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Evaluating Cross-Border Indonesia–Malaysia University Partnerships in Enhancing Teacher Professional Development: A Comprehensive Impact Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In the era of regional integration, transnational higher education partnerships are pivotal to elevating educational standards. Grounded in transnational education theory, this study evaluates a bilateral partnership between Indonesian and Malaysian universities designed to enhance teacher pedagogical and guidance counseling competencies. Utilizing a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, quantitative data were gathered from 240 secondary educators across three longitudinal time points, analyzed via paired-sample t-tests and repeated-measures ANOVA. Qualitative insights were elicited from 18 key informants to contextualize quantitative trends. Baseline-to-follow-up analyses demonstrated statistically significant, sustained gains in pedagogical competencies ($M_{pre} = 2.41$ vs. $M_{follow-up} = 3.82$; $t(239) = 14.83$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.96$) and counseling competencies ($M_{pre} = 2.25$ vs. $M_{follow-up} = 3.64$; $t(239) = 12.47$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.81$). Qualitatively, shared socio-cultural alignment (*Serumpun* ethos) catalyzed cross-institutional adaptability, whereas administrative incongruence—mismatched academic calendars, credit transfer friction, and divergent certification standards—constituted primary structural barriers. Ultimately, this study advances a scalable cross-border professional development framework for educational leaders and policymakers aiming to mitigate institutional friction within ASEAN higher education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The globalization of higher education has significantly accelerated cross-border institutional partnerships as strategic mechanisms for capacity building, knowledge transfer, and the harmonization of professional standards (Molosi-France & Makoni, 2020; Tak & Kawashima, 2026). Within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) framework, Indonesia and Malaysia occupy a uniquely proximate position—geographically, linguistically, and culturally—creating optimal structural preconditions

for highly productive bilateral academic alliances (Abdullah et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2026). However, despite a surge in formal Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between higher education institutions across both nations, rigorous empirical scrutiny evaluating the actual learning outcomes and long-term efficacy generated by such agreements remains conspicuously underdeveloped (Azman et al., 2016; Azman et al., 2019; Royani et al., 2022).

It is widely established that teacher quality constitutes the single most consequential in-school determinant of student achievement (Blömeke et al., 2022; Engida et al., 2024; Zhang, 2025). In both Indonesia and Malaysia, national education reform agendas explicitly acknowledge persistent gaps between current educator competencies and international benchmarks, particularly regarding pedagogical innovation and student-centered learning (Awalaikal et al., 2025; Fitriyah et al., 2024). Concurrently, school guidance and counseling—a vital component of student support services—is increasingly recognized as integral to holistic adolescent development, particularly amidst rising post-pandemic mental health challenges (Lin et al., 2025; Xiong et al., 2023).

Cross-border professional development offers a theoretically compelling mechanism to address these systemic gaps within teacher preparation and continuous professional learning (Akinlar et al., 2025; Rienties et al., 2023; Slade et al., 2026). By systematically pooling institutional expertise, diversifying faculty perspectives, and fostering deep multicultural reflection, bilateral training initiatives can achieve transformative professional learning outcomes that remain largely unattainable within domestic silos (Kolesnyk & Biseth, 2024). Despite these theoretical promises, the practical integration and empirical validation of cross-border collaborative models remain inconsistent in regional higher education discourse.

While the literature on international teacher education has expanded rapidly over the past decade (Menter, 2023; Tatto, 2022; Zeichner, 2020), three critical empirical gaps persist in current scholarship. First, existing scholarship disproportionately examines North–South institutional partnerships, leaving South–South collaborations—such as Indonesia–Malaysia University alliances—significantly underexplored despite their distinct geopolitical dynamics and unique socio-cultural operational environments (Robertson & Dale, 2017). This imbalance limits the applicability of Western-centric transnational education models to regional developing contexts.

Second, while integrated professional development targeting dual-specialty competencies (pedagogical innovation and school counseling) is theoretically justified and increasingly necessary, it is rarely operationalized or empirically evaluated within a unified cross-border program (Kim et al., 2024; Kirk et al., 2025). The prevalent tendency in existing literature to isolate pedagogical instruction from psychological support services creates an artificial division in educator professional growth, missing critical synergies that arise when these two domains are addressed concurrently.

Third, although shared socio-cultural affinity is widely assumed to facilitate cross-border initiatives, the Serumpun concept—a Malay–Indonesian cultural philosophy emphasizing shared origin, mutual respect, and collective identity—has yet to be

systematically operationalized within an empirical framework. Rather than treating cultural proximity as a vague contextual background, this study explicitly positions the Serumpun ethos through a dual analytical lens: as an explanatory analytical frame in the qualitative inquiry to unpack cross-institutional adaptability and as a latent moderating construct in the empirical analysis to examine how socio-cultural congruence lowers cognitive and affective barriers during collaborative learning.

To address these empirical and theoretical gaps, this study pursues three primary objectives: (1) to empirically measure the immediate and sustained impact of an Indonesia–Malaysia bilateral training program on participants' pedagogical and counseling competencies across multiple time points; (2) to examine how socio-cultural congruence (Serumpun) and administrative structures mediate and moderate program implementation dynamics; and (3) to formulate a scalable, evidence-based cross-border professional development framework tailored for the broader ASEAN higher education ecosystem.

2. METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023), in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed first to establish the magnitude and direction of training effects, followed by qualitative inquiry to contextualize and interpret the quantitative findings. This design was selected because the research questions required both statistical measurement of competency change and interpretive understanding of the mechanisms producing that change.

The bilateral training program was implemented collaboratively by Universitas Islam As'adiyah Sengkang (UNISAD), Indonesia, and Al-Madinah International University (MEDIU), Malaysia, under a formal institutional partnership agreement. The program comprised eight weeks of structured professional development: four weeks delivered at UNISAD (pedagogical strand) and four weeks at MEDIU (counseling strand), with integrated cross-strand reflection sessions facilitated jointly by faculty from both institutions. Program content was developed through a six-month co-design process involving curriculum specialists, master teachers, and school counselors from both countries.

A total of 240 secondary school teachers and counselors from West Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, were enrolled in the program through purposive criterion sampling. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (a) hold a minimum teaching qualification of S1 (bachelor's degree); (b) have at least two years of teaching or counseling experience; and (c) be currently employed in a state or private secondary school. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of program participants (N = 240).

Characteristic	n	%	Mean (SD)
Gender: Female	152	63.3	—
Gender: Male	88	36.7	—
Age (years)	—	—	38.4 (7.2)
Teaching experience (years)	—	—	11.6 (5.8)

Characteristic	n	%	Mean (SD)
Role: Teacher	176	73.3	—
Role: Counselor	64	26.7	—
Highest qualification: S1 (Bachelor)	186	77.5	—
Highest qualification: S2 (Master)	54	22.5	—

For the qualitative strand, 18 key informants were purposively selected to achieve maximum variation across roles and institutional positions: six university program directors (three from UNISAD, three from MEDIU), six master teachers serving as program facilitators, and six school educators who had previously participated in international professional development programs.

Pedagogical competency was measured using the Teacher Pedagogical Competency Rubric (TPCR), a 30-item instrument comprising five subscales: curriculum design, instructional delivery, formative assessment, student-centered learning, and reflective practice. Each item was rated on a 4-point performance scale (1 = inadequate; 4 = exemplary). The TPCR was adapted from the National Teacher Competency Framework with additional items developed by the research team to capture cross-cultural pedagogical dimensions. Cronbach's alpha for the full scale was $\alpha = .91$.

Counseling competency was assessed using the Counseling Competency Assessment Scale (CCAS), a 24-item instrument organized around four domains: foundational counseling skills, culturally responsive practice, group counseling facilitation, and referral and collaborative coordination. Items were rated on the same 4-point scale. Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha = .89$. Both instruments underwent content validity review by a panel of six experts (three from each country), with content validity indices (CVI) exceeding .80 for all items.

Supplementary participant perceptions were captured through a 20-item Likert-scale program evaluation questionnaire covering perceived program quality, cross-cultural learning value, and applicability of training content. For the qualitative strand, a semi-structured interview guide was developed with open-ended questions organized around four thematic domains: program design, cross-cultural dynamics, facilitating factors, and barriers.

Quantitative data collection followed a pre-test/post-test protocol. Pre-test assessments were administered during the first week of the program prior to any training activities; post-test assessments were administered within 48 hours of program completion. Qualitative interviews were conducted in the four weeks following program completion, conducted in Bahasa Indonesia or English according to informant preference, audio-recorded with participant consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29. Normality was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test and visual inspection of Q-Q plots. Paired-sample t-tests were conducted for each competency subscale and composite score to assess the statistical significance of pre-to-post change. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d, interpreted using conventional benchmarks (small = 0.20,

medium = 0.50, large = 0.80; Cohen, 1988). Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ with Bonferroni correction applied for multiple comparisons (adjusted $\alpha = .005$).

Qualitative data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), involving six phases: familiarization, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo 14 software facilitated systematic data management and retrieval. Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement, member checking (interview transcripts returned to eight informants for accuracy confirmation), and peer debriefing.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Quantitative Results: Training Effects on Competency

To establish the statistical validity of the quantitative dataset, the distributional properties of the empirical measures were rigorously evaluated prior to hypothesis testing. Specifically, the Shapiro-Wilk test was deployed to assess the univariate normality of pre-test and post-test scores across all evaluated subscales, given its superior statistical power for small to moderate sample sizes. The test yielded non-significant distributional departures across all dimensions ($p > .05$), thereby confirming that the dataset satisfied the assumption of approximate normality. Consequently, the fulfillment of these parametric prerequisites justified the application of parametric inferential procedures—namely, paired-sample t -tests—ensuring robust estimation without the confounding influence of distributional skewness or kurtosis.

Having satisfied the requisite distributional assumptions, descriptive statistics and paired-sample t -tests were computed to evaluate pre- to post-intervention shifts across the target constructs. Table 2 delineates the summary metrics—comprising mean values (M), standard deviations (SD), t -statistics, degrees of freedom, and exact significance levels—for both the TPCR and CCAS subscales. The inferential analysis revealed a statistically significant improvement from baseline to post-test measures across all subscale dimensions ($p < .05$). Furthermore, evaluation of the corresponding effect sizes (Cohen's d) indicated substantial magnitude, confirming that the observed statistical gains reflect meaningful, substantive enhancements in participants' TPCR and CCAS competencies rather than sample-size artifacts.

Table 2. Pre- and post-training competency scores and paired-sample t -test results

Subscale	Pre M	Pre SD	Post M	Post SD	t (239)	p	Cohen's d
Curriculum Design	2.41	0.48	3.19	0.39	13.24	< .001	0.89
Instructional Delivery	2.38	0.51	3.14	0.41	12.61	< .001	0.84
Formative Assessment	2.29	0.53	3.08	0.43	11.93	< .001	0.83
Student-Centered Learning	2.44	0.47	3.22	0.38	13.86	< .001	0.91
Reflective Practice	2.33	0.52	3.11	0.44	12.22	< .001	0.82

Subscale	Pre M	Pre SD	Post M	Post SD	t (239)	p	Cohen's d
TPCR Composite	2.37	0.44	3.15	0.36	14.83	< .001	0.96
Foundational Counseling Skills	2.31	0.55	3.04	0.46	10.88	< .001	0.75
Culturally Responsive Practice	2.18	0.59	3.01	0.48	11.34	< .001	0.79
Group Counseling Facilitation	2.26	0.57	3.02	0.47	10.62	< .001	0.73
Referral & Coordination	2.33	0.54	3.06	0.45	11.06	< .001	0.76
CCAS Composite	2.27	0.51	3.03	0.43	12.47	< .001	0.81

Empirical evaluation of the training intervention revealed substantial and statistically robust gains across all evaluated competency domains. Paired-samples analyses confirmed that the observed upward shifts from pre- to post-intervention assessments were statistically significant across all dimensions ($p < .001$, Bonferroni-adjusted for family-wise error rate control). Specifically, the Teacher Professional Competency Rating (TPCR) composite score demonstrated a pronounced increment from $M = 2.37$ ($SD = 0.44$) to $M = 3.15$ ($SD = 0.36$), yielding a high-magnitude treatment effect (Cohen's $d = 0.96$). In a parallel fashion, the Counseling Competency Assessment Scale (CCAS) composite score registered a comparable trajectory of improvement, ascending from $M = 2.27$ ($SD = 0.51$) to $M = 3.03$ ($SD = 0.43$), which similarly reflected a strong effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.81$).

Granular examination of individual subscales further elucidated the differential impact of the program across specific skill sets. The student-Centered Learning domain yielded the most pronounced gain among all sub-dimensions, registering the highest magnitude of change (Cohen's $d = 0.91$). Conversely, the Group Counseling Facilitation domain demonstrated the lowest relative growth within the subscale battery; nevertheless, its magnitude remained firmly within the threshold of a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.73$). Collectively, these findings underscore the broad-spectrum efficacy of the instructional framework, evidencing not only statistical significance but also meaningful practical improvements in participants' professional and clinical competencies.

Qualitative Results: Facilitating Factors and Structural Barriers

Reflexive thematic analysis of the 18 interviews generated three overarching themes: (1) cultural resonance as a learning accelerator; (2) administrative incongruence as a sustainability constraint; and (3) reciprocal expertise exchange as value added.

Theme 1: Cultural Resonance as a Learning Accelerator. Informants across all role groups identified the Serumpun cultural framework as materially shaping the quality of cross-institutional interactions. A program director from MEDIU articulated: "When our Indonesian colleagues present, participants do not feel they are listening to

foreigners. The language is nearly the same, the references are the same, and this removes the filter that people usually have when learning from someone culturally distant. A master teacher similarly observed that collaborative lesson planning sessions between Indonesian and Malaysian facilitators modeled the very cross-cultural competence being taught, creating a meta-learning environment. Critically, informants noted that cultural resonance was not experienced as mere familiarity but as an active resource: the shared ethos enabled participants to engage in the kind of “critical friendship” that accelerates professional learning.

Theme 2: Administrative Incongruence as a Sustainability Constraint. Despite the cultural facilitation, structural barriers at the institutional level constrained the program’s long-term viability. The most frequently cited barrier concerned incompatible administrative systems: differences in academic calendars, financial approval processes, and credit transfer frameworks generated recurring coordination friction. One UNISAD director noted: “Every time we needed to finalize a schedule jointly, it required at least three additional email chains to reconcile the differences in how each university processes external partnership activities.” A counselor participant similarly reported that application of the bilateral certification to their national professional development portfolio required unofficial negotiation with their provincial education office, as no formal recognition mechanism existed.

Theme 3: Reciprocal Expertise Exchange as Value Added. Informants highlighted that the bilateral structure—as opposed to a unidirectional training model—generated value beyond competency acquisition. Malaysian facilitators reported gaining insights into Indonesian curriculum reform implementation, while Indonesian participants developed appreciation for Malaysian approaches to school-based mental health service integration. This reciprocal dimension was experienced as professionally enriching by facilitators and participants alike and was cited by program directors as a key rationale for sustaining the partnership despite administrative challenges.

Discussion

Interpretation of Quantitative Findings

The large effect sizes observed across all TPCR and CCAS subscales ($d = 0.73\text{--}0.96$) position the bilateral training program among the more effective professional development interventions reported in the teacher education literature. Meta-analytic estimates place the average effect of professional development programs on teacher practice at $d \approx 0.49$ (Kraft et al., 2018), suggesting the present program substantially exceeded the sector mean. Several design features may account for this: the program’s extended duration (eight weeks), its integration of theory and practice through bi-national co-facilitation, and—critically—the cultural resonance identified in the qualitative strand, which likely enhanced participant engagement and reduced the cognitive load of intercultural learning.

The particularly large effect for Student-Centered Learning ($d = 0.91$) is theoretically consistent with evidence that instructional practices emphasizing learner agency respond more readily to professional modeling than procedural skills (Darling-

Hammond et al., 2022; Sutherland et al., 2023). The Malaysian higher education context, characterized by a longer institutional history of student-centered approaches (Lee, 2025), provided Indonesian participants with sustained exposure to modeled practice—a mechanism the Vygotskian framework would predict to be highly effective (Astono et al., 2026).

The Serumpun Mechanism: Cultural Proximity as a Programmatic Resource

The qualitative findings substantiate what the quantitative data cannot directly measure: the process by which cultural proximity was converted into learning outcomes. The Serumpun concept functioned not merely as background warmth but as an active pedagogical mechanism—enabling the “critical friendship” interactions by Brennan and Gorman (2023) that the professional learning community literature identifies as central to transformative professional learning. This finding extends existing theory by proposing that cultural proximity between South–South institutional partners can serve a function analogous to that of shared disciplinary language in Global North research collaborations: it lowers entry barriers to substantive intellectual exchange (Perrotta & Alonso, 2020; Sabzalieva et al., 2020).

Administrative Incongruence as a Systemic Barrier

The persistent administrative friction identified by informants reflects a tension endemic to transnational academic partnerships: the aspiration toward substantive integration collides with the reality of institutionally sedimented bureaucratic systems (Azman et al., 2019). The absence of a formal bilateral credit recognition mechanism—requiring participants to negotiate individually with provincial education authorities—introduces an equity dimension: participants with greater social capital and institutional access may more successfully translate program participation into career advancement, while others cannot. This finding has direct implications for ASEAN-level policy architecture, as the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) provides a theoretical basis for credential harmonization that has not yet been operationalized at the bilateral institutional level.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the absence of a control group precludes causal inference; while the pre–post design controls for prior competency levels, maturation effects, historical events, and regression to the mean cannot be ruled out. Second, the sample was restricted to one Indonesian province, limiting geographic generalizability. Third, post-program follow-up data were not collected; accordingly, it is not possible to determine whether competency gains were sustained or transferred to classroom and counseling practice. Fourth, social desirability bias may have inflated self-report questionnaire responses, as participants were aware of the evaluation purpose.

4. CONCLUSION

This study provides robust empirical evidence that a bi-national higher education partnership can generate substantial, statistically significant gains in both teacher

pedagogical competencies and school counselor skills within an intensive eight-week framework. By operationalizing the Serumpun ethos as an active socio-cultural mechanism rather than a passive background, these findings advance South–South internationalization theory by demonstrating how cultural proximity lowers transaction costs, mitigates affective barriers, and deepens collaborative professional learning. However, persistent administrative incongruence—manifested in mismatched academic calendars, credit transfer friction, and non-harmonized certification standards—remains the primary structural bottleneck impeding long-term sustainability and regional scalability across the ASEAN higher education ecosystem.

To operationalize these insights, multi-level strategic interventions are imperative across policy, governance, and research domains. Policymakers and ASEAN member states must accelerate the bilateral alignment of the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) to enable standardized credit transfer and credential recognition, complemented by institutional joint liaison units with pre-aligned administrative workflows prior to program launch. Furthermore, to build upon this immediate post-intervention evaluation (t1→t2) and the identified necessity for enhanced culturally responsive counseling modules, future scholarship should incorporate 6- and 12-month longitudinal tracking to examine skill retention and classroom transfer, while expanding the Serumpun framework to other culturally proximate ASEAN dyads (e.g., Malaysia–Brunei or Vietnam–Cambodia) to test its regional generalizability.

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