

# International Students in Indonesia: A Study on Academic and Socio-Cultural Adjustment

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**Abstract.** Increasing numbers of international students in higher education sector in Indonesia urges the institutions to pay attention to the students' adjustment process into academic and non-academic matters. Quality of services and facilities provided by institutions, quality of education and social groups in which they interact become key success of their assimilation. A cross sectional survey toward international students at a prominent university in Indonesia revealed unique obstacles during their transition in both academic and socio-cultural lives. Challenges were mainly due to communication as there was a gap between the students' and lecturers' language competence and use. Other difficulties are related to different academic workload, teaching processes, and assessment procedures. As for sociocultural adaptation, the students are still highly dependent on their country's community groups assistance as integration programs, services, and facilities that support their life especially outside the university needs major improvement.

**Keywords:** *International Students, Adjustments, Academic, Sociocultural, Language, Communication*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The interest of international students studying in Indonesian universities continues to increase. Ministry of Research Technology and Higher Education Republic of Indonesia ('PerguruanTinggi Indonesia Diminati MahasiswaAsing', 2017)[1] informs that throughout the year 2016, as many as 6.967 License of Learning had been published by the Directorate of Institutional Development of Higher Education. The ministry targets 20.000 international students to enroll in Indonesian universities in 2019 (Widyawati, 2016)[2] . The increasing number of international students is one of the aspects used by Ministry of Research Technology and Higher Education Republic of Indonesia to measure readiness and reflect the ability of universities in organizing internationalization programs to face the global competition.

In order to meet professional commitments of Indonesian universities and to compete with other centres of university learning, it is essential that delight and quandaries of the international students in coping with different socio-cultural and academic lives are well responded whenever evaluation to improve the quality of the institutions is conducted. Ellis &

Van Aart (2013) in Krishna (2016) [3] confirmed that three of the most important concerns about studying abroad are (1) the academic which include professors, lessons in different languages and methods used; (2) the city and culture including the location and its atmosphere; and (3) university services including accommodation, counselling, information desk, and integration activities. De Wit, et.al (2011)[4] also argued that support services for international students can be achieved if all stakeholders at the university work together to enhance the campus internalization process. It means universities need to appropriately facilitate international students' adjustment to their system by taking the three aspects into consideration. This process has become an indicator for quality in higher education. If lecturing staff have an understanding on the students' academic, language, and cultural background situation, it will be a good position to prepare inclusive curricula which enable students to use their background to their advantage. Cultural diversity thus enables greater participation by the students in integration activities be it of the academic matter or social need in which exposure to host language presents in most contextual practice.

Challenges for international students in their adjustment process pertinent to socio-cultural life in its relation to language and communication in Indonesian context is something interesting to be researched as Indonesian is rich with traditional culture and vernacular languages practiced in everyday life. Mastering Indonesian language may not be enough for the international students as in many areas in Indonesia it can serve as a second language. This study, thus, explored academic and socio-cultural lives of international students at a prominent university in Indonesia to identify what the university needs to prepare and improve to enhance its quality. Focus was given to the service, supports and assistance needed by international students to have a smooth adjustment to life in Indonesian context. The university was chosen due to the fact that it is among the top 10 universities in the country which holds many national and international certifications as one of the guarantees of its quality. Hundreds of international students are now actively studying at the university as more and more provision of scholarships and international collaborations are available. In order to support the study activities of the students, it is committed to provide the best service (Denok, 2015 September 10)[5].

### **1.1. International Students Adjustment Process**

International students often face an array of challenges in the process of adapting to an environment which differs significantly from their prior socio-cultural and educational experiences. Previous studies have consistently identified domain of engagement in the acculturation of foreign students, namely 1) environmental, such as adjusting to cuisine, housing environments and transportation, 2) socio-cultural, such as interpersonal relations, intergroup interactions and social contact, 3) academic, such as different assessment system and difficulty meeting deadlines of assignments, and 4) psychological, such as experiencing stress, homesickness, loneliness, and problems with self-esteem and identity (Alavi & mansor, 2011)[6].

A study by Wang & Xiao (2014)[7] revealed that research has identified that ease of socio-cultural adaptation of higher degree research students often has a major bearing on academic outcomes and psychological well-being. With regards to international higher degree research students in Australia, the key issue raised in the existing literature is English language proficiency. A lack of English language skills has been consistently identified as a major barrier to academic adjustment in Australia (Son & Park, 2014)[8]. In particular, international students without English as their mother tongue have been frequently shown to struggle with

academic reading, writing and oral presentations. The studies indicated that language can be a problem for international students in adapting to their academic life.

Many host institutions have focused on providing language and academic skills support as an important resource to international students, given the potential impact on academic success. Yet, mixed findings have been reported regarding the relationship between host language skills and international students' personal life satisfaction. For example, a positive relationship was found in a national survey in New Zealand (Ward & Masgoret (2004) in Newton (2015))[9] , but no relationship was found in survey with Chinese international students in Australia (Mak (2009) in Yu & Wright (2016))[10]. However, it is possible that host language proficiency could play a relatively more important role in international students' satisfaction with university life, as opposed to their personal life.

In addition, research has suggested that international students in Australia often struggle to integrate into society (Abdullah, 2011)[11], (Wang et al., 2015) [12]. This literature points to international students experiencing problems in understanding socio-cultural norms, and often having limited opportunities to interact with domestic students. Instead, international students are more likely to seek support from those within their existing socio-cultural group. In the absence of such networks, a concern is that international students may become socially isolated.

## **2 RESEARCH METHOD**

Quantitative approach using cross-sectional survey design was employed in this study due to its effectiveness in gathering data on attitudes and preferences, beliefs and predictions, behavior and experiences (Dornyei, 2007)[13], (Weisberg et al., 1996) [14] at one point in time (Creswell, 2011)[15].

As this study works on the adjustment experiences of international students in a university in Indonesia, a survey questionnaire was adapted from Kukatlapalli (2016)[16] on the adjustment experiences of Indian International students in New Zealand Universities. This questionnaire was adapted in this study for of two reasons: (1) the topic of the study conducted by Kukatlapalli (2016)[16] is similar to the topic of this present study, and (2) the questionnaire that is used in Kukatlapalli's (2016)[16] study had been reviewed.

The questionnaire was meant to seek quantifiable descriptive responses, thus it consisted of 53 multiple choice and short open ended questions that covered the topics on: background information, educational experiences, experiences with service and facilities, social life experiences, and cultural experiences. The questionnaire was then made in online and printed versions, tried out, revised and modified further for the ease of the respondents. The population in this study is all international (non-Indonesian nationality) students who study at the university. Data collected are focused on the international students' adjustment process both in their academic and social lives by taking their personal information into consideration to give background to the adjustment process.

## **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

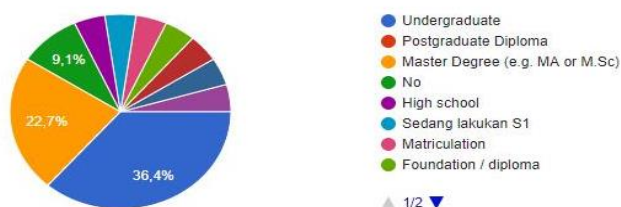
The international students participating in this study were male and female students age between 18 years-old to 41 years-old. They were citizen of 11 different countries; Gambia, Libya, Thailand, Malaysia, Timor Leste, India, South Korea, Russia, Tajikistan, Germany, and Madagascar.

Studying in Indonesia was the first experience of studying outside of their country to 69.6% of the respondents and to 39.1% of them it was their first time living away from the family, while only 18% were accompanied by their family. 65% of the respondents had only been staying in Indonesia for 2 months when they participated as in this study, while 23% other had been staying for 1 year or more.

The participants' academic qualification before coming to Indonesia were varied, starting from high school graduates up to Master degree (Figure 4.1). This leads them to join various academic programs, namely international doctorate program, graduate, undergraduate, and exchange students programs.

What was your highest academic qualification before coming to Indonesia ?

22 tanggapan



**Figure 4.1** Academic qualification before coming to Indonesia

This various programs made the respondents had numerous situations in regard to their education financial issue. 54.5% of the respondents did not have any difficulty at all in paying their tuition, while 22.7% said it was slightly difficult, 9.1% argued that it is very difficult, and 9.1% were not sure whether they have difficulties.

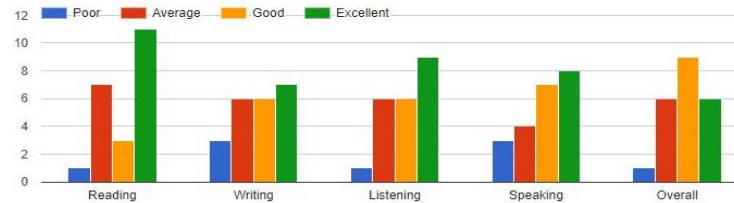
a. Adjustment Experience in Academic Life

Most of the respondents stated the excellent quality of their lecturers, and good content of the courses they were taking. Although they added that the assessment procedure was only average and that the feedback they received was either good or average, they were very satisfied (30.4%), satisfied (30.4%), and slightly satisfied (30.4%) with their academic progress. 9,1% of the respondents even claimed that they were excellent in their study, while equal number of respondents (45.5% respectively) believed that they were doing good and average in their studies.

Although most respondents stated that they had differences in the academic workload, teaching process, and assessment procedure, interaction between students and lecturer as well as interaction between students were similar. As for academic workload which comprises academic load, teaching practices, assessment procedure, interaction between students and lecturer, as well as interaction between students and other students, 85.7% of the respondents rated that it is just about right, while 9.5% stated that it was too little.

It is expected that the respondents have English competency needed to support their academic life while they are living abroad. In this study the respondents believed that their reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills are excellent for their study, while overall, their language skills were good (Figure 4.2).

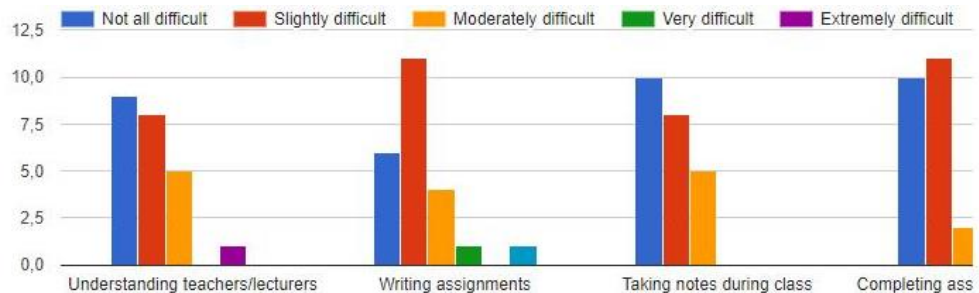
In academic studies, How would you Rate your English language ability ?



**Figure 4.2** English language ability in academic life

The fact that some lecturers and staff cannot speak fluent English made the respondents in difficulties to adjust with the academic life. The lecturers cannot explain the content of the lecture clearly, and even worse, some use sometimes Javanese as the language of instruction in the classroom. Ballard and Clanchy (1991)[17] argued that individual students quite often regard their lack of proficiency in English as the single cause of difficulties in their studies in English speaking country. It means that international students needs to master the host country language well to be successful in their study. In this study, however, it is not only the international students lack of Indonesian language mastery, but the lecturers' lack of proficiency in English topped up with the use of vernacular language also becomes a main cause of international students escalating challenges in their studies. To cope with the difficulties, the respondents asked and got helps from their friends and some lecturers. The availability of materials and their persistence and hard work also helped them a lot. Provision of language classes should be the first and upmost importance of help needed by both the international students and lecturers teaching them.

Figure 4.3 shows that the respondents' academic activities pertinent to understanding lectures and taking notes were not all difficult, while academic activities related to writing assignment and completing assignments on time were slightly difficult.



**Figure 4.3** Educational activities difficulty level

Despite all the hardships, the respondents found many enjoyable academic lives. The university good infrastructure, kind and accommodative nature of lecturers, staff, and students made them adapt with the academic environment fast.

Most respondents chose excellent for accommodation services, language laboratories, 'Buddy' or mentor programs, sports and recreational facilities. As most of them opted that

student orientation program was either excellent or good, they stated that students association, international student office, health, computing, and additional services were good. While, financial advice services, vocational or educational guidance, and learning support center were claimed to be average. Some respondents voted excellent for clubs and societies, yet equal number of respondents believed that it was average. This contradictory finding might be caused by the fact that only 25% of the respondents moderately used the services. 25% other respondents did not even use the services and facilities available. Overall, 47.6% of the respondents thought that the quality of the services and facilities at UB was average. Only 14.3% of the respondent argued that it was excellent.

Despite all the difficulties faced by international students, various enjoyable academic life during their study such as experiencing a better infrastructure, services and facilities, new academic environment, various activities and new knowledge related to the culture of the host country, and having many friends from different countries made 81% of the respondents recommend the university as a place to study.

Argument that international student look more satisfied with the stay in the country abroad than with the quality of their studies abroad (Fellinger et al. in ESN Survey, 2013)[18] seems to be not entirely true. This research found out that academic background of lecturers as well as the university high standard becomes the reasons of choosing the university. It leads to 60.8% satisfaction in academic progress. Zhao (2012)[19] asserted that student satisfaction has a strong relationship with the quality of higher education perceived by the student, and that this perception will be influenced by many factors concerning the educational service, including expectation of service and image of the institution.

In this study, the respondents chose Indonesia and the university as a place of study because of (1) academic concerns such as the university's high standard in academic matters, its international programs and collaborations that facilitated them in many ways, academic background of lecturers and the availability of program delivered in English and Indonesian language, (2) the city and culture concerns as Indonesian is located close to their home countries and it has nice weather, interesting culture, and beautiful tourism attractions, (3) university services concerns including excellent accommodation services, and excellent 'Buddy' or mentor programs. Other reason was language concerns as expressed by respondents from Malaysia and Timor Leste who stated that similar language used in Indonesia and their countries becomes one of their main considerations. Those reasons reflects three of the most important concerns about studying abroad namely (1) the academic which include professors, lessons in different languages and methods used, (2) the city and culture including the location and its atmosphere, and (3) university services including accommodation, counseling, information desk, and integration activities (Ellis & van Aart, 2013)[20].

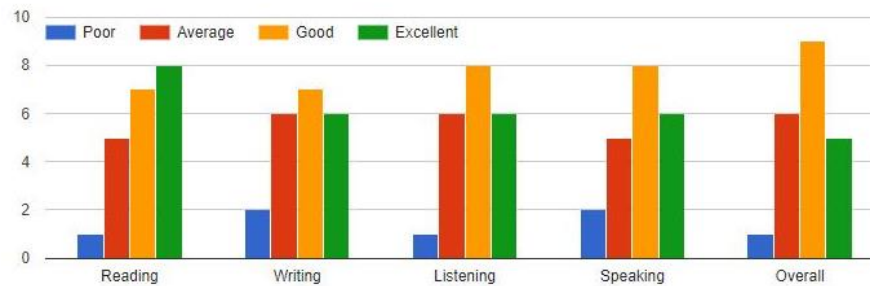
#### b. Adjustment Experience in Social Life

Housing convenient to the respondents is not an easy thing to find as it needs to closely resemble the place they usually lived in. Studying at the university gives benefit to the

respondents as there are many options of housing available in the city. Thus, it is not a surprising finding to know that most of the respondents were staying at Kos.

The respondents believed that their English ability was good to be used to socialize. Most respondents argued that they have excellent reading skills, while their listening, writing, and speaking skills were just good (Figure 4.4).

In socializing, How would you Rate your English language ability ?



**Figure 4.4** English language ability in social life

Some respondents realized that their leisure time activities and habit were somehow changed since they arrived in Indonesia. They started to wake up early, did more indoor activities or stayed at home more as they did not know much about places in the city. Some other respondents started to travel and tried new things more frequently than before.

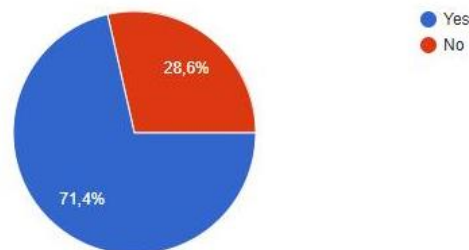
As foreigners, most of the respondents never experience racial issues from Indonesian and other international students. Even, their Indonesian friends were as many as friends they had from their own countries. Most of the respondents also made friends with other international students from different country.

In regard to practicing their religious belief, the respondents can maintain their religion and carry out their religious observances as free as when they were in their home country. Some argued that it was because the people are open minded, tolerant and quite liberal in perceiving religious beliefs.

During their adjustment in Indonesia, 71.4% of the respondents got support from their country community group, while 28.6% did not (Figure 4.5).

Do you get any support from your country community groups ?

21 tanggapan



#### **Figure 4.5** Support from the respondents' country community groups

As satisfaction helps students to build their self-confidence leading to the development of useful skills and the acquisition of knowledge (Letcher and Neves, 2010)[21], provision of programs and facilities supporting international students to cope with their social and psychological challenges are needed. These programs are then combined by the availability of host community which refers to the local community groups related to a particular institution in which a student lives, along with other local and international students (Arambewela & Hall, 2013)[22] will help international students' social adjustment process in a more meaningful way.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

Both academic and socio-cultural aspect play role as key success to international students' adjustment process in a host universities. Deciding to study abroad means that the students are ready to also live in a new country in which its socio-cultural aspects may differ from their home country. Adaptation not only to academic but also social lives inside and outside campus becomes unavoidable consequences that potentially cause problems to the success of their study.

It is revealed in this study that language still becomes the main obstacles for the international students to get through their assimilation process. Although most of them are aware of the importance of English and are confident with their English proficiency to survive in their academic and socio-cultural lives, many do not pay significant attention to the importance of mastering the host country language. While, academic staff and most people in the society in which they are living in during their study mostly use the host country language (and even vernacular languages) instead of English.

Aside of language, the international students adjustment in academic life showed that there are differences in the academic workload, teaching process, and assessment procedure. Yet, most of the international students admitted that they were satisfied with and enjoy their academic progress because the university's good infrastructure, accommodative nature of lecture, academic staff and students helped them to adjust with the campus life relatively fast.

Although there is a 'Buddy' program which provides assistance to the international students during their adaptation process, most of the students still depended on their home country. It might be caused by the limited service of the 'Buddy' who cannot really be with the international students outside campus.

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