

Crafting Futures: Inspiring Interdisciplinary Innovation with Young Craft Artisans in Malaysia

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Indigenous Craft, Design Innovation, Creative Education, Studio-based Pedagogy, Interdisciplinarity.

Abstract

The authors present a studio-based approach to inspiring interdisciplinary innovation with young craft artisans in Malaysia drawing on *Crafting Futures*, a project delivered in partnership between the British Council and The Glasgow School of Art. The Malaysian craft context currently faces a range of challenges that have led to a precarity in communities where craft has historically been a key mode of economic production, in addition to youth migration, particularly young women, from villages to urban centres. In response to this, *Crafting Futures* is predicated on the economic empowerment of young women in South East Asia through fostering innovation and design-led skills for female artisans. A Design Innovation pop-up studio programme was co-designed with Malaysian-based craft experts, and delivered to young craft students studying at the Insitut Kraf Negara, a specialist craft school in Rawang, Kuala Lumpur. Studio-based pedagogy underpinned the programme, with a focus on nurturing creative capacity-building towards cultivating a collective community of practice centred on Design Innovation approaches. The authors share insights surrounding the co-design process of programme development and delivery, where themes around gender, neo-colonialism and cross-cultural collaboration emerged. The authors conclude by discussing the value and impact of participation for the students, and set out directions for future regionally-focused research in the Malaysian craft context.

1. Introduction

Crafting Futures is an international research and education programme delivered by the British Council in collaboration with UK-based Higher Education institutions, which seeks to protect, conserve and sustain craft practice with a focus on the economic empowerment of young women in South East Asia. In this article, the authors describe and critically reflect upon a Design Innovation pop-up studio programme that inspired interdisciplinary innovation with young craft artisans studying at the Insitut Kraf Negara (IKN), a specialist craft school in Rawang, Kuala Lumpur. The studio programme was co-designed by the Crafting Futures team – two design-researchers from The Innovation School at The Glasgow School of Art (GSA), representatives from the British Council, Malaysian craft experts, and teaching faculty from IKN – to address innovation challenges within the context of craft-based learning and creativity. The studio programme was delivered at IKN in February 2019 and introduced participatory approaches and principles through a range of collaborative activities; bringing together 22 students from across the six indigenous craft pathways: weaving, rattan, batik, metalwork, woodwork and ceramics. Key within the programme were opportunities for the students to engage with Malaysian-based craft experts as inspiring role-models – several of whom are highly successful female creative industry leaders and social entrepreneurs.

The Malaysian craft context currently faces a range of innovation and sustainability challenges from various cultural, social, economic and environmental forces.

This includes an under-appreciation of the technique and skills required in creating indigenous textiles (such as Pau Kumbu, Songket and Tanun), extending to a lack of awareness and recognition of craft-based heritage, and the vernacular materials connected to specific regions. The importance of protecting indigenous craft as culture assets (McHattie et al. 2019) is gaining local-level traction, however there is an attendant lack of structural support for craft and indigenous textile production and creative education. This has resulted in low morale in craft communities and rural villages where craft has historically been a mode of economic production. Furthermore, this fragility has been heightened by youth migration, particularly that of young women from longhouses and villages to urban centres, entering into low-skilled employment with global brands and organisations (LoveFrankie 2018). This combination of external factors is leading to precarity in indigenous craft techniques and practices, and has led to IKN experiencing challenges in recruiting students to their craft programmes (currently reaching one third of their total capacity of 600 students).

In response to this, and with an over-arching aim to contribute to a wider research agenda for the future of sustaining indigenous craft practices in Malaysia, the focus of the pop-up studio was on addressing participatory approaches and skills development to reimagine craft that has contemporary relevance. The IKN curricula is largely based on learning by rote with handbooks that detail the extensive techniques and processes relevant to each pathway – thus it could be argued that current craft education in this context is neither crea-

tive learning or learning creativity. In contrast, as a learning experience, during the pop-up studio the craft students were immersed in a range of participatory activities and engaged in cross-disciplinary collaboration, inspiration and ideation, critical reflection, and visual story-telling. Following the pop-up studio, the students described a shift in their creative mindset surrounding innovation and their identity and intention as craft practitioners. Unpacking this, the authors share insights surrounding the co-design process of programme development and delivery, where themes around gender, neo-colonialism and cross-cultural collaboration emerged. The authors conclude by discussing the value and impact of participation for the craft students, and set out directions for future research.

2. Studio-Based Learning

The approaches developed for the pop-up studio were informed by the field of Design Innovation, underpinned by Participatory Design (PD) approaches (Björgvinsson et al. 2010; Frauenberger et al. 2015; Simonsen & Robertson 2013). PD emphasizes the value of collaborative learning, which recognises users of design and other project stakeholders as experts of their own knowledge and “experience domain” (Sleeswijk Visser 2009, p.5). Often reported in PD studies is the process of participation being as meaningful and transformative as the final designed output (Bannon & Ehn 2013; Greenbaum & Loi 2012). Within a PD process, *relational tools* can be used to foster a shared design language that traverses disciplinary sociocultural practices and hierarchical boundaries (Brandt et al. 2013; Sanders 2002).

Building on this, and in seeking to inspire a culture of participation and community of practice (Wenger 1998), the design of the pop-up studio was aligned to studio-based pedagogy, which encourages exploration, experimentation and prototyping (Bull 2015). As described by Drew (2015), “[t]he process of learning becomes one of apprenticeship to the practice, by engaging with the real-world practice and understanding the process through narration, collaboration and social construction” (2015, p. 108). This pedagogical style is in contrast to how IKN students typically engage in craft-based learning. The students learn technical skills through observation, direction and repetition; a learning cycle that is output-orientated and places an emphasis on honing skills as opposed to fostering creative autonomy. Furthermore, craft practices at IKN are taught in *silos*, where cohorts across weaving, rattan and batik remain discrete from each other with little opportunity for interdisciplinarity. In seeking to widen the students’ repertoire beyond their technical skillset, key tenets of studio-based design pedagogy were employed, which foreground the social and collaborative dimensions of learning in a shared and immersive space (Lynas et al., 2013). As learners become more fluent in creative practice, they engage in tacit sense-making and reflective dialogue between themselves and the making and problem-solving process, and with their peers (Budge et al., 2013; Schön 1985; Shreeve 2015). The pop-up studio was designed to support learning in ways to become creative decision-makers – elevating the students’ highly technical practices as a means to differentiate themselves if and when they enter the craft sector. This was done through a series of individual and collaborative creative activities described in the next section.

3. Co-designing the Pop-Up Studio Programme

A critical awareness of the post-colonial context of Malaysia established the necessity to co-design the studio program with representatives from the British Council UK and British Council Malaysia, Malaysian-based craft experts and visual arts practitioners. This ensured the interventions were sensitively aligned to the cultural context; ethically mindful; and that the program was sustainable beyond the authors involvement. Agreements surrounding attribution and intellectual property were co-defined with each project partner and stakeholder during the process of recruitment, and were highlighted in the process of gaining institutional ethics approval and in a thorough risk assessment carried out before commencing the project.

Prior to the delivery of the studio in February 2019, a series of scoping activities took place in order to identify and work in partnership with six Malaysian-based craft experts and entrepreneurs to co-design the programme with the Crafting Futures team (Fig. 1). These craft experts engage with the local craft sector and are committed to providing education and entrepreneurial opportunities for young people in Malaysia. A key event during the programme development phase was a symposium where 65 craft professionals from across education, government (including Kraftangan, the governing body for craft in Malaysia), social enterprises and retail shared their experiences and insights around the challenges facing the local, regional and national craft sector. During this scoping phase, insights around gender inequalities emerged, where young women pursuing craft as a vocation is, in general, declining. This is particularly the case for young women and

girls below the age of 18, who leave school early as a result of caring responsibilities and/or marriage.

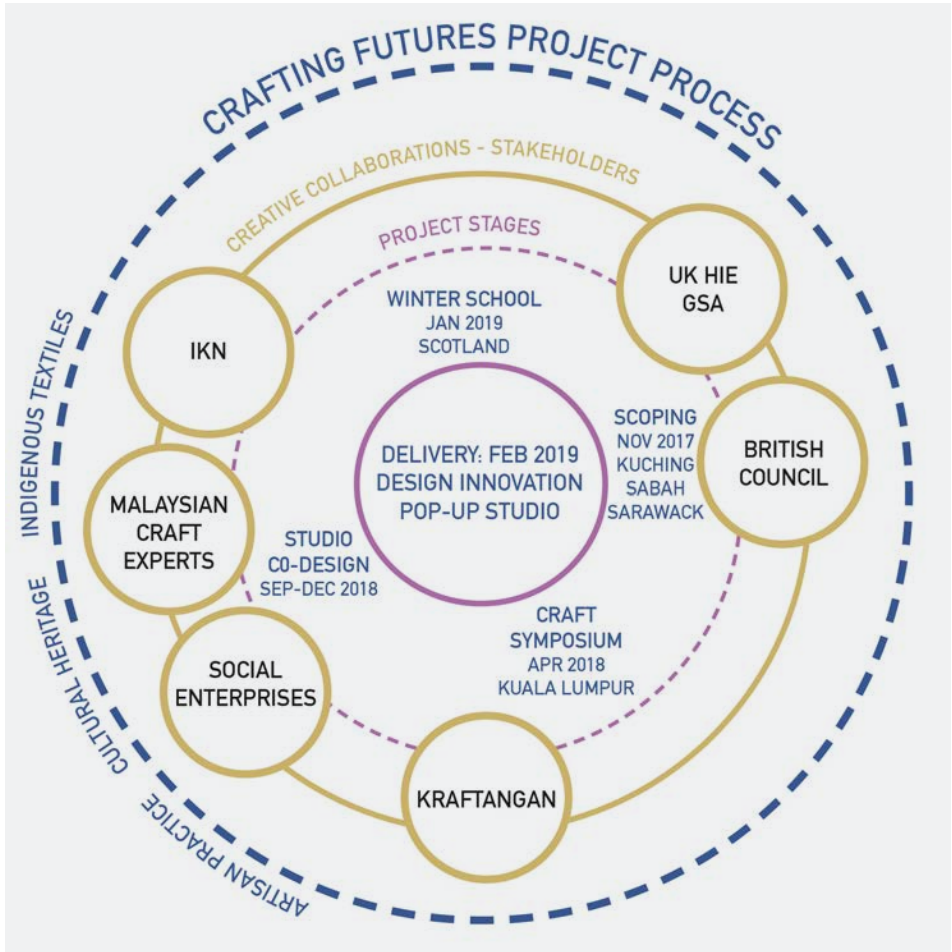


Figure 1. Crafting Futures Project Process Diagram, 2020.

In light of the gender-based barriers female artisans face in accessing educational and employment opportunities in the creative economies, nurturing capacity-building through mentorship was a key aspiration in the project.

The majority of the Malaysian-based craft experts recruited are highly successful female entrepreneurs and innovators who exemplify creative leadership; experiences and qualities the Crafting Futures team wanted to share with the craft students as positive female role-models to mobilise their sense of creative self-efficacy and agency.

In addition to scoping visits to Malaysia, in January 2019 members of the IKN faculty were invited to Winter School, an international programme held at GSA's Creative Campus in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, to experience and participate in studio-based pedagogy delivered to Design Innovation postgraduate students. This knowledge exchange highlighted differences in cross-cultural pedagogical practices, which could be experienced in action at the intersection between craft practice, education and industry.

Underpinning the pop-up studio programme was a relational ethos that supported interdisciplinary craft collaboration between students, drawing upon vernacular materials and practices from their distinct craft disciplines. The programme consisted of six distinct activities that centred on cycles of creative action and critical reflection. In the next sections, the authors describe each activity in more detail.

3.1. Interdisciplinary Studio-Based Project

The studio-based project, which ran for the duration of the programme in parallel to the other activities, was facilitated by Eira, a principal architect who specialises in bamboo-based structures. The aim of the project was to provide the students with the opportunity to experiment with apply-

ing and adapting their skills to the context of other creative practices – in this case architecture – introducing them to interdisciplinary and collaborative ways of working. Having preassembled a bamboo framework (Fig. 2), Eira explained to the students how they could apply their skills to the structure to create individual craft-based panels with the collective goal of co-constructing a pavilion – demonstrating how they could bend rattan over the frame, wrap and weave wool around, and stack, balance, and hang bamboo rings.



Figure 2. Bamboo Pavilion Structure. Authors, 2019.

To encourage collaboration, students from across the six craft pathways were divided into cross-pathway groups, which was the first time they had worked alongside peers from other disciplines. Over the course of the week, the students began

upskilling each other through exchanging their craft skills and techniques (see Figure 3). Applying craft skills for a different purpose and intuitively engaging in peer learning differs to how the students are typically taught.



Figure 3. Studio-based Project: Co-constructing the Pavilion. Authors, 2019.

During the other programmed activities, the students continuously returned to the pavilion to develop their group panels, implementing their studio learning in an iterative process.

3.2. Design Journaling

At the beginning of the programme the students were given a design journal (Fig. 4) to document and share their ideas and creative decision-making. Journal pages were curated as “pin ups” for the students to share their reflections with their peers and the Crafting Futures team at the start of each day. The journal was intentionally designed to be used like a scrap-book, where the pages could be swapped around, torn and cut up, and put back together; encouraging creative authorship and autonomy.

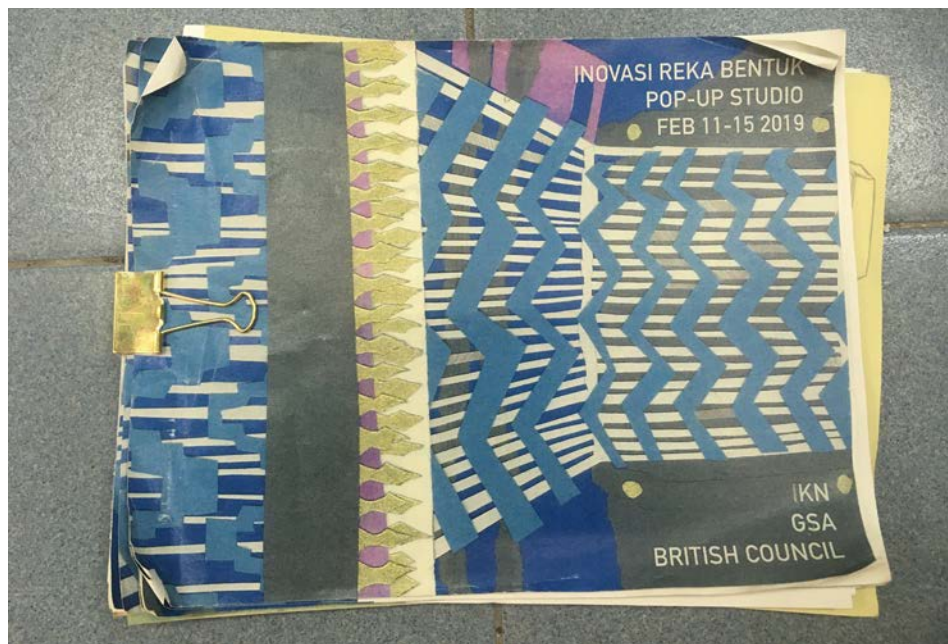


Figure 4. A Student's Design Journal. Authors, 2019.

To support the students in developing their unique identity narratives, batik designers Farah and Nabil, who both own and manager successful businesses in Malaysia, were invited to share their design philosophies as practitioners; the journeys of their businesses; how they gather inspiration for their collections; and ways they have innovated traditional batik techniques. In both cases, the designers emphasised the importance of collaboration, the need to be explorative and experimental, and to celebrate Malaysian culture in contemporary design. In response to these presentations, the students used their journals to prototype ideas and collage mood boards to tell a story behind what personally inspires them.

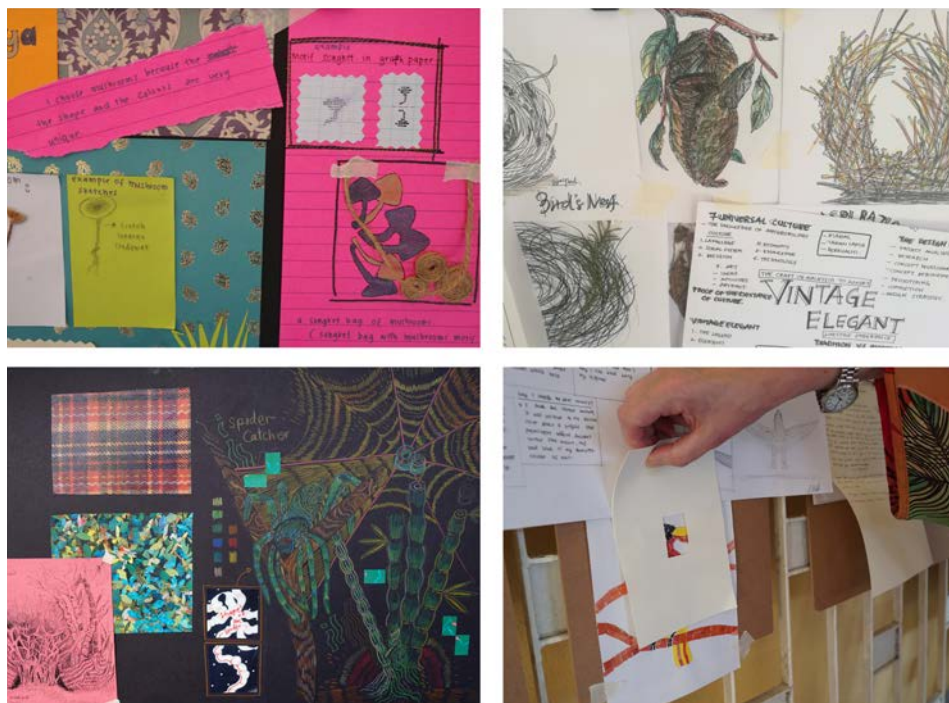


Figure 5. Pages from Student's Design Journals. Authors, 2019.

At the end of each day, the students were requested to take their design journals home with them to record their reflections. This independent activity informed group tutorials, where each student curated a pin-up that was used to unpack their ideas and insights. The students independently used a range of approaches (Fig. 5) such as collage, process diagrams, concept sketches, illustrations, and prototyped ideas for products. Through this process, the students began to reflect upon and articulate their own creative identity narratives through their visual story-telling.

3.4. Sourcing Design Inspiration

A key aim for the pop-up studio was to support the students in creative decision-making and to explore what inspires them as craft practitioners through engaging in a process of ideation and concept development. Sofea, a social entrepreneur who promotes Malaysian culture heritage through her contemporary textile accessories, shared her experiences and insights around principles for nurturing innovation, ways of maintaining a competitive advantage, design processes, and sources of inspiration. To apply this learning, the students returned to their creative groups and, facilitated by the Crafting Futures team, undertook a sensory walk around the IKN campus to source inspiration from nature to inspire their groups ongoing concept development for the pavilion textile panels. Students were encouraged to collect found objects (such as foliage, rocks and bark), draw, film, photograph, and take rubbings of inspiring objects, colours, organic and man-made structures, and textures from nature. On their return, the students arranged their found objects on a large table, describing what informed their decisions and how they might employ them conceptually in their pavilion textile panels (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Collecting Design Inspiration. Authors, 2019.

3.5. Collaborative Filmmaking

Shen, a renowned Malaysian filmmaker and photographer joined the studio to share his experience and insights around the importance of documenting creative processes and ways of doing this visually through filmmaking. The student groups were encouraged to make and edit a series of short films on their mobile phones about the production of the pavilion, where they were asked to reflect on their choices of materials, colours, techniques used and the resultant compositions they had co-created. This filmmaking process took place at the end of each day of the studio, and towards the end of the week Shen supported the students to create a final film showcasing their entire design process.

3.6. Showcase Exhibition

The final day of the programme centred around showcasing the accumulation of the students' design work and the completed pavilion (which is now a permanent structure on the campus) to the wider IKN faculty from across teaching and management, British Council partners, and collaborating craft experts. The Crafting Futures team created a pop-up exhibition space and curated a display of pages from the students' journals and artefacts made and collected throughout the week, alongside a projection of the students' films (Fig. 7). During this celebratory event, the students presented their work and IKN's Principle shared his commendations and emphasised a need for innovation and participatory making to be more formally embedded into their craft curriculum as evidenced in the students' collaborative and interdisciplinary outputs.



Figure 7. Pop-up Studio Showcase. Authors, 2019.

3.7. Programme Evaluation

The studio programme concluded with a final reflective feedback session with the students, which centred on evaluating the programme. Each student was given a feedback questionnaire asking for their personal highlights of the week, if and how the pop-up studio has changed the way they think about design and if and how it has changed the way they will design in the future. Insights from this evaluation frame the following discussion, where the authors reflect on the efficacy of the studio programme and outline the key cross-institutional and cross-cultural challenges.

4. Discussion

Reflecting on the delivery of the programme, key insights emerged pertaining to the immersive nature of studio-based pedagogy in the context of technical craft education.

A key challenge was positioning this approach alongside the embedded educational practices at IKN. Experimenting with implementing a pedagogy that is in contrast to how and what is routinely delivered by IKN required a deep level of trust from the faculty. The co-design nature of the programme's development sought to mediate potential notions of neo-colonialism, where the over-arching objective was to introduce a different lens through which to view creative education, as opposed to critiquing and conferring curriculum change at IKN. At a local level, an example of this included adjusting the layout of the studio to physically and symbolically enculture a more democratic and participatory working space. Furthermore, collaboration with the bilingual IKN staff members played a crucial role in the delivery for programme, where language translation was required when explaining more abstract concepts that became overly complex when explained in English as opposed to Bahasa Malay.

In seeking to inspire interdisciplinary innovation, the co-construction of the pavilion as a collaborative studio-based project played a key role in anchoring the programme. As the students' engagement in developing their textile panels was an iterative process, it became a catalyst for team-building, forming social bonds, and as a relational tool for peer-to-peer knowledge and skills exchange:

My most enjoyable activity was making the pavilion project because I got some experience from my group and I'm learning something new from them like how to do weaving (Pop-up Studio Participant)

The most enjoyable activity for me [was] making the pavilion (...) we learned about the techniques and advantages of each of the majors. (Pop-up Studio Participant)

Working together and exchanging ideas with my friends from other disciplines. (Pop-up Studio Participant)

Another meaningful activity was the sensory walk where students were asked to collect sources of design inspiration. This included exploring the use of geometric forms, organic patterns and traditional cultural motifs. Based on their feedback, this activity appeared to be key in understanding how inspiration can be used in a design process – developing an awareness of what can influence and inspire them as designers. Throughout the programme, time was dedicated to sharing and reflecting on the development of these creative ideas. The students were encouraged to participate in group discussions and reflect on the work in their design journals, which were pinned up at the beginning of each day. In the feedback, the students commented on the value of this process and how it supported their creativity:

to find things as inspiration, [this] activity has changed the way I thought about design. (Pop-up Studio Participant)

How it's changed the way I think (...) that through doing the daily journals it's helped me think more creatively. (Pop-up Studio Participant)

What we see or hear or feel, we can keep in the journal and it can become inspiration to innovate. (Pop-up Studio Participant)

With the aim of expanding the students' repertoire beyond their technical skills, the programme stimulated a community of practice centred on learning, making and innovation. Bringing in expert voices from the Malaysian craft industry to share their own innovation journeys and how they set up independent craft enterprises provided the students with real-world examples and role models from their local context. Based on their feedback, the students were motivated by this engagement:

Design can be further expanded during the process and preparation. It inspired me as I watched and heard the talks given. (Pop-up Studio Participant)

The talks from them give me motivation about life (Pop-up Studio Participant)

Through the activities and the way, the pop-up studio taught us how to design. I love the way they taught us. (Pop-up Studio Participant)

When asked to reflect on if and how the pop-up studio had changed the way they think about design, many of the students described a shift in their mind-set about innovation as well as about their identity and intention as practitioners. The students described the transformative nature of the programme and how it will be carried forward into their craft practice:

Becoming someone who thinks more out of the box (...) Making us be more brave." (Pop-up Studio Participant)

This pop-up studio has changed my way of thinking about design by [looking more deeply] into the colour, structure, and characteristics of a design. (Pop-up Studio Participant)

Inspiration that shows us ourselves (...) Innovation changed [my] thinking. (Pop-up Studio Participant)

It has changed how I will design in the future (...) I no longer need to feel afraid to make mistakes because mistakes are also possibilities (Pop-up Studio Participant)

Underpinning the students' feedback in several of the examples above was a sense of growth particularly around their confidence in becoming more autonomous and "brave" in their creative decision-making. The impact of their participation is evident in how they will implement what they have learned in the future, and how it has changed the way they think about their craft practice and innovation.

5. Reflections

Returning to the over-arching aim of the Crafting Futures programme, the pop-up studio programme explored the role and impact of creative education in promoting innovation with young craft practitioners. However, this was only achieved through the development of a trusting relationship with the IKN faculty, where the physicality of the teaching space was sensitively re-arranged, and the experimental nature of the design process was legitimised.

Furthermore, key within the programme were opportunities for the students to engage with and learn from the Malay-

sian-based craft practitioners; the majority of who were female experts.

In the article, the authors have shared insights into the challenges of cross-institutional and cross-cultural collaboration and, in doing so, have evidenced the value and impact of participation for the IKN students. Seeking to contribute to a wider research agenda for the future of craft in Malaysia, opportunities for future research have been identified to support inclusive integration and female economic empowerment. This includes iterating and co-developing future pop-up programmes with IKN to contribute to their curriculum development in areas such as entrepreneurship, portfolio preparation, and introduce formal trajectories to support engagement between students and female craft mentors. Building on this, the authors are exploring the potential of developing the studio programme as regional creative hubs for young artisans living in rural communities – for example in Sabah and Sarawak. This research will inform local-level strategies to support greater recruitment and retention in craft education – particularly targeting those below the age of 18, so to cultivate sustainable youth craft-based livelihoods. Furthermore, to address gender inequalities in rural socio-economic infrastructures, the aim of this next phase is to further develop a distributed craft network of artisans, stakeholders and policy-makers and embed youth-led advocacy with a focus on female leadership to shape future policy and practice.

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