

**CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS IN ACADEMIC LIFE
EXPERIENCED BY INDONESIAN POSTGRADUATE
STUDENTS IN LONDON**

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ABSTRACT

The number of Indonesian students studying in the United Kingdom is steadily rising. Previous studies have shown that adjusting to a new culture is an essential factor in the academic success of international students. This research examines the academic challenges faced by Indonesian postgraduate students because of the significant cultural disparities between Western and Indonesian. Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis were applied in this study to investigate the students' challenges in the academic context. This study discovered essential themes from the interview data, including difficulty using academic English, cultural differences in the classroom and students' inability to think critically. Moreover, most students said they struggled to write essays throughout the cultural transition period. This study suggests that Indonesian students planning to study abroad should prepare themselves to adjust to cultural differences to achieve excellent academic performance successfully.

Keywords: Study abroad, Cultural adjustment, Culture-shock, Indonesian students, Academic English

A. INTRODUCTION

People may travel to different nations with relative ease in this modern era of globalization. Moreover, society may quickly obtain the information they want, especially in this day and age of the internet and social media. As a result, the number of overseas students enrolling in universities around the country is expanding due to this trend. A notable expansion of international students has also been observed in developed countries. For example, in the anglophone countries, international students seek tuition in English and where the education system is widely regarded as high quality, with degrees that are internationally recognised as having earned their degrees there (Harrison, 2012). In the US, for example, the number of international students attending US colleges and universities has risen sharply in recent years, and this trend is expected to continue (Zhang et al., 2016). More countries with developed economies are encouraging their citizens to pursue higher education in other countries, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the United States (Zhang et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the period of globalisation has offered a chance for income growth in developed nations. According to Harrison (2012), the trend toward a rise in international students has created chances for higher education institutions to profit more. Therefore, a global university has evolved into the most diversified environment, with many students and faculty members from a broad range of cultural backgrounds. Eldaba (2016) believes that because of the globalisation of economies and societies, there are currently many benefits for educational institutions found in the increasing number of international students. Moreover, the increasing number of international students is potentially significant for higher education institutions because of their "diversity, status, and revenue "(Palacios et al., 2015, p. 5).

Many students from many countries aspire to pursue their education abroad in this global era. They desire to get new experiences that will be valuable in the future and obtain a higher education. Students from China, India, and Korea, for example, make up the large majority of overseas students at the institution (Zhang et al., 2016). International students are reportedly increasing in number in the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom has become the second most popular foreign student destination, with over 300,000 non-EU students in 2017/18 (Higher Education Statistics Authority, 2019, cited in Lomer and Mittelmeier, 2021). Students from Indonesia who pursued their education abroad contributed to the increase in international students in the UK. For example, a rising number of Indonesian students are choosing to study in the United Kingdom. Indonesian students' most popular study abroad locations are the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Germany, and France. According to EU figures, 3,210 Indonesian students studied in Germany in 2016, while 2,950 studied in the United Kingdom, 1,300 in France, and 1,113 in the Netherlands (Jakarta Post 2016).

Intercultural encounters may occur during international students' studies when they come into interaction with various cultures in their host country, which may impact their academic performance. Several prior studies have been performed to investigate the experiences of foreign students living abroad (e.g., Coles & Swami, 2012; Wang and Hannes, 2014). Swami et al. (2010) conducted a quantitative study on sociocultural adjustment among Malaysian and Chinese students in the United Kingdom. They discovered that Malay students had a more difficult time adjusting to their new social environment. Another conclusion revealed that sociocultural adjustment is also affected by family income, interaction with indigenous people, language competency, perceived cultural differences, and prejudice. Additionally, students with a greater level of English proficiency adapt more rapidly and have better sociocultural adjustment, which may result in an improved health state. Furthermore, Wang and Hannes (2014) analyse the experiences of Asian overseas students, with a particular emphasis on their academic and social transitions. The researchers discovered that participants had encountered difficulties with academic adjustment in four domains: (1) academic activities, (2) academic resources, (3) languages, and (4) time management.

Previous research has also been discovered in the context of Indonesian students studying abroad. Novera (2004) conducted qualitative research on the academic, social, and cultural experiences of Indonesian students studying at universities in Victoria, Australia. She noticed that students struggled with academic English and other academic standards and that there was a lack of suitable facilities for Muslim students. This study appears to be out of date; thus, the purpose of this study is to analyse the most recent findings in terms of

Indonesians' problems in London during the intercultural adjustment phase, particularly in the academic context.

B. METHOD

As stated in the preceding section, because the current study intends to analyse the challenges faced by Indonesian students throughout the intercultural adjustment phase in the setting of academics, the following research question was developed to lead the study:

What challenges in academic and social life do Indonesian postgraduate students studying in London face throughout their cultural adjustment period?

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews was used in this study. A qualitative methodology is a technique that serves as a tool for the researcher, allowing him or her to plan the study, gather the data, and analyse the results (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The current study used a semi-structured interview. This type of interview elicits information about the participants' "perceptions and opinions" and enables the researcher to obtain more information as needed (Barriball and While, 1994, p. 330). The participants were questioned about their experiences or any issues they encountered during the cultural adjustment process. One of the primary benefits of semi-structured interviews is probing, which comes after gathering broad information. Probing aims to uncover additional information about the participants' responses to the interview's key question (Keats, 2000). Another purpose of probing is to clarify and collect thorough information about relevant and essential subjects addressed by participants (Barriball and While, 1994).

Purposive sampling was also applied in this study to choose participants for the interviews. Purposive sampling is a method of selecting participants based on the qualities of the targeted participants who are thought to have the qualities to answer the interview's questions comprehensively (Bernard 2002, Lewis & Shepard 2006, referenced in Tongco, 2007). Additionally, all participants were volunteers approached via PPI London's Instagram (Indonesian Student Association of London). Following the release of information on this study, eleven postgraduate students (8 males and 3 females) participated in interviews to gather information about their experiences with intercultural adjustment in their academic lives. The researcher scheduled interviews at locations and times convenient for the participants and met with the majority of them during the college's lecture periods. The majority of the interviews lasted between 5 and 10 minutes and were recorded using a smartphone.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse all of the data collected. Thematic analysis is a self-contained descriptive technique for data analysis that may be used as a strategy for detecting, analysing, and reporting (themes) inside data (Braun & Clarke, cited in Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 3). Additionally, it is claimed that thematic analysis is a flexible and beneficial study tool that provides a variety of comprehensive ways of analysing the data (Braun & Clarke, cited in Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 3). The findings and discussion of this study will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following findings from the participants' data indicate their perspectives on the cultural adjustment challenges in the academic context faced by Indonesian postgraduate students. The resultant data is organized by subject and sub-theme areas explored, with direct quotations utilized to allow the data to speak for itself at this point with minimum intervention from the researcher. The data will show shared and split knowledge areas in this area, which will be examined in further detail in the discussion section.

1. Academic Adjustment Difficulties

All participants were questioned about the problems they have encountered in academic contexts. The academic adjustment experiences of participants can be summarized into four broad themes: the use of Academic English, a lack of confidence to participate in classroom discussion, a hierarchical teacher-student relationship, and a lack of critical thinking in essay writing, questioning, analysing, and evaluating.

a. Using Academic English

During the cultural adjustment phase, six of the participants struggled with academic English. In terms of academic activity, I noticed a subtheme relating to essay writing. Furthermore, a participant acknowledges that they were experiencing difficulty in academic English since they did not receive much English instruction, particularly in academic English, during their prior study in Indonesia. A Master of Laws student at Middlesex University stated:

"Because we basically learn English in Indonesia, but just general English, but when we join a class here, especially in writing, we use different English, I mean different style of English because we express our ideas in academic English style, so we learn more while we study in UK, so this is challenging for me."

Another student pursuing a course in Biological Science at Imperial College, London, stated that he feels the UK's conversational language is considerably distinct from academic English:

"Because in my prior degree in Indonesia, this is pretty different from the usage of English that I know or study in my country, especially when we talk or write something in academic English, it is quite different."

b. The absence of critical thinking skills in essay writing, questioning, analysing, and evaluating

The second issue most participants perceived as an impediment was their lack of critical thinking. All individuals who struggled with a lack of critical thinking had issues with critical thinking, particularly in writing activities. A student at the Goldsmiths College University of London studying Digital Journalism stated that she found it difficult to think critically about stories or reports when she was forced to be more critical in crafting headlines or lead articles. A participant, who is enrolled in the TESOL programme at UCL, stated that he had difficulty writing and discussing in an academic setting, which expects students to be more critical:

"I need to prepare myself for critical thinking, especially because I didn't just speak my opinion, but I also had to have strong arguments and it had to be critical, so when I spoke to my friend discussing something, I needed to make sure that I also had some background knowledge about it and some evidence to support my arguments."

A student at University College London pursuing a master's degree in urban planning claimed that he needed to adapt his critical thinking methods. When it comes to critical thinking, he claims that students express themselves in various ways. In Indonesia, students do not frequently ask questions during lectures; but, in the United Kingdom, he observed that students continue to query even when the topic itself does not need critical examination.

c. Lack of confidence in participating in class discussions

A participant studying Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, was pleased with his English academic abilities, despite previous difficulties, because the classroom was mostly made up of international students, and he felt that his level was relatively high. However, he struggled more with a lack of confidence in expressing his thoughts in class discussions. He added that students in Indonesia's education system are not used to expressing their ideas or asking questions in university courses. Another student at Imperial College earning a master's degree concurred with this viewpoint, commenting:

"four years learning in Indonesia, in undergraduate study, talking in a classroom is not something usual, so we actually don't debate that much, and now it has been challenging for me."

d. The teacher-student relationship is hierarchical

One student at the University College London School of Pharmacy has firsthand knowledge of the differences in the teacher-student interaction between Indonesia and the United Kingdom. She stated:

"Here the hierarchy with the teacher and student connection being the most important, is totally different, because in Indonesia, where I came from, I discovered teacher and student is like the gap between student and instructor is so far away, so when we ask questions we have some like regulations." We couldn't be like a we had to contain ourselves if we had a question but here I really when we are not holding our question they would regard us as if we lack interest in studies itself thus it is sometimes tough for me to separate whether I have to query item or not."

Although just one participant thought this was the most critical issue during the academic adjustment stage, she indicated that it had an impact on her grade in one of her courses because she did not tell the truth when asked to offer comments on the programme. She mentioned the following:

"because they will assess us based on what you told them, so like they perform well or not, so if you said if they not performed the course well, so it is not your fault to get fully understand about the study or like for example when you are not fully understand about the study or like get unsatisfactory mark or something like that so it is not your fully responsibilities because they not performing the course well so likely this is really important"

e. Disadvantages of writing an essay

Most of the participants stated that the most challenging component of cultural adjustment in the classroom was writing essays. There are, however, several reasons behind this. Writing essays may be particularly challenging for two reasons: first, since many students are unfamiliar with the conventions of English academic composition, and second, because their preferred method of communication is oral rather than written.

Six participants said that writing academic English in the UK throughout the research was their first time doing so.

"I didn't write much before, like in my undergraduate, I didn't write like a lengthy paper, like thesis, and it is, in here you have to write a lot of reports and then literature review and for my thesis itself near the conclusion of my master degree," said Participant #7.

Another participant also said during the interview as follows:

"Because I never wrote English before in academic style, when I went to my uni for the first time and had my first essay, it was really tough, I mean I had to study a lot and then it takes more than one month to understand how to write an essay," said a participant..

Writing academic English has shown to be a challenge for three participants compared to speaking in English. To put it another way, they can speak and write English in a conversational or informal manner. As a result, when they had to write academically, they found it challenging since they hadn't done any writing in English before. In the opinion of another participant,

"The regular English and academic English are somewhat different in, normal English you can communicate as usual and make some few faults, but in academic discussion fall mistake like grammatical mistake might affect a significant mark or viewpoint from the people."

In addition to the previously listed elements, another participant asserted that he felt more comfortable with American English throughout his college studies in Indonesia. When he was making the transition, he had no idea that his instructor wanted him to write in British English in his essays for class. His essay grades suffered after he made several spelling errors while studying for his master's degree in London.

Most participants said they had difficulty understanding the lecturer's instructions. According to the participant, the standards did not accurately represent her grade while pursuing a Master's degree in Mental Health at Kings College London. #6 participant also reported that he had difficulty connecting his ideas and a variety of scholarly sources, including journal articles.

f. Difficulty in Comprehending

Because of the differences in curriculum between Indonesia and the United Kingdom, one of the students at University College London's School of Pharmacy is experiencing difficulties with comprehension throughout her studies. She stated that she lacked expertise in what she had learned in the UK. She uses an example from her internship during the study.

She had difficulty interacting with other professionals who had previously been living here for a while. She stated, "

"They know a lot about here, and of course we have to offer therapy based on what is applied here, but when they asked me what should I do and about all that I know, it was extremely tough for me to reply since I don't really know what is going on here."

Due to the significant cultural disparities between Western and Indonesian cultures, the current study tried to investigate the problems encountered by Indonesian students in the academic context. This section will go through the data collected from the study's participants and highlight the significant results and themes from the data analysis. The findings will be examined in connection to the research questions given at the start of this study and in the context of the previous literature, which includes Novera (2004) and Robertson et al. (2000). This is done to assess the relevance and significance of the results to the topic under examination, which leads to overall conclusions and recommendations for further research.

The two significant challenges highlighted in academic transition were difficulty using academic English and a lack of critical thinking in essay writing, questioning, analysing, and assessing.

2. Academic Adjustment

The study discovered two key themes arising from the interview data, including difficulty in using academic English and cultural differences in the classroom

a. Using Academic English

Six of the 11 participants in this research had difficulty using English in academic settings. This is consistent with the findings of Novera's (2004) study, which discovered that practically all of her participants struggled with academic English use. One of the reasons for this was the first time English was used in an academic setting. Several participants said that they did not write in English very regularly during their prior degrees. This is consistent with Novera (2004)'s observation that English is learned as a foreign language and only becomes a compulsory subject at the secondary and higher levels. Furthermore, it is never taught for academic purposes; instead, it is taught for informal language use or daily conversation. Two students reported having difficulty distinguishing between British and American spelling, while several students were unfamiliar with British English. One student remarked that he had difficulty comprehending or hearing the professors' speaking correctly due to their British accent; the English he was used to hearing or understanding was American English utilized in films or games. However, the most crucial feature is that English is taught using American English instead of British English in the Indonesian education system.

b. Cultural differences in the classroom

Asian cultures, like that of Indonesia, are defined by a high power distance, collectivism, and a low level of uncertainty avoidance. In contrast, the UK is defined by a low power distance, individualism, and a low level of uncertainty avoidance. A number of issues were discovered in this study as a result of cultural differences in academic settings, including difficulties surrounding the lack of confidence to participate in classroom discussion, the

hierarchical teacher-student relationship, and a lack of critical thinking in essay writing, questioning, analysing, and evaluating. Indonesia, according to Hofstede (1997), is a country with a high level of power distance. According to Novera (2004), large degrees of Power Distance might influence how Indonesian students act when changing to different cultures, including issues regulating the teacher-student relationship. According to the findings of this study, one participant was hesitant or unwilling to speak honestly when requested to reply with criticism after the class, which was detrimental to her. Another issue connected to high power distance was the typical quiet maintained by Indonesians, as mentioned by participant #11:

"Because in Indonesia, where I am from, I noticed that the distance between student and instructor is so great that when we ask questions, we have some similar regulations." We couldn't be like a we had to hold ourselves if we had a question but here I really when we are not holding our question they would regard us as if we lack interest in studies itself so it is like sometimes it is like tough for me to separate whether I have to query item or not."

Another cultural variation in learning discovered in this study was in the example of two individuals who were hesitant to participate in a classroom discussion. They were not used to talking much in class since, in Indonesian tradition, students are not allowed to speak in class without the teacher's permission. Hua (2014) discovers that students who have trouble efficiently participating in a conversation have more classroom involvement overall, which is a prevalent concern for Asian students. Furthermore, overseas students from high-power distant cultures are less likely to participate in classes and lack the critical abilities necessary in Western academic contexts (Biggs cited in Novera 2004).

Another component of schooling that differs between Asian and Western cultures is the technique of critical thinking. Rhetoric and critical reasoning are anticipated in Western higher education, which is frequently unfamiliar to Asian students who are used to a more "...transmission form of teaching and learning" (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars cited in Durkin 2008). This study also discovered that a number of individuals had similar issues adapting to new modes of critical thinking. As another participant added:

"I need to prepare myself for critical thinking, especially because I didn't just speak my opinion, but I also had to have strong arguments and it had to be critical, so when I spoke to my friend about something, I needed to make sure that I also had some background knowledge about it and some evidence to support my arguments."

D. CONCLUSION

Studies abroad, especially in Western countries, might be interesting for Indonesian students and provide them with fresh experiences. On the other hand, students must be aware of the cultural differences between Western countries and Indonesia and the need for cultural adjustment. Students had to deal with both academic transitions throughout the cultural adjustment period. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic content analysis, this study examined the difficulties experienced by Indonesian postgraduate students in London. Most challenging for students to adapt to academic culture was using academic English; next was developing the critical thinking skills required in a Western university setting. In light of the difficulties connected with learning styles, students should plan by taking English courses that focus on academic English writing, mainly if English is their second language.

Many students have no previous knowledge of academic writing in the English language. To meet the requirements of UK universities, students must be familiar with Western critical thinking methods. In addition, the university may give extra information regarding academic requirements such as essay writing, critical thinking, and participation in class debates during orientation activities.

The findings of this study imply that Indonesian students in the United Kingdom must adjust to and prepare for cultural differences to obtain positive results in their academic performance. Due to budget and limited time, the present study is limited to a few participants. To overcome these limits, additional research with more participants is required to cover all regions of the world with students studying in the UK. The generalizability of the findings of this study may be limited, as with any other qualitative study with a small and unrepresentative sample. Larger-scale research conducted by or in collaboration with an organisation such as the Indonesian Student Association, which currently has access to a significant number of students studying abroad, might address this study's limitation by merging qualitative and quantitative approaches.

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