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Empowering Urban Communities through Social Entrepreneurship: Insights from University-Community-based Creative Arts Project

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ABSTRACT

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B40 urban communities in Malaysia, especially those in public housing projects (PPR), often have limited access to structured training and entrepreneurial opportunities that could improve their livelihoods. Social entrepreneurship has been recognized as a viable way to empower such communities by combining skills development with income-generating opportunities. In this context, universities and libraries can play a transformative role as partners in providing inclusive, lifelong learning opportunities and promoting community resilience. This article explores the outcomes of a joint college-community initiative, the Library X-Change Hub, which used creative arts as a medium for social entrepreneurship to empower the residents of B40 in Kuala Lumpur. The project was conducted between February and October 2025 and involved two workshops: Felting Fabric and Paper Quilling. The participants were primarily women (95%) from various age groups, with the majority of B40 residing in the PPR communities. Data was collected using questionnaires and feedback from participants. The results show that creative skills have improved, self-confidence has increased and awareness of entrepreneurship has been raised. The feedback reflected a high level of satisfaction and a desire for an extension of the workshop duration. By equipping participants with creative skills and entrepreneurial awareness, the initiative contributes to SDG 4 (Quality Education) by providing accessible, lifelong learning opportunities beyond formal schooling. At the same time, by strengthening community cohesion and creating spaces where knowledge and innovation are shared, the program supports SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) by promoting inclusive, resilient urban communities.

Keywords:

Social entrepreneurship; community empowerment; B40; creative arts; lifelong learning

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1. Introduction

Urban B40 communities in Kuala Lumpur face additional constraints in terms of skills development, market access and mobility. When higher education institutions (HEIs) engage with communities mutually through non-formal, co-developed projects, they can accelerate SDG 4 while ensuring shared decision-making and sustainable relevance [1]. Libraries are increasingly positioning themselves as civic participation and innovation infrastructure, bridging audience participation and civic engagement and providing trusted, nearby spaces for inclusive design and co-creation. This repositioning helps to mediate power, access and the translation of community problems into actionable knowledge [2,3]. Artistic approaches are particularly well suited to building inclusive skills as they combine technical and socio-emotional skills while maintaining engagement through contextualized facilitation [4].

A community-embedded perspective on entrepreneurship emphasizes that outcomes are shaped by local networks, culture, skills, and the degree of community control over business decisions, not just individual characteristics [5]. In the field of social entrepreneurship, a three-dimensional model - pace of change, scale of change, and degree of control over the social enterprise - helps distinguish early-stage lifestyle and personal development changes from more profound structural changes and existential shifts, providing a lens for evaluating pilot initiatives such as arts and crafts programs among B40 residents [6]. Evidence from arts-inspired and co-produced projects shows that there are robust mechanisms for engagement, skill-building and broader perspectives of impact, particularly when facilitation and design are contextually appropriate [4]. Research on creative aging highlights that the quality of facilitation is a critical factor in sustaining older adults' participation, with workshops acting as sites of adaptation, wellbeing and social value creation [7]. Community arts research also points to identity restoration mechanisms - control through coping, connectedness and acceptance, and overcoming personal challenges - that lead to positive self-esteem and a willingness to try new roles, which for marginalized groups is an essential prerequisite for entrepreneurial agency [8]. In the context of low-income housing in Kuala Lumpur, participatory design has highlighted the centrality of residents' voices in shaping relevant interventions and infrastructure, demonstrating how co-creation can determine the path from craft to market [9].

2. Methodology

The Library X-Change Hub was conducted from February to October 2025 as a partnership between the university, library and community with residents of two public housing projects in Kuala Lumpur - PPR Desa Rejang and PPR Seri Semarak. Two workshops formed the core of the program: Felt Fabric and Paper Quilling, attended by a total of 41 participants from different generations, with about 95 percent of the participants being women. Each workshop combined practical technical instruction with an introduction to entrepreneurship, embedding craft production in a discussion of product quality, pricing, packaging and accessible sales channels suitable for low-capital home-based ventures.

3. Results

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of participants who attended the two Library X-Change workshops, namely Fabrik Felt and Paper Quilling. A total of 41 participants joined the sessions, with the majority being women (95%). The age distribution indicates active engagement across different age groups, with the largest representation among participants aged 30–49 years (49%).

Table 1

Demographic profile of participants in Library X-Change workshops

Demographic	Fabrik Felt (n=19)	Paper Quilling (n=22)	Total (%)
Category			
Gender:	18	21	39 (95%)
Women	1	1	2 (5%)
Gender: Men			
Age: 18–29	4	5	9 (22%)
Age: 30–49	9	11	20 (49%)
Age: 50+	6	6	12 (29%)

As can be seen from Table 1, the demographic breakdown shows that the workshops successfully attracted a diverse age group, highlighting the relevance of creative activities across all generations. Although male participation was minimal, the overall participation reflects a strong interest in craft learning programs, particularly among women in the community. Participation patterns indicated that proximate, low-cost creative activities hosted in a trusted library setting resonated strongly with B40 residents, enabling women and older adults to participate in non-formal skills training that aligned with daily routines. This reflects evidence that facilitation and inclusive formats are critical for initiating and sustaining creative engagement among older adults and marginalized groups [7], especially when programs are tailored to the context and abilities of participants and enable identity reconstruction through a safe, empowering environment [8].

Prior to the Fabric Felt workshop, participants were asked to rate their prior knowledge of craft on a scale of 1 (Not knowledgeable at all) to 5 (Very knowledgeable). Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses.

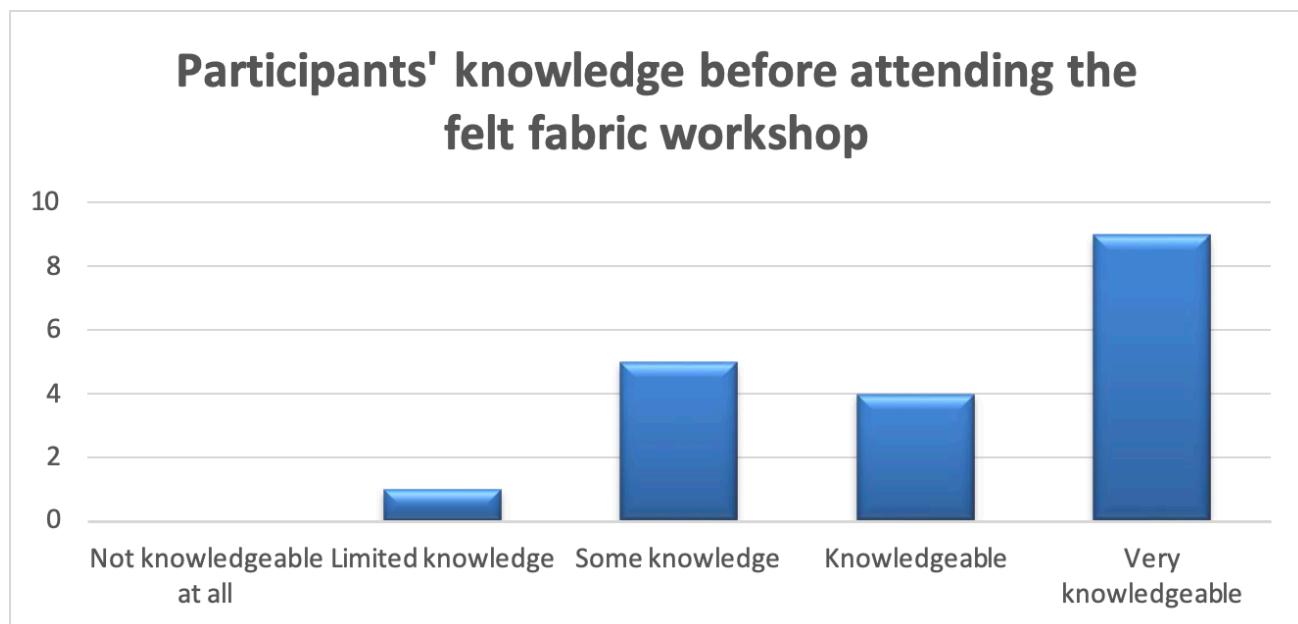


Fig. 1. Participants' knowledge before attending the felt fabric workshop

The results shown in Figure 1 show that the participants entered the workshop with a relatively high level of basic knowledge. While only two participants rated themselves at level 2, the majority rated their knowledge at levels 4 and 5 (four and nine participants respectively). This suggests that many participants already had a certain level of familiarity with felting techniques, although the workshop provided an opportunity to strengthen and expand their skills.

After the workshop, participants were again asked to rate their knowledge. Figure 2 illustrates the responses after the workshop.

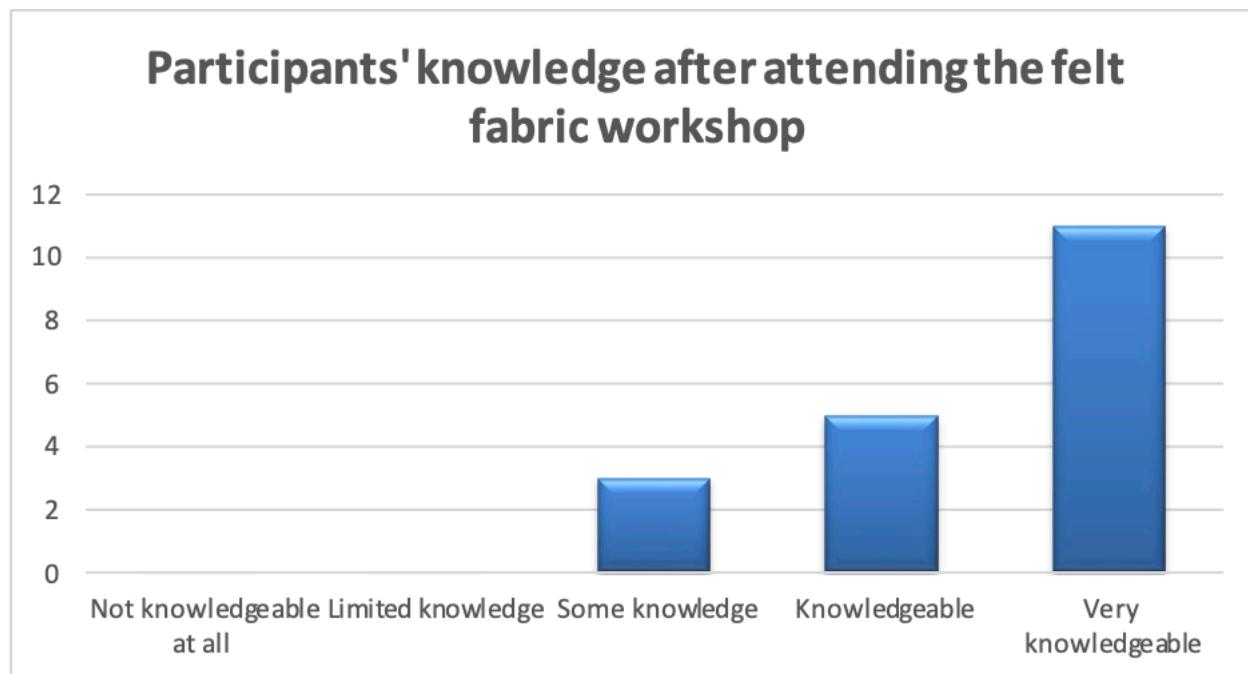


Fig. 2. Participants' knowledge after attending the felt fabric workshop

The results presented in Figure 2 show a clear upward shift in self-reported knowledge. Most participants rated themselves at Level 4 (five participants) or Level 5 (eleven participants), with only three participants at Level 3, indicating that the workshop was effective in improving participants' confidence and understanding by consolidating prior knowledge and introducing new techniques that brought participants closer to mastery. Prior to the Paper Quilling workshop, participants assessed their knowledge of the craft. Figure 3 shows their assessments.

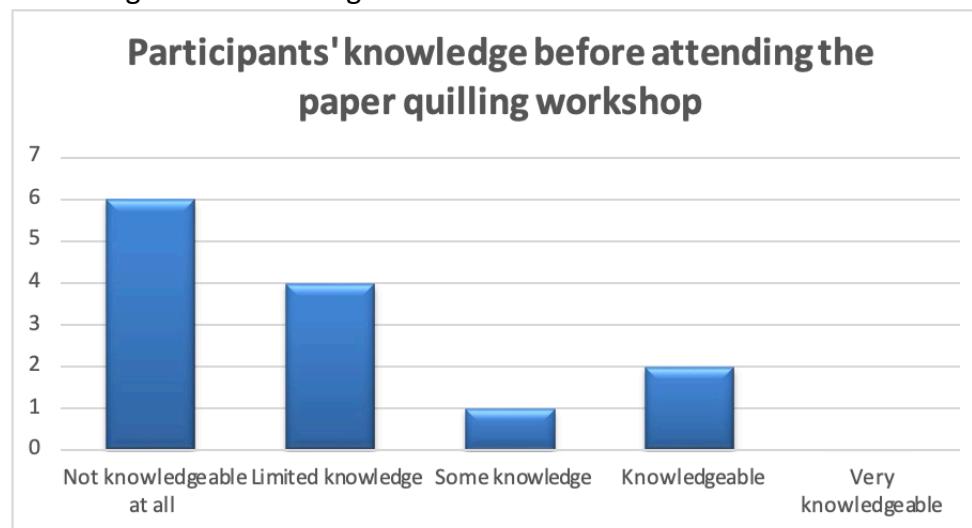


Fig. 3. Participants' knowledge before attending the paper quilling workshop

The responses shown in Figure 3 indicate that knowledge of paper quilling prior to the session was generally low. Six participants indicated Level 1 (not knowledgeable at all) and four Level 2, while only a few participants indicated moderate knowledge (one at Level 3 and two at Level 4). This

pattern highlights the novelty of the craft for most participants and emphasizes the role of the workshop in introducing them to an unfamiliar skill. After the paper quilling session, participants reassessed their knowledge. Figure 4 shows the results.

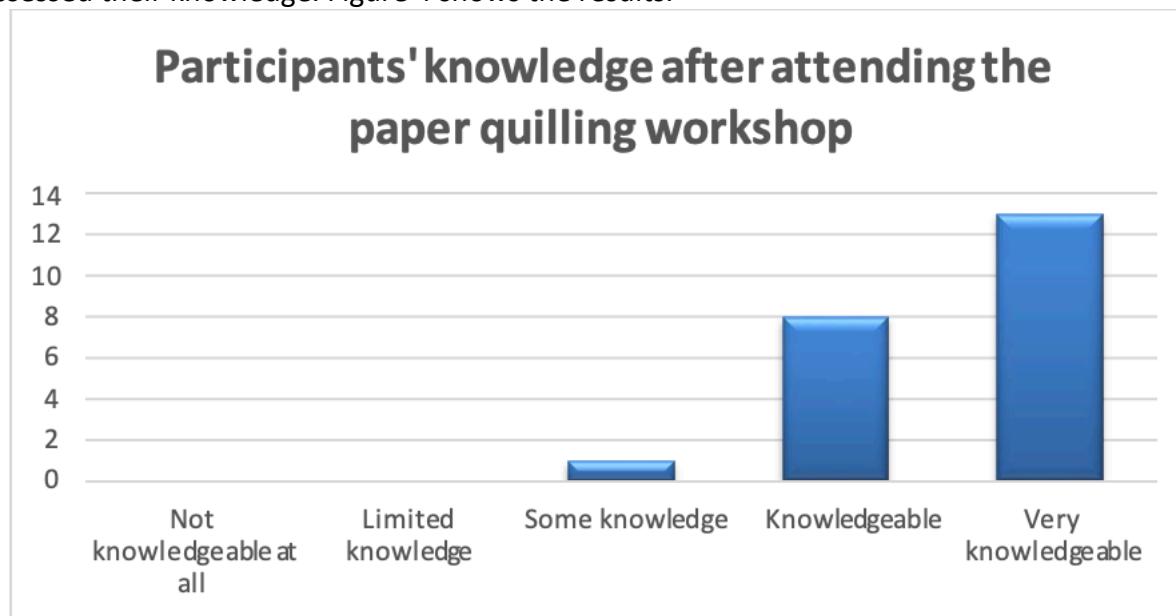


Fig. 4. Participants' knowledge after attending the paper quilling workshop

As can be seen in Figure 4, the distribution clearly shifts towards a higher level of self-reported knowledge. Thirteen participants rated themselves at level 5, another eight at level 4 and one at level 3. This change shows that the workshop had a strong impact on technical understanding and confidence, especially considering how little prior knowledge they had before the workshop.

The comparisons before and after the workshop for Felt Fabric and Paper Quilling show a consistent pattern of knowledge gain among participants. In the case of Felt Fabric, many participants had already entered the workshop with a degree of familiarity. Nevertheless, they were able to deepen their skills and increase their confidence, which is reflected in a higher self-assessment. For Paper Quilling, basic skills were much lower, but the workshop led to dramatic improvements, with almost all participants moving into the higher categories of understanding.

Taken together, these results suggest that the Library XChange Hub workshops were effective in reaching participants across different starting points, whether by consolidating existing skills or introducing an entirely new craft. They also show that the workshop model not only improves technical skills but also builds confidence and willingness to pursue further creative or entrepreneurial opportunities.

Figure 5 illustrates participants' satisfaction with the two workshops. Respondents were asked to rate the sessions in terms of relevance, quality of facilitation, skills gained and confidence using a five-point scale.



Fig. 5. Participant satisfaction ratings

As can be seen from Figure 5, the results show a consistently high level of satisfaction, with over 88% of participants awarding the highest score in all categories. The quality of facilitation received the highest rating (95%), while the workshops also scored well for boosting self-confidence (91%) and perceived relevance (90%). These results suggest that the workshops were not only well received, but also effective in equipping participants with new skills and boosting their confidence.

Table 2 shows the feedback from the Fabric Felt workshop participants. The comments indicate both practical suggestions for improving workshop delivery and a wider interest in expanding similar programs.

Table 2

Participant feedback for Fabric Felt workshop

Feedback Theme	Number of Responses	Example Comments
Request for cooking- based workshops	2	Cadangan untuk buat latihan memasak seperti baking
Provision of physical notes	1	Beri nota fizikal
Longer workshop duration	1	Lanjutkan masa bengkel
More skill-based programs	5	Perbanyakkan lagi program kemahiran
Enjoyable activities, want more similar	4	Buat lagi aktiviti yang menarik seperti ini

As shown in Table 2, the strongest theme raised by five participants was the call for more competency-based programs, indicating participants' enthusiasm for hands-on learning opportunities. In addition, four participants highlighted the fun nature of the workshop and expressed a desire for more activities of a similar nature. Two participants suggested introducing cooking workshops, while others recommended providing physical notes and extending the duration of the workshop. Overall, the feedback indicates that the Fabric Felt workshop was both engaging and inspiring and has created a demand for a wider range of creative and skill-building programs.

Table 3 shows the qualitative feedback from the Paper Quilling workshop participants. The comments reflect participants' enjoyment of the program as well as their recognition of its personal, social and even economic value.

Table 3
Participant feedback for Paper Quilling workshop

Feedback Theme	Number of Responses	Example Comments
Program was enjoyable	4	Program sangat menyeronokkan
Continuation of craft-based healing programs	1	Semoga berterusan program melibatkan kraftangan sebagai salah satu cara untuk healing
Request for more hands-on craft activities	3	Buat lagi kerja tangan yang lain
Useful and knowledge-sharing	4	Program yang memberi manfaat dan pengetahuan
Potential for income generation	1	Boleh menjana pendapatan

As shown in Table 3, most responses described the program as enjoyable and useful, with four participants highlighting the value of the program in terms of providing new knowledge and four others describing it as enjoyable. Several participants also emphasized the high quality and usefulness of the workshop and expressed a desire for more similar hands-on activities. One participant mentioned the therapeutic potential, another the applicability for community activities and another the potential as a source of income. Overall, the feedback suggests that the Paper Quilling workshop was well received as it was fun, provided practical skills and offered opportunities for wider application.

In both workshops, participants reported significant technical advances in felting and quilling methods, improved finishing and quality control, and an increase in creative problem solving as they adapted their designs and recovered from mistakes, an interweaving of technical and socio-emotional skills that is consistent with the findings of the artistic study [2]. Participants' self-confidence increased as they were validated by their peers. This is consistent with the mechanisms identified in the arts community: connectedness, acceptance and overcoming personal challenges [8]. Entrepreneurial awareness increased at an introductory level: participants identified micro-selling opportunities such as community bazaars, school events and peer-to-peer digital channels (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook), but also requested more in-depth modules on branding, costing, packaging and basic digital marketing. These requests are consistent with the documented constraints on artisanal livelihoods, limited capital, marketing gaps, competition and policy hurdles, and highlight the need for funding, marketing and structured market access to turn skills into income [11]. Satisfaction was high (majority 5/5). Qualitative feedback emphasized the accessible facilitation, peer support, and welcoming environment of the library - characteristics consistent with organizations that connect audiences and community engagement [5].

4. Discussions

Building on the clear knowledge gain demonstrated in both workshops, the Library XChange Hub can be seen as more than a training exercise. It acted as a catalyst to help participants strengthen their craft skills, develop self-confidence and awaken their entrepreneurial curiosity. The results of the Library X-Change Hub confirm that short, arts-based workshops in a trusted library environment can act as skills catalysts rather than full business incubators. Participants quickly gained technical

skills in felting and quilling as well as increased confidence and peer-supported problem solving. These findings are consistent with the literature on arts-informed inquiry and community arts [2,8]. These findings illustrate how creative arts programs can simultaneously develop technical and socio-emotional skills that enable participants to take pride in their work and see themselves as makers.

Libraries can be positioned as integrative innovation centers that combine public engagement (learning and creation) with civic engagement (co-creation, showcasing, and sales). This can take the form of display or sales corners, rotating pop-ups and peer-led demonstrations within the learning sequence, a role differentiation that can already be seen in some non-profit arts and culture organizations that seek to move beyond passive consumption to civic contribution [13]. At the same time, co-creation processes run the risk of reproducing power asymmetries. Program governance should therefore include resident participation in decision-making and structured consultation practices to ensure that less audible voices determine the goals, evaluation and norms for revenue sharing. Urban co-creation research highlights this as a necessary ethical consideration [14]. In practice, this could mean including community representatives in steering groups, using transparent criteria for product selection and pricing, and incorporating reflective forums to align promotion and market interactions with community values [15].

A shared infrastructure also offers the opportunity to improve both cost efficiency and quality. Shared procurement, shared tools, and collective branding can increase profit margins while reinforcing prosocial norms. This is consistent with a community-oriented view of entrepreneurship, where outcomes are influenced by local structures, networks and culture, not just individual characteristics [16]. Such arrangements can also support a psychologically safe and empowering environment, which is essential for building trust and developing identity. Research in community arts suggests that social connectedness and structured challenge are mechanisms through which participants maintain engagement and take on new roles [17]. To this end, facilitators can embed peer critique, quality circles, and micro-mentoring into cohorts, as these approaches enhance technical improvement while promoting psychosocial gains that have been shown to support participation of both older adults and youth from low-income backgrounds when guided by experienced professionals [18].

5. Conclusions

The Library XChange Hub illustrates how universities and libraries can empower residents of B40 cities through co-produced arts-inspired programs, fostering creative skills, confidence and entrepreneurial awareness. In line with research on community arts and arts-informed knowledge mobilization, the workshops provided safe, supportive spaces that fostered technical learning and socio-emotional growth [2,8].

By embedding the workshops in a community hub, the program bridged audience and community engagement, creating an inclusive urban innovation infrastructure [5]. Sustainable college governance that embraces the SDGs, invests in knowledge management and upholds the ethic of co-creation will be critical to scaling up impact. With such support initiatives, the Library XChange Hub can extend its contribution beyond SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) to SDG 1 (no poverty) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) by translating creative participation into meaningful livelihood opportunities while protecting community voice and agency [3,12].

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