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# Bridging cultures: Innovative adaptation strategies of Indonesian students navigating academic and social challenges in the United States

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## Abstract

*This study investigated the experiences of Indonesian students pursuing higher education in the United States, highlighting the importance of understanding their cultural adaptation, academic challenges, and social integration. Despite the significant presence of Indonesian students, comprehensive research addressing their unique experiences, and challenges in a new educational environment is limited. The study aims to understand their cultural adaptation, identify academic challenges, and examine strategies for social integration. A phenomenological qualitative approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with doctoral students to gather in-depth insights. Thematic analysis reveals that cultural adaptation is significantly influenced by language barriers, differing educational norms, and social dynamics. Participants reported academic challenges related to adjusting to critical thinking-based learning and independent study practices. Additionally, social integration is often complicated by cultural misunderstandings and the individualistic values prevalent in American society. To address these challenges, students employ strategies such as building support networks, engaging in campus activities, and utilizing institutional resources. This study underscores the necessity for proactive cultural engagement and institutional support to enhance international students' experiences and foster more inclusive educational environments.*

**Keywords:** Students; cross-cultural adaptation; challenges; international

## INTRODUCTION

Pursuing higher education abroad has become increasingly prevalent, with a notable surge in Indonesian students opting to study in the United States. During the 2023-2024 academic year, 8,348 Indonesian students were enrolled in U.S. institutions, making Indonesia the second-largest source of students from Southeast Asia and 23rd globally (U.S. Embassy Jakarta, 2024). Understanding the unique challenges these students face in adapting to a new academic and cultural environment is essential.

Upon arriving in the U.S., Indonesian students often experience cultural shock due to stark contrasts between their home culture and American society (Pacheco, 2020; Silvhiany, 2019). As Krsmanovic (2020) noted, international students frequently encounter various difficulties, including acculturative stress and challenges in psychological and social adjustment. This transition necessitates reconciling their cultural values with American norms.

Recent studies have shed light on various aspects of international students' experiences in the U.S. As Shu et al. (2020) observed, international students often encounter numerous difficulties, both academic and non-academic difficulties during their time in the United States. Pacheco (2020) suggested that the challenges faced by international students have softened over time due to an adjustment of expectations and a process of cultural learning. This highlights the transformative potential of international education, where students not only acquire knowledge and skills but also undergo significant personal growth.

Studies have also highlighted the importance of cultural adaptation in the success of international students. Navigating this cultural divide often involves a process of identity negotiation, where students integrate elements from both cultures to form a hybrid identity that reflects their evolving sense of self (Leonard & Smith, 2024). Additionally, cultural differences can lead to feelings of isolation and disorientation, as students grapple with the unfamiliar emphasis on self-reliance and competition (Sasse, 2017; Sommers & Satel, 2007). Same as the initial exposure to a wide array of cultural backgrounds can be overwhelming, potentially leading to feelings of alienation or cultural fatigue (Smith et al., 2016). This process of adaptation can be both challenging and enriching, as students learn to balance their cultural heritage with their newfound experiences in the U.S.

Despite the growing body of study on international students' experiences, there is a notable gap in the literature specifically addressing the unique challenges and adaptation strategies of Indonesian students in the U.S. higher education system. While studies have explored the general experiences of international students, the challenges faced by Indonesian students have not been extensively discussed. This study aims to address this gap by focusing on the perceptions of cultural and social differences, the challenges encountered, and the strategies employed by Indonesian students to adapt to their new environment in the U.S. By illuminating these experiences, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Indonesian student experience in U.S. higher education, potentially informing more effective support systems and policies for this specific student population.

The study employs the cross-cultural adaptation theory as its conceptual foundation, focusing on the model proposed by Kim and Gudykunst (1988). While their model comprises six components of adaptation, this research narrows its scope to examine three key dimensions: personal communication, social communication, and predispositions. These chosen components function as a framework through which the writers assess the students' cross-cultural skills and their journey of adapting to an unfamiliar cultural setting.

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The decision to focus on these three components is driven by their direct relevance to the challenges faced by Indonesian students in adapting to the American educational and social environment. Personal communication addresses language barriers and effective expression within a new cultural context, while social communication pertains to building social networks and integrating into campus life. Predispositions are crucial for understanding students' psychological readiness and attitudes toward adapting to cultural differences. By focusing on these specific aspects of cross-cultural adaptation, this study aims to provide Indonesian students' cultural, academic, and social experiences in the U.S., examining on their perceptions of cultural and social differences, their challenges, and their strategies to adapt to their new environment.

**Cultural and Social Differences**

Indonesian students pursuing higher education in the United States encounter various cultural and social differences that require significant adjustments. These differences permeate various aspects of their lives, from navigating daily social interactions to adapting to the nuances of the American education system. As highlighted by Mesidor and Sly (2016), these challenges encompass language barriers, difficulties with social integration, and the broader process of cultural adjustment. One major hurdle is language proficiency, particularly in academic English. Indonesian students often struggle to understand lectures, engage in class discussions, and express their ideas effectively in writing (Arifin, 2021). This language barrier can negatively impact their academic performance and lead to frustration and decreased self-confidence (Dauba & Jullanda, 2024).

Cultural differences also significantly affect classroom interactions and social engagements. In Indonesia, education tends to be more hierarchical and teacher-centered, emphasizing rote learning (Bilad et al., 2024; Ghaleb, 2024). In contrast, U.S. classrooms encourage student participation, critical thinking, and active engagement (Claramita et al., 2022; Lu, 2024). This shift requires Indonesian students to adapt to new expectations regarding classroom behavior and academic autonomy. Additionally, forming meaningful connections with American peers can be challenging due to cultural misunderstandings and differing social norms. (Firdaus et al., 2020). The distance from family and familiar support networks can exacerbate feelings of isolation and loneliness.

The individualistic nature of American society contrasts sharply with the collectivist values prevalent in Indonesia. While Indonesian culture emphasizes community and family ties, American culture prioritizes individual autonomy (Li, 2024). This difference can complicate social interactions and hinder students' sense of belonging.

Indonesian students from Muslim backgrounds may face additional challenges related to their religious practices, such as finding prayer spaces, accessing halal food, and observing religious holidays (Meilyani et al., 2023). Universities may not always provide adequate accommodations for these needs, adding to the stress of adjusting to a new environment.

Financial constraints also pose significant challenges, as the cost of tuition and living expenses in the U.S. is much higher than in Indonesia

(Hidayati, 2023). Many Indonesian students rely on scholarships or part-time work to finance their education, which can impact their academic performance and limit social engagement. Balancing the demands of academic life with the need to manage financial pressures can be overwhelming and affect their overall well-being (Park et al., 2020).

Understanding these cultural and social differences is crucial for educational institutions aiming to provide effective support systems for Indonesian students. By recognizing these specific challenges, institutions can create more inclusive environments that foster both academic success and personal well-being.

### **Strategies for Adaptation**

In response to these challenges, Indonesian students demonstrate resilience by employing various strategies to navigate their new environment. A common approach is actively seeking support from institutional resources such as international student offices and academic counseling services (Can et al., 2021). These resources provide guidance on academic expectations, cultural norms, and practical matters.

Building a strong support network is another crucial strategy. Students often connect with fellow Indonesians and other international peers to create a sense of community that mitigates feelings of homesickness (Ali et al., 2022). These networks serve as vital lifelines, offering emotional support, sharing practical advice, and mitigating feelings of homesickness and cultural dislocation. Active engagement in campus activities is important in adaptation. Participation in clubs, sports teams, and cultural events allows Indonesian students to interact with American students, fostering cross-cultural understanding and friendships (O'Neil et al., 2022). These interactions provide opportunities to improve language skills, gain insights into American culture, and develop a broader perspective on the world.

Furthermore, many Indonesian students adopt proactive learning strategies to enhance academic performance. They take the initiative to improve their skills through independent study, seeking feedback from professors, and utilizing online resources (Santoso et al., 2022). Developing effective time management skills is critical for coping with the academic rigor of U.S. institutions. Murniati et al. (2023) further emphasized the importance of proactive learning strategies for Indonesian students in navigating the cultural and social landscape of U.S. universities. This highlights the necessity of self-motivation, initiative, and a proactive approach to learning in facilitating a successful transition to the American education system.

The experiences of Indonesian students highlight the importance of institutional support, social networks, and proactive learning strategies in facilitating adaptation to a new cultural environment. By understanding these experiences, universities can create supportive environments that enhance the overall well-being of international students. Providing comprehensive support services, promoting cross-cultural understanding, and encouraging active engagement in campus life are crucial steps toward creating a more welcoming and enriching experience for all international students.

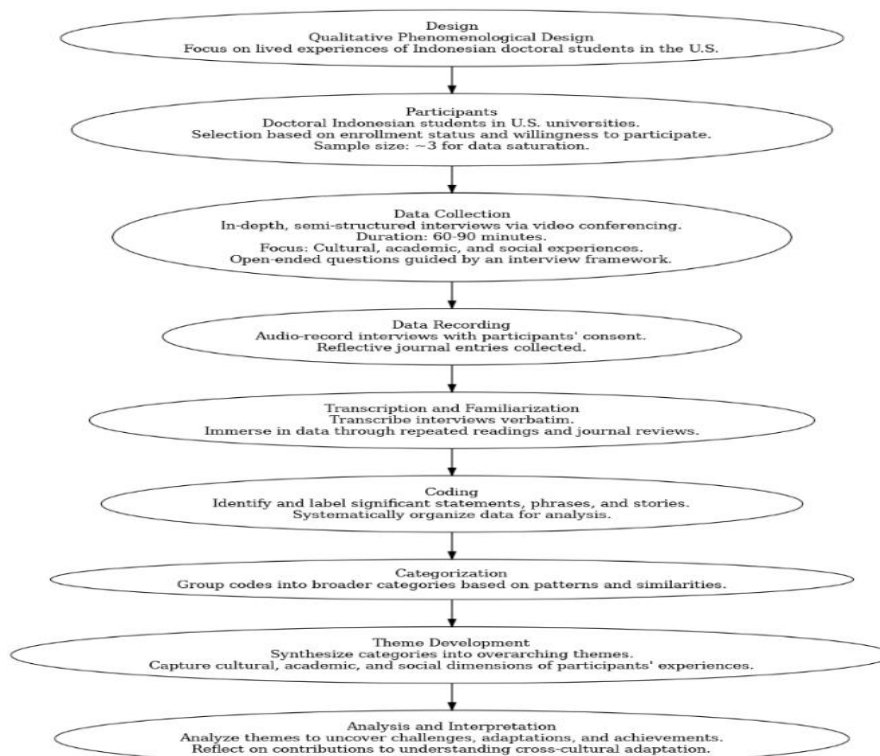
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## METHOD

### Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the cultural, academic, and social experiences of Indonesian students pursuing higher education in the United States. The phenomenological approach captures the intricacies and nuances of individual lived experiences, providing an ideal framework for understanding how these students navigate new cultural and academic landscapes. By allowing participants to express their experiences in their own words, this approach facilitated a deep understanding of the challenges, achievements, and transformative journeys these students experience. As Gill (2014) suggested, phenomenology shapes an individual's sense of self and identity. The insights shared by Indonesian students offered valuable perspectives on how their experiences in the U.S. influenced their cultural identity and worldview.



**Figure 1.** Research Methodology Flowchart

### Participants

The participants for this study were doctoral Indonesian students at one of universities across the United States. Selection was based on their enrollment status and willingness to share their experiences, ensuring a range of perspectives. The aim was to interview approximately three students, a number deemed adequate to reach data saturation within a phenomenological qualitative framework. This focus is particularly important, as doctoral students often encounter unique academic pressures and cultural adjustments that set them apart from undergraduate students.

Among the participants were two females and one male. Participant 1 (PF-1), a second-year female student. Participant 2 (PM-2), a second-year male student, and Participant 3 (PF-3), a third-year female student. This diverse representation provides insights into the unique challenges faced by Indonesian doctoral students in the U.S., particularly those who are also educators in Indonesia.

### **Data Collection**

In-depth semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection. Each interview was conducted one-on-one, via video conferencing platforms such as *Zoom*, and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. These interviews included open-ended questions about specific topics related to participants' experiences. While these interviews may vary slightly depending on the interviewers and the participant's responses, to maximize consistency of data collection, they followed an interview guide that is composed by the writers that listed the questions to be asked (McGrath et al., 2019). The interviews were designed to elicit detailed personal stories and reflections on the students' cultural, academic, and social experiences.

### **Data analysis**

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' permission to enhance (Gray et al., 2020). Reflective journal entries were collected and reviewed. The writer immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and journal entries to become deeply familiar with the content.

### **Coding and Theme Development**

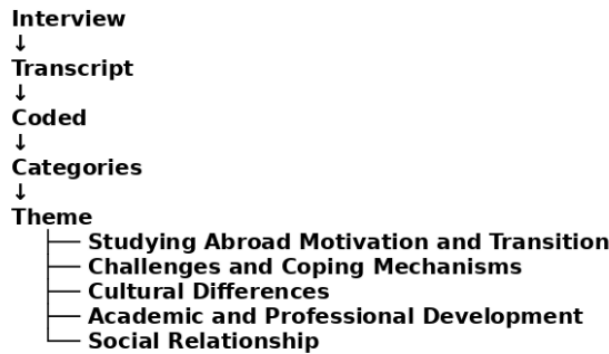
In this study, thematic analysis, a widely recognized qualitative study method, is employed to analyze the phenomenological data gathered from Indonesian students studying in the United States. This approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of their cultural, academic, and social experiences. The process begins with initial coding, where significant statements, phrases, and stories in the data were identified and labelled, this step allows for the systematic organization of the data, facilitating subsequent analysis.

Subsequently, the coded data was categorized into broader categories based on similarities and patterns. This categorization process, as outlined by experts such as Clarke and Braun (2017), enables a deeper understanding of the underlying themes and issues present in the phenomenological qualitative research. Finally, theme development involves synthesizing the categorized data to develop overarching themes that capture the essence of the participants' experiences across cultural, academic, and social dimensions. By employing this systematic and rigorous analytical approach, the study aims to uncover the nuanced aspects of Indonesian students' experiences in the United States, shedding light on their challenges, adaptations, and achievements.

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**Figure 2.** Thematic analysis of Indonesian Students' Experiences Studying in the U.S.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Studying Abroad Motivation and Transition**

The decision to study abroad for Indonesian students, particularly in countries like the United States, is driven by a desire for academic, cultural, and personal growth. To better understand these motivations and transitions, the following table provides a comprehensive overview of the participants' experiences:

**Table 1.** Studying Abroad Motivation and Transition

CATEGORIES	PF-1	PM-2	PF-3
Motivation for Studying Abroad	Pursued deeper learning to improve knowledge and understanding of areas of interest	Aimed to enhance language skills by living and studying in an English-speaking environment	Chose destination for academic excellence and advanced research opportunities
Experience Transitioning to Studying Abroad	Felt encouraged by the appreciation of diversity and differences	Faced initial language challenges in academic and conversational settings, adapting over time	Found social integration challenging initially but overcame it by engaging in community activities
Advice for Other International Students	Emphasized the importance of asking questions and seeking clarity without fear of judgment	Highlighted the value of prioritizing well-being and embracing opportunities for growth	Encouraged thorough research about scholarships and persistence in achieving goals

From table 1, PF-1 highlights the opportunity to encounter diverse teaching methodologies and develop critical thinking skills. This aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the transformative nature of studying abroad (Ali et al., 2022; Chennamsetti, 2024). PM-2 emphasizes the benefits of language immersion and cultural exposure in an English-speaking environment, while PF-3 underscores the appeal of renowned academic excellence and the chance to build international connections through interdisciplinary education and global networking. Kim & Gudykunst (1988) cross-cultural adaptation theory provides a critical framework for understanding these motivational dynamics. The theory illuminates how students develop communication skills, construct social connections, and psychologically prepare themselves for navigating new cultural landscapes.

However, the transition to studying abroad comes with challenges. PF-1 notes that appreciating differences helps overcome feelings of insecurity, while

PM-2 points out that language barriers—whether academic or conversational—can be significant hurdles requiring time and effort to overcome. For PF-3, social integration took time but was facilitated by participating in campus organizations, community activities, and cultural events. These experiences reflect findings from Adisa et al. (2019) and Zarrinabadi et al. (2022), who highlight cultural differences, language barriers, and academic adjustments as common challenges faced by international students.

Each participant also offers valuable advice for prospective students. PF-1 encourages asking questions without fear of judgment to gain clarity and understanding. PM-2 stresses the importance of prioritizing well-being while seeking growth opportunities during this transformative journey. PF-3 advises finding as much information as possible about scholarships and staying persistent in pursuing goals. These insights underscore how studying abroad fosters not only academic development but also personal growth and resilience. (Ali et al., 2022; Chennamsetti, 2024).

Indonesian students choose to study abroad, particularly in the United States, to gain diverse academic experiences, enhance language skills, and build international networks. While they face challenges such as cultural differences and language barriers, the support from university communities helps them adapt and develop resilience. Ultimately, this journey not only enriches their academic knowledge but also fosters significant personal growth, preparing them for a globalized world.

### Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

The experiences of Indonesian students pursuing higher education in the United States are characterized by a complex interplay of challenges and adaptive strategies. To gain a deeper insight into these challenges and the strategies used to cope with them, the following table presents a detailed summary of the participants' experiences.

**Table 2.** Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

CATEGORIES	PF-1	PM-2	PF-3
<b>Cultural Adjustment</b>	Need to be more independent rather than relying on others	Cultural misunderstandings lead to confusion	Difficulty with direct eye contact, considered impolite in Indonesia
<b>Academic Demands</b>	Struggle with class participation and preparation	Difficulty understanding colloquial expressions	Uncomfortable addressing professors by first name
<b>Social Integration</b>	Writing assignments are helpful for structuring thoughts	Challenges with public transportation	Language barriers in academic and social life
<b>Identity Navigation</b>	Initial challenges wearing hijab; found acceptance in diversity	Balancing cultural identity with integration	Cultural differences lead to communication misunderstandings
<b>Social Support</b>	University offers various cultural events and activities	Family support system helps prevent homesickness	Regular communication with loved ones
<b>Coping Strategies</b>	Improving academic writing skills and confidence	Active engagement with course materials and resources	Self-study for language preparation
<b>Self-care Practice</b>	Being authentic while respecting boundaries	Maintaining balance through regular practice	Building relationships with other international students



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From the table 2, participants encounter several challenges across cultural, academic, and social dimensions as they embark on their academic journey in the United States. Yang (2023) highlights that navigating cultural adjustments independently stands out as a significant hurdle. Despite preparatory efforts, instances of cultural misunderstanding may arise, contributing to moments of confusion and potential embarrassment (Bens, 2022).

Language barriers present a substantial challenge, particularly in academic and social contexts. As PM-2 noted, "I struggle to grasp colloquial expressions and academic jargon during lectures." Additionally, Samanhudi & Linse (2019) highlight that writing assignments emerge as a crucial aspect of academic life. PF-1's experience with writing illustrates this, stating, "It's been all about writing assignments here, constantly writing... Initially, writing was daunting, but now it's more manageable." Bridging culture plays a critical role here by encouraging students to engage in language support programs and campus activities. These practical applications not only enhance language proficiency but also provide opportunities for cultural exchange, fostering better understanding between international students and their peers (Can et al., 2021).

Maintaining cultural identity while adapting to a diverse environment emerges as a central concern. PF-1 expressed challenges with wearing a hijab and facing stereotypes but found that "people here respect differences as long as you show your true self." In line with self-verification theory (SVT) by Swann Jr (2012) posits that individuals actively manage interactions to confirm their self-concept, engage in self-disclosure that supports internal perceptions, and seek environments that validate their personal identity. This reflects the broader struggle of balancing cultural expression with integration into a new social context. Claramita et al. (2022) emphasize that Indonesian students often face challenges adapting to the more individualistic U.S. classroom culture, which contrasts sharply with their traditional hierarchical educational background. This cultural transition requires significant adjustments in both personal expression and academic participation.

In response to these challenges, Indonesian students demonstrate remarkable resilience through various coping strategies. These include active engagement with coursework, seeking clarification from professors, and utilizing university resources. As PF-3 emphasized, "Before arriving, I worked on improving my language skills through extensive self-study." Universities play a crucial role by providing resources such as cultural orientation programs and peer mentoring initiatives. Can et al. (2021) found that international students actively seek support from institutional resources, including academic counseling services and language assistance programs, which helps them develop necessary skills and confidence.

The findings also highlight the importance of social support networks. Some students, like PM-2, benefit from having family present, "I bring my family—my wife and kids—here, so I don't feel that kind of homesickness." Others maintain connections through regular communication with loved ones back home and build relationships with fellow international students. These social support networks play a critical role in helping students overcome feelings

of loneliness, maintain cultural connections, and create a sense of belonging in a new environment (Shu et al., 2020).

Through their adaptive strategies and commitment to personal growth, these students contribute to a more inclusive and enriched international academic community. Their experiences underscore the importance of comprehensive support systems and cross-cultural understanding in fostering successful educational outcomes for international students.

### Cultural Differences

Despite preparatory efforts, which involves adjusting to a new culture over time, is a multifaceted process that offers both challenges and opportunities. To gain a clearer insight into these cultural differences, the table below highlights key cultural differences and adaptation challenges faced by Indonesian students in the U.S., particularly in communication, education, and social integration.

**Table 3.** Cultural Differences

CATEGORIES	PF-1	PM-2	PF-3
<b>Cultural Communication</b>	Misinterpretation of humour leading to confusion (direct vs. formal)	Appreciates differences, but struggles with assertiveness	Open to more direct communication, but adjusting to American style
<b>Cultural Adaptation</b>	Active participation and building reciprocal relationships	Struggling with assertiveness, but trying to adapt	Engaged in building hybrid identity, integrating both cultures
<b>Educational Environment</b>	Transition to independent study and critical thinking (U.S. system)	Struggling to adapt to active participation and critical thinking	Transitioning to more autonomous learning and deeper exploration of interests
<b>Social Integration</b>	Joining group discussions, but finding it challenging to connect socially	Engaged in extracurricular activities to build friendships	Engaged in extracurricular activities to build friendships

In terms of cultural communication in the U.S. is generally more direct and informal compared to Indonesia's formal and hierarchical style. For example, PF-1 experienced confusion due to a misinterpretation of humor, reflecting the challenge of navigating direct communication. PM-2 appreciated cultural differences but struggled with assertiveness, while PF-3 began adjusting to the American communication style by adopting a more open approach. This highlights the need for Indonesian students to adapt to open dialogue and assertiveness, which contrasts sharply with their accustomed norms (Kim & Gudykunst, 1988).

Cultural adaptation involves active participation and building reciprocal relationships. As Gong et al. (2021) emphasizes, successful adaptation requires understanding specific contexts and unique difficulties faced by students from diverse backgrounds. PF-1 actively engaged in social interactions to adapt, while PM-2 faced challenges with assertiveness but made efforts to adjust. PF-3 worked on developing a hybrid identity that integrates elements from both their home culture and American society (Ali et al., 2022; Hasyim & Nur, 2022). PF-1 transitioned to this new learning style but found it challenging at first. PM-2 struggled to adapt to active classroom participation and critical thinking, while PF-3 embraced autonomous learning and explored topics of personal interest more deeply. This hybrid identity allows them to maintain their cultural heritage

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while adapting to new social norms (Shu et al., 2020), facilitating a smoother transition into their academic environment.

The educational environment presents stark contrasts. The U.S. system emphasizes independent study, participation, and critical thinking (Braun & Borowiec, 2021), which differs from the teacher-centered approach common in Indonesia. PF-1 transitioned to this new learning style but found it challenging at first. PM-2 struggled to adapt to active classroom participation and critical thinking, while PF-3 embraced autonomous learning and explored topics of personal interest more deeply. PF-1 expressed this adjustment by stating, “I expect to have more in-depth kind of learning... to improve knowledge about things that interest me.” This shift requires Indonesian students to adapt to new expectations regarding classroom behavior and academic autonomy.

Social integration also posed difficulties due to cultural differences. The individualistic nature of American society emphasizes personal goals and self-reliance (Wang et al., 2024), which can be challenging for Indonesian students who are accustomed to collectivist values that prioritize community and family ties. This contrast can lead to feelings of isolation as they navigate social situations that prioritize personal expression over communal bonds. PF-1 struggled with balancing individual goals with community values, while PM-2 found the individualistic nature of American society challenging. In contrast, PF-3 adapted by maintaining a sense of community while embracing individualism. Such involvement not only aids in social integration but also enriches their cultural experience. Indonesian students in the United States experience significant cultural differences in communication, education, and social interactions (Silva et al., 2024).

Overall, understanding these cultural differences is crucial for Indonesian students as they strive for academic success and personal growth in the U.S. By actively engaging with their surroundings through extracurricular activities, seeking support services, and building networks students can effectively navigate these challenges. The insights provided by participants underscore the importance of institutional support systems that recognize and accommodate the unique experiences of international students, ultimately facilitating their adaptation and enriching their educational journeys.

### **Academic and Professional Development**

Studying in the United States offers international students transformative academic and professional growth. The U.S. education system, renowned for its diversity and innovation, fosters critical thinking, curiosity, and specialized knowledge (Liu, 2019). Participants highlighted how the educational environment encourages active participation and debate, which are essential for intellectual development. For instance, PF-1 shared emphasized on interactive learning that characterizes American classrooms. Additionally, PM-2 underlined the value of mentorship from supervisors in advancing their academic progress.

The role of learning support centers is pivotal in assisting students with various academic challenges. As PM-2 utilized an excellent Writing Centre to improve writing skills through consultations, while PF-3 relied on learning support centers to overcome academic difficulties. These centers provide

tutoring sessions, workshops, and personalized guidance tailored to individual needs (Adisa et al., 2019). By offering support in areas such as writing skills and study strategies, these resources help students navigate the rigorous academic demands of U.S. institutions.

Studying abroad also opens up numerous professional opportunities for Indonesian students. Connections with international peers, faculty members, and professionals create a robust network that leads to internships, research collaborations, and job prospects both domestically and internationally. PF-3 shared, “building a global network of contacts through my experiences abroad has been invaluable for my career.” Similarly, PF-1 emphasized how cross-cultural skills gained through study abroad enhanced their employability. Zarrinabadi et al. (2022) emphasize that the professional networks established during international education significantly enhance students' career prospects by providing access to unique job opportunities and industry insights.

The cross-cultural competencies and adaptability gained through studying abroad are highly valued by employers. PF-1 said, “the cross-cultural skills I developed have made me more competitive in the job market.” These skills not only enhance their employability but also prepare them for diverse work environments where collaboration with individuals from different cultural backgrounds is essential. Pacheco (2020) further reinforce this idea, indicating that the challenges faced during cultural adaptation foster resilience and problem-solving skills, which are critical attributes sought after by employers in today's interconnected world.

Living and studying in a multicultural environment broadens perspectives and enhances adaptability. PM-2 remarked on how engaging with diverse cultures enriched their understanding. Additionally, extracurricular activities such as Thanksgiving events (PF-1) or cultural exchange programs (PF-3) further foster cross-cultural understanding while promoting personal growth and independence—qualities crucial for success in today's interconnected world (Samanhudi & Linse, 2019).

Professionally, internships, co-op programs, and campus jobs provide practical experience in students' fields of study. These opportunities allow them to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings while developing essential skills such as leadership and teamwork (Zarrinabadi et al., 2022). Many universities also offer career services tailored to international students to help them build professional connections and navigate the job market effectively. The following table summarizes participants' experiences across key areas:

Table 4. Academic and Professional Development

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CATEGORIES	PF-1	PM-2	PF-3
Extracurricular Activities	Participated in free cultural activities, including Thanksgiving events and group trips	Joined community activities and cultural exchange programs; active in the International Students Union	Participated in cultural exchange and community activities to meet international students
Career Opportunities	Gained professional opportunities, expanded networks, and enhanced employability through cross-cultural skills	Built a global network of contacts with professors, classmates, and professionals	Developed global networks through study abroad, aiding career advancement
Learning Support	Benefited from academic resources and university support systems	Utilized an excellent Writing Centre to improve writing skills through consultations	Used learning support centres to overcome academic challenges
Academic Progress	Actively participated in class discussions and focused on academic growth	Valued supervisor relationships for guidance, mentorship, and research progress	Appreciated support from a caring supervisor who contributed to academic and personal success
Academic and Professional Development	Improved critical thinking through interactive discussions	Gained new perspectives by engaging with diverse backgrounds and ideas	Recognized the importance of global networks for academic and professional growth

Overall, the academic and professional development of Indonesian students in the U.S. is significantly influenced by the supportive educational environment, access to resources, and networking opportunities. Institutions must continue addressing the unique challenges faced by international students while fostering inclusivity to promote cross-cultural understanding. This ensures that students not only thrive academically but also develop the personal growth and professional readiness needed for success in an increasingly globalized world.

**Social Relationship**

Studying abroad in the United States offers Indonesian students a rich tapestry of cultural, academic, and social experiences, marked by opportunities and challenges due to contrasts in cultural norms and social interactions. In Indonesia, deference to authority and formal language usage are emphasized, with titles such as Bapak/Pak (Sir) and Ibu/Bu (Madam) commonly used (Mulyanah & Krisnawati, 2022). In contrast, American culture values open-mindedness, informality, and egalitarianism (Mulyadi et al., 2024; Olagunju et al., 2024). This cultural shift can be challenging but enriches students' understanding of diverse norms. Americans' openness and informality, such as using first names and casual physical contact like hugs or handshakes, can feel unfamiliar to Indonesian students accustomed to formal communication.

To understand the differences in social and communication characteristics between Indonesian and American cultures, the following table compares key aspects:

**Table 5.** Social Relationship

CATEGORIES	PF-1	PM-2	PF-3
<b>Open-mindedness</b>	Open to diverse perspectives and avoids quick judgments	Strives to understand situations before forming opinions	Emphasizes clarifying unfamiliar situations before making conclusions
<b>Sensitivity and Consent</b>	Respects personal boundaries	Values creating a safe and inclusive communication environment	Prioritizes ensuring individual comfort during interactions
<b>Authority Perception</b>	Recognizes and respects hierarchical social structures	Understands the importance of maintaining formal interactions when necessary	Demonstrates respect for relationships within institutional frameworks
<b>Language Usage</b>	Adapts language use based on formal or informal contexts	Adjusts communication style to suit different settings	Acknowledges and navigates nuanced language variations effectively
<b>Community Engagement</b>	Actively participates in student organizations and social groups	Engages in cultural and academic communities to build connections	Builds networks through shared interests and collaborative activities
<b>Personal Growth</b>	Sees experiences as opportunities for learning and self-reflection	Focuses on expanding perspectives and exploring new ways of thinking	Highlights the importance of continuous self-improvement and growth
<b>Social Challenges</b>	Strategically navigates cultural differences to avoid potential conflicts	Proactively works to address and resolve misunderstandings	Balances maintaining a strong personal identity while adapting to new environments

Forming close friendships with American peers can be difficult due to cultural differences and language barriers. Despite being open and friendly, Indonesian students may struggle to integrate into American social circles (Hasyim & Nur, 2022). However, proactive efforts in community building and participation in cultural or interest-based groups offer avenues for social integration and support. The table highlights the importance of community engagement, where building networks through shared interests is key to overcoming these challenges (Shu et al., 2020). For example, PM-2 emphasizes engaging in cultural and academic communities to foster connections, while PF-3 underscores collaborative activities as a way to establish meaningful relationships.

Sensitivity to personal boundaries is another critical aspect of navigating social relationships. As highlighted in the table, PF-1 respects personal boundaries during interactions, while PM-2 emphasizes creating a safe and inclusive communication environment. Similarly, PF-3 prioritizes ensuring individual comfort during interactions. These findings are consistent with Can et al. (2021), who argue that respecting personal space and fostering inclusive environments reduce adjustment problems for international students.

The perception of authority also plays a significant role in shaping social relationships. PF-1 recognizes hierarchical social structures typical of Indonesian culture but adapts by balancing respect with the egalitarianism found in the U.S. Meanwhile, PM-2 understands the importance of maintaining formal interactions when necessary, while PF-3 demonstrates respect for relationships within institutional frameworks. These strategies reflect findings from Claramita et al. (2022), who note that adapting to less hierarchical systems requires flexibility while maintaining respect for authority.

Language usage is another area where adaptation is essential. PF-1 adjusts language use based on formal or informal contexts, while PM-2 modifies communication styles depending on settings. PF-3 further acknowledges nuanced language variations and navigates them effectively. As Dauba &

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Jullanda (2024) highlight, overcoming language barriers is critical for fostering meaningful communication among international students.

Al-Abyadh & Abdel (2022) found that self-management and building relationships with others were crucial for adapting academically and socially. Communities not only foster belonging but also support personal growth (Olagunju et al., 2024). This aligns with the table's emphasis on personal growth, where PF-1 sees experiences as opportunities for learning and self-reflection, PM-2 focuses on expanding perspectives by exploring new ways of thinking, and PF-3 highlights the importance of continuous self-improvement.

Social challenges are inevitable but can be addressed strategically. As noted in the table, PF-1 navigates cultural differences carefully to avoid conflicts, while PM-2 proactively resolves misunderstandings. Meanwhile, PF-3 balances maintaining a strong personal identity with adapting to new environments. These strategies demonstrate how Indonesian students manage cross-cultural challenges effectively. This aligns with Mesidor & Sly (2016), who emphasize that proactive problem-solving strategies significantly enhance international students' adjustment processes.

The academic dimension of studying abroad contributes significantly to the overall experience of Indonesian students in the United States. Hasyim & Nur (2022) note that classroom engagement and participation in Indonesian student associations help establish social interaction. Exposure to diverse perspectives broadens intellectual horizons. PF-1 expressed, "I expect to have more in-depth learning to improve my knowledge," reflecting how studying abroad fosters open-mindedness, critical thinking, and cultural awareness.

In navigating the challenges effectively, Indonesian students highlight the importance of cultural orientation programs, proactive networking, and self-acceptance. Comprehensive support tailored to international students' needs facilitates adjustment and success. By embracing diversity and seeking support when needed, Indonesian students embark on a transformative journey of self-discovery and cross-cultural exchange.

**CONCLUSION**

Indonesian students studying in the United States experience a multifaceted journey encompassing academic and cultural experiences. Their motivations for pursuing education abroad vary from personal aspirations to the academic support available. However, this endeavor is not without its challenges, including cultural disparities, language barriers, and difficulties in forming social connections. Despite these obstacles, Indonesian students appreciate the inclusive environment fostered by university in U.S., particularly in accommodating international students and recognizing their identities.

The concept of bridging culture is vital in understanding the experiences of Indonesian students as they navigate and settle their cultural backgrounds with the new academic and social environments in the United States. This process involves adapting to different educational norms and finding common ground with peers from diverse backgrounds, reflecting the dynamic journey of balancing cultural identities with new experiences. By recognizing the

challenges these students face and implementing supportive measures, universities can create environments that facilitate academic success while enriching personal growth. Such an approach ultimately contributes to a more inclusive academic community where diverse cultures can thrive together.

Furthermore, students often seek refuge in academic and social communities, both on and off campus, which not only provide scholastic assistance but also serve as conduits for social integration. The findings of this study suggest several implications for educational institutions and policymakers. To better support Indonesian students, universities should implement specific strategies that address their unique challenges. This includes enhancing language assistance programs and providing workshops focused on academic writing and communication skills to ease the transition into the U.S. education system.

Additionally, fostering an inclusive campus culture through diversity training and cross-cultural events can help mitigate feelings of isolation among international students. By creating opportunities for interaction among domestic and international students, universities can promote cross-cultural understanding and acceptance. It is also crucial for universities to recognize the financial constraints faced by many international students. Implementing financial aid programs specifically designed for international students can alleviate some of the burdens they face, allowing them to focus more on their studies and social integration.

For future Indonesian students considering studying abroad, it is advisable to proactively seek information about American culture while maintaining their identities and fostering social relationships. These strategies serve as a cornerstone for navigating the complexities of studying abroad and ultimately contribute to their academic and personal growth throughout their educational journey. To create a welcoming environment, universities should provide comprehensive support services tailored to the needs of international students. This could include hiring cultural connection officers who understand their needs and expanding access to mental health resources. By addressing these areas, institutions can enhance the overall experience of Indonesian students in the U.S., facilitating their successful adaptation and contributing to a more inclusive academic community that truly embodies the essence of bridging culture.

## **AUTHORS' STATEMENTS**

**Cindy Octavina** led the research, data collection, and manuscript drafting. **Fathia Khairunnisa**, **Tri Puja Lestari**, and **Sary Silvhiany** as project members, supported data collection, analysis, and manuscript refinement. **Soni Mirizon** and **Ernalida** provided oversight, and critical feedback to ensure the quality of the research and manuscript.

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