

## **Cultural Shocks: Understanding the impact on international students' academic journey at Yogyakarta, Indonesia**

Touheed Ahmed\*, Shahzeb  
Shah Abdul Latif University Khairpur, Pakistan  
\*Corresponding Author: [toheedhakro@gmail.com](mailto:toheedhakro@gmail.com)

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the experiences of international students who face cultural shock when starting higher education in Indonesia. Cultural shock manifests itself in a variety of ways, including changes in food, societal norms, behaviour, language, and religion, which cause students to experience stress, anxiety, and depression. The study investigates the coping mechanisms of the students, which include maintaining communication with locals, friends and family, engaging with Indonesian peers and immersing themselves in local culture. Despite initial difficulties, students gradually adjust to their new academic environment, aided by language proficiency, supportive university communities, and cultural assimilation within the curriculum. The findings emphasise the importance of predeparture education in terms of study programmes and their global implications, as well as fostering receptivity to diverse cultures and understanding cultural differences in order to facilitate effective adaptation and academic success abroad. Limitations include the subjective nature of experiences and the need for further investigation of specific cultural adaptation strategies. The recommendations include providing comprehensive support services for international students and incorporating cultural education into academic curricula

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent decades, internationalisation has evolved from a side issue to a major strategic priority, becoming an essential component of global higher education systems (Gao & De Wit, 2017)). This evolution is closely associated with recognising that education and culture are inseparable (Liang et al., n.d.); as societies change, educational practices must evolve to reflect cultural shifts. Welcoming international students not only boosts a country's economy but also provides a platform for promoting language, culture, and global reputation ((Gao & De Wit, 2017)). With its diverse cultural tapestry and abundance of educational institutions, Indonesia has emerged as a popular destination for international students looking for higher education opportunities (Baas, 2019). However, the arrival of international students brings with it a variety of cultural differences, which present challenges for both students and educators.

Indonesia, known for its diverse cultural landscape and numerous educational institutions, has become a popular destination for international students seeking higher education (Baas, 2019). As a result, by welcoming international students, Indonesia strengthens its economy while also promoting its language, culture, traditions, and global reputation. (Lovanavalona & Candy, 2016) argue that education and culture are inextricably linked; education evolves alongside cultural development because it serves as a conduit for transmitting cultural values. Similarly, Indonesia is using the same strategy to promote its culture by offering numerous opportunities to foreign students. However, this diversity creates challenges because each student brings their own beliefs, background, and culture, making it difficult to manage. To

create a more culturally conscious and supportive environment for marginalized diverse students, teachers must regularly reflect on their own beliefs and biases.

One of the most difficult challenges for international students is culture shock, which is defined as significant stress and discomfort caused by exposure to unfamiliar cultural norms and practices (Presbitero, 2016). Cultural shock includes feelings of confusion, anxiety, and ineffectiveness, which are frequently triggered by the loss of familiar cultural cues and social norms. Navigating cultural differences can be especially difficult for international students, affecting many aspects of their academic journey. The impact of cultural shock on the academic performance of international students is significant (Mulbah, 2017). It can cause increased stress, anxiety, and disorientation, making it difficult for students to focus, participate in class, and effectively engage with course materials (Blessing & Patrick, 2020). Furthermore, cultural shock can lead to learning dissatisfaction by preventing students from meeting academic expectations and decreasing their motivation and participation in the learning process. Conflict, both internal and external, caused by cultural shock can exacerbate academic challenges by limiting students' ability to fully participate in academic endeavours.

Cultural shock can cause learning dissatisfaction among international students, affecting their academic performance (Yılmaz & Temizkan, 2022). This dissatisfaction stems from unmet expectations and can reduce motivation and engagement in learning activities. In addition, it can cause emotional disturbances such as anxiety and loneliness, which can affect cognitive performance and general well-being. In addition, conflicts caused by cultural differences complicate academic challenges for international students in a variety of ways. Misunderstandings caused by different customs and communication methods can impede full participation in academic activities (Lee & Bailey, 2020), affecting grades and mental health. Additionally, practical challenges, such as visa issues, increase stress and affect academic performance.

Loneliness, homelessness, low self-esteem, mood swings, confusion, anxiety, uncertainty, sadness, and a variety of other emotional responses are common for international students adjusting to a new culture (Mesidor & Sly, 2016a). For those who are unable to adapt positively, these emotions can progress to more serious emotional disabilities, including behavioural disorders, depression, and personality disorders (Blessing & Patrick, 2020). Unbalanced emotions can have a significant impact on academic performance among international students studying abroad. The range of emotions felt, from homelessness and cultural shock to excitement and curiosity, can create a whirlwind of emotions. However, when these emotions become overwhelming or imbalanced, they can impair students' ability to focus, study effectively, and perform well in school.

Culture shock among international students in college poses a number of challenges to their academic performance and overall well-being (Wu et al., 2015). Learning dissatisfaction occurs when student expectations are not met during learning activities, resulting in decreased motivation, engagement, and concentration in class, negatively affecting academic achievement. Furthermore, deviant behaviour caused by difficulties integrating into the local culture creates additional challenges by diverting time and energy away from studying and potentially leading to disciplinary action. Furthermore, language barriers promote introversion, making it difficult for students to participate in class discussions (Ahmed et al., n.d.) and effectively comprehend course materials, thereby impeding academic achievement. To address these challenges and ensure international students' academic success, universities must provide comprehensive support services that are tailored to their emotional and cultural needs.

Abnormal conduct, which stems from a failure to integrate into the local culture, creates additional barriers to academic success (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, n.d.). As a result, this behaviour can result in disciplinary action and worsen feelings of loneliness and anxiety, interfering with focus and productivity. Furthermore, language barriers cause these challenges

(Mesidor & Sly, 2016b), preventing comprehension and active participation in academic activities. Regardless of these challenges, as students adapt and develop coping mechanisms, their academic performance may improve. With time, they may be able to better adapt to academic expectations and develop cross-cultural communication skills.

Yogyakarta's image as an educational hub attracts a diverse range of international students (Roostika, n.d.), making it an ideal location for studying cultural adaptation. The city is well known for its numerous universities and rich Javanese cultural heritage (Wang, 2019), making it an ideal destination for students looking for higher education opportunities. Yogyakarta's unique combination of educational excellence and cultural richness makes it an ideal setting for studying the complexities of cultural adaptation among international students. By investigating students' experiences in this specific context, the study hopes to provide clear insights into both the benefits and drawbacks of navigating a multicultural environment.

While previous research has highlighted the prevalence and negative effects of cultural shock on international students (Yang et al., 2018), this study seeks to expand understanding by focusing on specific cultural challenges that international students face in Indonesia (Ermiati et al., 2021). This focused approach makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the relationship between cultural adaptation and academic success among international students in Indonesia. However, as students adapt and develop coping mechanisms to deal with cultural shock, their academic performance can improve (Young & Schartner, 2014). This can manifest in a variety of ways, including improved academic performance, increased confidence in language skills, and improved cross-cultural communication abilities.

## **METHODS**

The research methodology used in this study was completely qualitative (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2018), with in-depth telephone call interviews as the method. Because, as suggested by (Grey et al., 2020) phone call interviews help researchers keep research costs reasonably low and enable them to gain access to larger and more diverse participant populations.

## **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

The interviews were conducted with 20 international students who were pursuing their higher education in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and English was the language of communication. The students were contacted via email to arrange suitable interview times, and semi-structured phone interviews were then conducted to look into how international students deal with cultural shock while studying in Indonesia, as well as the implications for their academic performance.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Data analysis was carried out using NVivo software and a coding method. The researchers precisely reviewed the coded data, organising it into themes over several readings. This process produced two main themes:

Theme 1- Cross- cultural challenges: Cultural shocks, food preferences, social etiquettes and positive changes in communication.

Theme 2- Academic Performance: Utilization language skills in studies, stress and anxiety, performance evaluation, intensive course structure and cultural teachings in curriculum.

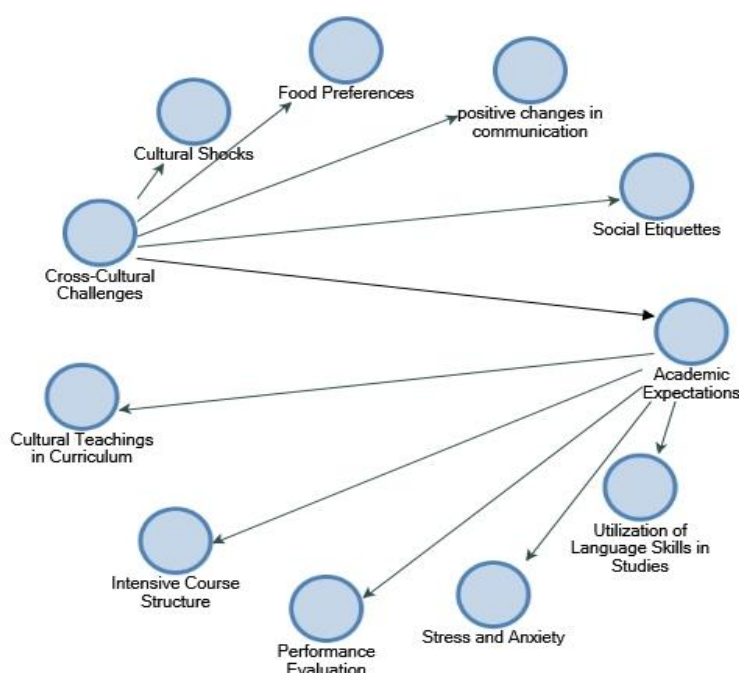


Figure No 1: The impact of Cross-cultural challenges factors on student's academic performance factors

## Participants

It is crucial to remember that participants were chosen based on a set of requirements, which included having lived in Indonesia for more than a year, speaking the language fluently, and representing a range of backgrounds including those of Russian, Burundian, French, Pakistani, Peruvian, and African and Asian countries. Every participant was given an anonymous P1 through P20 number.

## RESULTS

International students studying in Indonesia face numerous cross-cultural challenges as they progress through their academic careers. From the moment they arrive, they face adjustment challenges caused by differences in food, language, customs, and societal norms. According to P1, *"International students who pursue higher education in another country will undoubtedly face cultural shocks. These shocks can take many forms, including differences in food, language, lifestyle, culture, norms, religions, and even the weather"*. The students defined their challenges while coming to a different country for higher education (Theme 1) and also put ideas on how these shocks impacted their academic performance (Theme 2).

### Theme 1: Cross-cultural challenges

Upon starting their higher education in Indonesia, many international students experienced significant cultural disorientation, as stated by participants P1 through P20. P1's candid reflection on Indonesia's diverse linguistic and cultural fabric highlights the complexity of the adaptation process. Furthermore, P10's deep struggle with the unfamiliar sweetness of Indonesian cuisine clearly shows the gastronomic challenges of cultural adjustment, as he said: *"I'm not a fan of sweet food"*. Similarly, P16's concern about the directness of social interactions and the shift away from traditional greetings represents the complex dynamics of interpersonal communication.

*“They're not familiar with English, so for me to understand, to know more deeply the lifestyle, it was really difficult when I arrived here because I didn't want to do something which they don't like” [P4]*

Furthermore, P5's smart recognition of the critical role of effective communication in navigating Indonesian societal norms emphasizes the exceptional importance of language proficiency in cultural integration. Despite these formidable challenges, as evidenced by P6's diligent search for vegetarian alternatives and P20's commendable adaptation to changing gender roles, international students show remarkable resilience and adaptability. Their gradual integration into the difficulties of the Indonesian setting shows the transformative journey toward cross-cultural integration.

Theme 2- Academic performance:

The participants P1 through P20 have brought attention to the considerable problems that face international students' academic success in Indonesia. The difficulties P3 has in understanding the content of the course in a language other than her native tongue are highlighted by her struggles with the language barrier. P8's observation of variations in Indonesian and their native country's teaching methods highlights the necessity of adjusting to new instructional approaches.

*“Because the lectures are given in Bahasa Indonesia, which I do not speak well, I find it difficult to understand them” [P3]*

Furthermore, the level of academic pressure and competition that P12 students encounter in the Indonesian educational system is indicative of the level of academic demands that overseas students face. Furthermore, P17's trouble utilizing the academic assistance system emphasizes how crucial easily available tools and direction are to academic success.

*“The amount of work and the standards set here feel overwhelming to me. In comparison to my native country, it is far more competitive” [P12].*

## **DISCUSSION**

The study found that the participants shared a common experience: cultural shock when starting higher education in Indonesia (Mukminin, 2019). This phenomenon took many forms, including changes to food, culture, societal norms, behaviours, language, and religion. As a result of these cultural differences, students experienced stress, anxiety, and even depression, which had a significant impact on their overall physical and mental health (Beiter et al., 2015). Furthermore, participants reported difficulties in navigating their daily lives, such as social interactions, academic performance, and access to essential services.

The following advice is given to students who want to study abroad by the study. Before leaving for an educational journey overseas, it is crucial that students have a solid understanding of the workings of study abroad programmes (knight) and their global implications. Second, to facilitate their adaptation and adjustment when living abroad, students should cultivate good views about foreign culture. Third, it is important for students to recognise and value the cultural differences present in their host nation (Jones, 2017). If students wish to avoid interfering with their studies after moving overseas, they must understand all of these factors.

The study revealed how students cope with cultural shock in abroad (Gong et al., 2021). Students try to adapt to their new lives in a few different ways. Initially, they maintain communication with nationals living in the new country. They get a sense of community and support from this. To feel emotionally stable, they also communicate frequently with their friends and family back home (Beech, n.d.). Second, they interact with locals, such as Indonesian teachers and students (Muharom Albantani & Madkur, 2018). As a result, they gain knowledge of the local way of life and culture. Third, students observe and participate in the

everyday activities of the foreign culture(Wu et al., 2015), picking up social skills. Finally, they form friendships with students from other countries.

When international students arrived in Indonesia, they faced several cultural shocks(Ernofalina, n.d.), ranging from unfamiliar food preferences to navigating complex social etiquettes and communication norms. The sweetness of Indonesian cuisine presented a significant challenge for many students while adjusting to direct communication styles and differing gender roles added layers of complexity to their adjustment process.

These cultural shocks had a significant impact on the academic performance of international students' academic performance(Al-Raqad et al., 2017), resulting in feelings of stress and anxiety. Many students struggled to focus on their studies and meet academic expectations despite the mental strain caused by cultural adaptation challenges(Mesidor & Sly, 2016b). The intensive course structure prevalent in Indonesian universities increased these students' academic pressures, adding to their overall sense of unease.

Despite these challenges, international students learned to cope and adapt to their new academic environment(Mesidor & Sly, 2016a). Students effectively communicated with peers and faculty members using the language skills they learned in language courses, thereby facilitating their academic endeavours. Furthermore, the supportive university community, which included faculty members and fellow students, played an important role in assisting international students in navigating their challenges and fostering a sense of belonging within the educational community(Arthur, 2017). Students gradually adjusted to their new academic environment(Denovan & Macaskill, 2017), overcoming initial challenges and thriving in their academic pursuits thanks to positive interactions and cultural teachings integrated into the curriculum.

So, summarizing this research on: students should educate themselves about study programs and how they impact the globe before traveling to study abroad. For them to adapt effectively, they must have an open mind towards various cultures. Their ability to comprehend and value cultural differences will allow them to concentrate on their education abroad.

ID	Gender	Country	Years of Stay in Indonesia
P1	Female	Egypt	2 years
P2	Female	Chile	2 years
P3	Female	China	1 year
P4	Female	Russia	1.5 years
P5	Female	Sudan	1.2 years
P6	Male	Burundi	4 years
P7	Female	Egypt	3 years
P8	Female	Colombia	2 years
P9	Male	Sudan	2 years
P10	Male	Saudi Arabia	2 years
P11	Male	Pakistan	2 years
P12	Male	Pakistan	2 years
P13	Male	Yemen	2 years
P14	Male	Pakistan	2 years
P15	Male	Jordan	2 years
P16	Female	Pakistan	4 years
P17	Male	Tajikistan	2 years
P18	Female	Solomon Islands	5 years
P19	Female	Australia	1 year
P20	Male	Yemen	1.7 years

Table no 1: International students participated in this research.

## CONCLUSION

The study's conclusion clarifies the significant influence that cultural shock has on foreign students' experiences pursuing higher education in Indonesia. Participants experienced cultural shock in a variety of ways, from changes in food preferences to navigate complex social norms and communication styles. These challenges had a significant impact on students' physical and mental health, causing stress, anxiety, and depression. Furthermore, cultural shock had a direct impact on students' academic performance (Jack, 2014), making it difficult for many to concentrate on their studies and meet academic standards.

Despite the initial challenges, international students demonstrated resilience and adaptability in dealing with cultural shock and adjusting to their new academic environment. Communication with locals and peers, participation in cultural activities and friendships with students from various backgrounds helped students adjust and foster a sense of community and support (Leong, 2015). Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of pre-departure planning and cultivating an open mind toward cultural differences. Before embarking on the educational journey, international students must educate themselves about study programs and their global implications, as well as recognize and value cultural diversity, to successfully navigate the challenges of studying abroad.

In general, the findings highlight the transformative journeys of international students as they navigate cultural shock, adjust to a new academic environment, and eventually thrive in their educational pursuits in Indonesia. Understanding and embracing cultural differences allows students to fully immerse themselves in their educational experience abroad, enriching their

academic and personal development, while fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

### **LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The limitations of the study include its dependence on a small sample size (Vasileiou et al., 2018), which may limit the representation of diverse experiences among international students in Indonesia, and the applicability of the findings beyond this context is uncertain. Self-report bias and language barriers may have influenced participants' responses, compromising data accuracy. Furthermore, the study's short duration may have missed the long-term effects of cultural shock. To address these limitations, future research could use larger, more diverse sample sizes, longitudinal studies, and mixed-methods approaches. Furthermore, intercultural training, enhanced support services, and peer support programs are recommended to help international students navigate cultural differences while also promoting academic success and well-being.

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