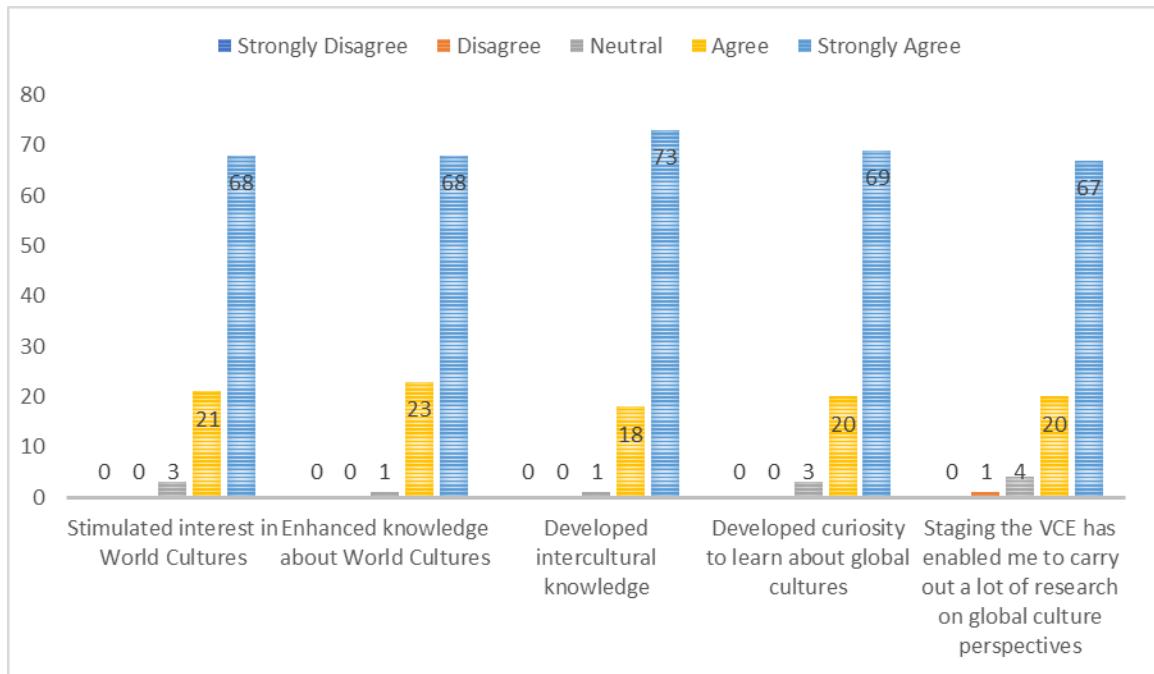


Figure 2 shows that 87 of the 92 students strongly agreed and agreed that the VCE enabled them to conduct a lot of research about global cultural perspectives and another 89 students agreed that it increased their curiosity about global cultures. In terms of developing their intercultural knowledge, a total of 91 students strongly agreed and agreed that it did. Another 89 mentioned that the VCE stimulated their interest in world cultures. In general, the students perceived the VCE positively in terms of being able to develop their knowledge in global cultures. The findings reveal that not only did the assessment create an awareness about

the importance of being socially responsible as a global citizen, but the respondents were also motivated to conduct research independently in order to complete the assessment and to enhance their knowledge in global cultures.

**Figure 3. Development of respect for global cultures**

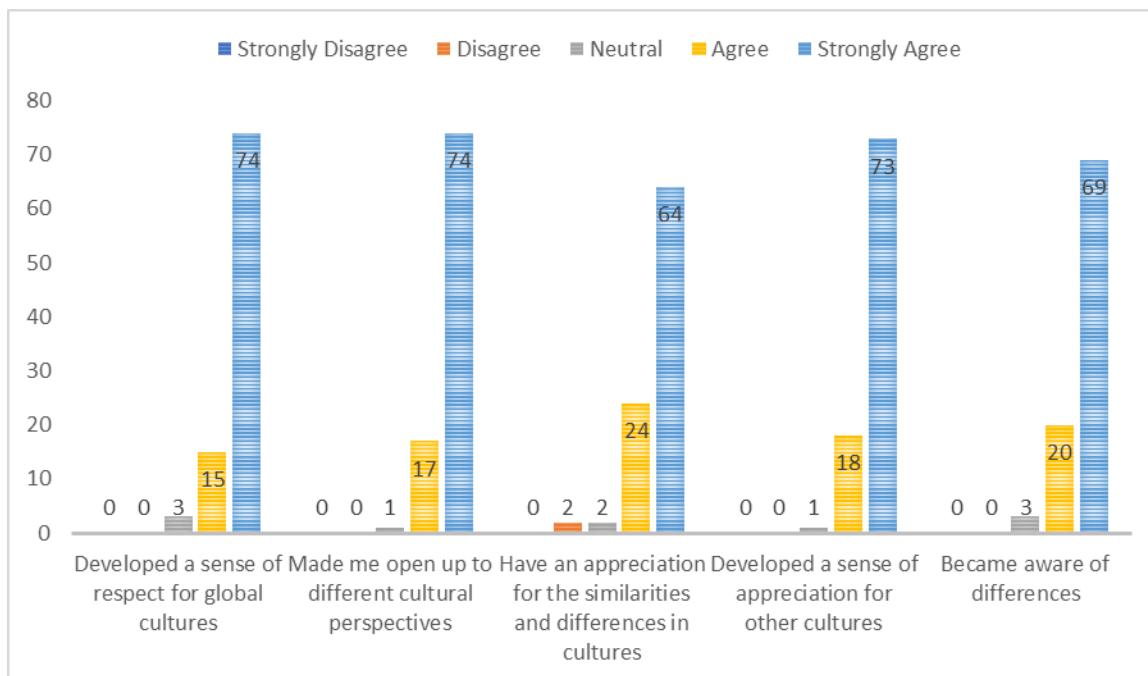


Figure 3 clearly indicates that the VCE enabled them to develop an increased sense of respect for global cultural identities. Also, all the students perceived that the VCE made them aware about the similarities and differences in cultures, developed their appreciation for other cultures and developed respect for global cultures. It is evident that the VCE developed their sense of respect for world cultures. In terms of aligning the course learning outcome to this assessment, it is evident that the intercultural competence of the students which includes their awareness, respect and knowledge about other cultures has been developed.

#### **4.2. Research Question 2**

Research question 2 required descriptive statistics that looked at the students' perception regarding the utility of the VCE in developing 21st century skills. To highlight the learners' perceptions, the researchers displayed the data using bar charts [Figures 4-5].

Figure 4. Development of 21st century skills

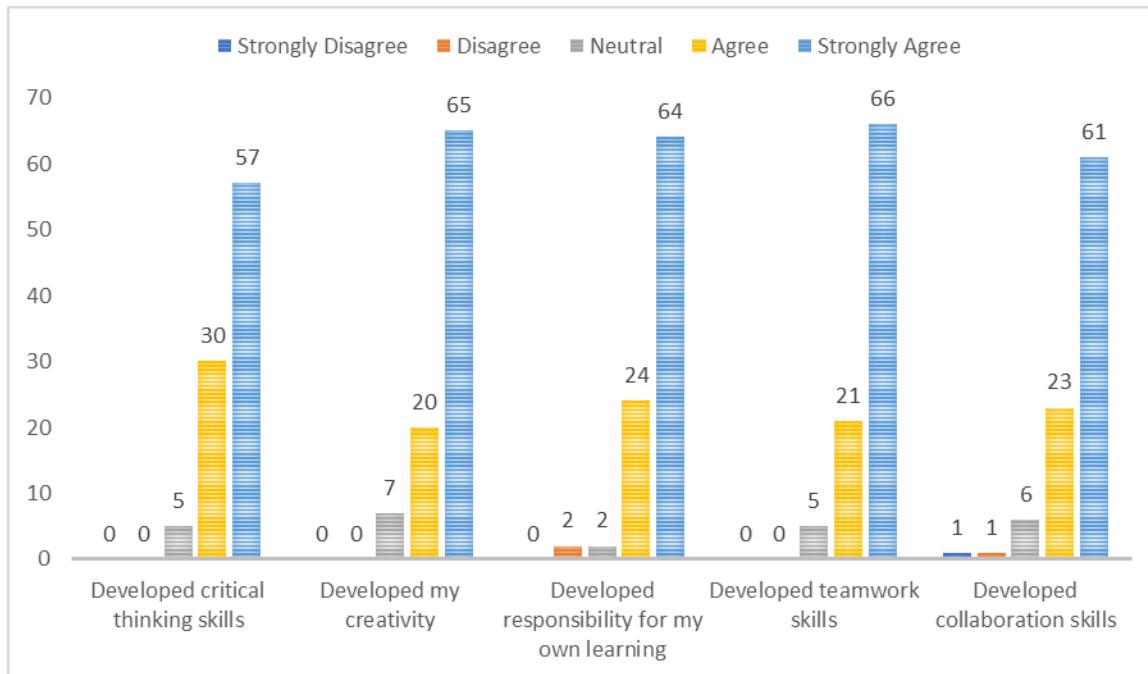


Figure 4 shows clearly that the VCE was perceived positively as most of the students strongly agreed that they were able to develop their collaboration, teamwork, responsibility, creativity and thinking skills. Only 1 and 2 students disagreed that the VCE enabled them to develop teamwork and responsibility for their own learning respectively. Overall, the VCE was perceived as useful in developing specific 21century skills among the students.

Figure 5. Development of digital literacy skills

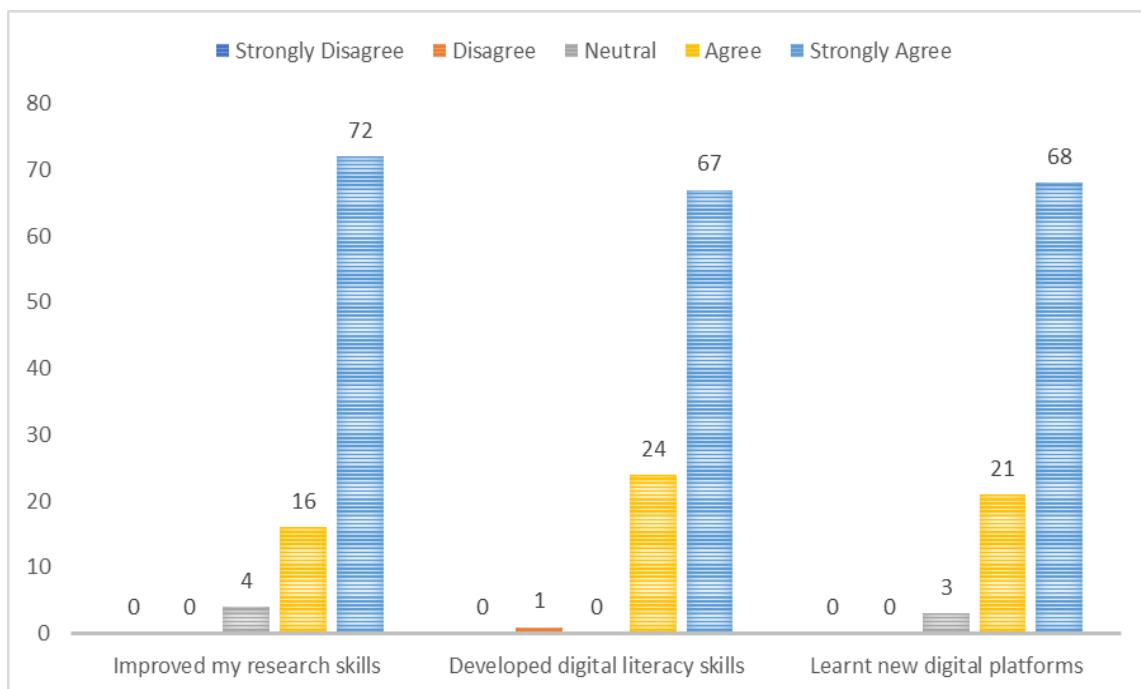


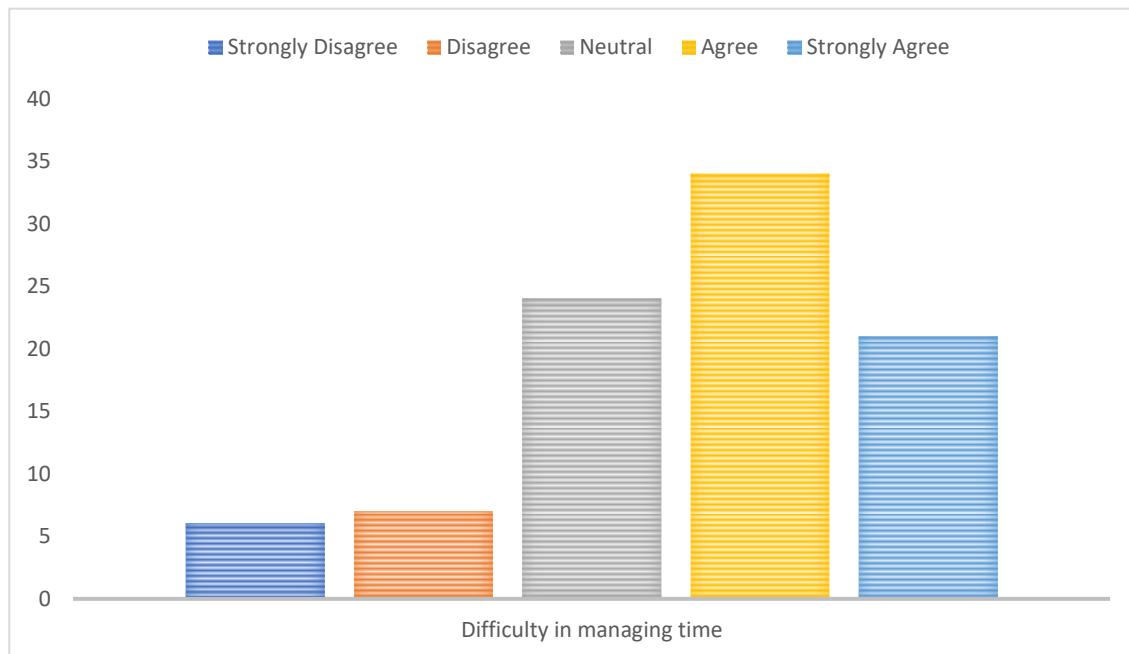
Figure 5 shows that the students perceived that the VCE developed their digital literacy skills which is also considered an important 21 century skill. Majority of them strongly agreed that they learnt new digital platforms and improved their research skills. In the designing the assessment, one of the key motivations of the course designers was to develop discrete 21st century competencies that replicate real world tasks. The findings demonstrate that in the process of completing the assessment, the students successfully acquired 21st century skills consciously as they were able to articulate their experiences, concerning those skills.

#### 4.3. Research Question 3

Research question 3 required descriptive statistics that looked at the students' perception about the challenges they faced in completing the VCE assignment. To highlight the learners' perceptions, the researchers displayed the data using bar charts [Figure 6].

Figure 6 clearly shows that the students perceived that the VCE challenged their ability to manage their time. 56 out of the 92 students faced difficulty in completing the VCE in the given time.

Figure 6. Challenges and issues



#### 4.4. Qualitative Data

Using qualitative procedures, the structured interview responses given by the students were coded. The data were assigned themes based on the focus of the students' responses.

#### 4.4.1. Most enjoyable experiences

Data for this question was coded and organised according to three themes namely, experiences, content, and skills. When asked to describe their most enjoyable experiences, the students highlighted that among others, they enjoyed working in teams, discovering new cultures, and learning new applications as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Most enjoyable experiences

Experience	Content	Other Skills
Enjoyed working in groups	Read many interesting articles	Creativity
Got to know course mates	Gained new knowledge about different continents	Teamwork
Had fun exchanging information.	Learnt about the cultural elements of.....	Source information
Discovered ways to manage unexpected events	Have a deeper understanding of issues in certain countries	Cooperation
Got to know that people are similar yet different	Learnt why certain cultures act in a certain way...	Manage work independently
Know how to pitch a proposal.	Developed my sense of empathy	Managing a blog
Learnt how to use Wixsite, Artsteps, Canva	Learnt how to put up a proposal	

#### 4.4.2 Development of real-world tasks

When asked how the VCE prepared them for the real-world tasks, the students said that the VCE helped them to develop many skills that they felt were relevant to the workplace. Many of them highlighted

that it developed their ability to work in teams and cultural knowledge. The actual responses are categorised in Table 2.

Table 2. Development of real-world skills

Developed my soft skills; work in teams, collaboration, communication, decision making
Developed my sense of creativity
Learnt to adapt my communication style
Made me sensitive to cultural boundaries
Learnt to integrate the multimedia elements for best results, learnt new digital platforms for hosting virtual events
Taught me how to evaluate decisions that affect the quality of my work in the group
Take responsibility for my own learning
Developed my curiosity about others in the world and why I should care about my environment
Improved my global knowledge and awareness about the opportunities ahead
Learnt how to prepare and pitch a proposal
Learnt how to juggle multiple tasks

#### 4.4.3. Challenges faced by students in doing the VCE

Students were asked about the challenges they faced to carry out the VCE. Among others, time management came up again. They confirmed that the VCE took up a lot of their time and they also felt that the task distribution among team members was problematic. They mentioned that some team members played an active role in developing the VCE while others took on menial tasks. Some students also highlighted that they faced problems when they had to describe cultures. The findings indicate that although the assessment was engaging and managed to develop skills that were intended, it demanded a great deal of their time on the part of the students. Generally, it can be assumed that students who were already experts in managing time were better equipped to handle this assessment compared to students who had difficulty managing their time.

As far as work distribution and time management is concerned, although a challenge for students now, it must be noted that this experience prepares them for the real tasks that await them in the workplace. It allows them to experience work challenges in a controlled environment.

## 5.0 Conclusions and Implications

The study was designed to explore the learners' perception of the VCE in terms of developing their social responsibility and respect for global cultures, alongside real-world skills like thinking, collaboration, and creativity. As with past studies that indicated that AA is seen as a bridge that can connect content knowledge to its application in real tasks (Yesilyurt, 2012; Gozuyesil & Tanriseven, 2017), the present study supports this notion. The students perceived the VCE as an assessment that enables them to learn actively while promoting their creative thinking, collaboration, and teamwork skills. While most of the previous studies looked at the utility of employing AA to measure generic real life skills, this study looked at its utility in promoting specific skills like cultural knowledge and competence. Thus, it is evident that AA has the potential to enable learners to develop content knowledge specifically in global cultures.

Research question 1 sought to determine the perceptions of the utility of the VCE in developing social responsibility and respect for global cultures. It can be concluded that the students perceived the VCE as a favourable alternative assessment that helped them develop a sense of awareness and respect for global cultures. It can also be gathered that the VCE enabled them to research and learn about cultures which inadvertently will develop their cultural competence. The researchers noted that even the sample students who scored lower grades in the course reiterated that the VCE was able to help them learn about cultures.

Based on research question 2, it can also be concluded that the students perceived the VCE as an effective assessment to promote 21st century skills like collaboration, teamwork, creativity, and independent learning. The results revealed that according to the students' perceptions, the VCE is effective in promoting 21st century skills which are necessary for undergraduates

The researchers also concluded the VCE was a demanding assessment as many of the students reiterated that they faced a lot of challenges in completing the assessments on time. Also, another aspect that can be concluded is in terms of task distribution, the lecturers need to carefully plan and distribute tasks in order to ensure that all group members contribute to the staging of the VCE.

The researchers concluded that while the students' perceptions about the VCE are vital in the execution of this alternative assessment, it is paramount that the lecturers ensure that the VCE meets the validity criteria. As there are many components and processes embedded in the execution of this assessment, the lecturers must ensure that reliable rubrics are used to measure the constructs of cultural literacy.

As the VCE is perceived by the end users(students) to lend itself to higher-order thinking and real-world application it should be adopted as a permanent assessment to meet course learning outcomes. However, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2022

it is necessary that the course designers take into consideration the workload and task distributions issues to make the VCE an alternative assessment that is manageable for the students.

In essence, the VCE is perceived well by the students, and this is a positive step towards meeting the teaching and learning goal. As assessments are key indicators of student learning, it is fundamental that teachers include students' views in the equation. Using their feedback, the teachers can continuously improve assessment practices and prepare undergraduates to face real world tasks. The significance of developing assessments that can teach as well as test students' knowledge and skills such as the VCE is a two-prong strategy that has far reaching implications in the higher education context. As such future research should consider exploring the possibility of using AA forms as a tool to teach and test specific content knowledge in the higher education context.

Previous studies have found that despite initial struggles in getting oriented to new forms of assessments or course design, most students are motivated to keep trying when engaged in tasks that they perceive as meaningful and relevant to them in their respective disciplines (Dabbagh & Williams, 2010). Overall, the learners demonstrated receptiveness towards the VCE as an assessment of choice. This was evidenced by positive evaluative feedback from the learners on the utility of the VCE in promoting cultural knowledge as well as real life skills. While further research is necessary to validate AA as an effective assessment tool for other content areas in higher education, the findings from this study provide a case for adopting more flexible assessment approaches in higher education which focuses on real world skills. Not only will this enable educators in higher education to move away from traditional assessment rigidity, but it will also bridge the gap between academia and the workplace.

In hindsight, although teaching during the pandemic has been hard-hitting for most educators, it has created real opportunities for them to radically rethink traditional assessments which require students to recall specific information under timed conditions. As we embrace a post-pandemic future, educators need to adopt meaningful ways of testing knowledge where students are forced to synthesise and apply information in authentic tasks derived from real life situations which they will encounter in their working lives. By doing this not only are we, as educators, orienting them for workplace challenges but also shifting our focus on methods that put learning first.

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