

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ADJUSTMENT CHALLENGES IN INDONESIA

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### Abstract

*The need to understand the adjustment challenges of international students cannot be overemphasized, especially international students studying at non-English universities. When international students' challenges are not adequately taken care of it can affect the psychological well-being of these students. This study explored the adjustment challenges of international students in Indonesia. An Interview was used to collect data from international students. Findings revealed that participants experienced language barriers, isolation from classmates, cultural differences, unpunctuality, financial problems, and technical problems. These problems led to excessive emotions, lack of understanding of what is communicated in the class, inability to build a good rapport with domestic students, academic stress, and lack of trust. Participants adopted coping styles like managing finances, seeking help from classmates and international students and suppressive coping (i.e. avoidance of coping and denial of problems) to adapt to their challenges.*

**Key words:** Adjustment, challenges, international students

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### 1. Introduction

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development {OCED} (2019), English speaking countries like Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States are the most attractive to international students. Therefore, it may seem plausible that a majority of the research on the challenges facing international students is concentrated on these top destinations (Andrade, 2006; Gebhard, 2012; Li et al., 2014; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Roy, 2013;

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Wenhua & Zhe, 2013). However, several scholars have also maintained that the research on the challenges of international students in non-English speaking countries is still in its infancy and should receive more attention (Ikeguchi, 2012; Lee, 2017; Tsegay et al., 2018).

Research shows that when international students go abroad to study they encounter problems adjusting to the new academic and social environment (Wilton & Constantine, 2003). Besides, transitioning to the new life, international students live in uncertainty because they have left their country of origin and do not quite fit into their new world (Sawir et al., 2005). Second language learning, social isolation, cultural norms, costs, visa procedures, and discrimination are some other common issues reported (Lee, 2017). Supporting international students to make a successful transition and adjustment to universities is important. Without attention and support to these problems, international students may feel stress and depression (Constantine et al. 2004). These challenges can cause feelings of homesickness, stress, anxiety, and depression for them and can lead to withdrawal from the university program (Tochkov et al., 2010). A common belief among educators is that international students are not sufficiently adjusted to higher education in their host countries, both academically and socially (Rienties et al., 2011). Furthermore, research shows that students who do not adjust well to college, particularly in the dimensions of social adjustment and institutional attachment, are more likely to leave school before graduation.

Researchers found a positive relationship between language proficiency and academic achievement among international students (Li et al. 2010). “Individuals with underdeveloped language skills report lower levels of academic success and social functioning” (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011, p. 180). According to the assertions of researchers in a study conducted by Gebhard (2012), due to language barrier, international students often have trouble understanding professors’ expectations and grading style, taking lecture notes, articulating their knowledge on essay exams and reading textbooks in a timely fashion, comprehending professors, and giving oral presentations, asking the professor questions and interacting in seminar discussions. Han (2007), for example, discovered that international students across an American university’s graduate programs had trouble participating in whole-class seminar discussions because of anxiety and insufficient content knowledge. Similarly, Coward (2003) studied the interaction between Americans and students from China, Korea, and Taiwan during graduate seminar discussions and concludes that these students were continuously trying to understand what was going on in class, when they could talk, and what role they should employ. In another kind of study, Lee & Carrasquillo (2006) analyzed the perceptions of professors on the linguistic/cultural characteristics that contribute to the academic difficulties of Korean college students in the United

States. These include: Being uncomfortable with speaking in class; viewing professors as having absolute authority, having trouble expressing critical thoughts; having difficulty answering negative questions.

Most challenges experienced by international students in Indonesia is centered on the language barrier and cultural differences. In a research conducted by Widyaningrum & Kusumaningtyas (2017), on the adaptation of international Students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, it was revealed that international students experience various adaptation problems associated with skin color, constant stares from locals, religious problems, food, language, weather and rude jokes from locals. The result of the research carried out by Fakhriana (2018), on the cultural adaptation of international students in Indonesia, also shows that international students have issues with the language barrier and cultural difference and this leads to frustrations, isolation, and anger. The language barrier was seen as a major constraint in international students' adaptation in Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES). International students presumed that their professors do not apply the participative principle in the class because of their limited English skills. Although they commented that their lecturers are available for any discussion, both formally and informally, and able to give relevant explanations in lectures and guidance activities. Also, international students do not benefit from the International Office (IO) at UNNES because of the staffs' inability to assist the international students especially in academic matters (Arief & Melati, 2017). Thailand Pattani Students studying in UIN SGD Bandung were discovered to experience feelings of inferiority, anxiety, and even fear especially in communicating with Indonesians (Ilhasana et al., 2016).

International students in Indonesia overcome adjustment challenges by using the following coping mechanisms: smiles, self-motivation, focusing on learning, making themselves comfortable with the environment plus an attitude of mutual respect for religion and culture for the sake of invaluable experience and acceptability (Widyaningrum & Kusumaningtyas, 2017). International students also use different strategies to adapt to Indonesian cultures, such as asking other international students about the culture, norms, values, and rules in Indonesia, tolerance, strong will and self-concept, and building a good relationship with Indonesians. Other than that, international students also have different principles they hold on to reach effective intercultural communication, such as being open, positive, polite, and being active (Fakhriana, 2018).

International students face a lot of adjustment challenges while studying abroad, and the goal of this qualitative study was to identify the kinds of problems that students in Indonesia face. A case study of international students studying at *Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia* is explored.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. Participants*

The participants of this study are five international students from Europe, Africa, America, and Asia from undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs enrolled in UPI. Participants were selected by purposive sampling, in purposeful sampling, researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2002). The participants were nicknamed P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5.

### *2.2 Data collection and analysis*

Data was collected using the interview. The protocol interview was developed by the researcher under the guidance of a research supervisor. Interviews were conducted on both individual and group basis. All participants agreed to have the interview recorded. The researcher used the traditional method of hand analysis to transcribe the interview result. Data triangulation was used to determine the validity of this study. Data was gathered from both the participants and the researcher's own experience of studying in Indonesia. Member checking was used in this study to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings by taking specific descriptions back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate.

## **3. Results**

International students who decide to pursue studies in a foreign country have to overcome the challenges that are related to their adjustment experiences. They are required to deal with the differences between their cultural values, norms, and customs and those of their hosts (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008). Participants in this study spent a significant proportion of the time discussing study-related issues during interviews. Participants in this study experienced adjustment difficulties due to language barriers, isolation from classmates, financial problem, technical problem, cultural difference, and issues with punctuality.

Language is a great hindrance to participants' adjustment in this study. Language is considered one of the greatest academic issues hindering smooth adjustment for international students (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005). Most participants indicated that the language barrier is a big issue for them. Most of the participants in this study are beneficiaries of the *Kemitraan Negara Berkembang* (KNB) scholarship, this indicates that they had undergone a year language class before commencing study. Despite taking this one-year Indonesian language program,

International students, however, may still have difficulties in understanding lectures, expressing ideas, writing reports, taking notes, class presentations, reading academic literature, and understanding informal language. Those that could communicate in the Indonesian language at the intermediate level complained that the Indonesian language used in the classroom is different from what is used outside the classroom. P4 discussed how he was affected by his poor Indonesian language skills:

*One major problem I had when I came to Indonesia was the language barrier. In the beginning, I thought the language wasn't that important but a lot of problems started coming up because I didn't give a lot of attention to learning the language. The language barrier caused me to lose a lot of chances with the Indonesian people. The language barrier affected my understanding of courses (sometimes I do a lot of unnecessary effort to understand the material that the lecturer gives) and limited my relationship with others.*

P1 appeared to be the most affected by the language difficulty. She has difficulties communicating in both English and Indonesian because she is from a French-speaking country. Although she can cope with speaking in English to an extent. Her inability to communicate efficiently in both English and Indonesian language made her have issues with her philosophy lecturer because the lecturer seems not to understand her when she communicates. She also complained about how difficult it was for her to relate to her classmate because of the language barrier. She said “...my classmates can't speak English and they mostly speak in Sudanese which I don't understand, so I get confused. P2 has been in Indonesia for 4 years. Although she loves learning languages and can communicate in the Indonesian language, she still finds it difficult to cope in the academic setting and she needs the help of her classmates. She noted that:

*The materials are in the Indonesian language and even if they are in English I still need someone to explain to me. The language barrier affected me a lot in class. There were times I didn't understand what the lecturer was saying especially when the lecturer make jokes in Sudanese. Although my major is English, the lecturers teach in Indonesian languages sometimes and others switch between English and Indonesian language. Sometimes I have to do my assignments in the Indonesian language. It was really difficult. I used Google to translate a lot.*

P5 has also been in Indonesia for almost 4 years, hence, he could speak the Indonesian language fluently. Despite his abilities, he still had issues with comprehending the Indonesian language used in the academic context. He noted that:

*At the beginning of my Ph.D., I enrolled as a regular student but I couldn't follow the class due to the language barrier. Of course, I understand the Indonesian language but in terms of the academic setting, I didn't. Most times I sit in class for like four (4) hours and I don't understand anything. I decided to do my Ph.D. by research because I didn't want to continue going to class. Although my lecturers can speak English in terms of comprehension they don't understand what I want to emphasize and when they speak to me I don't know if that's what they want to say or not or just for the sake of speaking English. For example, at this point, it's like me and my professor do not understand each other. Sometimes I doubt if my professor understands what I'm talking about.*

The experience of participants in this study aligns with other studies. For example, Sawir (2005) suggested that language problems loom as a hindrance for many international students. The difficulty with the contextual use of language is a source of culture shock. It is not a simple exercise of learning words in the second language but understanding grammar, syntax, and contextualization. Researchers have provided an understanding of the kinds of problems international students have while adapting to university life, and one of the most discussed is problems with academic language. They have reported that students often have trouble understanding professors' expectations and grading style (Zhou, Freg & Bang, 2011 in Gebhard, 2012), taking lecture notes (Huang, 2006 in Gebhard, 2012), articulating their knowledge on essay exams and reading textbooks in a timely fashion, comprehending professors (Kuo, 2011 in Gebhard, 2012), and giving oral presentations, asking the professor questions and interacting in seminar discussions. Due to the language barrier, participants in this study experienced excessive emotions, lack of understanding of what is communicated in the class, and relationship problems.

In addition to the language barrier, P1 reported feelings of isolation from classmates which is due to her inability to communicate properly in the Indonesian language. Her class is not a large class and none of her classmates speaks in English. P1 described her experience as follows:

*When we have group tasks in class, my classmates do not want to be in the same group with me during class presentations. My classmates can't speak English and they speak mostly in Sudanese which I don't*

*understand. When I have problems with homework I don't get help from classmates because when I ask them they are not willing to help.*

This problem prevented her from seeking help from her classmates which can be a good way to cope with the academic demands of her course. Researchers reported that students who report feeling isolated also report having academic difficulty because of their inability to communicate effectively with both colleagues and faculty. For example, students who report experiences of isolation in the US reported having problems with English proficiency (Trice, 2003). Closely associated with language proficiency are the decisions of some international students to keep silent in class (Campbell, 2004), risking the appearance of not being knowledgeable. Sawir, et al (2005) also revealed that most international students experience isolation and loneliness.

Another major problem participants talked about is the cultural difference. Sometimes, being confronted by a new culture can be a positive and enlightening experience, which leads to a deepened awareness of self and the appreciation of different cultures. On the other hand, this confrontation can also be experienced as “culture shock” (Zhou et al., 2008), whereby individuals find themselves faced with challenges to their deeply held beliefs and understandings which in turn pose potential threats to their sense of identity and sense of well-being (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008).

As Mills (2000) asserted, we live in the boundaries of our milieu, and our perspectives are limited by what we learn from the group of people that we live with. For this reason, it can be difficult for international students to make sense of, and get used to, the cultural differences in their new social and academic lives. This is similar to the experience of P1, who commented that “*I have a lot of problems with the culture. Indonesians perceive being direct as being impolite. I like people to be straight forward with me...*” this leads to her not trusting Indonesians because she does not know when they are saying the truth or not. P2 complained that Indonesians have different norms which makes her confused. She said:

*The way people here behave is different from the way people behave in Ukraine. If people smile at you in Ukraine it means that they want to tell you something, greet you, or they know you. But in Indonesia everyone is smiling, giving me too much attention, everyone is talking to me, everyone is laughing and there is a lot of communication and this was problematic for me at the beginning. I didn't know what they wanted from me, I kept wondering why everyone was smiling at me or talking to me,*

*laughing at me and I felt there was a problem with me. As time went on I realized it was their culture.*

P5 complained about what happens in Indonesian restaurants. He had issues with prices of food displayed in restaurants. He noted that:

*If you go to MacDonal'd's, they put a price on the screen like 15,000 rupiahs but later on when you want to pay they say its 16,500 rupiahs. I once asked one of the managers there about the changes in price, he said it's because of the tax. Why can't they just display the price of the food and the tax together so we can pay the fixed price? In my country, it's not like that: it's what's displayed that you will pay. I also don't like the way Indonesians smoke everywhere, in my country, you can't do that, especially in public places.*

Cultural difference is a great hindrance to the normal adjustment of participants in this study. This confirms the reporting of researchers, for example, Yeh and Inose (2003) found that international students have greater adjustment issues when there is a great difference between home and host cultures. According to the research carried out by Thomson et al. (2006), cultural differences were discovered to harm the welfare of international students.

In addition to cultural differences, participants expressed having issues with unpunctuality. Time in Indonesia is approached in a very relaxed and flexible manner. Punctuality is not always observed as Indonesians do not like to feel hurried and do not share the western sense of urgency. The Indonesian attitude towards time is reflected in that time is not money. P3 confirmed this by saying:

*When we fix a time for an appointment most Indonesians tend to come late. Although in Mexico, it's a little bit like that but not as much as here in Indonesia. They don't even take permission and when they come late they just come with a big smile.*

P2 went further to discuss how these punctuality issues affect her and that she can't even react. She noted that:

*In Ukraine, I have some friends that come late for appointments and I get mad at them, but here I can't be mad I just act like it's okay. When they come late I feel annoyed, irritated, and like why should I spend so much time waiting for others.*



The financial problem is also a major problem for participants in this study. The term financial problem generally refers to a mismatch between financial resources and demands (Kerkmann et al., 2000). Although all the Master's degree participants in this study are beneficiaries of the *Kemitraan Negara Berkembang* (KNB) scholarship, they still have their financial struggles. Participants spend a lot of money on accommodation, feeding, books, and so on. P1 noted that:

*The scholarship money is not enough. I spend a lot on accommodation and books. I don't know how to manage it. There is no one to counsel me financially.*

P2 believed that her financial problem was due to her inability to manage finances. She noted that *"the money I get from my scholarship is enough but I have issues with managing it. That's why I have a financial problem"*. P3 commented that the scholarship fund isn't enough and he has to do side jobs to make ends meet although he doesn't have a work permit. He noted that *"the money I get from my scholarship is not enough. I divide my time between studying and trying to find income"*.

Tuition and living fees for international students were found to be up to four times higher than for domestic students. This is because many of the financial aid programs available to domestic students are not available to the international student demographic (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Many international students depend on the generosity of family members and friends and oftentimes struggle with obtaining the basics such as food and clothing to not burden their support systems with more financial requests. These findings are similar to the experience of P4 who is self-funded. He noted that:

*I changed my major from civil engineering to management because of financial issues. You know I'm self-funded, when I was in civil engineering I spent a lot but in my current major they help more in the department in terms of finances by decreasing my tuition fee.*

P5 is on a scholarship from his home country. He is well paid but most of his finances are used for academic purposes. He commented that:

*My tuition fee is funded by UPI and my living allowance is sponsored by officials from my country. The money I get from my country is not enough because I spend a lot on books, seminars, and dissertation proposals.*

Kono et al. (2015) found international students who were not granted scholarships were more likely to suffer from depression which suggested their financial condition affected their health-

related quality of life. International students are subject to work restrictions due to their student visa status (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Visa restrictions put a financial hardship on students with many finding they could not maintain the same lifestyle they were accustomed to back home (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). All participants in this study are on student visa hence, they are not permitted to work. The only way most of them get funding is from family members and friends at home.

Technical problems were also discussed by participants. P1 complained about not knowing her academic supervisor and she has met him or her for counseling because his or her name is not on the website. This led to P1 not have sufficient information about the demands of the postgraduate school. P2 had issues assessing the school's website which led to delays in doing tasks. She noted that:

*I didn't know how to use SPOT UPI and I didn't know how to access it. Most of the materials that lecturers use in the class were on the website and I couldn't access it and I had to keep asking my friends about what is on the website. It was so tiring and time-wasting because I was always asking and it was annoying that I couldn't manage it myself.*

P5 also has issues with UPI's website. He specifically said the experience is really bad and when he goes to complain the officials just say "you are an international student, it's okay". He gave an example of his experience below:

*... For example, so far I have been unable to register for the second semester. I also do not know my grades for last semester. I can open the website but can't see my grades. My professor told me not to think about it, he said I should focus on my work.*

Most of the problems that hinder the normal adjustment of participants in this study are similar to those from other studies. According to Misra, Crist, and Burant (2003), all international students go through the process of adjusting to a new educational system and social environment. Adjustment to these new environments can be a stressful process (Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008) for international students who have the added strain of adjusting to new cultural values, language, and study habits. McLachlan and Justice (2009) found that the majority of international students reported academic, cultural, social differences, and serious health problems at the university in the United States.

Yan and Berliner (2009) found that international students face academic stress, the strain of language and academic problems, challenges with interaction with the faculty members, and cultural differences. Considering the many expectations that international students have and the many problems they face adjusting to a new country and learning environment, it is important for educational institutions to be aware of students needs and expectations, and take steps to identify, measure, meet and exceed those expectations which are under their control (Sherry et al. 2004, p. 2).

Participants in this study have learned to cope with their adjustment challenges by improving their language skills. Participants shared that by improving their Indonesian language, they found themselves more capable of understanding their courses and communicating with people around them. P1 commented that she learns the Indonesian language online in her room. P2 emphasized that she learned the Indonesian language by communicating with Indonesian friends. P4 noted that:

*I was having issues with the language and it affected my understanding of courses and it limited my relationship with others. I had to spend more time with Indonesians to practice my language and understand their culture. I kept practicing and putting more efforts to upgrade myself in the language. I kept involving myself by talking more with Indonesians. I became more open and behaved like a comedian because Indonesians like to laugh a lot and I allowed them to correct my Indonesian language.*

In the research conducted by Wu et al. (2015), international students make use of language support as an adjustment strategy. They have conversational partners with whom they practice their English language skills. This is similar to the experiences of participants in this study, most of them learn to talk more to Indonesians to practice their Indonesian language. Also, Lin and Scherz (2014) conducted a study on linguistic and cultural challenges that five Asian international graduate students encountered in an American university. Drawing on interviews and focal group conversations, the findings suggest that understanding lectures, as well as participation in discussions, posed linguistic challenges to the international students. To overcome linguistic difficulties, participants employed a variety of strategies (e.g., recording lectures, self-talk in English, talking with native speakers in the cafeteria).

Other ways participants in this study cope with adjustment challenges are to manage finances, seek help from classmates and international students, and suppressive coping (i.e. avoidance of coping and denial of problems). Quantitative procedures have shown positive coping and resilient

behaviors to have a large effect on the adjustment of international students (Wang, 2009). These include self-knowledge and a greater understanding of others, an expanded worldview, help-seeking behavior, and letting go of problems. Social interactions, including building a network of friendships and romantic relations with domestic students and natives (Lee, et al., 2004) and establishing relationships with instructors and advisors (Msengi, 2007), have an important role in the healthy adjustment of international students.

#### **4. Conclusion**

It is very crucial to gain a greater understanding of the adjustment problems of international students. It would help psychologists, counselors, academicians, and the staff of international offices and student support services to assist international students who experience problems and to better prepare students who will be going abroad. Unfortunately, the adjustments for international students are often overlooked, which is a large concern as these students experience higher levels of stress compared to local students (Mori, 2000). Understanding the experiences of international students has important implications for creating and implementing guidance and counseling programs that would provide academic and personal support to international students. This study provides valuable information regarding the adjustment challenges of international students in Indonesia. International students' adjustment problems such as language barriers, isolation from classmates, cultural differences, and issues with punctuality, financial problems, and technical problems lead to academic stress, excessive emotions, lack of trust, lack of understanding of what is communicated in the class and inability to build a good relationship with others. Participants adopted coping styles like managing finances, seeking help from classmates and international students and suppressive coping (i.e. avoidance of coping and denial of problems) to adapt to their challenges.

It is recommended that staff at the international office give adequate support to international students to ensure they are well-adjusted to the academic demands of the school and a smooth transitioning to life in Indonesia. They should also give sufficient information to international students about what to expect in class and what is required of them to be successful in their programs. Counselors should ensure programs are in place to take care of the needs of international students and international students should always seek help when they encounter any problems. Further research should be done extensively on how international students cope with their adjustment problems. Also, the role of counselors and psychologists in the adjustment process should be explored.

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