Building Innovation Readiness for Future-Ready National Events: An Exploratory Evaluation of Creative Thinking and Smart Event Training in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Public-sector event management increasingly requires capabilities extending beyond operational coordination to include visitor-centred innovation, creative problem-solving and digital readiness. This study evaluates immediate participant perceptions of an innovation-oriented executive education programme delivered to officers associated with Malaysia's Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC).

Design/methodology/approach: An exploratory descriptive evaluation was conducted using aggregated survey findings from 33 respondents attending a 1.5-day programme, *Designing Future-Ready National Events: Creative Thinking & Innovation Lab for MOTAC*, held on 13–14 May 2026. The programme integrated Design Thinking, Visitor Journey Mapping, SCAMPER, collaborative exercises and smart event concepts. Six programme evaluation indicators, selected response percentages and summarised qualitative feedback were examined.

Findings: Mean programme ratings ranged from 4.82 to 4.91 on a five-point scale. Facilitator effectiveness and willingness to recommend the programme received the highest ratings (4.91). The report indicated that 91% strongly agreed they understood Design Thinking, 91% strongly agreed that Visitor Journey Mapping was important, 85% agreed or strongly agreed that technology could improve event effectiveness, and 88% expressed readiness to explore digital technologies.

Research limitations/implications: The evaluation used aggregated post-programme responses without baseline measures, individual-level data or follow-up outcomes. Findings therefore describe immediate reactions and self-reported readiness rather than causal learning effects or verified organisational transformation.

Practical implications: A staged framework is proposed linking experiential training, perceived innovation readiness, workplace experimentation, implementation and organisational learning.

Originality/value: The paper connects event innovation, experiential learning and public-sector capability development in a Malaysian national event management context while explicitly distinguishing participant satisfaction from demonstrated learning transfer.

Keywords: event management; Design Thinking; visitor experience; smart events; innovation readiness; public-sector innovation; executive education; Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

Planned events contribute to tourism development, destination positioning, cultural expression and social participation. Their significance extends beyond the successful delivery of scheduled activities to include the

experiences created for visitors, residents, businesses and participating institutions. Getz (2008) identifies event tourism as a significant field connecting planned events with destination development, while Getz and Page (2016) demonstrate the expansion of research into the economic, social and experiential dimensions of event tourism.

National events present particular challenges because they operate within public accountability structures while serving diverse audiences. Event organizers must manage logistics, stakeholder relationships, visitor expectations and public resources while responding to changing technologies and societal demands.

The evolution of event management therefore creates a need for professional capabilities extending beyond operational planning. Creative problem-solving, visitor-centred service design and digital innovation increasingly complement traditional coordination competencies.

Experience-oriented perspectives provide one explanation for this shift. Pine and Gilmore (1998) argue that experiences constitute a distinct form of economic value, while Lemon and Verhoef (2016) emphasise the importance of understanding interactions across the customer journey. Applied to national events, these perspectives suggest that successful event delivery requires attention to the complete visitor experience rather than the formal programme alone.

Innovation is also an organisational capability. Teece (2007) explains that dynamic capabilities involve sensing opportunities, seizing them and transforming organisational resources. In public administration, these processes may be constrained by formal procedures, institutional responsibilities and accountability requirements (Hartley, 2005; de Vries et al., 2016).

Executive education offers one mechanism for developing relevant capabilities. Experiential learning theory suggests that learning emerges through the interaction of experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Training that connects these processes with real professional challenges may help participants recognise opportunities for improvement.

However, the effectiveness of training must be assessed carefully. Baldwin and Ford (1988) demonstrate that learning transfer depends on training design, trainee characteristics and workplace conditions. Positive reactions to a training programme do not necessarily establish changes in workplace behaviour.

This distinction is important for short executive education programmes, which may introduce valuable concepts without providing sufficient time for sustained workplace implementation.

The present study evaluates the *Designing Future-Ready National Events: Creative Thinking & Innovation Lab for MOTAC* programme delivered by Azman Hashim International Business School (AHIBS), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM).

The programme was conducted on 13–14 May 2026 and introduced Design Thinking, Visitor Journey Mapping, SCAMPER and smart event concepts to officers associated with MOTAC.

The study addresses three research questions:

RQ1: How did participants evaluate the relevance, content, facilitation and perceived effectiveness of the programme?

RQ2: What did participants report concerning Design Thinking, Visitor Journey Mapping and technology readiness?

RQ3: How can the findings inform a conceptual framework for developing and evaluating public-sector event innovation capabilities?

The study contributes an exploratory evaluation of a public-sector event innovation intervention and proposes a framework for progressing from immediate training reactions toward workplace experimentation and organisational implementation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 National event management and experience creation

Event tourism research has increasingly recognised the strategic relationships among planned events, destinations, stakeholders and visitor experiences (Getz, 2008; Getz and Page, 2016).

Traditional operational indicators, including programme completion, attendance and logistical efficiency, remain important. Nevertheless, they do not fully explain how events create value for visitors or other stakeholders.

The experience economy perspective suggests that organisations create value partly through the design and delivery of memorable experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1998).

For event organisers, this requires attention to interactions before, during and after an event. Visitor expectations may be influenced by information availability, registration, transportation, accessibility, navigation, participation and post-event communication. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) provide a useful customer journey perspective by emphasising the cumulative influence of interactions across multiple stages and touchpoints. Service-dominant logic further suggests that value is developed through interactions among providers, users and other stakeholders rather than being determined solely by the service provider (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

These perspectives imply that national event management should incorporate visitor-centred planning and continuous improvement. However, public-sector events differ from purely commercial services because they may pursue cultural, social and policy objectives alongside visitor satisfaction. Innovation must therefore consider multiple stakeholder expectations and the broader public value of event activities.

2.2 Design Thinking as an innovation approach

Design Thinking is associated with human-centred problem-solving, experimentation and iterative solution development. Brown (2008) describes its application beyond product aesthetics to broader organisational processes, services and strategies. Design Thinking encourages practitioners to understand user needs, reconsider problem definitions, generate alternatives and develop solutions through iterative testing.

For event management, this approach can support the redesign of visitor services, communication processes, accessibility arrangements and engagement activities. The emphasis on human experience aligns with service design perspectives, which examine the relationships among users, service providers and organisational processes. Bitner et al. (2008) demonstrate how service blueprinting can make service processes visible and support innovation by identifying interactions and operational dependencies. In national event management, these methods can help organisers recognise that a visitor's experience is shaped by multiple connected services.

However, Design Thinking should not be treated as a guaranteed solution to complex organisational problems. Its effectiveness depends on appropriate facilitation, meaningful stakeholder input, implementation resources and opportunities for testing.

2.3 Visitor Journey Mapping

Visitor Journey Mapping provides a structured representation of interactions between visitors and event-related services. Its theoretical relevance can be understood through customer experience and service design research (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Bitner et al., 2008).

A journey map may identify stages such as event awareness, registration, arrival, participation, departure and post-event engagement. At each stage, event organisers can examine visitor expectations, possible barriers, service interactions and opportunities for improvement.

For example, a national festival may provide high-quality performances but still create a poor overall experience through confusing directions, limited accessibility information or inefficient entry procedures. Journey mapping encourages organisers to consider these interactions systematically. The MOTAC programme introduced Visitor

Journey Mapping as a practical method for developing more visitor-centred event concepts. However, understanding the importance of the technique does not establish the ability to independently produce or implement a high-quality journey map.

2.4 Structured creativity and SCAMPER

Creative thinking is an important component of innovation capability because organisations must generate alternatives before evaluating and implementing improvements.

SCAMPER provides a structured method of prompting new ideas through questions involving substitution, combination, adaptation, modification, alternative uses, elimination and rearrangement. Its relevance to event management lies in encouraging practitioners to reconsider established activities, formats and operational processes. Structured ideation can be particularly useful in formal organisations because it provides a repeatable method for generating proposals that can subsequently be documented and evaluated.

Nevertheless, idea generation is only one stage of innovation. Organisations must also assess feasibility, stakeholder implications, costs, risks and expected benefits. Dynamic capability theory provides a broader perspective by connecting opportunity recognition with the mobilisation and transformation of organisational resources (Teece, 2007). Thus, SCAMPER-based exercises should ideally be followed by solution prioritisation, prototyping and implementation planning.

2.5 Smart events and technology acceptance

Digital technologies create opportunities for improving event communication, registration, visitor engagement, operational monitoring and evaluation.

Potential applications include mobile information services, automated communication, visitor analytics, dashboards and AI-assisted administrative processes.

However, technology adoption depends on more than awareness of available tools. The Technology Acceptance Model proposes that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use influence individuals' attitudes toward information systems (Davis, 1989). The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology extends this perspective by considering performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

Subsequent extensions highlight the relevance of additional contextual and behavioural influences on technology acceptance (Venkatesh et al., 2012). These perspectives are useful for interpreting the MOTAC findings on technology perceptions. A participant may believe that technology improves event effectiveness while lacking the resources, technical support or organisational authority needed to implement it.

Rogers (2003) similarly emphasises that innovation diffusion involves a process of awareness, persuasion, decision, implementation and confirmation. Therefore, positive technology attitudes should be interpreted as potential antecedents of adoption rather than evidence that adoption has occurred.

2.6 Experiential learning in executive education

Experiential learning theory explains learning as a process involving experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Professional education programmes can apply this approach by allowing participants to examine realistic challenges and develop solutions through collaborative activities. Reflective practice is particularly relevant to professional learning because practitioners must often respond to uncertain or complex situations that cannot be addressed solely through established procedures (Schön, 1983).

The MOTAC programme incorporated interactive lectures, group discussions, Design Thinking Sprint, Visitor Journey Mapping, SCAMPER exercises and group presentations. These activities created opportunities for participants to connect innovation concepts with actual event management challenges. However, participation

in an experiential exercise does not necessarily demonstrate mastery of the underlying skill. Competency development requires opportunities for feedback, repeated practice and application in different contexts.

2.7 Training evaluation and learning transfer

Training evaluation is essential for determining whether professional development initiatives produce meaningful outcomes. Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2006) distinguish among participant reactions, learning, behaviour and results. This distinction is particularly important when interpreting post-programme satisfaction surveys.

Positive reactions may indicate that participants found a programme relevant or engaging. They do not independently establish improvements in knowledge, skills or workplace performance. Holton (1996) argues for a more comprehensive understanding of training evaluation and its relationship to organisational outcomes. Baldwin and Ford (1988) identify training design, trainee characteristics and the work environment as important influences on transfer. Blume et al. (2010), in a meta-analytic review, further demonstrate that training transfer is influenced by multiple individual and contextual factors.

Grossman and Salas (2011) identify practical factors supporting the transfer of training, while Salas et al. (2012) emphasise the importance of evidence-based training design and evaluation. Together, these studies suggest that training effectiveness should be evaluated across multiple stages. Immediate satisfaction is useful, but subsequent assessment should examine learning outcomes, practical application and organisational effects.

2.8 Public-sector innovation and organisational readiness

Innovation within public administration is influenced by organisational structures, institutional expectations and stakeholder relationships. Hartley (2005) discusses the distinctive characteristics of innovation in governance and public services. De Vries et al. (2016) systematically review public-sector innovation research and identify the importance of innovation types, antecedents and outcomes. Collaborative governance perspectives also emphasise the importance of stakeholder participation and institutional arrangements in public problem-solving (Ansell and Gash, 2008). Bryson et al. (2006) examine cross-sector collaboration and its implications for addressing complex public problems. These perspectives suggest that innovation training should not be isolated from organisational processes. Public-sector employees may develop creative ideas but face implementation barriers involving resources, authority, procurement, governance and coordination. Consequently, innovation readiness should be understood as a combination of individual capability and organisational support.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing on experiential learning, technology acceptance, innovation diffusion and training transfer, this paper proposes a five-stage framework for public-sector event innovation capability development.

Stage 1: Experiential innovation training. Participants are introduced to relevant methods and engage in structured learning activities.

Stage 2: Perceived learning and readiness. Participants develop initial understanding, recognise potential usefulness and express willingness to explore new practices.

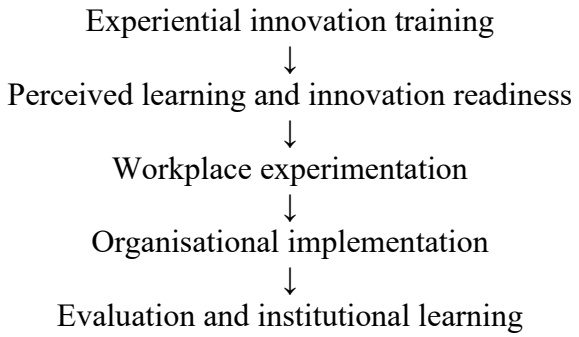
Stage 3: Workplace experimentation. Participants apply selected methods to actual event management problems.

Stage 4: Organisational implementation. Feasible innovations are integrated into operational practices, systems or services.

Stage 5: Evaluation and institutional learning. Implemented changes are assessed, refined and potentially scaled.

The framework integrates Kolb's (1984) experiential learning perspective with the training-transfer considerations of Baldwin and Ford (1988), the technology acceptance concepts of Davis (1989) and Venkatesh et al. (2003), and public-sector innovation perspectives developed by Hartley (2005) and de Vries et al. (2016).

Figure 1. Proposed event innovation capability-development framework



Contextual influences: leadership support, organisational resources, digital infrastructure, governance and stakeholder collaboration.

The framework is proposed rather than empirically validated.

The available MOTAC data mainly describe immediate reactions and selected self-reported perceptions relevant to Stage 2.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research design

The study uses an exploratory descriptive programme evaluation design.

The empirical analysis is based on aggregated participant feedback reported in the official MOTAC programme report.

The research does not employ an experimental or quasi-experimental design and does not attempt to establish causal training effects.

4.2 Programme context

The programme, *Designing Future-Ready National Events: Creative Thinking & Innovation Lab for MOTAC*, was conducted on 13–14 May 2026. It was delivered by AHIBS, UTM, as a 1.5-day professional development intervention for officers associated with MOTAC. The programme aimed to encourage innovation-oriented work practices, strengthen visitor-centred thinking and introduce digital opportunities in national event management.

4.3 Training activities

The programme incorporated interactive lectures, group discussions, Event Experience Reflection, Design Thinking Sprint, Visitor Journey Mapping, SCAMPER Innovation Challenge, group presentations and organisational action planning. Participants worked collaboratively to identify event management challenges and develop potential improvements.

4.4 Data collection and measures

The official programme report states that 33 participants completed the evaluation questionnaire.

Six evaluation components were reported on a five-point scale:

1. Relevance to participants' work
2. Programme content
3. Facilitator effectiveness
4. Group activities
5. Achievement of programme objectives
6. Willingness to recommend the programme

Additional findings concerned perceived understanding of Design Thinking, the importance of Visitor Journey Mapping, perceived usefulness of technology and willingness to explore digital applications.

4.5 Analysis

The study reproduces and interprets the aggregated mean scores and percentages reported in the programme document. The qualitative feedback is presented using the categories explicitly identified in the report. Individual response records were unavailable; therefore, standard deviations, reliability coefficients, correlations, hypothesis tests and effect sizes were not calculated.

4.6 Research integrity

The analysis distinguishes documented programme outcomes from theoretical interpretation. Claims concerning actual improvements in competency, workplace behaviour or organisational performance are avoided because these outcomes were not directly measured. Before publication, the authors must verify applicable ethics requirements, permission to publish the evaluation findings and any institutional or client confidentiality obligations.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Overall programme evaluation

Table I. Mean programme evaluation scores

Evaluation component	Mean / 5
Relevance to participants' work	4.88
Programme content	4.85
Facilitator effectiveness	4.91
Group activities	4.82
Achievement of programme objectives	4.85
Willingness to recommend	4.91

Source: MOTAC final programme report (2026); 33 survey respondents.

The reported means indicate consistently favourable immediate evaluations. Facilitator effectiveness and willingness to recommend the programme received the highest ratings, both at 4.91. Relevance to participants' work received a mean rating of 4.88. Programme content and achievement of objectives each received 4.85. Group activities received the lowest mean rating, at 4.82, although this remained positive on the five-point scale. The difference between the highest and lowest reported mean was 0.09 points. Without individual response distributions, these differences should not be interpreted as statistically significant.

5.2 Design Thinking and visitor experience

The programme report indicates that 91% of respondents strongly agreed that they understood Design Thinking. A further 91% strongly agreed that Visitor Journey Mapping was important in designing visitor experiences. These findings suggest favourable perceptions of the two central innovation methods. However, self-reported

understanding and perceived importance are different constructs. The findings do not establish whether participants could independently apply the methods in subsequent professional activities.

5.3 Technology readiness

The report indicates that 85% agreed or strongly agreed that technology could improve event effectiveness. Additionally, 88% expressed readiness to explore digital technology applications in MOTAC events. These findings suggest positive attitudes toward technology-enabled event management. They do not establish actual technology adoption, implementation capacity or organisational readiness.

5.4 Qualitative feedback

The report identifies Design Thinking, Visitor Journey Mapping, SCAMPER, technology and AI, and systematic idea generation as the most beneficial programme components. Participants also reportedly expressed interest in using SCAMPER for future event planning. These findings suggest that respondents recognised the practical relevance of structured innovation approaches. However, the available qualitative information consists of summarised feedback categories rather than independently coded transcripts or verbatim participant statements.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Experiential learning and perceived programme relevance

The favourable programme ratings suggest that participants considered the training relevant and well delivered. The intervention's use of collaborative exercises is consistent with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning perspective and Schön's (1983) emphasis on reflective professional practice. The practical activities provided opportunities for participants to examine event-related challenges and explore potential solutions. Nevertheless, the positive evaluation findings should not be interpreted as proof of competency development. Training evaluation research emphasises that immediate reactions represent only one dimension of effectiveness (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 2006; Holton, 1996).

6.2 Visitor-centred innovation

The positive responses concerning Visitor Journey Mapping suggest recognition of the importance of visitor-centred event design. This aligns with the experience economy perspective (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) and customer journey research (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). The findings are also consistent with service design approaches that encourage organisations to examine interconnected service processes (Bitner et al., 2008). For national event organisers, this suggests potential value in systematically examining registration, access, navigation, participation and post-event engagement. Future research should determine whether participants subsequently apply journey mapping and whether the resulting interventions improve visitor experiences.

6.3 Digital readiness and implementation barriers

The reported technology perceptions indicate favourable attitudes toward digital event management. Technology acceptance research suggests that perceived usefulness is an important consideration in adoption decisions (Davis, 1989). However, adoption also depends on facilitating conditions, organisational influences and implementation opportunities (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Venkatesh et al., 2012). Rogers (2003) similarly distinguishes awareness and persuasion from implementation. The MOTAC results therefore provide preliminary evidence of interest in digital innovation rather than evidence of actual transformation. Future programmes should incorporate practical implementation activities, including prototype development, feasibility assessment and organisational support.

6.4 From training satisfaction to workplace application

The programme's 1.5-day duration is relevant when interpreting its outcomes. Short interventions may introduce useful concepts and encourage experimentation, but sustained application requires additional conditions. Baldwin and Ford (1988) emphasise the influence of trainee characteristics, training design and the work

environment on transfer. Blume et al. (2010) further demonstrate that learning transfer depends on multiple interacting factors. Grossman and Salas (2011) identify practical mechanisms that support the application of learning, while Salas et al. (2012) emphasise evidence-based approaches to training effectiveness. Accordingly, follow-up activities should include supervised workplace projects, feedback, managerial support and evaluation of implementation outcomes.

6.5 Public-sector innovation capability

The findings also have implications for public-sector innovation.

Hartley (2005) argues that innovation in governance and public services has distinctive organisational and institutional characteristics. De Vries et al. (2016) identify multiple antecedents and outcomes of public-sector innovation. These perspectives suggest that innovation training must be connected with organisational resources and governance arrangements. Collaborative governance research further highlights the importance of stakeholder relationships in addressing complex public problems (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2006). For national event management, this may require collaboration among government agencies, tourism operators, local authorities, service providers and community stakeholders.

Consequently, innovation readiness should not be evaluated solely at the individual level.

7. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The study makes three exploratory contributions.

First, it connects experiential learning and service design concepts to public-sector national event management.

Second, it demonstrates the importance of distinguishing participant reactions from learning transfer and organisational outcomes.

Third, it proposes a staged capability-development framework integrating experiential learning, technology acceptance, workplace experimentation and public-sector innovation.

These contributions are conceptual and contextual. The proposed relationships require further empirical validation.

8. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Implications for MOTAC

MOTAC could extend the programme through a structured innovation capability pathway. The initial stage would focus on awareness and foundational techniques. A second stage could involve supervised application of Design Thinking, Visitor Journey Mapping and SCAMPER to actual event planning challenges. A third stage could support prototype development and limited implementation of selected improvements. A final stage could evaluate visitor experience, operational efficiency and other relevant outcomes.

8.2 Implications for executive education providers

Training providers should connect programme activities with realistic professional challenges. Evaluation should extend beyond satisfaction surveys to include assessment of participant outputs and workplace application. Practical deliverables might include visitor journey maps, innovation proposals, implementation plans and post-event evaluation reports.

8.3 Implications for event managers

Event managers should consider structured innovation techniques as complementary to established operational practices. Potential improvements should be evaluated for feasibility, accessibility, stakeholder value, cost and

organisational requirements. Technology adoption should follow clear problem identification rather than being pursued solely because a tool is new.

9. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study is limited to a single programme and 33 survey respondents.

The analysis relies on aggregated findings reported in an official programme document. Individual response records, complete questionnaire wording, response distributions and measures of statistical variability were unavailable. The study also lacks baseline measurements, a comparison group and longitudinal follow-up. Consequently, it cannot establish causal effects or sustained organisational impact. The qualitative findings are based on reported categories rather than original transcripts. Future research should incorporate pre/post competency assessments, independent evaluation of participant outputs, follow-up interviews and workplace implementation measures. Multi-programme and multi-agency studies could also test the proposed capability-development framework.

10. CONCLUSION

The MOTAC programme received consistently positive immediate evaluations from its 33 survey respondents.

Participants reported favourable perceptions of Design Thinking, Visitor Journey Mapping and digital technology applications. These findings suggest that experiential innovation training was positively received within the programme context. However, the evidence does not establish actual competency improvement or organisational transformation. The study therefore proposes a staged framework connecting experiential learning, perceived readiness, workplace experimentation, implementation and organisational evaluation. Further research is required to test the framework and establish whether training translates into sustained improvements in national event management.

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