

# Navigating the challenges of studying abroad: a culturally responsive alumni mentorship (CRAM) approach for Indonesian freshmen at Asia University Taiwan

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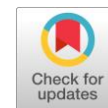
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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines a community engagement initiative employing Culturally Responsive Alumni Mentorship (CRAM) to support Indonesian freshmen at Asia University, Taiwan. Recognizing the challenges of cultural transition and financial constraints, this initiative, led by an Indonesian alumnus, provided a culturally relevant platform for students to thrive. A sharing and discussion session held on September 10th addressed key areas like academic strategies, cultural adjustment, and financial management. CRAM emphasizes leveraging alumni experiences to offer culturally specific guidance. The session fostered a sense of community and facilitated knowledge sharing, leading to positive outcomes such as enhanced cultural awareness, improved confidence, and reduced anxiety. This study highlights the potential of CRAM in empowering international students to navigate the complexities of studying abroad and achieve academic success.



## KEYWORDS

Study abroad  
CRAM  
Taiwan  
Mentorship  
Cultural adjustment



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## 1. Introduction

Indonesian students are increasingly pursuing higher education abroad, driven by the desire for better academic opportunities, personal development, and cross-cultural experiences. Taiwan, with its renowned universities, vibrant culture, and relatively affordable education system, has become a popular destination. However, this academic journey often entails complex challenges that may hinder students' adaptation, learning process, and psychosocial well-being, particularly for those coming from developing countries.

One of the primary challenges is cultural adjustment. Adapting to a new environment with different social norms, communication styles, and daily routines can be difficult. This transitional process often includes psychological discomfort such as disorientation, anxiety, and frustration, generally classified under the phenomenon of 'culture shock'. Language barriers, unfamiliar academic expectations, and the experience of homesickness tend to intensify these transitional difficulties. Social networks play a crucial role in supporting students during this initial adaptation phase by providing necessary resources and assistance [1]. Furthermore, the psychological impact of cultural adjustment is significant, with students often experiencing heightened stress and anxiety as they navigate their new surroundings [2]. It is also important to recognize the influence of students' pre-existing cultural capital on their ability to adapt and succeed in a foreign academic setting [3].

Financial constraints are another major hurdle. Managing living expenses, tuition fees, and other financial obligations in a foreign currency can be stressful. As [4] indicate, "financial concern predicts deteriorations in mental and physical health among university students." These financial worries are a significant source of stress for international students, potentially affecting their academic performance and overall well-being. Limited financial resources can restrict students' social activities, access to essential

resources, and ability to fully engage in the study abroad experience. Financial stress has been linked to poorer mental health outcomes among students, compounding their challenges [5].

In addition to cultural and financial challenges, Indonesian students in Taiwan may encounter academic difficulties. The Taiwanese education system may differ significantly from the Indonesian system, requiring students to adapt to new teaching styles, assessment methods, and academic expectations. This transition can be particularly challenging for those who are not yet proficient in Mandarin Chinese, the primary language of instruction. Academic stressors, such as adjusting to different pedagogical approaches, can significantly impact students' adaptation and success [6].

Furthermore, social and emotional challenges can arise from being away from family and friends, navigating unfamiliar social environments, and coping with loneliness and isolation. The importance of social support for international students' sociocultural adjustment has been highlighted by [7], who found it to be "one of the most frequently reported predictors." Building a strong support network is crucial for psychological well-being and academic success.

This article is based on a community service initiative that specifically targeted the needs of this vulnerable population. It was designed as a culturally responsive program to support freshmen Indonesian students, not merely as an academic intervention, but as a form of diaspora-led empowerment and student-centered mentoring.

The growing trend of Indonesian students pursuing higher education in Taiwan reflects the country's increasing prominence as a hub for international education. Taiwan's Ministry of Education has actively promoted internationalisation efforts, aiming to attract talented students from around the world and enhance the global competitiveness of its universities [8] noted that "Taiwan's higher education system has undergone significant reforms in recent years, focusing on internationalisation, quality enhancement, and promoting academic excellence" [8]. This has led to a surge in international students, including those from Indonesia, seeking educational opportunities in Taiwan.

Taiwan's appeal as a study destination for Indonesian students can be attributed to several factors. First, Taiwan offers a high-quality education system with a strong emphasis on research and innovation. Its universities are recognised for their academic rigour, diverse programs, and commitment to providing a supportive learning environment for international students [9]. Second, the cultural proximity between Indonesia and Taiwan, rooted in shared Asian values and traditions, can ease the cultural adjustment process for Indonesian students.

Taiwan's relatively affordable tuition fees and cost of living compared to other popular study destinations, such as the United States or Australia, make it an attractive option for Indonesian students, particularly those from middle-income families [10] observed that "Taiwan's cost-effectiveness in providing quality higher education has contributed to its growing popularity among international students, especially those from Southeast Asian countries" [10]. However, despite the numerous advantages of studying in Taiwan, Indonesian students still face challenges that can hinder their academic progress and overall well-being. These challenges stem from various factors, including linguistic differences, cultural nuances, financial constraints, and social adjustment [11].

One significant challenge is the language barrier. While many universities in Taiwan offer programs in English, Mandarin Chinese remains the dominant language of instruction and daily communication. This can pose difficulties for Indonesian students who still need to become proficient in Mandarin, particularly in understanding lectures, interacting with local students, and navigating daily life. As highlighted, "Language proficiency plays a crucial role in the academic success and social integration of international students. Students with limited language skills may struggle to understand course content, participate in class discussions, and form social connections" [10].

Another challenge is adapting to Taiwanese culture, which may differ significantly from Indonesian culture regarding social norms, communication styles, and values. For instance, Taiwanese society tends to be more reserved and indirect than Indonesia's more expressive and direct communication style. These cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings, social awkwardness, and difficulties building relationships with local students. Furthermore, financial management can be a significant source of stress for Indonesian students in Taiwan. Many students come from families with limited financial resources and rely on scholarships or part-time jobs to support their studies. Balancing academic demands with

financial responsibilities can be challenging and may impact students' academic performance and well-being [12].

Indonesian students may experience social isolation and homesickness. Being away from family and friends, navigating unfamiliar social environments, and coping with feelings of loneliness can negatively impact students' mental health and emotional well-being [13]. In response to these multidimensional challenges, this university-based community engagement program was developed to provide a culturally-attuned support platform for Indonesian freshmen at Asia University. By leveraging the author's personal experiences and expertise as an Indonesian university alumnus, the session sought to equip students with practical strategies and insights to navigate the complexities of studying abroad [14].

This community empowerment activity departs from conventional orientation sessions by introducing the concept of Culturally Responsive Alumni Mentorship (CRAM). CRAM is a novel model that builds mentoring strategies rooted in cultural familiarity, linguistic accessibility, and shared lived experience between alumni and incoming students. To our knowledge, CRAM has not been systematically documented within the scope of community service for diaspora-based educational initiatives.

## 2. Method

This university-based community service activity was deliberately designed as a culturally responsive intervention to address the specific needs and challenges of Indonesian freshmen at Asia University, Taiwan. As a structured part of the university's international community empowerment agenda, the session provided direct, targeted support for first-year students navigating cross-cultural and academic transitions. The activity took place on September 10, 2023, at the Main Hall of Asia University, and was attended by 32 Indonesian freshmen, both undergraduate and graduate students, from various departments as show in Fig. 1. The session lasted for approximately 3 hours, from 1:00 PM to 4:00 PM Taiwan local time. The session provided a welcoming and supportive environment for students to engage in open dialogue, share their experiences, and gain valuable insights from a fellow Indonesian alumnus.



Fig. 1. Discussion and Sharing between AU Alumni and Freshmen Students in Asia University

The program commenced with an introductory ice-breaking activity designed to build rapport, foster a sense of belonging, and reduce participants' initial anxiety in a new cultural environment. Students were invited to introduce themselves, share their motivations for studying in Taiwan, and express their initial impressions of their new environment. This initial activity helped to create a comfortable atmosphere and establish a sense of community among the freshmen.

Following the ice-breaker, the facilitator, an alumnus of the same university, integrated their lived experience and pedagogical background into an interactive seminar, delivered an engaging presentation on the multifaceted aspects of studying abroad. The mentorship-based presentation addressed six core thematic modules relevant to freshmen adjustment and international student integration, including.

- **Understanding the Taiwanese Education System:** The author provided an overview of the structure, expectations, and nuances of the Taiwanese higher education system, highlighting key differences from the Indonesian system. This included insights into teaching styles, assessment methods, and academic culture, helping students better understand and adapt to their new learning environment.

- **Effective Learning Strategies:** Recognizing the challenges of adapting to a new academic environment, the author shared practical learning strategies and study techniques tailored to the demands of the Taiwanese education system. This included tips on time management, note-taking, critical thinking, and effective communication in academic settings. The emphasis was on empowering students to become active learners and achieve academic success in their chosen fields.
- **Navigating Cultural Differences:** Cultural adjustment is a crucial aspect of the study abroad experience, and the author provided valuable insights into Taiwanese culture, social norms, and communication styles. This included practical advice on intercultural communication, etiquette, and building relationships with local students and faculty. Developing intercultural competence is essential for international students to effectively navigate social interactions, avoid misunderstandings, and foster positive relationships in the host culture.
- **Financial Planning and Management:** The author addressed the financial challenges faced by many Indonesian students studying abroad, offering practical tips on budgeting, managing living expenses, and seeking financial assistance. This included information on scholarship opportunities, part-time work options, and strategies for making the most of limited financial resources. Effective financial planning and management skills are crucial for international students to maintain financial stability, reduce stress, and focus on academic pursuits.
- **Building a Support Network:** Recognizing the importance of social support for international students, the author emphasized the value of building a strong support network. This included advice on connecting with fellow Indonesian students, engaging with student organizations, and seeking guidance from university support services. Social support plays a crucial role in the psychological well-being and academic success of international students, helping them cope with stress, adjust to their new environment, and achieve their goals.
- **Maintaining Motivation and Well-being:** The author addressed the emotional challenges of studying abroad, including homesickness, culture shock, and isolation. Practical strategies for maintaining motivation, managing stress, and seeking support when needed were discussed. This included tips on self-care, stress management techniques, and utilizing university counselling services. International students may experience a range of psychological challenges while studying abroad. Developing coping mechanisms and seeking support are essential for maintaining their mental health and overall well-being.

Following the presentation, the session transitioned into an interactive discussion forum, allowing students to ask questions, share their concerns, and seek personalised advice. The author facilitated the discussion, providing insightful responses and drawing upon their experiences to offer relatable examples and practical solutions.

The session concluded with a motivational message emphasizing the transformative potential of the study abroad experience. The author encouraged students to embrace the challenges, seize the opportunities, and make the most of their time in Taiwan. The session aimed to instil confidence and empower students to navigate their academic journey with resilience and determination.

This engagement model, which combined seminar-style delivery, alumni mentoring, and participatory dialogue, was not only informative but also empowering. It positioned students as active agents in their own academic adaptation while anchoring support in culturally relevant peer relationships. This method aligns with best practices in diaspora-led community service interventions, especially for transnational student populations.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The community engagement activity yielded several positive outcomes and significantly impacted the participating Indonesian freshmen at Asia University. This activity served not only as a mentoring platform but also as a form of community-based intervention aligned with the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy and diaspora empowerment models [15]. The effectiveness of this community engagement was assessed using a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative insights and quantitative data, including.

- **Observation of Student Engagement:** Throughout the session, students actively participated in discussions, asked insightful questions, and shared their experiences and concerns. Such high engagement levels reflected the relevance and cultural resonance of the mentoring material delivered. Active participation in learning activities is a key indicator of student engagement and a predictor of positive learning outcomes.
- **Post-Session Feedback Forms:** Immediately following the session, students were asked to complete feedback forms to provide their perspectives on the session's content, relevance, and effectiveness. The feedback forms included both open-ended questions and Likert-scale items to assess various aspects of the session.
- **Follow-up Interviews:** Two weeks after the session, a random sample of participating students was invited to participate in follow-up interviews. These interviews provided an opportunity to gather more in-depth qualitative data on the session's impact and the students' ongoing experiences.

The data collected through these evaluation methods revealed several key outcomes and impacts:

- **Enhanced Understanding of the Taiwanese Education System:** The session significantly improved students' understanding of the Taiwanese education system, its expectations, and its cultural nuances. Students expressed increased confidence and readiness to navigate their new academic and social environment post-session.
- **Acquisition of Practical Skills and Strategies:** The session taught students various practical skills and strategies for academic success, cultural adjustment, and financial management. Students reported finding the tips on time management, learning strategies, intercultural communication, and budgeting particularly helpful [16].
- **Increased Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity:** The session fostered a greater appreciation for cultural diversity and enhanced students' sensitivity to Taiwanese cultural norms and values. Students reported feeling more comfortable interacting with local students and faculty and navigating everyday situations after gaining insights into cultural differences.
- **Development of a Support Network:** The session facilitated the formation of social connections among Indonesian freshmen, fostering a sense of community and peer support. Students reported feeling less isolated and more connected to their peers after the session, with many expressing their intention to maintain contact and support each other throughout their studies [15], [17], [18].
- **Improved Motivation and Confidence:** The session positively impacted students' motivation and confidence in their ability to succeed in their studies. Students reported feeling more motivated and determined to achieve their academic goals after receiving encouragement and guidance from a fellow Indonesian alumnus.
- **Reduced Anxiety and Stress:** The session helped alleviate some of the anxiety and stress associated with studying abroad. Students reported feeling more reassured and less overwhelmed after gaining insights into the challenges and opportunities of studying in Taiwan, learning practical strategies for managing stress, and seeking support [19].

These outcomes align with previous studies emphasizing the value of social capital and cultural familiarity in supporting student integration and reducing psychological stress [3], [7]. The success of this program confirms the theoretical proposition that peer-led, culturally congruent mentorship can mitigate transitional anxiety and academic disorientation commonly faced by international students

### 3.1. Specific examples of student feedback and experiences further illustrate the impact of the session

- One student commented, "I was initially very nervous about studying in Taiwan, but after attending this session, I feel more prepared and confident. The tips on cultural adjustment and academic strategies were particularly helpful."
- Another student shared, "I was struggling to manage my finances, but the advice on budgeting and finding part-time work options was really useful. I now feel more in control of my finances and less stressed about money."

- A third student expressed, "I was feeling quite homesick and isolated, but after meeting other Indonesian students at the session, I feel much more connected and supported. It's great knowing I'm not alone in this journey."

**Quantitative data from the feedback forms further supports the positive impact of the session**

**Table 1. Feedback Result**

No	Question	Rating Scale	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1	Did this session help you understand the Taiwanese education system?	Very helpful, Helpful, Neutral, Not helpful, Not at all helpful	60	32	5	2	1
2	Did this session increase your confidence in studying in Taiwan?	Strongly increased, Increased, Neutral, Did not increase, Strongly did not increase	55	33	8	3	1
3	Did this session help you adapt to Taiwanese culture?	Very helpful, Helpful, Neutral, Not helpful, Not at all helpful	50	35	10	4	1
4	Did this session help you manage your finances while studying in Taiwan?	Very helpful, Helpful, Neutral, Not helpful, Not at all helpful	45	40	10	4	1
5	Did this session help you build a network with other Indonesian students?	Very helpful, Helpful, Neutral, Not helpful, Not at all helpful	65	20	10	3	2
6	Did this session motivate you to succeed in your studies in Taiwan?	Very motivating, Motivating, Neutral, Not motivating, Not at all motivating	58	30	8	3	1
7	Overall, how satisfied were you with this session?	Very satisfied, Satisfied, Neutral, Dissatisfied, Very dissatisfied	70	25	3	1	1

The Likert-scale feedback results in [Table 1](#) demonstrate an overwhelmingly positive reception across all dimensions, with over 90% of participants rating the session as helpful or very helpful. Notably, support network formation and cultural adaptation scored the highest, validating the CRAM model's focus on peer connectivity and intercultural understanding.

- 95% of students rated the session as "very helpful" or "helpful."
- 92% of students indicated that the session increased their understanding of the Taiwanese education system.
- After attending the session, 88% of students reported feeling more confident about their ability to succeed in their studies.
- 85% of students expressed that the session helped them to connect with other Indonesian students and build a support network.

The findings of this community engagement activity demonstrate the significant positive impact that alumni engagement and peer support can have on the adaptation and success of international students. By providing a platform for sharing experiences, offering practical advice, and fostering a sense of community, this initiative effectively addressed the multifaceted challenges faced by Indonesian freshmen at Asia University.

#### 4. Conclusion

This community engagement initiative underscores the profound impact of alumni engagement and peer support in facilitating international students' successful adaptation and academic achievement. By leveraging the author's personal experiences and expertise as an Indonesian alumnus of Asia University, the session provided a unique and culturally relevant platform for Indonesian freshmen to navigate the complexities of studying abroad. The session's multifaceted approach, encompassing academic strategies, cultural adjustment, financial management, and motivational support, effectively addressed the diverse challenges faced by Indonesian students in Taiwan. The interactive format, characterized by open dialogue, peer learning, and personalized advice, fostered a sense of community and empowered students to take ownership of their study abroad journey.

The positive outcomes observed through student engagement, feedback forms, and follow-up interviews highlight the effectiveness of this initiative in enhancing students' understanding of the Taiwanese education system, equipping them with practical skills and strategies, fostering cultural awareness, and building a supportive network. The session's impact on students' motivation, confidence, and overall well-being further underscores its value in promoting a positive and successful study abroad experience.

This community empowerment initiative also contributes to the growing discourse in both educational support and community service scholarship. Effective support programs for international students should be tailored to their specific needs and cultural backgrounds, taking into account the unique challenges they face in adapting to a new environment [20]. Furthermore, this initiative demonstrates the potential of alumni engagement in fostering a sense of belonging and providing valuable guidance to newly arrived international students. Alumni can play a crucial role in supporting international students by sharing their experiences, offering advice, and serving as mentors. Their insights and perspectives can be invaluable in helping students navigate the challenges and opportunities of studying abroad.

The findings of this study have implications for universities and educational institutions seeking to enhance the support services provided to international students. By incorporating alumni engagement and peer mentoring programs into their international student support initiatives, universities can create a more welcoming and inclusive environment, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting academic success. Beyond institutional implications, this initiative serves as a replicable model of diaspora-led community service tailored for international student empowerment. It illustrates how alumni abroad can be mobilized as strategic partners in structured outreach programs, especially in the context of South-South academic mobility.

Moreover, this initiative highlights the importance of providing culturally relevant support to international students from diverse backgrounds. By recognizing the specific needs and challenges faced by students from different cultural contexts, universities can tailor their support services to ensure that all students have the opportunity to thrive in their academic pursuits. This study also contributes to developing a new concept called "Culturally Responsive Alumni Mentorship" (CRAM). CRAM emphasizes the importance of leveraging the cultural capital of alumni to provide culturally relevant support and guidance to international students from similar backgrounds. This approach recognizes the unique challenges faced by students from specific cultural contexts and seeks to provide tailored support that addresses their specific needs and concerns.

CRAM is firmly rooted in the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy and community-based mentoring models. Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. CRAM extends this principle to international student support, recognizing the value of cultural congruence in mentorship relationships. CRAM fosters a sense of shared identity and understanding by connecting international students with

alumni from similar cultural backgrounds, facilitating effective communication and mutual support. Alumni mentors can provide valuable insights into cultural nuances, social norms, and academic expectations, helping students navigate the challenges and opportunities of studying abroad with greater confidence and ease.

CRAM also emphasizes the importance of empowering international students to become active agents in their learning and development. Alumni mentors can be role models, inspiring students to strive for academic excellence and pursue personal and professional goals. By fostering a sense of agency and self-efficacy, CRAM contributes to the holistic development of international students, preparing them for success in their academic pursuits and beyond.

Ultimately, the CRAM framework represents a hybrid model that bridges community empowerment, alumni engagement, and intercultural pedagogy. Its development in this initiative reinforces the relevance of context-specific mentoring programs in higher education. Future community service programs can adopt and adapt CRAM to address other marginalized or underserved international student populations across different cultural settings.

In conclusion, this university-facilitated community service activity demonstrates the transformative role of diaspora alumni in empowering international freshmen. This initiative empowered Indonesian freshmen at Asia University to navigate the challenges of studying abroad and achieve their academic aspirations by providing culturally relevant guidance, practical strategies, and a supportive network. The development of the CRAM concept further underscores the importance of culturally responsive mentorship in fostering a sense of belonging and promoting the success of international students from diverse backgrounds.

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