INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol 16, Issue 3, (2026) E-ISSN: 2222-6990

Enhancing Graduate Competencies through Incubator-Based Teaching and Learning Innovation: Evidence from the ACE Entrepreneurship Program

Muhammad Majid[1]*, Mohamad Faizal Ramli[2]

[1&2]Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Johor,

[1&2]Mentor, Accelerated Entrepreneurship Development (ACE) Program

*Corresponding Authors email: muhdmajid@uitm.edu.my

DOI Link: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i3/27883

Published Date: 15 March 2026

Abstract

This study examines the Accelerated Entrepreneurship Development (ACE) Program as a cutting-edge platform for teaching and learning in higher education. The study investigates how student involvement, critical thinking, real-world problem-solving, and entrepreneurial competencies are improved in an incubator-based experiential learning setting. Students' opinions of the program's efficacy and its contribution to entrepreneurial growth were assessed using descriptive analysis. The results show high levels of participant satisfaction, especially in areas pertaining to entrepreneurial confidence, and the development of interpersonal skills. The findings imply that by offering real-world exposure to entrepreneurship, incubator-based learning environments can successfully supplement conventional academic curriculum. The study provides suggestions for academic institutions looking to improve creativity in teaching and learning through entrepreneurship-driven educational programs.

Keywords: Teaching and Learning Innovation, Incubator-Based Learning, Experiential Learning, Higher Education, Accelerated Entrepreneurship Development Program (ACE)

Introduction

Students in universities are expected to enter the workforce that is in line with their field, study or qualification once they have completed their studies and become graduates. That is a perception that entrepreneurship will be the last resort for a career option. In addition, it is viewed that graduates who become entrepreneurs are those graduates who were having difficulties to secure employment. In Malaysia, graduate unemployment is still a problem, particularly for recent graduates who typically favour paid work over self-employment (Rahim & Abdullah, 2026). Thus, to encourage graduates to think about entrepreneurship as a career option, higher education institutions have responded by offering entrepreneurship

education. It is important to note that a career as an entrepreneur is attractive and of course, challenging; thus, these challenges would help to develop graduates to become more competitive and capable individuals (DOSM, 2022).

As the Malaysian government has recognised the potential of entrepreneurship, initiatives to encourage and nurture students in the field of entrepreneurship has been implemented. Development plans like The Malaysia Education Development Plan (Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia, PPPM) 2016–2020 laid the foundation, followed by the Action Plan for Integrated Entrepreneurship in Higher Education Institutions (Pelan Tindakan Keusahawanan Institusi Pendidikan Tinggi, PTK IPT) 2021–2025, launched in February 2019 by the Ministry of Higher Education (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi, KPT) Malaysia Gazette (2022). The importance of producing more entrepreneur-graduates has been highlighted by the Deputy Prime Minister (Kosmo, 2025). The Deputy Prime Minister stressed that universities should be able to produce job-creators (entrepreneurs) rather than just producing job seekers. He also stressed on the urgency to encourage graduates to become entrepreneurs.

In addition, this is important considering the current situation where the socio-economic issues are quite challenging such as layoffs, substandard salaries and securing a permanent employment, as well as urban poverty. Thus, entrepreneurial skills offer a good solution to address those issues and to improve the socio-economic well-being of families, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, and at the same time contribute towards the national economic growth. Universities facilitate venture creation through accelerators and incubators thereby sustaining the deal that could attract venture-capital and to be able to drive entrepreneurial growth (World Economic Forum, 2020).

From the Malaysian perspective, media reports have also highlighted a gap in essential soft skills among Malaysian graduates. Wong (2024), the Group Editor-in-Chief and Executive Director of The Star Media Group stressed that graduates often lack competencies such as communication, innovative minds, and leadership capability. Therefore, to meet the demands of today's complex industries, graduates are not supposed to be only technically skilled, but graduates are required to be adaptable, critical thinkers and capable of solving problems creatively (Abdul Roni, 2024). Consequently, educational institutions like universities must respond strategically and proactively. Therefore, the curricula need to be updated as this is vital to remain relevant towards the evolving societal and industry needs. Graduates must be equipped with future-ready skills through academic programs, alternative pathways, or Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs (Berita RTM, 2025). Innovations in university teaching and learning are therefore essential to prepare students for successful careers, ensuring they possess the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Thus, universities should play a crucial role in enhancing innovation and entrepreneurship. By providing resources, facilities and programs related to talent development, these will create conditions and develop a generation that advance ideas and manages to support practical application.

Accelerated Entrepreneurship Development Program (ACE)

The Accelerated Entrepreneurship Development Program (ACE) was established to generate graduates that are competitive and holistic. This program turns classroom theory into real-world experience by giving students a platform to run actual businesses on campus. The ACE

program is more than just a place to do business; it's an inventive method of practical learning integrated into a distinctive entrepreneurial incubator.

This program is where theory meets reality, as the students are no longer just learning about business concepts in the classroom, but are actively managing real operations, including marketing, finance, customer service, and daily business activities. Entering its third year of operation, officially launched in January 2023. The program has trained over 15 student groups in running businesses ranging from food and beverages to phone accessories (Jawatankuasa the Port, 2025). Beyond serving as a training platform, The ACE has successfully assisted in generating income for students and has become a catalyst for a growing and vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem on campus.

Literature Review

This section examines innovations in teaching and learning, as well as the role of incubators in fostering entrepreneurship education.

Teaching and Learning Innovation

Generally, innovation is adjusting or attempting strategies that are motivated by creativity and flexibility. Innovation in education is not limited by a particular definition or formula. Rather, it demonstrates an attitude of openness and readiness to question the status quo, reconsider conventional approaches, and investigate various approaches to engage students, present material, and gauge success (Thompson, 2024). Project-Based Learning (PBL) is one of the primary instances of innovation in education. This method assists students in identifying a real-world issue and coming up with a solution. As a result, students can practice their problem-solving skills, creativity, and teamwork. One excellent illustration of the PBL method is the Port (ACE Incubator).

Innovation in higher education can take many different forms, such as enhancing learning outcomes, creating new skills, expanding access, tackling outside issues, and utilizing technology. These forms frequently overlap since strategies used to achieve one objective can also help achieve another. The adoption and impact of innovations vary according on their context, and they can come from people, organizations, professional associations, or system-wide policies (Science Direct, 2026).

Education and Incubators

As higher education institutions strive to enhance students' creativity, opportunity recognition, and problem-solving skills, entrepreneurship education has expanded considerably. University-based incubators minimize financial risk while providing students with a nurturing learning environment in which to develop business ideas (Jones et al., 2021). Particularly in the context of the gig economy, a career in entrepreneurship offers many recent graduates a good alternative to regular employment.

Several studies have examined the role of incubators in entrepreneurship education. Research conducted by Arviv and Levi-Keren (2023) highlighted that incubator would be able to create a dual effect on professional development where it can support both practical skill acquisition and personal growth. Zvirbule et al. (2024) focused on teaching entrepreneurship and innovation through university incubators, while Jones et al. (2021) investigated situated

learning in business incubators, demonstrating how such environments encourage students to engage as real entrepreneurs.

Students attached to the incubator in entrepreneurship program will be provided with access to mentors, funding, and professional network resources that serve as powerful learning tools when integrated into academic programs. Similarly, a study by Kameas et al. (2024) highlighted that the incubator program would transform postgraduate education through challenge-based learning, digital innovation, and community engagement. A notable output of this program is the Project-Based Teaching Incubator, where top students' projects are co-designed with faculty to align new digital courses with EU priorities, including green, inclusive, and digitally fit initiatives.

Additionally, Jones et al. (2021) noted that the COVID-19 epidemic has made job difficulties worse and that traditional graduate positions are declining, making entrepreneurship a more viable career route. In this regard, university-based incubators provide a low-risk setting for students to consider entrepreneurial endeavours, giving them the knowledge and expertise they need to succeed in their future businesses.

The Research Objectives of this Study are as Follows

a) To investigate how the incubator program supports the development of competencies in students.
b) To provide recommendations for improving entrepreneurship education and incubation strategies to better prepare graduates for the workforce and self-employment.

Methodology

This section discusses the data collection process and the questionnaire.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected using online questionnaires (Google Forms) distributed to participants of The Port program between 2023 and 2025. The data collection process required additional time, as some participants had already graduated. To supplement the survey data, simple observations were conducted to understand the day-to-day operations and interactions among program participants. Additionally, informal interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and engagement with the program. The total number of respondents was only 34. This is because only those who participated in the program were eligible to answer the questions. However, future research should extend this study by involving larger samples across multiple institutions, thereby enabling broader generalisation. This is in line with the recommendation suggested by Rahim et al., (2026).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire had 3 sections, where the first section collected demographic information from the respondents. Meanwhile, the second section focused on evaluation items related to the ACE Entrepreneurship Incubator Program, including participants' perceptions of the program's effectiveness and the impact of specific subjects taken. This question was important to identify which subjects are important to assess the influence of curricular

innovations. The last section focused on the participants' suggestions to improve the ACE program and the overall incubator experience.

Results of Analysis

This section discusses the demographics of the respondents and the mean scores for evaluation items related to the ACE Entrepreneurship Incubator Program.

Demographics of the Respondents

Table 4.1 shows the demographics of the respondents whereby a total of **34 respondents** participated in the study. In terms of **age**, most respondents were **20 years old (8 respondents or 23.5%)** and **21 years old (7 respondents)**, followed by **24 years old (6 respondents)** and **19 years old (5 respondents)**. The minority of respondents were **23 years old (3 respondents)** and **25 years and above (3 respondents)**, while only **2 respondents were 22 years old**. Regarding the **programme of study**, most respondents were enrolled in the **Diploma programme (22 respondents or 64.7%),** and **12 respondents were pursuing a bachelor's degree** (or 35.3%). In terms of the year the respondents joined the program, most respondents joined the programme in 2024 (13 or 38.2%) and 2025 (13 or 38.2%), while 8 respondents joined in 2023. Technically, the number of participants was quite low in 2023 because the program has just started and the awareness of the program was not high compared to 2024 and 2025 respectively.

Subjects related to teaching and learning innovation

Meanwhile, for subjects that have been taken related to entrepreneurship, as shown in Table 4.1. The largest proportion of respondents had taken **Fundamentals of Entrepreneurship (20 respondents or 58.8%),** followed by **Fundamentals of Management (15 respondents)**. A minority had taken **Principles of Entrepreneurship (5 respondents or just 14.7%)** and **Introduction to Management (4 respondents),** these are among the subjects that are closely related to enhance the entrepreneurial skills among students.

Table 4.1
Demographics of respondents

Category	Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	19	5	14.7
	20	8	23.5
	21	7	20.6
	22	2	5.9
	23	3	8.8
	24	6	17.6
	25 and above	3	8.8
Programme	Diploma	22	64.7
	Bachelor's Degree	12	35.3
Subjects Taken	MGT162 – Fundamentals of Management	15	44.1
	ENT300 – Fundamentals of Entrepreneurship	20	58.8
	ENT530 – Principles of Entrepreneurship	5	14.7
	MGT400 – Introduction to Management	4	11.8
Year Joined	2023	8	23.5
	2024	13	38.2
	2025	13	38.2

Program Awareness

Awareness can be defined as a degree of customer familiarity with a brand and is linked to the strength of a brand node or memory trace as reflected in the capacity of customers to remember or identify a brand under various conditions Horsfall et.al (2020, as cited by Hussin & Hishan (2022). Hence, awareness of the ACE program is equally important because if the students are aware of the program, it could help them to participate, and the program will be more successful and sustained. As shown in Figure 4.1, the findings indicated that friends or peers were the primary source of information. This shows the importance of word-of-mouth communication among students. The majority of respondents reported learning about the program through friends or peers (73.5%), making it the most influential channel for disseminating information about the PORT Program. This suggested that peer recommendations play a significant role in promoting program awareness among students. The second most common sources of information were lecturers (8 participants or 23.5%) and social media platforms such as Instagram and others (23.5%). These results indicated that academic staff and digital platforms also contribute substantially to informing students about the program. Lecturers may introduce the program during classes or academic consultations, while social media likely serves as an accessible platform for program promotion and updates. A smaller proportion of respondents indicated that they learned about the program through posters or banners (5 or 14.7%), suggesting that traditional promotional materials still play a supportive role in raising awareness. Additionally, program briefings or official information sessions (3 or 8.8%) were reported as another source of information, although their impact appears to be relatively limited compared to peer influence and digital communication channels. Only a small number of respondents became aware of the program through academic advisors (2 or 5.9%) and the UiTM website (2 or 5.9%), indicating that formal institutional communication channels were less frequently cited as sources of information.

Overall, as shown in Figure 4.1, the findings suggested that **peer influence is the dominant factor in spreading awareness of the PORT Program**. This is not unusual, as several studies have highlighted the significant role of peer influence in shaping individuals' decisions and behaviours, including **decision-making processes (Makgosa & Mohube, 2007)** and **students' motivation (Vit et al., 2025; Warsi et al., 2025).** This is followed by **lecturers and social media** as additional sources of information. These findings implied that program promotion strategies may benefit from leveraging **student networks and digital platforms,** while also strengthening **institutional communication channels**, such as the university website and academic advisory systems, to enhance program visibility.

Additionally, program promotion strategies could consider utilising **TikTok**, as it has become a widely used platform among Malaysian youth and young adults (Balaraman et al., 2025). It is important to note that by incorporating TikTok into promotional efforts, it may help to increase outreach and engagement with potential participants

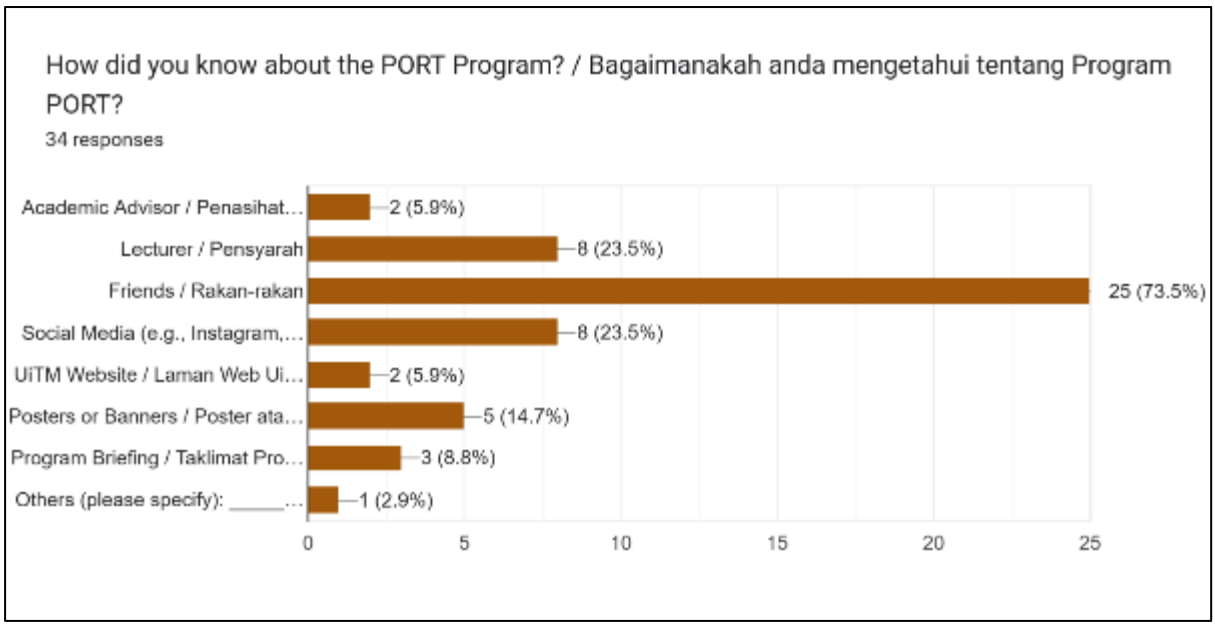

Figure 4.1 How respondents knew about the ACE Incubator Program

Descriptive Analysis

Table 4.2 shows the mean scores for evaluation items related to the ACE Entrepreneurship Incubator Program.

The Evaluation Items Related - ACE Entrepreneurship Incubator Program

The mean values range from 4.0 to 4.6 indicates a high level of agreement and satisfaction among respondents (a 5-point Likert scale where 5 = strongly agree).

Table 4.2

Mean Scores - ACE Entrepreneurship Incubator Program

Construct and item	**Mean**
How satisfied are you with your overall experience in the entrepreneurship incubator (ACE).	4.4
To what extent did the "The ACE Incubator Program" meet your expectations?	4.3
How relevant was the incubator program to your entrepreneurial goals?	4.5
How would you rate the support provided by the incubator facilitators and mentors?	4.3
Were the resources (workspace) provided by the incubator “ACE” sufficient for your business development?	4.2
How likely are you to recommend this incubator program (ACE) to other students?	4.5
Do you think joining this program helps with developing your interpersonal skills?	4.6
Do you think this program helps towards generating income?	4.6
The ACE program is aligned with teaching innovation, because it provides the environment and support systems that encourage creative thinking and problem-solving.	4.5
How practical and applicable was the content of "The ACE" program to your business.	4.4
Did the program help you to develop or refine your business objective	4.3
Did "The ACE" program improve your confidence in starting or running a business?	4.4
Do you feel more prepared to launch or grow your business after completing the program	4.0

Were you encouraged to reflect on your learning and entrepreneurial journey throughout the program?	4.2
Innovative teaching approaches were used throughout the incubator.	4.2
Do you consider the incubator to be more innovative compared to other academic courses?	4.2

This first item measured on the overall satisfaction of the ACE program where the mean is 4.4. This result indicated that respondents are highly satisfied with their overall experience in the ACE page. A mean score higher than 4 indicates that the majority of participants believe the program offers worthwhile exposure, educational opportunities, and real-world entrepreneurship experience. This high degree of satisfaction suggests that the incubator program is well-planned and efficiently run, fulfilling the expectations of students. Participants likely benefited from the activities, guidance, and business development opportunities provided during the program.

Program Meeting Expectations has an average score of 4.3. This item evaluates if the ACE Incubator Program fulfilled the participants' expectations. The mean score of 4.3 indicates that many respondents found the program to be above their expectations. This suggested that the program's delivery, content, and organization were all in line with what students anticipated when they joined. However, given the score is slightly lower than some other categories, it may indicate minor differences between expectations and actual experience, possibly in areas like business exposure or networking opportunities.

"Relevance to Entrepreneurial Goals" had a score of 4.5. This is one of the highest scores in the table, indicating that respondents believed the incubator program was highly relevant to their entrepreneurial and business goals. This suggests that the program's practical knowledge, business guidance, and entrepreneurial skills will likely immediately benefit students who want to start or grow a business.

The next item, support from facilitators and mentors mean score is 4.3. This item evaluates the quality of support provided by incubator facilitators and mentors. A mean score of 4.3 indicated that participants perceived the guidance, mentoring, and support from program facilitators positively. It is important that mentorship is a crucial component of incubator programs because mentors provide business advice, industry insights, and practical feedback. Yani et., (2024) found that mentorship proves to be a significant element in stimulating success. Resources and workspace mean recorded as 4.2. Among the items, the mean score is low. It still suggests a favourable assessment, though. The findings indicated that while most respondents thought the workspace and resources offered by the incubator were usually adequate, there might be potential for improvement. Despite the rating's minor decline, general satisfaction with the facilities offered is still reflected.

Meanwhile, 4.5 is the mean score “How likely are you to recommend this incubator program (ACE) to other students?”; where the participants are highly inclined to suggest the ACE Incubator program to other students, according to this high mean score. Recommendation intention is frequently employed in program evaluation as a measure of participant satisfaction and program performance. A score of 4.5 suggested that the program has created strong positive experiences, and participants see value in encouraging others to join.

Development of Interpersonal Skills, (mean = 4.6). This item received high mean score, indicating that participants strongly agree that the program helps develop interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skills may include Communication skills, Teamwork and collaboration, Leadership abilities. Networking skills, Confidence in presenting business ideas. This result showed that the incubator program not only focuses on business knowledge but also supports personal and professional development, which is essential for successful entrepreneurship.
Contribution To Generating Income (mean = 4.6). This item received one of the highest mean scores, indicating that respondents strongly believed that the ACE program helps them generate income through their business activities. This suggests that the incubator program provides students with practical opportunities to apply entrepreneurial skills in real business situations, such as selling products or services, managing finances, and identifying market opportunities. Alignment with innovation and creative thinking with the mean score of 4.5 indicated that respondents strongly agree that the ace program supports innovation and encourages creative thinking and problem-solving. Such environment is important because innovation is the key element of successful entrepreneurship.

Practicality and applicability of program content, (mean = 4.4). This item measures how useful and applicable the program content is to participants' businesses. The mean score of 4.4 indicated that respondents find the program content highly practical and relevant. This suggests that the ACE program provides hands-on learning experiences, real business exposure, and applicable entrepreneurial knowledge rather than purely theoretical learning. Development of Business Objectives (mean = 4.3). This item evaluates whether the program helps participants develop or refine their business objectives. The mean score of 4.3 indicated that respondents agree that the program contributes positively to clarifying and strengthening their business goals.

Improvement in confidence to start or run a business, (mean = 4.4). This result indicated that the ACE program significantly improves participants' confidence in starting or managing a business. Entrepreneurial confidence is essential because starting a business often involves risk, uncertainty, and decision-making. The item "Do you feel more prepared to launch or grow your business after completing the program" recorded a mean score of 4.0, indicated that respondents agree that the program helped prepare them to start or expand their business. A mean value of 4.0 suggested a positive perception among participants, although the level of agreement is slightly lower compared to some other items in the evaluation.

The item "Were you encouraged to reflect on your learning and entrepreneurial journey throughout the program?" recorded a mean score of 4.2. This indicated that respondents generally agree that the ACE program encouraged them to reflect on their learning experiences and entrepreneurial development during the program. In addition, a mean score of 4.2 suggested that the program successfully promotes self-reflection among participants, which is a vital component in entrepreneurial learning. The item "innovative teaching approaches were used throughout the incubator" recorded a mean score of 4.2, indicating that respondents generally agree that the ACE incubator program implemented innovative and engaging teaching methods during the program. A mean score of 4.2 suggested that participants perceive the teaching approaches used in the program as creative, interactive, and different from traditional classroom learning.

The last item, "Do you consider the incubator to be more innovative compared to other academic courses?" recorded a mean score of 4.2, indicating that respondents agree that the incubator program is more innovative than traditional academic courses. A mean score of 4.2 suggested that participants perceived the ACE incubator program as offering a different and more dynamic learning experience compared to conventional classroom-based learning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study will add to the expanding body of knowledge about entrepreneurship. It illustrates how transformative teaching and learning experiences can be produced by integrating non-traditional learning venues into academic education. Additionally, it provides an idea that can be replicated by other universities who want to match academic coherence with entrepreneurial activity.

The positive answers show that the special teaching techniques included in the ACE are strongly supported. The ACE Program exhibits high levels of participant satisfaction, successfully fulfilling expectations and supporting entrepreneurial objectives. The curriculum promotes professional and personal growth, including chances for income generation, business planning, creativity, and people skills. Participants' confidence and readiness for entrepreneurial endeavours are enhanced by mentoring, real-world experiences, and creative instructional techniques. All things considered, the program offers a vibrant, encouraging, and useful environment that gives students the abilities and perspective required for prosperous business.

To evaluate the efficacy of entrepreneurial incubators, future studies could consider other factors such as marketing capacities, program satisfaction, mentorship, skill development, program evaluation, and innovation perception. Other kinds of analyses, such as regression and correlation, should also be considered. Additionally, qualitative research that allows for thematic or content analysis should be taken into consideration for future studies. Other than that, larger and more varied samples from various academic disciplines and institutions should be used in future research to enhance this study. This would facilitate more extensive generalization.

Acknowledgement

Some sections of this document were rephrased and refined using OpenAI's ChatGPT to improve clarity and language.

Project members of The Accelerated Entrepreneurship Development Program (ACE) program, UiTM Cawangan Johor.

Malaysian Academy of SME & Entrepreneurship Development (MASMED), Universiti Teknologi MARA.

Bahagian Penyelidikan Jaringan Industri & Alumni (BPJIA), UiTM Johor.

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