

Revitalising the Food System Conversation: Insights from ISFE 2025

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The University of Nottingham Malaysia (UNM) hosted the International Symposium on Food Environments (ISFE) 2025 on its beautiful campus in Semenyih from the 21st to the 22nd of August 2025. This powerful international event brought together 91 participants from 13 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Oceania to engage in a discussion on food environments.

The symposium was organised by the Food Environment for Transitioning Economies (FETE) project team at UNM, in partnership with the Centre for Transformative Agricultural and Food Systems, University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa), Sokoine University of Agriculture (Tanzania), CSIR-Science, Technology and Policy Research Institute (Ghana), and Thünen Institute of Market Analysis, Germany. The ISFE 2025 was co-organised with SHAPE-Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Taiwan), and NURTURE-SEA (Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines).

The central theme ***“Transcending Disciplines and Sectoral Boundaries to Create Sustainable and Healthy Food Environments,”*** underscored the multidisciplinary nature of the gathering, which included academics, public health professionals, government representatives, non-governmental organisations, and healthcare practitioners.



Photo 1: ISFE 2025 brought together researchers, students, and professionals; pictured here in the official group photo

Over the course of two days, participants engaged in a rich programme. Keynote talks by Professor Anne-Marie Thow from the University of Sydney, Australia and Professor Paul Wilson from the University of Nottingham, UK provided valuable insights. Five nutrition update sessions, and the country spotlight series showcased the unique contributions of various countries. Thirty-seven research presentations, comprising 16 oral and 21 poster contributions, provided valuable insights into the disciplinary and sectoral boundaries that must be overcome to create sustainable and healthy food environments. Many of these presentations were delivered by young researchers from the FETE Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) cohort, adding fresh perspectives and enthusiasm into the proceedings.



Photo 2: ISFE attendees take a closer look at one of the many thought-provoking entries submitted for the symposium's poster competition



Photo 3: Johnny Osuwu-Arthur (second from left), a doctoral student from the University of Ghana, won Best Oral Presentation. Pictured with him (left to right): Professor Festo Massawe, Dr Johanna Schott, and Dr Daniela Weible

The 1-Minute Rapid Fire Presentation session was a popular attraction, with Alice David Gomezulu from Tanzania emerging victorious through her captivating, engaging, and impactful delivery.



Photo 4: Alice, a doctoral student affiliated with the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Sokoine University of Agriculture, receives her Best Rapid-Fire Presentation prize from Professor Festo Massawe

Beyond the formal sessions, the symposium facilitated strategic conversations on food system transformation. The Research Consensus Panel convened by NURTURE-SEA and the SHAPE-Asia workshop, offered participants practical insights into stakeholder engagement and resilience-building within food systems. These moments of collective reflection and knowledge co-production underscored a shared sense of urgency and purpose among participants, particularly in addressing the rising burden of diet-related diseases and the inequities in the food systems prevalent in many transitioning economies.



Photo 5: The NURTURE-SEA Research Consensus Panel members include Dr Goh Ee Von, Mrs Yasmin Norazharuddin, Professor Nguyen Phuong Le, Dr Sirinya Phulkerd, Professor Poh Bee Koon, Dr Le Thi Thanh Loan, Professor Alex Lechner, Professor Festo Massawe, Miss Olivia Herlinda, Dr Pedcris M. Orencio, Professor Chris Gibbins, and Professor Tapan Kumar Nath



Photo 6: The SHAPE-Asia panel members, comprising Dr Elaine Borazon, Professor Poh Bee Koon, Dr Nisha Arunatilake, Dr Sirinya Phulkerd, and Professor Anne-Marie Thow (from left to right)



Photo 7: A lively group brainstorming session at the SHAPE-Asia workshop, featuring Professor Anne-Marie Thow, Dr Albert Allotey, Dr Peter Noy, Dr Nyabasi Makori, and Dr Geoffrey Adebayo Asalu

Notably, the ISFE 2025 successfully dismantled traditional silos, not only across disciplines, but also across sectors and geographies. Institutions from Australia, Ghana, South Africa, Tanzania, Malaysia, Germany, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the UK joined representatives from the World Health Organization, the Ministry of Health Malaysia, Khazanah Research Institute, National Institutes of Health, and professional bodies such as the Consumer Association of Penang (CAP), the Malaysia Consumer and Family Economy Association (MACFEA), the Malaysian Dietitians' Association (MDA), the Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity (MASO), and the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM). This inclusive participation facilitated the bridging of research, policy, and practice.

The ISFE 2025 represented a pivotal juncture in the FETE project. Building upon the momentum generated by two preceding events organised by the Malaysian FETE team – the Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) and the FETE Project Annual Workshop – ISFE 2025 concluded a two-month series of transformative engagements. As the FETE project continues to grow, ISFE 2025 has set a powerful precedent. It amplified the voices emanating from the Global South, nurtured a new generation of scholars, and laid the foundation for deeper cross-border collaboration. With plans already underway for a larger convening in 2026, ISFE 2025 stands as a testament to the transformative power of shared dialogue, diverse perspectives, and collective action in shaping the future of food systems.

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