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Intercultural Competence Development of International Mobility Program Students during the Adjustment Period

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Abstract

The international student mobility program requires students to adapt to cross-cultural differences while studying abroad to fulfill their academic goals successfully. In the adjustment process, intercultural competencies, such as language, must be possessed in response to the need for communication. However, language is not enough. It must be accompanied by other competencies, such as accepting cultural differences and responding to differences in norms and values. This study investigates how Indonesian students, as international students, integrate various components of intercultural competence. It highlights the importance of intercultural competencies and their development. There are two competencies highlighted in this study, namely attitude and skills. The study's respondents are ten students participating in Indonesia International Student Mobility (IISMA) and International Credit Transfer (ICT) Program from the Indonesian Government. It is a qualitative study using two instruments, a questionnaire, and an interview, to collect the data. The findings demonstrate the importance of intercultural competency in this context, such as the ability adapt in the learning system and activities, foreign language, and culture differences.

Keywords: *Intercultural adjustment, intercultural competence, Indonesian international students, international student mobility.*

INTRODUCTION

Many exchange program opportunities exposed to the students come with the big question of how their ability to tackle the different cultures lies in the countries. The differences are not merely about the language but also many factors in the cultural issues. Indonesian students warmly welcome the increasing popularity of the exchange programs held by the Indonesian Government, such as International Student Mobility (IISMA) and International Credit Transfer programs (ICT). They show high enthusiasm in joining the selection to become the grantees or awardees of the program. This opportunity is a big chance for the students to study and increase their international

experiences in the destination countries.

Some studies discovered that international students or students who come abroad surely to face many challenges and obstacles in their journey during their stay in foreign countries, namely the food, weather, financial condition, health, the cultural and language barriers. With diverse foreign language skills, the challenges faced by each student in adapting to the environment will vary. The adjustment process to a new environment will have quite different impacts for each individual. Referred to academic life, international students who are studying offline/online often face problems in adjusting to various things related to the academic traditions, for example, class schedules with significant differences in time, learning and teaching styles (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016). The students may face several transitional difficulties from daily social interaction and cultural adaptation.

In the adjustment process, there is a possibility of failure in adapting that causes several psychological symptoms such as feelings of low self-esteem, confusion, homesickness, loneliness, anxiety, anger, feelings of isolation, loss of identity, insomnia, decreased motivation, loss of focus, and lack of self-confidence (Mahmud et al., 2010). Therefore, knowing the challenges faced by international students during their academic journey is very important as one of the efforts to support the smooth implementation of academic studies. It should be considered by the institution when enrolling students in the international mobility program. There are several previous studies related to the challenges faced by international students. Talebloo and Basri (2015) conducted a qualitative study on international students in Malaysia by focusing on the challenges and benefits of multiculturalism. The findings showed that the challenges in the adjustment period are related to some factors, such as facilities, social environment, education system, finances, and the international programs offered. However, this multicultural condition also provides benefits, including positive views regarding careers and personal self-development for students.

Baklashova and Kazakov (2016) conducted a case study regarding the obstacles faced by international students in Russia who have trouble in adjusting to lifestyle and academic environment. The problems faced were in three aspects, namely academic, social, and cultural. The suggestions made in this study are to provide more support to international students both academically and non-academically. Another study conducted by Mbous et al. (2022) regarding the challenges faced by international students during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. There are six factors analyzed, including housing challenges, lifestyle, facing the negative effects of the pandemic, social support and university. The findings showed that challenges related to housing and lifestyle have a direct negative impact on students. By using previous studies as a reference, this study explores the challenges faced by students who participate in the International Student Mobility program by examining five crucial factors, namely academic barriers, social barriers, cultural barriers, language barriers, and adaptation strategies (adaptation strategies). The results of this study are useful for adding to studies and references for both institutions and potential students who have the opportunity to participate in student exchange activities and international student mobility.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study employed a descriptive approach to describe the data and was a qualitative study. Students who participated in the International Student Mobility

program in 2021–2022, including the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) and International Credit Transfer programs, were from the Faculty of Agriculture at Brawijaya University Malang, Indonesia. Five students who were enrolled in semesters 4-5 at the time the program was implemented were chosen as responses. Respondents carried out student mobility programs in various countries, so they could provide quite extensive and varied data. Data collection was carried out utilizing in-depth interviews that were carried out online via the Zoom education application. This study used a qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interviews with respondents. A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews was adopted with the aim of understanding in depth the challenges faced by international students studying in foreign countries.

The interview session was conducted online using the Zoom education application. Each respondent gets a time allocation of 60 minutes in the interview. The interview were recorded and transcribed. The interview questions were related to the experiences of international students while implementing the International Student Mobility program. The questions asked were 15 semi-structured questions to measure variables and explore answers from respondents. The variables measured in this study include academic barriers, social barriers, cultural barriers, language barriers, and adaptation strategies. To support the smooth running of the interview process, a list of questions was created as a measurement guideline. Interviews were carried out using the Indonesian language to facilitate the delivery and receipt of information by both interviewers and research respondents. After collecting data and writing transcripts, the data is analyzed and explained based on the variables that have been measured. These variables are categorized into (1) challenges and struggles faced by students in various settings (academic, social, cultural, and language), and (2) strategies adopted to deal with these challenges.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

One of the government programs in Indonesia, the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA), gives undergraduate students in Indonesia the chance to participate in the educational process at renowned universities around the globe in order to enrich and enhance their knowledge and competence in the real world in accordance with their interests and ideals. Numerous faculties at numerous prestigious institutions in Indonesia supported this program and saw it as a great chance for students to expand their opportunities to study abroad. This program has a lot of advantages. It includes the opportunity to improve foreign language skills and understanding of diverse cultures, the opportunity to choose majors and fields of diverse knowledge with internationally recognized quality education, the opportunity to grow and develop personally when having to adapt to a new world and culture, and the experience and life skills that will be carried with you for life. The participation of IISMA participants is a valuable experience so that they can improve their abilities and competencies on the international stage.

However, apart from that, it turned out that there were challenges and obstacles for participants in carrying out lectures during the implementation of the ISSMA program, including the following:

Learning system and lecture activities

The communication that developed with the lecturers was related to the academic constraints that were attended by IISMA students during the implementation. This is

visible in the learning system and lecturers. According to the findings of interviews, interaction between instructors and students is still low. The lecturers' interactions did not appear serious, with merely asking questions during the session and light-hearted exchanges. Students anticipate rigorous meetings and in-depth and complete problem resolution. Discussions are limited to the classroom and there is no way to contact the appropriate instructors. Furthermore, the perceived academic barrier is that some instructors have ambiguous language accents when speaking English. Therefore, it might be difficult to understand them at times. The perceived academic barrier is that certain lecturers have confusing language accents when speaking English, making it difficult for me to grasp what is being delivered at times. In terms of lecture information, there were still unexpected changes to the timetable and no further collaboration. As a result, informants indicated that the lectures impressed them in the same way that worldwide webinars do.

Building communication with classmates in class presents another obstacle in addition to those with the teaching system and lecturers. There are several difficulties encountered, such as the fact that some overseas students find it difficult to communicate socially due to their limited English proficiency. In addition, while most assignments are completed separately, some lecturers may offer group projects as a means of project evaluation. It might be difficult to complete group assignments when the team is often made up of people who are of the same ethnicity. The expectations and reputation of parents play a role in one's academic capacity to complete studies. Parents often agree with IISMA participants' decision to register in their destination nation. Parents fully trust their children to conduct lessons in an effective and responsible manner, namely financial support, lecture facilities, spiritual and constructive motivation.

Foreign language skills

The difference in social language faced in achieving global competence is one of the challenges in the IISMA program for Overseas Destinations. The challenges seen are the many differences in terms of social and language. Socially, the culture that is built is still individualistic. The individualistic nature makes it difficult for someone to socialize. Not only that, the language barrier is crucial, not everyone uses English as an introduction. The reason that has become a common reason for many local speakers not being fluent in English is their mother tongue. Nevertheless, the ability to speak English is from the willingness to be brave. The right way is to force yourself. Not everything that is forced is bad, in fact by being forced to speak English will lead to the courage of this courage, ability will arise. It may be anticipated by always practicing and respecting the socio-economic conditions of the community. Try to share experiences and listen to friends who have different cultures to understand the better. So that we can understand each other and avoid misunderstandings in the future.

Culture Shock and Stigma of Destination Country

One of the difficulties IISMA students encounter is culture shock at the country of their destination. Starting with changes in the present culture and lifestyle, which can occasionally lead to annoyance, anxiety, and considerable stress. However, in general, IISMA participants claimed that cultural differences in the country of travel posed no challenges. It is still possible to adjust to Indonesia's different time zone. By arriving to class on time and developing oneself into a more independent person, one can anticipate

the culture of being on time, which is always a reference. Researching local customs and traditions beforehand is crucial because to the cultural limitations already in place. However, for food, some IISMA participating students have difficulty finding Asian food in general supermarkets. So when buying Asian food, they have to visit a specialty shop that sells Asian food first, and the price is relatively more expensive than other foods.

The way to deal with diversity is by being tolerant, and trying to understand, appreciate, and respect every existing culture. There was no bias or stigmatization of international students in the IISMA program, as far as that is concerned. There is no problem that can be assigned a label to explain away the right of IISMA students to pursue their academic interests and personal growth in the host nation. In responding to all the challenges of implementing IISMA Student Exchange activities, it is necessary to have strategies and adaptive steps to support study readiness in the destination country.

The following are some of the supports provided by the country of origin in collaboration with the country of study destination:

1. Academic Improvement Strategy in Destination Countries

Many things are done strategically to enhance academic skills and talents in the destination country, including taking the introductory courses offered so that one can interact and form relationships with teachers and students in the classroom. To better grasp the content supplied, make notes on all the information provided and organize it into folders. Moreover, by taking notes, I can learn more about the concepts I have understood and those I have not. As soon as the discussion session begins, you can ask questions about anything you do not understand. Additionally, creating organized folders and notes will reduce the possibility of losing crucial information and submitted materials, which will make when taking exams. Active discussion involves engaging in information exchange with classmates and actively asking or responding to questions from lecturers to help students improve their focus and comprehension of the material they have been taught. Information, financial support, and administrative help supplied by the nations of origin and destination to enhance academic advancement.

2. Provision of housing and dormitory facilities and campus activities.

The accommodation options offered by the destination nation are typically based on each of the targeted campuses. The dorms used by UTM are designated dormitories for international students, just like Universti Teknologi Malaysia. The hostel has excellent amenities, and the accommodations are ideal for relaxing and studying. There are many different activities on campus besides classes. UTM International carries out numerous extracurricular events as excursions with the participation of other international students.

3. Provision of supporting facilities in mastering foreign languages

When registering for the IISMA program, the university provides a free TOEFL through the Brawijaya Language Center (BLC). This is very helpful because before registering for the IISMA program we are required to attach an English proficiency certificate, of course this aims to avoid any obstacles in communicating when participating in the program. Therefore, in general, administration and filing of files really help students in preparation for departure.

4. Provision of counseling services available on campus (Campus Counseling Service)

Supervisory lecturers and destination campuses mostly carry out campus counseling services for student exchange students. Not many problems were

encountered during the implementation of the program so that many IISMA participants did not take advantage of counseling services on campus. One of them is that the University of Szeged also provides mentors as media that can be used for counseling.

5. Participation in Student Organizations (Students' organization)

Student organizations are a forum for developing skills and competencies while participating in the IISMA program. One of them is an organization at the University of Destination namely Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Student organizations on campus are very well organized. At UTM, student organizations that support international students are part of the International Students Society and the Indonesian Student Association for Indonesian students. Both of these organizations are very helpful if there are difficulties experienced by students. The Faculty BEM at the home university is also very good at helping convey the aspirations of students participating in the IISMA program by coordinating socialization in the MBKM group. In addition, at the University of Szeged you can join several organizations. German Class Organization. Classes are held 2 times a week that usually tend to be Master's degree and also Ph.D. but are welcome for undergraduate programs in interacting and establishing friendships with these international students.

CONCLUSION

The Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) and other exchange programs open opportunities for undergraduate students from tertiary institutions in Indonesia to take part in the learning process at leading universities in the world to enrich and enhance their knowledge and competence in concrete world in accordance with their interests and ideals. Awardee from international student mobility, students are given the opportunity to be able to carry out studies directly in the destination country both offline and online because it is still in a pandemic condition. Many things became challenges for the IISMA awardees in participating in the student exchange. These include problems with the academic system, relationships with lecturers and fellow students, cultural and social influences from the local community, access to Asian halal food, foreign language skills, culture shock and stigma received by international students in destination countries.

Realizing that the country of origin works in conjunction with the destination campus to offer facilities, adaptability, and the best possible execution of IISMA activities. This is demonstrated by the availability of campus housing and dorm amenities, as well as by the availability of counseling services, facilities for enhancing foreign language proficiency, and student participation in host campus organizations. It is anticipated that the convenience gained will boost knowledge, competencies, and worldwide changes.

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