

## Toraja Cultural Immersion: A Community Service Initiative for Higher Education in Australia

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### ABSTRACT

Cultural immersion programs are increasingly recognized for their role in fostering cross-cultural exchange, deepening cultural understanding, and promoting mutual learning. This study investigates the impact of a Toraja Cultural Immersion program, held in Bali from 6–21 July 2024, involving students from the University of Western Australia (UWA) and the English Education Study Program at UKI Toraja. A qualitative research design was adopted to evaluate the program's outcomes for participants and the host community. Twenty-one UWA students and seven UKI Toraja members were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse perspectives. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and participant observation during activities such as teaching, cultural rituals, and community service. Thematic analysis was applied to transcribed data to identify recurring themes. The findings reveal that the program significantly enhanced participants' cultural awareness and intercultural competence. UWA students gained deeper insights into Toraja culture and demonstrated improved adaptability and understanding of cultural nuances. Meanwhile, members of UKI Toraja observed increased enthusiasm for English language learning and cultural preservation efforts within their community. The program successfully bridged cultural gaps, fostering mutual learning and providing educational benefits for both groups. The involvement of local facilitators from UKI Toraja was pivotal in contextualizing cultural experiences and guiding participants. This study underscores the value of cultural immersion programs in promoting intercultural competence and educational exchange. Future research should explore the long-term effects of such programs on participants' personal and professional development.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, globalization continues to bring diverse cultures, perspectives, and economies into closer contact. Amid this dynamic exchange, cross-cultural engagement and community service have emerged as crucial mechanisms for fostering mutual understanding and collaboration (Ely et al., 2020; Yiting, 2021). These initiatives help dismantle stereotypes, build empathy, and promote cooperation on a global scale (Cadoret & Jones, 2024; Sima et al., 2024). Participants in such programs gain invaluable insights into the cultural and social frameworks of others, contributing to intercultural competence and respect (Russo et al., 2024). Despite the growing recognition of these benefits, limited research exists on the impact of cultural immersion programs in culturally rich yet under-explored regions like Toraja. Moreover, the intersection of cross-cultural exchange and community service in higher education, particularly in Indonesia, remains underexamined. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the experiences of University of Western Australia students participating in a Toraja cultural immersion program, providing a deeper understanding of how such initiatives enhance intercultural learning and community engagement.

Recognizing the potential of cross-cultural exchange and community service, the English Education Study Program at Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja (UKI Toraja) has initiated a groundbreaking cultural immersion program with the University of Western Australia (UWA). This innovative program exemplifies how cross-cultural learning is applied in real-world contexts, offering UWA students a unique opportunity to engage deeply with the rich cultural heritage of the Toraja people. The Toraja region, known for its distinctive cultural practices—such as elaborate funeral rituals, traditional Tongkonan houses, and a profound spiritual connection to ancestral traditions—faces challenges from modernization and globalization. By immersing UWA students in this vibrant culture, the program goes beyond observation, encouraging active and respectful engagement with the local community, fostering meaningful cross-cultural understanding.

This initiative is not just about cultural appreciation; it is also about the exchange of knowledge and skills. The program provides UWA students with the chance to apply their English teaching skills in a new and challenging environment, working alongside their peers from UKI Toraja to deliver lessons that incorporate elements of Toraja culture. This approach not only enhances the students' teaching abilities but also ensures that the local community benefits from improved English language education, which is increasingly important in a globalized world.

The present research intersects key themes of cross-cultural education, community service learning (CSL), and cultural preservation, providing a comprehensive framework to evaluate the Toraja Cultural Immersion initiative. Studies in cross-cultural education emphasize its role in developing intercultural competence, with Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity illustrating how exposure to diverse cultures can move individuals from ethnocentric to ethnorelative perspectives, fostering a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022). Ceo-DiFrancesco et al. (2020) similarly highlight the value of immersive experiences combined with reflective practices in advancing intercultural understanding. Aligning with these principles, the Toraja Cultural Immersion initiative immerses University of Western Australia (UWA) students in Toraja culture through living with local families, participating in cultural rituals, and engaging in community service, equipping them to navigate diverse cultural contexts effectively.

CSL further enhances this initiative by integrating academic learning with meaningful community engagement. Choo et al. (2019) demonstrate that CSL not only promotes academic growth and civic engagement but also fosters personal development, while Zhang et al. (2020) identify its role in enhancing cultural awareness and social responsibility. The Toraja Cultural Immersion initiative embodies these principles by combining cultural education with impactful community service projects. UWA students gain firsthand insights into Toraja culture while actively contributing to the host community's development, creating a mutually enriching experience. This dual emphasis on education and service highlights the program's capacity to promote intercultural competence, cultural preservation, and community empowerment.

By participating in this cultural immersion program, UWA students are expected to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of cultural diversity. They will learn to navigate the nuances of cross-cultural communication, adapt to different social norms, and appreciate the value of cultural preservation. In turn, this experience will prepare them to be more effective global citizens, capable of contributing positively to international cooperation and understanding. Ultimately, the collaboration between UKI Toraja and UWA through this cultural immersion program exemplifies the potential of educational partnerships to make a meaningful impact on both students and communities. It highlights how universities can play a vital role in promoting global awareness and fostering the kind of intercultural dialogue that is essential for a harmonious and interconnected world. Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore the impact of a cultural immersion program that connects students and faculty from the University of Western Australia with the team of English Education Study Program, UKI Toraja. This initiative aims to facilitate cross-cultural exchange, deepen participants' understanding of Toraja culture, and foster mutual learning through community service activities. The research seeks to evaluate the outcomes of the program in terms of cultural awareness, social responsibility, and the enhancement of academic and personal growth for both the participants and the host community.

## 2. METHODS

The study employed a qualitative research methodology to comprehensively analyze the impact of the Toraja Cultural Immersion program on participants and the host community (Weyant, 2022). This approach aimed to explore the experiences, perceptions, and meanings participants associated with their involvement in the program. Conducted in Bali from July 6–21, 2024, the program facilitated immersive cross-cultural interactions and community engagement activities, providing a robust context for qualitative inquiry.

The participants of this study included 21 students from the University of Western Australia (UWA) and seven members of the English Education Study Program at UKI Toraja. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the selection of participants who were deeply engaged in the program (Campbell et al., 2020). The inclusion of 21 UWA students allowed for a diverse examination of individual responses to Toraja culture, capturing variations in perception, adaptation, and learning outcomes. Meanwhile, the involvement of seven UKI Toraja members ensured representation of local perspectives and insights, as well as contextual guidance during cultural immersion activities. This balanced sample size facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the intercultural dynamics and educational exchange central to the program's goals.

Data collection involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with selected participants (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2021). These interviews, with open-ended questions, encouraged participants to share detailed accounts of their experiences, focusing on cultural exchange, learning outcomes, and personal and community impacts. To complement the interviews, researchers conducted participant observations by accompanying UWA students during key program activities, such as teaching, cultural rituals, and community service projects (Shin & Miller, 2022). Detailed field notes documented these interactions, providing valuable insights into the lived experiences of participants and the cultural contexts of their activities.

The data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This involved coding the data to identify recurring themes and patterns related to cultural exchange, learning, and community engagement. Thematic analysis enabled researchers to extract significant narratives and understand the meanings participants ascribed to their experiences. This method offered a rich, nuanced understanding of the program's impact, highlighting its role in enhancing cultural awareness, fostering social responsibility, and promoting meaningful community engagement.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed significant insights into the impact of the program on both the participants from UWA and the members of the English Education Study Program at UKI Toraja. The analysis of the data collected through interviews, participant observations, and thematic analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of the program's outcomes, particularly in the areas of cultural awareness, social responsibility, and community engagement.

#### 3.1. Enhanced Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Competence

The program had a profound effect on the cultural awareness and intercultural competence of the UWA students. Through in-depth interviews, students reported a deepened understanding of Toraja culture, particularly its rituals, traditions, and values. Many participants described how living with the team of English Education Study Program and participating in art activities and cultural presentation, such as learning Toraja language, learning *pa'tirra'* dance, and intensive Toraja Cultural presentation, challenged their preconceived notions and expanded their cultural horizons. Here are excerpts from interviews with participants:

*"Living with the UKI Toraja team was an eye-opening experience. Before coming here, I had a very basic understanding of Indonesian culture, mostly limited to what I had read or seen online. But being immersed in Toraja life, especially through the art activities and cultural presentations, really expanded my perspective. For instance, learning the Toraja language was initially very challenging, but it gave me a deeper appreciation for how language shapes cultural identity. I realized that the language is not just a means of communication; it's a vital part of their heritage and traditions."*  
[Interview, participant "A". 10 July 2024]

Participant "A" above elaborated on how the intensive cultural presentations contribute to his understanding of Toraja traditions and values. Moreover, participant "A" described his participation in specific cultural activities, like the *pa'tirra'* dance to influence his perceptions, as follow interview quotation:

*"Participating in the pa'tirra' dance was incredible. Initially, I felt a bit out of place, unsure if I could ever grasp the meaning behind these intricate movements. But as I practiced more and received guidance from the local team, I started to understand that these dance is much more than performances. They are expressions of Toraja values and community spirit. The dances tell stories of their ancestors and reflect their respect for nature and life cycles. This experience really challenged my preconceived notions about what dance is and what it represents in different cultures."*  
[Interview, participant "A". 10 July 2024]

This experience highlights the importance of active participation in cultural practices as a means of gaining deeper insight into the values and beliefs of a community. It underscores the idea that cultural immersion involves not just observing but also engaging with and reflecting on the practices of others, leading to a more profound appreciation and respect for cultural diversity. The participant's journey from feeling out of place to gaining a deeper understanding of the *pa'tirra'* dance exemplifies the transformative potential of cross-cultural exchange in challenging assumptions and expanding one's cultural horizons. Below, participant "A" deeply explained how has his experience shaped his cultural awareness and competence:

*"Absolutely. The cultural presentations were intensive, but they were also incredibly informative. Each presentation was like peeling back another layer of Toraja culture. I remember one session where we learned about the symbolism in traditional Toraja clothing and how it reflects their social structure and beliefs. These insights helped me see how deeply interconnected their cultural practices are with their daily lives. I used to think that cultural rituals were just symbolic acts, but now I understand that for the Toraja people, these practices are a living, breathing part of their identity."*

*This experience has profoundly expanded my cultural horizons and taught me to appreciate the depth of meaning in cultural traditions."*

*[Interview, participant "A". 10 July 2024]*

The depth of cultural immersion provided by these presentations not only broadened the participant's knowledge but also altered his worldview. It helped him see that cultural traditions are not static or isolated; they are dynamic and intimately tied to the lived experiences of the people who practice them. This shift in perspective is a key outcome of the program, illustrating how experiential learning can cultivate empathy, respect, and a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity. This process of cultural learning is essential for developing intercultural competence, as it moves individuals from passive observation to active understanding and engagement. Related to this, Participant "B" gave her view. The participant's reflection on her experience highlights the profound impact of immersive cultural engagement in developing true cultural competence. Initially, the participant expected to gain a surface-level understanding of a new culture—essentially, to acquire knowledge about customs, traditions, and practices. However, what she experienced was far more transformative, reshaping her perspective on cultural awareness and competence:

*"This experience has been transformative for my cultural awareness. I came here thinking I would just learn about a new culture, but what I gained was much more significant. I learned to see the world through a different lens, to appreciate the depth of traditions that I had never encountered before. My preconceived notions were definitely challenged, and I feel that I've developed a stronger ability to interact with people from diverse backgrounds with respect and understanding. This program has taught me that cultural competence is not just about knowing facts about a culture, but about engaging with it on a deeper, more empathetic level."*

*[Interview, participant "B". 10 July 2024]*

The participant's experience illustrates that true cultural competence is an ongoing process of learning and engagement, one that requires openness, humility, and a willingness to have one's perspectives challenged and expanded. This deeper level of engagement is what ultimately equips individuals to interact more effectively and respectfully in an increasingly interconnected and multicultural world. This example reflects the profound impact that the cultural immersion program had on participants, highlighting their increased cultural awareness and intercultural competence through active participation in and reflection on Toraja cultural activities.

Thematic analysis of the interviews indicated that students moved from an initial stage of curiosity and observation to a more immersive and engaged stance, where they began to appreciate the complexities of Toraja culture. This shift aligned with the stages of intercultural sensitivity outlined in Bennett's model, with students progressing from ethnocentric perspectives to more ethnorelative views. Participants noted that their experiences in Toraja fostered a greater respect for cultural diversity and an enhanced ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries.

One observation noted during the program was the evolution in students' behavior and attitudes as they engaged more deeply with the Toraja culture. Initially, students displayed a natural curiosity, asking numerous questions during cultural presentations and taking pictures of the traditional *Tongkonan* houses and the elaborate funeral ceremonies. At this stage, their interactions were largely observational and surface-level, reflecting a genuine interest but also an outsider's perspective.

This deeper level of engagement was also observed in their interactions with the Torajan natives (members of the English education Study Program). Students who had initially relied on translators and spoke in simple English phrases gradually began to use basic Toraja language greetings and phrases. They showed increased comfort in navigating cultural nuances, such as understanding when to bow in respect during ceremonies or how to appropriately address elders in the community. Their body language, initially reserved and formal, became more relaxed and open, indicating a growing sense of belonging and cultural adaptation.

This progression aligns with Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity, where students moved from an ethnocentric stage of curiosity—marked by viewing cultural differences from a distance—towards an ethnorelative stage, where they began to appreciate and embrace the complexities of Toraja culture. By the end of the program, the students' reflections and behaviours indicated a greater respect for cultural diversity, as well as an enhanced ability to communicate and interact effectively across cultural boundaries. This shift was particularly evident in how students discussed their experiences, often highlighting not just what they learned about the Toraja culture, but how these interactions changed their own perceptions and attitudes toward cultural differences.

The findings of this research underscore the transformative impact of immersive cultural programs on the cultural awareness and intercultural competence of students. Through active engagement with Toraja culture, UWA students moved beyond mere observation to a deeper, more empathetic understanding of the intricacies of cultural traditions, rituals, and values. The program facilitated a shift from an ethnocentric perspective to an ethnorelative one, as students progressed through stages of curiosity to genuine cultural engagement. This evolution was reflected in their behaviors, attitudes, and communication skills, demonstrating a newfound respect for cultural diversity and a more profound ability to interact across cultural boundaries.

The in-depth interviews reveal that participation in activities such as learning the Toraja language and *pa'tirra'* dance played a crucial role in challenging preconceived notions and broadening students' cultural horizons. These experiences not only expanded their knowledge but also altered their worldview, helping them see cultural traditions as dynamic and interconnected with the lived experiences of the Toraja people. This deeper level of cultural immersion highlights the importance of active participation and reflection in developing true cultural competence.

Ultimately, the program's success lies in its ability to foster empathy, respect, and an appreciation for the depth of meaning in cultural traditions. The students' journey from initial curiosity to a more immersive and engaged stance exemplifies the potential of cross-cultural exchange to cultivate a deeper understanding and respect for cultural diversity, which is essential for effective and respectful interactions in an increasingly interconnected world.

The findings of this research align closely with existing studies on the impact of immersive cultural programs in enhancing cultural awareness and intercultural competence among students. Numerous studies have documented the benefits of cultural immersion experiences in moving students beyond superficial cultural encounters to deeper levels of engagement and understanding.

For instance, Maakrun (2020) emphasizes the importance of experiential learning in developing intercultural competence, arguing that active participation in cultural practices allows individuals to engage with the cultural nuances that are often missed in more passive forms of cultural learning. This aligns with the experiences of UWA students, who, through their active engagement with Toraja culture, moved from an observational stance to a more involved and empathetic understanding of cultural intricacies.

Similarly, Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) adopted by Mellizo (2017), provides a theoretical framework for understanding the stages of intercultural sensitivity that individuals typically progress through during cultural immersion experiences. The shift from ethnocentric stages (where one views one's own culture as central) to ethnorelative stages (where one begins to appreciate and adapt to cultural differences) observed in this study mirrors the progression outlined in Bennett's model. As students engaged more deeply with Toraja culture, they began to demonstrate behaviors and attitudes indicative of higher levels of intercultural sensitivity, such as using the Toraja language, participating in traditional dances, and showing increased respect for local customs.

Research by (Matthews et al., 2021) also supports these findings, as they highlight the role of guided cultural immersion programs in fostering intercultural competence. Their study suggests that students who participate in well-structured cultural immersion programs, which include reflection and active participation, are more likely to develop deeper cultural understanding and intercultural skills.

The structure of the UWA program, which included both immersive activities and reflective opportunities, appears to have been key in facilitating the students' development from mere cultural awareness to a more profound intercultural competence.

Moreover, (Kwon, 2021) argues that the depth of cultural immersion—whether through language acquisition, participation in local traditions, or living with host families—significantly enhances students' ability to develop intercultural competence. This is evident in the UWA students' experience, where learning the Toraja language and participating in traditional activities like the pa'tirra' dance provided them with deeper insights into the culture and contributed to a more meaningful engagement with the Toraja community.

Finally, these findings resonate with (Chiocca, 2021), who discusses the transformative potential of study abroad programs in altering students' worldviews and intercultural communication skills. The UWA students' shift in behaviors, attitudes, and communication, as noted in this research, supports the idea that immersive cultural programs can profoundly influence students' perceptions and interactions across cultural boundaries.

Therefore, this research contributes to the growing body of literature that underscores the effectiveness of immersive cultural programs in fostering intercultural competence. It highlights the importance of active cultural engagement and structured reflection in facilitating students' progression from ethnocentric to ethnorelative perspectives, thereby equipping them with the skills necessary for effective and respectful intercultural communication.

### 3.2. Improved English language education and cultural preservation

The program's impact on the members of English Education Study Program was also significant. Thematic analysis of the data from members of English Education Study Program revealed that the presence of UWA students was generally seen as positive and beneficial. The community appreciated the cultural exchange and the students' efforts to learn and respect local traditions. The collaboration between UWA students and the UKI Toraja team in educational and service projects was particularly valued, as it contributed to improved English language education and cultural preservation. Below is Table 1: The thematic matrix of the Positive Impact on the members of English Education Study Program on Language Education and Cultural Preservation:

**Table 1.** The thematic matrix of the Positive Impact on the members of English Education Study Program on Language Education and Cultural Preservation

Key Themes	Description	Examples from Interviews	Impact
<b>Cultural Exchange and Mutual Respect</b>	The program facilitated positive cultural exchange. UWA students showed respect for local traditions and a strong desire to learn from the community.	"The UWA students were eager to engage with our culture and traditions."	Strengthened the collaboration and promoted mutual understanding between UWA students and UKI Toraja.

<b>Enhancement of English Language Education</b>	New teaching strategies and materials introduced by UWA students enriched the curriculum, improving the quality of English education and student engagement.	"The collaboration was beneficial... UWA students introduced new teaching strategies and materials."	Enhanced curriculum and increased student motivation in the English Education Study Program.
<b>Cultural Preservation</b>	The program played a role in preserving local culture by involving UWA students in cultural activities, highlighting the importance of cultural heritage.	"The UWA students' willingness to learn... showed that they valued our traditions."	Encouraged the community to continue valuing and preserving their cultural heritage.
<b>Empowerment and Community Pride</b>	Interaction with UWA students fostered a sense of pride and empowerment in the community, inspiring them to take greater pride in their heritage.	"The fact that the UWA students were so interested in our culture made us realize the importance of preserving it."	Increased community pride and motivation to actively promote and preserve local traditions.

The interview responses reflect a positive and impactful experience during the collaboration between UWA students and the UKI Toraja community, particularly within the English Education Study Program:

*"It was a unique experience. The UWA students were eager to engage with our culture and traditions. They showed genuine interest in learning from us, which made the collaboration very fruitful. The exchange of ideas and methods in English language education was particularly valuable."*

[Interview, participant "C". 11 July 2024]

Participant "C" emphasized the eagerness of UWA students to engage with Toraja culture, highlighting their genuine interest in learning from local traditions. This indicates a successful cultural exchange where both parties benefitted from the interaction. The exchange of ideas in English language education was particularly valuable, suggesting that the program facilitated a meaningful academic and cultural dialogue. Regarding the cultural exchange and learning experience, participant "D" also conveyed his experience as follows:

*"I found it very inspiring to work alongside the UWA students. They brought different perspectives on teaching English, and it was interesting to see how they adapted to our cultural context. Their respect for our traditions made the experience more meaningful for us."*

[Interview, participant "D". 12 July 2024]

Related to the impact of the collaboration between UWA students and UKI Toraja, below, the participant "E" explain her experience:

*"The collaboration was beneficial in several ways. The UWA students introduced new teaching strategies and materials that we hadn't used before. This not only enriched our curriculum but also motivated our students to engage more actively in their English studies."*

[Interview, participant "D". 12 July 2024]

Participant "E" noted that the UWA students introduced new teaching strategies and materials, which enriched the English Education Study Program's curriculum. This suggests that the collaboration was not just an exchange of ideas but also a practical enhancement of educational resources and approaches, leading to increased student engagement. Moreover, one of the learners (participant "F") stated the benefit of joining this program:

*"Working with UWA students gave us the opportunity to practice our English in real-life situations. We also learned a lot about their culture, which broadened our understanding of how English can be taught in different cultural contexts."*

[Interview, participant "F". 12 July 2024]

Participant "F" pointed out the practical benefit of using English in real-life situations during the program. This hands-on experience likely helped improve language proficiency and also provided insights into how English can be taught in various cultural contexts, which is crucial for future educators. In addition to the pedagogy aspect, this program also has a positive impact on the preservation of local culture. This was conveyed by the following participant "G":

*"I believe the program played a significant role in cultural preservation. The UWA students' willingness to learn and participate in our cultural activities showed that they valued our traditions. This encouraged our community to take pride in our heritage and continue to pass it on to the younger generation."*

[Interview, participant "G". 12 July 2024]

Participant "G" mentioned that the UWA students' participation in cultural activities encouraged the local community to take pride in their heritage, suggesting that external interest can reinforce internal cultural appreciation. Student (Participant "H" agreed, noting that the UWA students' interest in Toraja culture emphasized the importance of preserving it. The student also recognized that English can be a tool for sharing local traditions with the world, implying that the program fostered an understanding of how global languages can support cultural preservation, as in interview quotation below:

*"Yes, I agree. The fact that the UWA students were so interested in our culture made us realize the importance of preserving it. It also made us more aware of the role that English can play in sharing our traditions with the world."*

Community members reported that the program helped to bring international attention to Toraja culture, fostering a sense of pride and reinforcing the importance of maintaining cultural traditions in the face of modernization. Additionally, the benefits of pedagogy and support for cultural activities were noted as important outcomes of the program.

The findings regarding the community members' perceptions of the program's impact on Toraja culture resonate with several strands of research focused on cultural preservation, the effects of international exposure, and the role of educational programs in supporting cultural activities.

Research by Tomasi et al. (2020) emphasizes the role of international educational programs in promoting cultural preservation by bringing global attention to local traditions. This exposure often fosters a renewed sense of pride among community members, encouraging them to maintain and protect their cultural heritage. The Toraja community's response aligns with these findings, as they reported an enhanced sense of pride and recognition of the importance of preserving their cultural practices amid the pressures of modernization.

Similarly, studies by Raphoon (2019) highlight how international engagement, particularly through cultural exchange programs, can lead to a heightened awareness of the value of cultural heritage. These studies suggest that when local communities see their culture being appreciated and valued by outsiders, it reinforces the community's commitment to preserving these traditions. The community's acknowledgment of the program's role in bringing international attention to Toraja culture and reinforcing cultural pride is consistent with these observations.

Educational programs that incorporate cultural elements have been shown to provide significant pedagogical benefits, not only for participants but also for the host communities. According to Lau and Shea (2022), culturally responsive pedagogy, which integrates local culture into the learning process, can lead to positive educational outcomes by making learning more relevant and meaningful to students. In the context of the Toraja program, the integration of cultural activities, such as learning the Toraja language and participating in traditional dances, likely enhanced the educational experience for both UWA students and the local community. This aligns with the finding of Bennett et al. (2018) on culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes the importance of connecting educational content to students' cultural backgrounds to enhance learning and engagement.

The community's concern about maintaining cultural traditions in the face of modernization echoes research by Zayadi (2023), which examines the challenges that indigenous communities face in preserving their cultural identities amid rapid societal changes. These studies suggest that while modernization can bring economic and social benefits, it often poses a threat to traditional practices and values. The program's success in reinforcing the importance of cultural preservation suggests that international educational programs can serve as a counterbalance to the homogenizing effects of modernization by highlighting the unique value of local cultures.

Therefore, the findings of this research are well-supported by previous studies on cultural preservation, international exposure, and the pedagogical benefits of culturally responsive education. The program's ability to bring international attention to Toraja culture, foster community pride, and support cultural activities demonstrates the potential of educational initiatives to contribute positively to both cultural preservation and the educational experience of participants. These outcomes reinforce the idea that such programs can play a vital role in empowering communities to preserve their cultural heritage in an increasingly globalized world.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the cultural immersion program between the University of Western Australia and the English Education Study Program at UKI Toraja significantly enhanced students' intercultural competence and awareness, particularly through direct engagement with the Toraja community. For instance, students' participation in local traditions, such as rituals and communal events, provided firsthand insights that fostered a deeper understanding of Toraja culture and traditions, actively supporting cultural preservation. This type of engagement encouraged students to move beyond passive observation, developing meaningful connections that enriched their intercultural competence and provided authentic contexts for language learning.

These findings highlight the potential of cultural immersion programs to shape not only individual participants' intercultural competence but also to bolster cultural preservation efforts. They underscore how such programs can bridge cultural divides and support educational and preservation initiatives on a global scale, contributing to the broader discourse on intercultural education and international collaboration. This study addresses a key gap in understanding how active community engagement in cultural immersion settings can enhance both the participant's learning experience and the cultural preservation of host communities.

Future research should build on these findings by exploring additional dimensions of cultural immersion programs. For instance, studies could investigate the specific impacts on host communities, examine the role of technology in facilitating cultural exchange, or conduct comparative analyses across different cultural contexts to assess the adaptability and influence of immersion programs.

Longitudinal research is also recommended to determine the sustained effects on participants' intercultural competence, language skills, and cultural awareness over time. This approach will deepen the understanding of how such programs contribute to the evolving field of intercultural education and the diverse ways in which international collaboration can support cultural resilience and preservation in a globalized world.

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