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Equality of Indonesian Higher Education for International Students: A Narrative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to address the equality issues of international students learning in Indonesian higher education institutions by engaging with this issue and identifying how international students in Indonesia reshape their learning trajectory by providing quality and equitable education for international students. We implemented a narrative inquiry research design; we interviewed seven international students from various backgrounds to determine the institutional equality perceptions of their learning surroundings. By using emotional geography and language appraisal, we analyze their experiences and passionate encounters when they are studying in Indonesia. The recommendations of the findings will be beneficial in improving Indonesian university quality in terms of social and cultural aspects, as well as the institutional system. In short, embracing diversity, equity, and inclusiveness to engage international students' participation and capacity is pivotal in reshaping their identity.

Keywords: diversity, equality, inclusiveness, international students, quality

INTRODUCTION

Recently, equality in education has garnered attention from scholars and instructors worldwide, including Indonesia. However, the methods have varied and often fail to genuinely foster equality and high-quality, fair education for global students. On the other hand, inequality in education may be influenced by several factors, such as the student's family background (Guohua et al., 2024) and gender differences. Inequality in education may negatively impact students'

participation in and engagement in and out of the classroom. Gender inequality in education, for example, may affect economic growth directly by decreasing the average level of human capital and indirectly through its impact on investment and population growth (Obiageli et al., 2022). Hence, it is foundational for a radical transformation of education to address inequalities, including changes in recruitment, organization, curriculum content, and pedagogy (Lumby & Moorosi, 2022), as well as promoting egalitarian views, which are the idea that all humans are equal in fundamental value and should be accorded equal rights (Benjamin et al., 2024), clarifying the principles of educational equality of opportunity and considering alternate justifications for those principles, especially in the context of fair competition and meritocratic distributive justice (Napoletano, 2024).

Several recent investigations have explored the factors influencing the experiences of postgraduate students from abroad and what aids their adjustment to life and academics in the destination nation (Busher et al., 2016; Schartner, 2014; W. Wu & Hammond, 2011; Young et al., 2013; Young & Schartner, 2014). The findings have consistently revealed that significant determinants encompass English language proficiency upon arrival, personal determination in choosing to study abroad, elements of cross-cultural competence, prior familiarity with the host country, and the availability of social support and interactions within the host country (refer to Schartner and Young (2016) for a concise model summarizing these factors). Other factors, such as financial situation (Backman et al., 2023), self-motivation (M.-Y. Wu et al., 2021), regulatory and support frameworks established by the host country and educational institutions (Jokila & Filippou, 2023), language proficiency and cultural integration (Consoli et al., 2022), language barriers (Dai, 2023; Zhu et al., 2023), the interplay of existential concerns (Didehvar & Wada, 2023), students' adjustment (Malay et al., 2023; M.-Y. Wu et al., 2021), students' personality (Serrano-Sánchez et al., 2024), students' sense of communication and connection with mainstream society (i.e., with insiders/locals) (Jurasek & Wawrosz, 2023), the development of intercultural competence through collaborative learning in culturally diverse groups (Meleady et al., 2021), and the presence of acculturative stressors (Tang & Zhang, 2023), seem to play significant roles in facilitating better adaptation to students' new environments.

This paper aims to enrich the intercultural education discourse by sharing our insights, analysis, and suggestions for effectively incorporating cultural diversity into education while pursuing fairness and social equity. The rise in the enrollment of international students has led to a growing body of research focused on their encounters, particularly their process of acclimatization and integration (Schartner & Young, 2016). This study centers explicitly on the latter aspect, investigating the role of social contact as a contributing factor. Moreover, there is a danger of embracing essentialism by treating local culture as unchanging knowledge to be acquired, overlooking individual diversity, and disregarding the multilingual and multicultural complexities prevalent in numerous programs within international university contexts.

Interest in researching the social interactions of international students has taken a dual approach: (1) investigations that analyze the characteristics of social interaction patterns among international students in their destination country, encompassing the fairness of social connections, and (2) studies that investigate social contact as a potential factor influencing the academic, psychological, and sociocultural adjustment and adaptation of international students. Although conational connections remain a significant source of "comfort" for international students in numerous studies (Schartner, 2015), relationships with individuals from the host country tend to remain on the outskirts of their social experiences. Repeated studies indicate that international students encounter difficulties in initiating and sustaining meaningful relationships with "home" students and residents within the broader community (Brown, 2009; Schartner, 2015; Wright & Schartner, 2013). In addition to university staff, engagement with host individuals often appears confined to casual conversations and scripted dialogs, which are frequently observed in service-related interactions (Schartner, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Adaptation

Intercultural adaptation involves individuals relocating from their home cultures to unfamiliar cultural environments and striving to establish and sustain functional relationships within these settings. This term gained prominence in the 1960s alongside the expression "culture shock," leading to extensive research over the past five decades. Various related terms, such as assimilation, adjustment, acculturation, integration, and cultural learning, have been explored in this context. The process is often divided into four stages: excitement upon arrival, a crisis phase, coming to terms with the new environment, and regained adjustment. Although different terminologies exist, these stages consistently define the process. Research also views these stages as learning and developmental processes wherein individuals gradually acquire intercultural knowledge and sensitivity. Intercultural adaptation encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, and scholars have studied psychological and sociocultural adaptation, focusing on well-being and social skills. The initial step in improving intercultural competence is self-awareness (Qiu et al., 2024). Kim's research (2024) on the subjective well-being of international students revealed that perceived discrimination, health status, and community satisfaction significantly affect their well-being. He highlights the importance of community-oriented support systems and efforts to improve international students' satisfaction with their local communities in facilitating their intercultural adaptation.

The notion of a U-shaped curve in the adaptation process has been challenged by longitudinal studies revealing various factors affecting adaptation, including value disparities, cultural identity, locus of control, relational satisfaction, cultural distance, contact with hosts, and cultural fit. International students are often the subjects of these studies and face challenges such as

communication difficulties, loneliness, academic demands, student-supervisor relationships, academic marginalization, and language barriers. Therefore, understanding different cultures requires cultural intelligence, which can be related to intercultural social contacts, travel experience, and knowledge of foreign languages (Jurasek & Wawrosz, 2023). Understanding and respecting cultural differences in pedagogy and social norms is necessary to facilitate the intercultural adaptation of international students (Astley, 2024).

International Students in Indonesia

Indonesia has become an international host for international students to study and learn diverse cultures that unite the country via multicultural adaptation or approaches. Furthermore, Indonesia has been actively working to attract international students to its higher education institutions. The number of international students studying in Indonesia has steadily increased over the years. This growth can be attributed to various factors, including government initiatives, scholarship programs, and the promotion of Indonesia as a study destination. International students in Indonesia enroll in a wide range of academic programs. While many students come for language and cultural studies, there has been increasing interest in pursuing degree programs in various disciplines, such as engineering, business, social sciences, and environmental studies. Indonesia's appeal as a study destination has led to a diverse student population. Students from neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Timor-Leste, and the Philippines constitute a significant part of the international student community. Additionally, interest from countries outside the Southeast Asian region is increasing.

METHOD

Research Design

The researchers applied a narrative inquiry research design to set up participants' stories as robust data. The philosopher John Dewey profoundly molds Clandinin and Connelly's extension of narrative inquiry as a research methodology (Hutchinson, 2015). Dewey, a philosopher of lived experience, established his principles on the basis of interaction and continuity, and he conceptualized essential terms such as personal, social, temporal, and situational to characterize the attributes of experience. He showed that studying life and education was synonymous with investigating the incident, as education, life, and experience were inseparable. The core of narrative inquiry lies in research experiences. As applied in research, John Dewey's three-dimensional narrative structure approach (involving interaction, continuity, and situation) is central to his philosophy of experience within a personal and societal framework. This method asserts that comprehending individuals, such as international nursing students from mainland China, entails scrutinizing their intimate encounters and interactions with others. Dewey's three-dimensional approach significantly influenced my research and the application of narrative inquiry across various fields, particularly education. The fluidity inherent in storytelling, transitioning

between the past, present, and future, lies at the heart of Dewey's educational theory of experience.

Participants

As narrative researchers, we are concerned with identifying international students at a state university in East Java, Indonesia, who are studying in international undergraduate programs from West Asian countries and Southeast Asian countries. They are still taking BA medicine in this 2023 academic year, and this is the participants' demography.

Table 1: Participants' demographics

Name (Initial)	Gender	Age	Country	Program
MA	F	19	Bangladesh	Bachelor in Medicine
LSFS	F	22	Timor Leste	Bachelor in Medicine
NFHBA	F	20	Malaysia	Bachelor in Medicine
FZU	F	21	Malaysia	Bachelor in Medicine
EKKK	M	24	Malaysia	Bachelor in Medicine
AABAH	M	23	Brunei Darussalam	Bachelor in Medicine
VTYX	F	23	Malaysia	Bachelor in Medicine

Instrument and Data Collection

In this study, we employed semistructured interviews to look for definite and in-depth answers from the selected participants. Therefore, we can obtain concrete responses from listening to participants' narratives (Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The participants and the researchers narrated the field of text to provide the readers with authentic and robust experiences. Ampofo and Caine (2015) explained that learning experiences come from data exploration in a classroom environment. The narration would come from international students who study in the international undergraduate program (BA Medicine) at a state university in East Java, Indonesia, in 2023.

Widodo (2014) recommended interviews to collect international students' experiences. Indeed, educators who decided to cease sharing their narratives were comfortable with their choices and experienced no remorse or blame. Establishing trust and gaining esteem is essential in narrative research (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Hence, an investigator must recognize their position as a "visitor within the personal realm" of their partner's environment (Stake, 1995). In this regard, we interviewed the seven participants via Zoom because of data collection effectiveness and comfort. We recorded the interview session and then transcribed it on the basis of the time of the interview. It was performed to set up the data correctly and make them presentable. Therefore, the compilation of the data would be an artifact ready to be analyzed via emotional geography and language appraisal.

Data analysis

Dealing with data analysis of the interview facet, Widodo (2014) proposed how to analyze the data by listening and noticing, writing and codifying the data, interpreting the data, and validating. We need to employ an additional external perspective while dissecting the data to establish connections between the narratives and the theories and broader discussions that influence the educational landscape in Seychelles (Riessman, 2008, p. 189). We processed the data via a construction process that provided new insight into the narrative (Quayle & Sonn, 2019). In this study, we applied language appraisal and emotional geography to analyze participants' emotions regarding equality issues during their studies in Indonesia. Martin and White explained three values: appreciation, assessment, and the influence of the assessment framework. Therefore, we can obtain students' narratives in response to prompt questions during an interview.

RESULTS

Narrative representation

The authors restructured each theme via a narrative inquiry format and presented them in storytelling. We linked the themes by showing them in a narrative or storytelling format. These constructed stories served as narrative representations, elucidating the research phenomenon. According to Clandinin, crafting these stories can be viewed as a form of narrative analysis (Dowling et al., 2015).

When we rephrased our participants' stories to maintain their original essence and ensure a sense of coherence over time, my narrative inquiry became a firsthand experience. We weren't just gathering field data; we presented the shared narratives in a manner that upheld the authenticity of the recounted experiences. Clandinin and Connelly underscored the importance of the research text in narrative inquiry as both "adequate" and "authentic" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). As narrative researchers, we honored and respected the voices and stories of my participants. We also remained mindful of Bruner's insights regarding the interplay between memory and imagination. He suggested that through storytelling, we construct, reconstruct, and, in a sense, reimagine the past and the future. The human mind can never fully and faithfully replicate the past, yet it cannot escape its influence.

Instead of employing methods such as frequency counts or coding specific terms, as often seen in 'thematic analysis,' understanding the significance of lived experiences involves a profound and insightful exploration. It is best to grasp the concept of a theme by considering its methodological and philosophical nature. To achieve this goal, we repeatedly listened to audio-zoom recordings, extensively reviewed the transcriptions and other field materials, and scrutinized the text's meaning to ensure that it aligned with the research objectives. Afterward, we engaged in collaborative discussions with the participants to validate and refine the interpretation of their narratives. We shared drafts of each participant's story with them, and their feedback was integrated into revisions. This member-checking phase was pivotal in my

research, providing direct insight into how participants interpreted their stories. I took notes, categorized the data into themes via thematic analysis techniques, and then reshaped these narratives via language appraisal and emotional geography, which faithfully conveyed the participants' intended meanings. We included participants' quotes in the findings, which was essential because it placed the participant at the forefront of the narrative, enabling readers to interpret the participant's story rather than relying solely on the researcher's interpretation.

While recounting and revisiting stories within the figurative three-dimensional realm of narrative inquiry, my participants and I navigated through time, moving in various directions—from past to present, inward to outward, individual to societal contexts, and across changing circumstances and locations. Within this multidimensional inquiry space, as our stories interwove, the ongoing connections and reverberations continually mold and transform our comprehension and insight into our respective experiences.

This study aims to contribute to this growing area of research by exploring the data of research participants and setting up emotional pictures through data codification. We extracted the data by living stories when they began their studies in Indonesia and met with new cultural differences. How they dealt with the culture shock would be described by structured narration to reconstruct their intercultural experiences using deductive narration stories to gain a holistic complex phenomenon. There are several themes in these findings:

Journey of a Bangladeshi International Student: Adapting and Thriving in Surabaya

MA

I am an international student from Bangladesh who comes from a low class. I board a plane from Dhaka to Cengkareng International Airport in Indonesia. It was my first time traveling abroad, and this country welcomed me with a smile when I walked out of the airport. It was pretty different from my cultural background as Bangladeshi. I tried to communicate with somebody who picked me up at the airport in English because this is the international language that I can share. My driver assisted me in ordering a train from Jakarta to Surabaya for the next day. Finally, I can see my university in East Java, Indonesia.

I was raised in a poor city near Dhaka, Bangladesh, nineteen years ago. My environment was full of criminals, fighting, and drugs; it shaped me as a fighter in how to be independent. This motivated me to study hard in Surabaya. This city is similar to my hometown; the people are straightforward and brave. This atmosphere reminds me of my cultural background, so I can adapt quickly. In reality, my Surabaya colleagues are the most honest, courageous, and supportive people whom I ever met. However, I needed help with my communication barrier. The Indonesian language is new for me; however, my faculty mediate me with the BIPA program. It assists me in learning Bahasa in practice; it

motivates me to improve my speaking and listening simultaneously. I have done with this program. Fortunately, my Indonesian friends helped me acquire new Indonesian vocabulary.

Now, I feel that Surabaya is my second home, and I have a housemother who is completely caring and respectful. She always advised me to focus on my studies and care for my parents. Studying overseas is a milestone in further gaining my future medical employment. What I can learn from my college atmosphere is a massive motivation fighting to spirit to learn and benefit many people. This moral value shaped my personal goal in studying in Surabaya. From what I see from the Surabaya city logo, 'Suro' and 'Boyo" are fighting words that represent crocodiles and sharks as predators in land and sea.

The student is happy and appreciative of the support and honesty she receives from her colleagues in Surabaya, who feel a strong sense of belonging. She values assistance from friends, faculty, and her housemother, which has contributed to her happiness and helped her overcome communication barriers. Attracted to Surabaya for its familiar atmosphere and supportive community, she sees the city as a second home. The narrative showcases her social interactions, transition from Bangladesh to Indonesia, and her moral values, including determination and resilience. It also touches on her professional aspirations in medicine, viewing her education in Surabaya as a stepping stone toward future employment. The story describes the significant changes in the environment and culture she experienced during her journey from Dhaka to Surabaya.

A Journey of Cultural Immersion: From Timor Leste to Surabaya

LSFS

I came from Timor Leste, the last province of Indonesia, and then became the newest country in Southeast Asia. I traveled from Dili Airport to Ngurah Rai International Airport in Bali, Indonesia. I took travel to Surabaya by minibus from Denpasar the following day. I did not have language communication issues when I arrived in Indonesia because Indonesian is a familiar language in China. As an informal language used by Timor Leste traders college students, it helps me understand Indonesians.

There are many Timor Lester students in Surabaya, East Java. It helps me share Surabaya's cultural aspects because this is my first visit to Indonesia. Certain bad words used by some Surabaya students, such as 'Jancuk', attracted me. Even though they use that word, my colleaguefriend does not allow me to use it. Furthermore, I finally understand that the Surabaya people are straightforward, brave, and challenging. It is similar to that used by Timor Leste citizens. Therefore, I immediately comprehended the situation I could bring and

adapt to on campus. Eventually, this made Indonesia my second motherland, and I feel fascinated here.

With many language improvements in Indonesia, I suppose that my ability to immerse myself in Surabaya culture was easy. I reflected on the past a year ago; my adaptation took work. I need to overcome my cocky that staying and learning in Surabaya has never been hard. Otherwise, it was full of traumatic challenges such as Surabaya's local language barrier, Surabaya's oral communication, and harmful words that I perceived it was worse but not. Indeed, these experiences have helped me become a charming person with a different cultural background.

The student is highly motivated to adapt and immerse herself in Surabaya's culture, actively learning the Indonesian language and embracing local customs. This proactive approach to integration and familiarity with the language provides a sense of security and comfort, aiding in her smooth transition. She expresses deep happiness and fascination with Indonesia, referring to it as her "second motherland." The narrative highlights her interactions with fellow Timor Lester students and her successful adaptation, which contributes to her happiness. Despite challenges such as language barriers and exposure to negative words, she views these experiences as opportunities for personal growth, enhancing her openness and charm in dealing with different cultural backgrounds. The story emphasized her adaptability and openness, underscoring her personal growth and self-awareness. It also touches on the physical journey from Timor Leste to Indonesia and the social interactions that help her understand and integrate into Surabaya's community. The story suggests a commitment to respectful behavior and personal development, hinting at potential future professional growth through these experiences.

Embracing Surabaya: A Timor Leste Student's Journey of Cultural Adaptation

NFHBA

It started two years ago when I first came to Indonesia, especially in Surabaya. Direct flight from Surabaya to Kuala Lumpur International Airport made my trip easier. It was the second time I had visited Indonesia after visiting Bali a couple of years ago. I felt that Surabaya was the same as my country, especially in Johor, Malaysia, because my ancestors came from Java Island. I am eager to study in Indonesia and was impressed by the East Javanese culture here.

My College helped me learn the Indonesian language with the BIPA program for over two weeks. Therefore, I can gather and understand a bundle of Indonesian vocabulary, idioms, and cultural diversities, including outfits and foods. In addition, my housemother helped me learn the local language and Surabaya people's habits and cultures, such as 'Ludruk' as a symbol of the Surabaya people fighting

against colonialism. I learned a lot from her that the Surabaya people are straightforward but honest. These environments leveled up my fighting spirit and made me want to study in college.

My new era has come to help me complete my studies at my university in Surabaya. The atmosphere in my College is studying hard, disciplined, and never surrendering, which increases my interest in learning, especially in my medical faculty, how to help people with their health. Since then, my oral communication with people who need to get healthier, give them advice to set up a healthy menu and do exercise has been increasing due to my cultural adaptation in Surabaya. I knew that learning was about academic competence and cultural transformation.

The student is strongly inclined to study in Surabaya, Indonesia, and is eager to learn and appreciate East Javanese culture. Her participation in language programs and willingness to adapt demonstrate a proactive approach to her studies and integration. Having previously visited Indonesia, she felt familiar and secure, contributing to her comfort in pursuing education there. The student is content with her decision to study in Surabaya, enjoying the positive college atmosphere and her growing ability to communicate in academic and cultural contexts. Her journey is marked by personal growth, a deep connection to the local culture, and a sense of belonging enhanced by ancestral ties to Java Island. The narrative also highlights her medical professional development, where cultural adaptation aids in effective patient communication and holistic health advice. The disciplined college atmosphere supported her growth. Her adaptation to new environments and cultural surroundings and her understanding of local customs such as "Ludruk" contributed to her social development. The narrative subtly emphasized moral values such as determination, discipline, and honesty, aligning with her dedication to helping others and ethical practice in her profession.

From Neighbors to Friends: A Journey of Cultural Discovery and Determination

FZU

I was with my best friend, NFHBA, and planned to study overseas, especially in my neighboring country, Indonesia. One of the factors was the similarity of the culture between my government and Indonesia; it would not make me struggle to adapt to a new culture. However, my prior knowledge about Indonesia is limited to language and people's race; I have yet to meet with the local language of the Surabaya people and their typical behavior. My first visit to Indonesia opened my eyes to the fact that it would be my first intercultural journey. At Juanda airport, I was welcomed by my Indonesian colleagues, and they treated me to 'Rawon', which was tasty, and I liked it a lot.

My second impression was about classmates who assisted me in adjusting and adapting to new encounters. They liked my bloody nuclear family, which directed me to study in the medical department. I saluted them for their honesty, humility, and cherishing, which attracted me to learn hard on campus. However, I met a few challenges here, such as how Surabaya people raised their tone when speaking with me, and one of my classmates said a bad word that I did not feel warm with. To address these gaps, I was eager to ask my friends about Surabaya people's characteristics and style.

Now, I am preparing for a milestone to step up further and reach my dream. Here, on campus, I know how to cope with specific communication barriers. My trip as an international student was challenging and exciting. Finally, I knew why the Surabaya people seem stiff but humble; they never surrender to reach what they want, as symbolized by Suro and Boyo. These two land and ocean predators have to fight against the enemy. I perceived the enemy as lazy, and I must be intelligent and clever to succeed.

The student initially felt insecure about adapting to a new culture and language but found comfort in the welcoming attitudes of her Indonesian colleagues and positive experiences at Juanda airport. Overcoming these challenges helped her navigate cultural differences and strengthened her sense of security. She expresses happiness and satisfaction, enjoying local dishes such as "rawon" and appreciating her classmates' honesty, humility, and warmth. Her decision to study in Indonesia was driven by an interest in a similar culture and a desire for an intercultural experience. She successfully adapts to her new environment, demonstrating determination to succeed in her studies and achieve her goals. The student is satisfied with her decision to study in Indonesia, has learned to navigate communication barriers, appreciates culture, and understands the characteristics of Surabaya's people. The narrative highlights her personal growth and the importance of social interactions in her adaptation process a. This narrative hints at her professional aspirations in medicine, emphasizing her motivation to study hard and pursue her dreams.

Embracing Diversity: A Chinese Malaysian Student's Journey in Surabaya

EKKK

I am from Pulau Pinang, Malaysia, and this is my first visit to Indonesia. I am a Chinese Malaysian who wants to study in Indonesia because I want to have a new experience. I left Pulau Pinang two years ago for Cengkareng International Airport Indonesia and took the flight to Juanda International Airport in Surabaya. Finally, I arrived in Surabaya for the first time; it was hotter than my place and humid. However, I immensely enjoyed my first trip from Pulau Pinang to Surabaya.

The Chinese majority influenced me in my hometown; I seldom speak the Melayu language but Chinese. In contrast, I was surprised that Chinese Indonesians, my classmates, never spoke Chinese in class. I salute them because they speak Bahasa to one another as an official language in Indonesia; they sometimes say Javanese-Surabaya. It is like, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans.'

Therefore, I started to become immersed in Surabaya culture, which taught how to be diverse in unity through the national language as the communicative message for different races and tribes in Surabaya and the local language. My friends treat me as their family, and I am so proud. Indonesia taught me to become a well-respectful person and be equal. It makes me struggle hard to study in Indonesia to pursue my dream of becoming a professional in medicine.

The student's journey from Malaysia to Indonesia suggests a sense of security and safety, as he enjoyed his trip and felt secure during his travels. His decision to study in Indonesia reflects a desire for new experiences and an openness to embracing different cultures and languages. The student expresses happiness and fulfillment in his narrative, enjoying his time in Surabaya and feeling proud of his cultural immersion. Being treated as part of his friends' family adds to his sense of happiness. He is satisfied with his decision to study in Indonesia, appreciating the diversity and unity of the culture and the values he has learned. His aspiration to become a professional physician contributed to his satisfaction with his academic journey. The narrative highlights his personal growth and adaptation, including adjusting to climate differences and language dynamics, as he integrates into the local culture. While primarily focused on personal and social experiences, the story also touches on professional development and moral values, emphasizing respect for cultural diversity and equality.

A Bruneian Student's Journey in Surabaya: Embracing the Cultural and Academic Experience

AABAH

I am from Indonesia's neighboring country, Brunei Darussalam, in the northern part of Borneo Island. I decided to go to Indonesia to study because I love traveling. Finally, I left China a year ago via a direct flight to Juanda International Airport. I supposed that Indonesia was the same as language communication, or 70% similar. Therefore, I optimistically want to grasp my first foreign study in Surabaya, Indonesia. Then, my long story begins with my campus and surroundings.

In Surabaya, the weather is quite same as that in China. However, the air is a bit polluted, and I must wear my mask daily when traveling around this city. However, this city provides several city parks, such as Taman Bungkul, which is better for me for inhaling oxygen. Hence, I

sometimes study here with my friends to complete specific medicine courses. When I was there, I sometimes did not know what the visitors said to me; they greeted me in the local language. I need to step out of my comfort zone, so I ask my Surabaya fellas about Javanese words to make communicating with local people here easier.

Furthermore, I practice my Javanese language with some Indonesian colleagues and campus staff; it benefits me greatly. As medical students, it makes it difficult for me to communicate and ask for help from faculty members in nonformal lecture settings to ask about tasks and practicum material inside or outside the campus. It engages in my daily academic activity; I communicate intensively with campus staff and faculty members to discuss course tasks and tips on being successful students in the digital literacy era.

The student's story does not directly address security concerns, but their ability to communicate with Indonesian colleagues and seek assistance from faculty suggests a supportive and secure academic environment. Driven by a love for travel and the desire for a foreign study experience, the student shows optimism about adapting to life in Surabaya. Although not explicitly stated, their engagement in activities such as studying in city parks and practicing the Javanese language indicates contentment and engagement in their daily life as medical students. The students' willingness to participate in academic activities, seek help, and adapt to the local culture and language reflects their satisfaction with their educational experience. The narrative underscores personal growth and adaptability, with the student stepping out of their comfort zone to learn Javanese words. Their interactions with colleagues and locals demonstrate efforts to integrate socially, and their commitment to studying medicine highlights their dedication to professional development. The narrative also subtly touches on moral aspects, such as respect for local culture and language, via the student's efforts to learn and adapt.

Bridging Cultures: A Malaysian Student's Journey of Language and Cultural Exploration in Surabaya

VTYX

I am from Kuching, Sabah, Malaysia. I imagined that I could study in Indonesia to earn my higher degree. Luckily, I was accepted to look at one of the state universities in Surabaya, East Java. I departed from Kuching and headed to Juanda International Airport. After I arrived in Surabaya, I found that Surabaya is a metropolitan city that is hot and humid. Finally, I arrived at my campus. On the first day of my studies, I struggled hard to learn Indonesians from my colleagues; I supposed our languages were similar. However, I found that some words are different in use, and I need to know them. Fortunately, the campus taught me the Indonesian language, Surabaya culture, food, and cuisines.

I was raised in Melayu surroundings, and this is my native language. My nuclear family and colleagues speak in Melayu with a Sabah accent that differs slightly from the Johor Melayu language. My second official language is English; however, it is influenced by Malaysian English, such as 'Can lah'. Therefore, when I speak English to my friends here in Surabaya, everybody knows I am from Malaysia. Sometimes, I talked to my Indonesian fellows in English or Melayu. In addition, I am eager to learn Bahasa daily or even the local Javanese–Surabaya language, which is quite hard to understand, but Indonesian colleagues assist me greatly.

I meet my colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds on my campus, not only from indigenous Surabaya students but also from other Indonesian provinces. It makes me understand how rich Indonesia is as a multicultural country. I believe that Bahasa can mediate these unique differences in skin color, language, and religion to achieve unity. It is what I feel when I study in Surabaya that encourages my cultural understanding of how to appreciate a difference. Learning from Surabaya, the second largest city in Indonesia, supports me in enhancing my respect, valuing diversity as harmony, and being grateful for what I have done.

The student feels comfortable and secure in their academic environment in Surabaya, driven by a desire for a greater degree and cultural experience. She is eagerly learning Bahasa Indonesian and the Javanese–Surabaya language, indicating a solid inclination to adapt. The student expressed content and enthusiasm for studying in Surabaya, appreciating the multicultural campus environment and seeing Bahasa Indonesian as a bridge for cultural unity. The narrative highlights their journey from Sabah, Malaysia, to Surabaya, emphasizing personal growth and a focus on diversity, respect, and cultural understanding. The students' commitment to academic and professional development, along with their adaptability and appreciation for comfortable study environments such as "Taman Bungkul," is evident.

DISCUSSION

These seven participants share their stories about rich tapestries of intercultural experiences, highlighting their journeys from various backgrounds to the vibrant cities of Surabaya and Indonesia.

The students' collective narratives underscore the profound sense of contentment and belonging they have discovered through the support and camaraderie of their colleagues. The decision to study in Surabaya was a conscious choice driven by the welcoming atmosphere and the desire to overcome language barriers. Despite initial communication challenges, support from the BIPA program, faculty, and friends has been instrumental in their

adaptation process. The university's role in accommodating the diverse profile of students is crucial because they may be challenged with inequality and diversity (Kimura, 2014). Therefore, Surabaya has become not just a study destination but also a second home, where a deep sense of belonging contributes significantly to their happiness. These narratives encompass a broad spectrum of personal and professional aspirations, displaying values of determination, resilience, and cultural openness.

These students' stories highlight their engagement with Surabaya's culture, showing a unique perspective and commitment to diversity. They immerse themselves in local customs, languages, and habits, including the Javanese–Surabaya language and Indonesian cuisine such as "Rawon." This proactive integration is supported by Surabaya's welcoming environment and minimal language barriers, fostering feelings of safety and security. The transformation of Surabaya into a "second motherland" underscores the depth of their intercultural experience. Their interactions with fellow students enhance their personal growth, open-mindedness, and interpersonal skills across diverse cultural backgrounds. It has become an essential aspect of their place, which acts as a communication zone for students of various backgrounds (Logli, 2016).

The students' journeys from Malaysia to Surabaya represent significant changes in location and surroundings, showcasing their adaptability to cultural and physical environments. While the narratives do not explicitly mention security concerns, positive travel experiences suggest a sense of comfort and safety. Motivated by a love for travel, curiosity, and a desire for an international study experience, the students display resilience and an eagerness to explore diverse cultures. They express happiness and satisfaction, appreciating Surabaya's diversity and unity. Their commitment to academic excellence and personal growth aligns with their professional aspirations, even if not the central focus of their stories. In sum, these seven participants' narratives highlight the intercultural tapestry of Surabaya, where diversity, resilience, and happiness intersect in their educational journeys.

To create a supportive and enriching environment for international students, universities should prioritize comprehensive support systems, including language assistance, cultural orientation, and social integration programs. Promoting cultural inclusivity and diversity is crucial, as a welcoming atmosphere fosters a sense of belonging. Addressing language barriers through tailored programs helps students adapt and feel comfortable in their new environment. Encouraging cultural immersion and engagement, such as through cultural exchange activities, enhances students' understanding and appreciation of the local culture. Ensuring safety and security, with clear guidance on local customs and laws, is essential for student well-being. Supporting personal and professional development through mentorship and career counseling aids in students' growth and future prospects. Creating a "second home" atmosphere by fostering community and providing dedicated spaces can help international students feel connected and supported. Integrating these elements into policy and practice promotes intercultural understanding and global citizenship among students.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the interconnectedness of cultural adaptation and happiness among international students. They illustrate how a supportive environment without significant language barriers can enhance students' sense of belonging and overall contentment. This highlights the importance of fostering a welcoming atmosphere in educational institutions to promote successful intercultural experiences. It has been proven that particular cultural practices may develop their intercultural views (J. Kim, 2020). Their stories serve as a conceptual contribution by demonstrating the power of personal stories in understanding intercultural experiences. They provide how descriptions can capture the complexity of these experiences, including emotional and individual dimensions, which quantitative methods may overlook.

These personal stories contribute to the theoretical understanding of cultural adaptation and its relationship with the sense of belonging. They suggest that a strong sense of belonging can be critical in enhancing students' overall happiness during their intercultural journeys. The narratives hint at developing a dual identity, with Surabaya becoming a "second motherland" for these students. This aspect contributes to the theoretical discourse on identity formation in intercultural contexts and how individuals may develop multiple layers of identity through their experiences. The narratives underscore the importance of a supportive educational environment in facilitating successful intercultural experiences. It aligns with theories emphasizing the role of institutions and social networks in helping international students adapt and thrive in foreign territories. Providing tailored programs to overcome language barriers, fostering cultural immersion and engagement, ensuring safety and security, supporting personal and professional growth through mentorship and career counseling, and creating a welcoming community atmosphere can help international students feel connected and promote intercultural understanding and global citizenship. However, future research could explore the diverse range of international student experiences and delve into more profound aspects of their intercultural journeys.

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