



CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATION STRATEGIES OF INDONESIAN STUDENTS IN INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly interconnected world, international higher education has become a popular choice for many students globally, including those from Indonesia. Over the past decade, the number of Indonesian students opting to study abroad has consistently risen, with notable destinations including Australia, Malaysia, the United States, Japan, and England. This study explores the specific challenges faced by Indonesian students in international higher education environments and identifies the effective adaptation strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. Using a qualitative research approach, interviews were conducted with ten Indonesian students at Quest International University Perak, Malaysia. The findings reveal that language barriers, cultural differences, academic pressure, psychological stress, and financial constraints are the primary challenges faced by these students. To address these challenges, students employ various adaptation strategies, including language improvement, cultural engagement, academic support, psychological support, and financial management. These insights provide valuable information for educational institutions, policymakers, and students, highlighting the need for robust support systems to enhance the international education experience. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of Indonesian students abroad and offers recommendations for improving support mechanisms in international higher education contexts.

Keywords: Indonesian Students, International Higher Education, Adaptation Strategies, Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, international higher education has become a popular choice for many students globally, including those from Indonesia. Over the past decade, the number of Indonesian students opting to study abroad has shown a consistent rise. According to the latest data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 55,961 Indonesian students are currently pursuing higher education abroad. This figure represents a growth rate of more than 21% since 2014, highlighting a significant trend in the education choices of Indonesian youth. Australia has emerged as the most popular study abroad destination for Indonesian students. The data from 2021 reveals that 12,852 Indonesian students were studying in Australia, making it the top choice for higher education outside their home country. Malaysia is another preferred destination for Indonesian students due to its proximity and cultural similarities. In 2021, the number of Indonesian students in Malaysia reached 9,874, which is a significant number compared to other popular destinations. Other notable destinations include the United States, Japan, and England, but these countries attract fewer Indonesian students compared to Australia and Malaysia.

Higher education becoming increasingly internationalized, degrees from prestigious foreign institutions offer significant advantages such as elevated social status, enhanced career prospects, and expanded networking opportunities. As a result, the number of international students has surged dramatically over the past decade (Ghazarian, 2014; Wenhua & Zhe, 2013). These benefits make studying abroad an attractive option for many students seeking to enhance their professional and personal development on a global scale.

International higher education presents numerous unique challenges for students, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds. For Indonesian students, adjusting to a new environment encompasses various difficulties related to language barriers, cultural differences, and unfamiliar educational systems. Moreover, Chang (2011) asserts that international students view gaining international educational experiences as a valuable opportunity to immerse themselves in different cultures, gain life experience, and enhance their academic and research knowledge. Research has identified five primary challenges faced by international students: (1) general living adjustments, such as adapting to new foods, securing affordable and adequate housing and transportation, and managing financial constraints; (2) academic difficulties, including issues with different teaching methods; (3) English-language proficiency; (4) socio-cultural difficulties, such as culture shock and recreational challenges; and (5) personal psychological adjustment, including homesickness and depression (Mustapha, 2010; Marginson et al., 2010; Alavi & Mansor, 2011; Chang, 2011; Talebloo & Basri, 2015). Cultural stuttering is another significant challenge that can be alleviated by aligning students' expectations more closely with the realities of the host country (Pacheco, 2020).

Indonesian students in Malaysia, for example, often encounter culture shock and must navigate various challenges, including adjusting to different food, unfamiliar

living conditions, financial issues, balancing work and study schedules, differing learning styles, and difficulties related to language and cultural barriers. Despite these challenges, the demand for internationalization and globalization continues to drive cross-border student mobility, significantly increasing the number of Indonesian students studying in Malaysia.

While there is substantial research on the general challenges faced by international students, specific studies focusing on Indonesian students in different host countries remain limited. Most existing literature aggregates data on international students without sufficiently addressing the unique socio-cultural and educational contexts of specific national groups. The challenges faced by Indonesian students, as they navigate distinct cultural landscapes and educational systems, warrant a closer examination. Moreover, there is a need for in-depth studies that explore adaptive strategies employed by Indonesian students to overcome these challenges. Moreover, this study aims to fill this gap by conducting a qualitative analysis of the challenges faced by Indonesian students in international higher education environments. Additionally, it seeks to identify the effective adaptation strategies these students use to overcome such challenges. The findings from this study are expected to provide valuable insights for educational institutions, policymakers, and the students themselves, ultimately contributing to better support systems and learning experiences in international higher education contexts. The main research questions for this study are as follows:

RQ 1: What are the challenges faced by Indonesian students in adapting to the international higher education environment?

RQ 2: What adaptation strategies are used by Indonesian students to overcome these challenges?

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at Quest International University Perak, Malaysia. The participants were ten Indonesian graduate and post-graduate students studies in fields such as business administration, management, Islamic education, English Linguistics, engineering, economics, social anthropology, and renewable energy. These students were selected using convenience sampling due to the researcher's easy access to them. According to Patton (2002), qualitative research often involves relatively small, purposefully selected samples to allow for in-depth understanding of a phenomenon.

The interviews were conducted via email. Out of 12 students contacted, ten agreed to participate. Prior to the interviews, the questions were reviewed by two education experts, whose feedback was incorporated. The study's objectives were explained to the participants, and the transcriptions of their interviews were sent to them for confirmation, ensuring accuracy in capturing their responses. The reliability of the findings was strengthened by the consistency of responses with relevant literature.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed in relation to the study's purpose. Data were coded into categories, and the process was carried out inductively, involving the examination of small pieces of information and building connections between them. Categories were then developed based on these codes.

Table.1 The summary of challenges faced by international Students

(modified and adopted from Wenhua & Zhe,2013)

Category	Specific Problems
Language barrier	Difficulties in communicating with native speakers, understanding lectures, writing up essays, etc
Cultural Differences	Cultural shock, cultural fatigue, stereotyping prejudice, racial discrimination, difficulties in adjusting to new social/cultural customs, norms and regulations and participating in intercultural/social activities, relationship problems, etc
Academic Pressure	Different teaching methods, evaluation standards, high academic expectations and competition
Psychological Stress	Homesickness, loneliness, stress, depression,frustration, loss of status or identity, anxiety, confusion, etc.
General Living issues	Accommodation difficulties, difficulties in using student support services, financial stress, dietary restrictions, safety threats, etc

Table. 2 The summary of adaptation strategies used by international students

(modified and adopted from Wenhua & Zhe,2013)

Category	Specific Problem Solving
Language improvement	Using dictionaries, language learning resources, Participating in language classes and cultural exchange programs
Cultural Engagement	Building friendships with local and international students and engaging in university-organized cultural activities
Academic Support	Seeking help from faculty and academic advisors and joining study groups and academic clubs
Psychological Support	Utilizing university counseling services and maintaining regular contact with family and friends
General Living issues	Budgeting and financial planning, finding scholarships and part-time job opportunities

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this research are divided into two parts, corresponding to the two research questions. The first part investigates the specific challenges faced by Indonesian students in Malaysia. The second part explores the adaptive strategies that these students employ to overcome these challenges.

I. Result

Results Based on interviews with several informants, the field findings related to the challenges and adaptation strategies of Indonesian students studying abroad are summarized as follows:

Challenges Faced by Students

Language Barriers

Language barriers emerge as a significant challenge for Indonesian students studying in Malaysia. The necessity of mastering English for academic success and social integration is evident. As participant 1 and participant 2, understanding English is particularly challenging, though his familiarity with Malay eases his transition somewhat. Similarly, participant 2 emphasizes the importance of mastering English, given its central role in education and communication in Malaysia.

"The main challenge is the language barrier, as I come from Indonesia. Understanding the language, especially English, is a challenge, though understanding Malay is easier since I live in Malaysia and study at Quest International University, which helps a lot." (Participant #1)

"The hardest challenge for me is learning English first, as English is the main language there, and we are required to master and be equipped with it." (Participant #2)

This finding aligns with previous research, which consistently identifies language proficiency as a crucial factor for international students' academic performance and social integration (Andrade, 2006; Zhang & Mi, 2010). Improved English proficiency enables students to comprehend academic material better, participate in class discussions, and engage in social activities, thereby enhancing their overall educational experience.

Cultural Differences

Cultural adaptation is another crucial aspect of the international student experience. participant 3 and participant 4 highlight that the cultural and linguistic similarities between Indonesia and Malaysia facilitate their adaptation. The support network of friends from both countries plays a pivotal role in this process.

"Adapting to a new learning environment certainly presents new challenges, but cultural, language, and social support factors greatly assist in the adaptation process. The culture and language in Malaysia are not much different from Indonesia, and the network of friends, both from Indonesia and Malaysia, helps a lot in the adaptation process." (Participant #3)

"In terms of culture and language, I did not face many difficulties as they are quite similar to Indonesia. Regarding the education system, I think the standards at this university are higher compared to other universities because it requires a GPA of 3.75 to get on the dean's list. In terms of social support, I adapted well because I have friends who supported me from the beginning and helped me with things I found difficult or did not understand." (Participant #4)

These observations are consistent with previous studies that highlight the importance of cultural similarities and social support in easing the adaptation process for international students (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Yeh & Inose, 2003). The presence of a supportive community and familiar cultural elements can significantly reduce the stress associated with cultural adaptation.

Academic Pressure

The transition to a new education system, with its distinct standards and expectations, poses significant academic pressure. Both Participant 3 and Participant 2 report feeling pressured by the high academic standards and the need to maintain good grades.

"Adapting to a new education system and teaching methods requires time and effort. I was initially shocked by the different education system. I thought international universities generally have high academic standards, which made me feel pressured to always achieve good grades." (Participant #3)

"The most challenging aspect is adjusting to my learning environment because most of my classmates and friends are quite well-known at my university." (Participant #4)

This challenge is well-documented in the literature, with international students often experiencing academic stress due to differences in educational systems and expectations (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). The high academic standards at international universities can exacerbate this stress, making it essential for institutions to provide adequate academic support to help students manage these pressures.

Psychological Stress

Adapting to a new academic and cultural environment also entails psychological stress. However, both participant 3 and participant 4 view this experience positively, noting that it enhances their resilience, adaptability, and communication skills.

"The experience helped me become brave and unafraid of challenges that may arise simply because I am unfamiliar with my surroundings. This will be useful for my future career as I will not be shy or afraid of challenges that could impact my growth and progress." (Participant #4)

"Adapting to an international university environment provides valuable benefits for future career development. I learned to adapt to new environments, different cultures, and unexpected situations, which is highly valuable in a dynamic and

constantly changing work environment. I also learned to communicate effectively with people from diverse backgrounds and work in multicultural teams. Additionally, I became independent, creatively and independently solved problems, and remained persistent in achieving goals." (Participant #3)

Previous research supports the notion that the challenges faced by international students can lead to personal growth and improved resilience (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Developing these skills is beneficial not only for academic success but also for future career development, as students become more adept at navigating diverse and dynamic environments.

Adaptation Strategies

Language Improvement

Participant 1's strategy of using dictionaries and reading books to improve his language skills highlights the proactive measures students take to overcome language barriers. His gradual improvement in responding in English underscores the importance of consistent practice and exposure.

"First, I bought many books, such as Malay-English and Indonesian-English dictionaries, and books on English history, which helped me understand better." (Participant #1)

"It is very effective, especially with the additional language (English). Initially, I could not respond quickly, but gradually I improved, and although it was difficult at first, studying at Quest International University helped me understand English and Malay better." (Participant #2)

Cultural Engagement

Participant 4's efforts to be friendly and make friends outside her study program, along with Participant 2 reliance on local friends for language adaptation, illustrate effective social integration strategies.

"I try to be friendly and open to everyone by making friends with people outside my study program or faculty to socialize with new people." (Participant #4)

"To adapt in Malaysia, I often ask for help from friends who have been at the campus longer, especially for language adaptation. So far, I have received a lot of help from local Malaysian students." (Participant #2)

These approaches are supported by research indicating the importance of social networks in cultural adaptation (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

Academic Support

The availability of support programs, such as orientation weeks, counseling services, and language classes, as noted by participant 3 and participant 4, underscores the role of institutional support in facilitating academic adaptation.

"The international university where I study provides various programs and services to help international students adapt, such as student orientation (known as ta'aruf week program) that provides information about the curriculum. There are also counseling services for consultation, support, and guidance on various issues. Additionally, CELPAD classes help improve language skills." (Participant #3)

"The university helps me adapt to the new environment through lecturers and friends who encourage me to participate in events and competitions to get used to the new environment." (Participant #4)

Such programs are essential in helping students navigate the academic and social demands of their new environment (Glass, Buus, & Braskamp, 2013).

Psychological Support

Maintaining mental and physical health is crucial for coping with the stresses of studying abroad. The positive experiences with supportive lecturers and administrative staff, as mentioned by participant 3 and participant 2, highlight the importance of a supportive academic environment in mitigating psychological stress.

"Maintaining mental and physical health to stay motivated and sane while facing challenges during my master's education process." (Participant #3)

"The good service from the lecturers and administrative staff is sufficient to help me adapt. Their services are good and very open to us international students." (Participant #2)

II. Discussion

The findings from the interviews with Indonesian students studying abroad reveal a comprehensive picture of the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to adapt to their new educational environments. These insights are crucial for understanding the specific needs and experiences of Indonesian students in international universities. Language proficiency emerges as a primary challenge, particularly in countries where English is the main medium of instruction. Students like participant 1 and participant 2 highlighted the difficulties in mastering English, which is essential for their academic success and daily interactions. The necessity of learning and adapting to a new language can create significant initial barriers, impacting both academic performance and social integration. Cultural adaptation is another significant challenge. Although students like participant 3 and participant 4 found similarities between Malaysian and Indonesian cultures, they still encountered challenges in adjusting to different social norms and lifestyles. This adaptation process is facilitated by the cultural proximity between Indonesia and Malaysia, which helps in easing the transition. However, even minor cultural discrepancies can pose difficulties in social interactions and integration into the host community.

The academic environment in international universities often differs considerably from that in Indonesia. Participant 3 mentioned the high academic standards and different teaching methods as sources of pressure. This is compounded by the

competitive nature of international academic settings, where students must constantly strive to meet rigorous expectations. The adjustment to new evaluation standards and teaching styles requires significant effort and can be a source of stress.

The psychological impact of studying abroad is evident in the feelings of loneliness and homesickness reported by students. The stress of adapting to a new academic and social environment can exacerbate these feelings. Participant 4 and participant 3 discussed the importance of mental health in their adaptation process, emphasizing the need for support systems to help manage the psychological pressures associated with studying abroad.

While financial constraints were not directly highlighted in the interviews, they are an underlying issue for many international students. The high cost of living and education abroad necessitates careful financial planning and management. Students often need to seek part-time employment or scholarships to support their studies, which can add to their overall stress.

The adaptation strategies employed by Indonesian students are diverse and resourceful. For language improvement, students like participant 1 utilized dictionaries and language resources to enhance their proficiency in English and Malay. Participating in language classes and cultural exchange programs also played a crucial role in overcoming language barriers. Cultural engagement through building friendships with local and international students and engaging in university-organized cultural activities helped students like participant 4 and participant 2 integrate into their new environments. These activities fostered a sense of belonging and facilitated cultural understanding.

For academic support, seeking help from faculty, academic advisors, and joining study groups were common strategies. Universities provided orientation programs, counseling services, and language improvement classes (e.g., CELPAD classes mentioned by Retno Lestari) that were instrumental in supporting students' academic adaptation. Psychological support involved maintaining regular contact with family and friends and utilizing university counseling services, helping students manage psychological stress. The supportive environment created by faculty and peers, as highlighted by participant 2, was essential for mental well-being. Though not explicitly discussed, financial management strategies likely include budgeting, applying for scholarships, and seeking part-time jobs. These measures are critical for sustaining their studies and living expenses abroad.

CONCLUSION

The study provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges and adaptation strategies of Indonesian students pursuing higher education abroad, particularly in Malaysia. Insights gained from interviews with these students reveal the multifaceted nature of their experiences, highlighting both the obstacles they face and the resilient strategies they employ to overcome them. One significant challenge is language proficiency, especially in English, which affects their ability to understand lectures,

communicate with native speakers, and complete academic tasks. To overcome these barriers, students use dictionaries, attend language classes, and participate in cultural exchange programs.

Cultural differences, despite the proximity between Indonesia and Malaysia, also present challenges in adjusting to different social norms and lifestyles. Building friendships and engaging in cultural activities help mitigate these challenges, fostering a sense of belonging and understanding. The transition to different teaching methods and high academic standards in international universities creates significant academic pressure. Support from faculty, advisors, peer groups, and university-provided orientation programs and counseling services is crucial in helping students adapt.

Psychological stress, including feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and mental pressure due to the adaptation process, is common among students. Maintaining contact with family and friends and utilizing counseling services play a vital role in managing these stresses. Although not directly highlighted in the interviews, financial constraints are a common underlying issue. Students employ strategies such as budgeting, seeking scholarships, and finding part-time employment to manage the high costs of living and education abroad.

The findings from this study provide valuable insights for educational institutions, policymakers, and the students themselves. Educational institutions can enhance their support systems by offering robust language assistance programs, cultural integration activities, academic advising, psychological counseling, and financial aid resources. Policymakers can use these insights to develop policies that better support international students, ensuring a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. For students, understanding these challenges and effective adaptation strategies can better prepare them for their international education journey. By addressing the specific needs and experiences of Indonesian students in international higher education, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of student mobility and supports the ongoing efforts to improve the international educational landscape

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