

Navigating Non-Academic Challenges of International Students: A Case Study at an Islamic University in Indonesia

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Article history

Received 15 September 2024

Revised 3 October 2024

Accepted 18 December 2024

Keywords

Higher Education

Internationalization

International Students

Non-Academic Challenges

The internationalization of higher education creates both benefits and challenges for international students. While academic issues are routinely prioritized, non-academic challenges such as homesickness, culture shock, and social isolation are sometimes disregarded. This study looks at the non-academic experiences of international students at an Islamic University in Indonesia. Using qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, this study identifies substantial problems in students' assimilation to local culture, as well as the effectiveness of institutional support. The findings suggest that colleges should broaden their support services beyond academics to include emotional and social well-being. This study adds to the overall understanding of international student experiences and makes recommendations for non-Western higher education institutions.

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Introduction

Globalization has been affecting higher education institutions around the globe, forcing them to adopt internationalization as a strategy to enhance academic standards [1]. The international student is one of the most frequently mentioned themes in conversations regarding the internationalization of higher education. A report published by The British

Council reveals that the number of international students has increased significantly, reflecting the growing demand for global education opportunities [2]. Nevertheless, international students frequently face a variety of non-academic obstacles that can have a significant impact on their academic success and overall experience, in addition to these academic benefits.

Homesickness is one such challenge that can have a substantial impact on the academic performance and mental health of international students. Research has revealed that melancholy, in conjunction with social isolation, is one of the most prevalent challenges encountered by international students in a variety of cultural contexts [3]. This challenge is further exacerbated by social isolation, particularly in institutions where language barriers and cultural differences obstruct meaningful interactions between international and domestic students [4].

Another significant obstacle is cultural assimilation, as international students encounter difficulty in adjusting to unfamiliar social norms, traditions, and customs [5]. These non-academic challenges are not only widespread but frequently ignored by host institutions that prioritize academic outcomes over emotional and social support [6]. This oversight has the potential to impede students' ability to completely engage with their new environment, resulting in decreased academic performance and feelings of alienation.

The internationalization process is still evolving in the context of Indonesian higher education, particularly at the private Islamic institution where this study takes place. Despite the university's significant progress in attracting international students, it is still imperative to examine the extent to which these students are provided with support in non-academic areas. This investigation explores the non-academic obstacles encountered by two Thai international students at this studied university, with an emphasis on their cultural adaptation, social isolation, and melancholy. The findings enhance the current body of literature by providing a deeper understanding of the significance of comprehensive support systems for international students in non-Western higher education environments [1].

Material and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design, with a case study approach, to investigate the non-academic issues faced by two international students at the Islamic University under study. A case study allows for in-depth analysis of complex, context-specific topics, making it ideal for investigating international students' emotional and social experiences [7]. This approach was chosen to capture the participants' lived experiences, which provide valuable insights into their issues and coping mechanisms.

This study included two international students, consisting of male and female, who were chosen via purposive sampling. For ethical reasons, their names have been anonymized. Henceforth, they will be referred to as P1 (male student) and P2 (female student). Both

students were in their final year, so they had plenty of experience dealing with the difficulties that come with studying in a foreign country. They were chosen for their desire to participate and their abilities to express their non-academic challenges in both English and Indonesian.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in both English and Indonesian to ensure that participants could fully and properly express themselves. The use of two languages sought to improve data validity by removing potential language barriers [8]. The interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour and were intended to provide flexibility in investigating participants' experiences with homesickness, social isolation, and cultural adaptation. Open-ended questions were used to enable participants to think about their obstacles and the help they got from the institution.

This study was heavily focused on ethical considerations. Before the interviews, participants were given thorough information about the research objectives, and their informed consent was documented in writing. Participants were promised that their responses would be kept anonymous and confidential. These ethical procedures followed the British Educational Research Association's principles, which emphasize the importance of voluntary involvement and the protection of research participants' rights [9].

Thematic analysis was used to examine the interview data, using Braun and Clarke's six-step procedure [10]. Thematic analysis was chosen because of its versatility and capacity to detect repeating patterns in the data. The analysis included familiarising with the data, creating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and identifying themes, and lastly preparing the report. Key motifs highlighted included homesickness, social isolation, and cultural adaptability. The data was carefully coded, and common themes were compared to the existing literature to ensure conformity with broader patterns in overseas students.

To ensure the data's trustworthiness, numerous tactics were used, including member checking, triangulation, and reflexivity. Following initial coding, the themes were discussed with the participants to ensure the accuracy of the findings. Furthermore, the results were triangulated by comparing participant responses to current research on international student experiences. The researchers maintained reflexivity throughout the research process, and recognized and resolved any potential biases that could influence the interpretation of the findings [11].

Results and Discussion

The interviews revealed three primary themes: homesickness, social isolation, and cultural adaptability. These findings are contextualized within the larger discussion of international student experiences.

A. Homesickness and Emotional Wellbeing

The participants reported homesickness as one of their most major challenges. Both participants experienced great longings for a home that lingered throughout their first year of university. P1 said, "I truly missed my family. Everything felt different here, and I often found myself reflecting on what I had left behind in Thailand." Similarly, P2 expressed feeling emotionally overwhelmed in her first few months, especially since she didn't have an instant support network. "It was difficult to be away from home, and sometimes I didn't feel like I belonged," she said.

The findings support research that found homesickness is one of the most common emotional challenges experienced by overseas students [3]. Homesickness generally worsens when students enter a foreign cultural setting, and it can lead to a variety of mental problems, including melancholy and anxiety [4]. This study adds to the current literature by establishing that homesickness is still a common problem for international students in non-Western contexts where the cultural and social situations differ greatly from their home countries.

This conclusion is also consistent with the concept of acculturative stress, which arises when people have trouble adapting to a new cultural setting [12]. The extreme emotional strain William and Kate felt as a result of being apart from their families indicates that acculturative stress played a big role in their overall university experience. Homesickness is a significant component of acculturative stress, as overseas students frequently find themselves alienated from familiar social and cultural environments [13]. This emphasizes the importance of emotional support services for overseas students who are experiencing homesickness and loneliness.

B. Social isolation and language barriers

Social isolation was another significant difficulty for both subjects. P1 talked about: "Even though I was surrounded by people, I felt isolated because I couldn't connect with them." P2 described similar experiences, explaining how the language barrier made it difficult for her to build meaningful relationships with local pupils. She mentioned feeling excluded from group events because she lacked the confidence in her Indonesian language skills to properly engage.

These findings are consistent with the general literature on social isolation among overseas students, particularly in circumstances where language obstacles prevent social integration [14]. Social isolation can be especially severe when overseas students struggle to communicate in the local language, preventing them from developing strong social relationships with their peers [5]. This was especially important for the participants because neither of them had mastered the Indonesian language when they first arrived. Although both had taken university

language classes, they felt that they were insufficiently prepared for the day-to-day social interactions required to form acquaintances with local students.

Social isolation has been related to poor academic and emotional outcomes, with research showing that kids who feel socially excluded are more likely to struggle academically and emotionally [4]. The language barrier encountered by the participants highlights the need for providing thorough language help to overseas students as part of their overall social integration strategy. These findings, which are consistent with previous research [5], indicate that universities should adopt more structured initiatives focused on increasing interaction between international and domestic students outside of classroom settings. This could include peer mentorship programs, social gatherings, and joint projects that bring kids from all backgrounds together.

C. Cultural Adaptation: Challenges with Norms and Customs

Cultural adaptation was revealed as one of the hardest components of the participants' academic experiences. The Participants had a difficult time adjusting to Indonesian customs, traditions, and social standards. P1 described an incident in which he unintentionally insulted a local student by failing to follow cultural etiquette about greetings. He explained, "I didn't realize I was expected to welcome them in a specific way. It was a minor issue, but it made me feel out of place." P2 had similar issues navigating the cultural terrain, saying, "I didn't know how to behave in certain situations, and I often felt like I was doing something wrong."

The participants' difficulties with cultural adaptation are consistent with the findings, which imply that cultural differences might pose major barriers to social integration and emotional well-being for overseas students [2]. Cultural adaptation entails adjusting to new social norms and expectations, which can be particularly difficult for students from diverse cultural backgrounds [12]. In the instance of the participants in this study, the disparities in Thai and Indonesian social conventions caused discomfort and estrangement, hampering their attempts to assimilate into the academic community.

Research emphasizes the importance of cultural adaptation in the international student experience, and universities have a responsibility to assist in this area [5]. However, both of the participants expressed unhappiness with the university's cultural orientation. P1 stated, "There was no direction on how to connect with local pupils or what the social standards were. I had to find things out on my own." This lack of institutional assistance for cultural adaptation is a widespread issue in many colleges [6], suggesting that many institutions prioritize academic support while ignoring the cultural challenges that overseas students experience.

These findings emphasize the necessity of cultural orientation programs that go beyond basic introductions to local norms. A more thorough approach to cultural adaptation could include intercultural communication training, mentorship programs that pair international

and local students, and cultural exchange opportunities. This would not only assist international students such as P1 and P2 in navigating the social difficulties of their host setting, but it would also promote mutual understanding among domestic and international students.

D. Institutional support and the need for holistic approaches

Both participants stated that, while the university provided enough academic help, there was a notable deficit in the non-academic support services offered to overseas students. P2 mentioned: "the university was helpful with academic things, but when it came to social life and adjusting to the culture, we were left on our own." P2 continued: "I think they [the university] don't realize how important it is to help international students settle in emotionally and socially, not just academically."

This conclusion supports a critique of how many universities approach internationalization, which frequently prioritizes academic achievements and global rankings over their students' overall well-being [5]. Successful internationalization requires not just the incorporation of international students into academic programs, but also their complete integration into the institution's social and cultural fabric [1]. However, as this survey demonstrates, schools still have room for improvement in meeting the non-academic demands of overseas students.

The study's findings highlight the need for a more thorough internationalization strategy that balances academic and non-academic support. The university might benefit from establishing a separate international student office to handle cultural adaptation programs, social integration initiatives, and language assistance services. These findings add to the larger discussion about internationalization by emphasizing the significance of emotional and social support in addition to academic help [2]. As international student mobility increases, colleges must recognize the entire range of issues that these students experience and tailor their support systems accordingly.

E. Implications of Future Research and Policy

This study has important implications for future research and policy development. First, it emphasizes the need for additional research into the non-academic issues that overseas students encounter in non-Western cultures. While much of the existing literature focuses on Western universities, this study offers insights into students' experiences in Indonesia, leading to a more diverse perspective of internationalization in higher education.

Second, the findings indicate that universities should take a more comprehensive approach to internationalization, including emotional and social support services for international students. Institutions should think about creating extensive orientation programs, continuous cultural training, and social integration initiatives to better meet the unique needs of their

international students. Future research could look into how such programs improve student outcomes and experiences.

Finally, this study emphasizes the significance of including international students in the design and delivery of support services. By allowing students to shape these programs, institutions can ensure that their services are suited to the unique requirements and problems of their international communities. This participative approach has the potential to improve support services and create a more inclusive and welcoming campus atmosphere.

Conclusion

The results of this study expose that homesickness, social isolation, and difficulty in cultural adaptation are among the major non-academic obstacles international students at the university must deal with. These difficulties emphasize the need for more thorough institutional support that covers students' emotional and social well-being in addition to their academic needs. Expanding its support services would help the university establish a more inclusive atmosphere that improves the academic and personal performance of its international students. This study emphasizes the need to tackle non-academic obstacles in addition to academic ones, therefore contributing to the larger conversation on internationalization. Universities have to take a more all-encompassing strategy that acknowledges the whole spectrum of experiences faced by overseas students as the process of internationalizing keeps changing. This will help them to build a feeling of community and belonging necessary for both emotional well-being and academic performance.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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