PIAUD Students' Cross-Cultural Experience in the Campus Program Has an Impact at the University of Muhammadiyah Malaysia

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the experiences of PIAUD (Islamic Early Childhood Education) students who participated in the Kampus Berdampak exchange program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Malaysia (UMAM). The program is part of the Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) initiative that encourages students to gain cross-cultural academic experience. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and reflective journal documentation from one PIAUD students who participated in the exchange program. Results indicate that students experienced significant academic, social-cultural, and personal development. They gained exposure to Malaysian early childhood education systems, strengthened their Islamic educational values, and developed intercultural communication competencies. Challenges such as language adaptation, cultural adjustment, and curriculum differences were also identified. The study concludes that the Campus Impact exchange program effectively broadens PIAUD students' perspectives and prepares them to become more globallyminded Islamic early childhood educators. Institutional support, structured mentoring, and predeparture preparation are key factors in maximizing program outcomes.

Keywords: PIAUD Students; Campus Impact; Student Exchange; University of Muhammadiyah Malaysia; Freedom of Speech at the University of Wisconsin.

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Introduction

Early Childhood Islamic Education (PIAUD) is one of the study programs that focuses on the development of early childhood education based on Islamic values. In the era of globalization and the rapid development of the world of education, PIAUD students are required not only to have good academic competence, but also cross-cultural insight and adaptability to various international educational contexts (Suyadi, 2017).

The Impact Campus Program is one of the schemes in the Merdeka Learning – Merdeka Campus (MBKM) policy launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia. This program provides opportunities for students to study outside the home campus, including participating in student exchanges to partner universities, both at home and abroad (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). Through this program, students are expected to develop holistic competencies that include academic, social, cultural, and character aspects.

Universitas Muhammadiyah Malaysia (UMAM) is one of the Islamic higher education institutions that is a strategic partner for PIAUD's student exchange program. As a university based on Islamic values, UMAM offers a relevant academic environment for PIAUD students in expanding their horizons about the early childhood education system rooted in Islamic traditions in the Malaysian context (Razali & Ahmad, 2019).

However, even though this student exchange program has been running, there have not been many studies that have in-depth analyzed the experiences of PIAUD students who participated in the program, especially related to the challenges, benefits, and impacts on the development of their professional competencies as prospective early childhood educators. Therefore, this study aims to comprehensively analyze the experience of PIAUD students in participating in the Impact Campus Program through student exchanges at the University of Muhammadiyah Malaysia.

This research aims to analyze academic and socio-cultural experiences, the process of crosscultural adaptation, and the impact of the Impact Campus Program on the professional competence of PIAUD students.

Literature Review Independent Learning Program – Independent Campus (MBKM) and Impact Campus

The Independent Learning Policy – Independent Campus (MBKM) is a major transformation in the Indonesian higher education system which is designed to provide flexibility to students in determining their learning process. This program gives students the right to take 20 credits outside the study program and 40 credits outside the home university during the study period (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). One of the flagship schemes in MBKM is the Impact Campus Program which aims to encourage universities to make a real contribution to society, including through international student exchange programs.

According to Wibowo (2021), the student exchange program within the framework of MBKM is not just a physical transfer of students to other institutions, but a transformative process that includes the development of academic competence, intercultural skills, and personality maturity. In this context, the study abroad experience is an effective means to form the character of students who are adaptive, critical, and globally insightful.

The cross-cultural experience of PIAUD students in the Impact Campus program at UMAM focuses on communication adaptation, *culture shock*, and intercultural competence. Previous research has shown that social support and open-mindedness are crucial in overcoming cultural and language barriers for Indonesian-Malaysian students. Related studies highlight the importance of the role of institutions in bridging differences in norms and communication styles to enrich students' insights.
Students who participate in cross-cultural programs generally develop adaptation strategies such as:
* Improves interpersonal communication
* Building social networks
* Understanding the local culture
* Maintaining the cultural identity of origin

The success of adaptation will have an impact on increasing students' global competence.

Early Childhood Islamic Education (PIAUD) in a Global Perspective

Early Childhood Islamic Education (PIAUD) is a scientific field that combines the principles of early childhood education with Islamic values and teachings. From a global perspective, Islamic-based early childhood education is receiving increasing attention in various Muslim-majority countries, including Indonesia and Malaysia (Abdullah, 2018). These two countries have similarities in the philosophical foundation of early childhood education which is rooted in the values of monotheism, morals, and the development of the nature of children as creatures of Allah.

Sujiono (2018) stated that holistic-integrative early childhood education does not only focus on cognitive aspects, but also includes spiritual, social-emotional, and physical dimensions. In the context of PIAUD, the development of curriculum and learning methods must consider the uniqueness of each child as a mandate that needs to be maintained and developed according to its nature.

Student exchanges between countries in the field of PIAUD open up opportunities for students to compare and enrich their understanding of the implementation of education in different cultural contexts and educational systems. This is in line with the goal of multicultural education that encourages appreciation for diversity while maintaining Islamic identity (Banks, 2014).

Cross-Cultural Learning Experiences for Students

Cross-cultural learning experience is a process in which individuals learn in a cultural environment that is different from their home culture. According to Kolb (1984), experiential learning emphasizes that individuals learn most effectively through direct experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. In the context of student exchange, these four elements can be optimally facilitated when students interact directly with different academic and social environments.

Hofstede (2010) explains that cultural dimensions such as individualism-collectivism, power distance, and long-term orientation greatly influence the way a person adapts to a new cultural environment. For PIAUD Indonesia students who participate in exchanges in Malaysia, the differences and similarities between Malay-Indonesian cultures provide unique dynamics in the process of adaptation and cross-cultural learning.

Several studies have shown that students who participate in student exchange programs tend to experience improvements in intercultural communication competencies, confidence, critical thinking skills, and academic motivation (Deardorff, 2006; Cushner & Karim, 2004). However, obstacles such as language barriers, culture shock, and differences in the academic system are also factors that need to be considered in designing an effective exchange program.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-phenomenological type of research. This approach was chosen because it aims to deeply understand the subjective experience of PIAUD students in participating in the student exchange program at the University of Muhammadiyah Malaysia (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenological research allows researchers to explore the meaning and essence of the experiences experienced by the participants directly and authentically.

Research Subject

The subjects of the study are one (1) student of the PIAUD Study Program and two students of the Islamic Religious Education Study Program who have participated in the Impact Campus Program through student exchanges at the University of Muhammadiyah Malaysia for one semester. The selection of subjects was carried out by purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) have completed the student exchange program, (2) are willing to be research resource persons, and (3) have diverse experiences while participating in the program.

Data Collection Techniques

Data is collected through three main techniques:

In-depth Interview: Conducted in a semi-structured manner with each student to explore academic, socio-cultural, and personal experiences during student exchanges. Interviews last between 45–90 minutes per session and are recorded with the permission of the participants.

Participatory Observation: The researcher conducts direct observation of students' academic and non-academic activities during the program, including lecture processes, student activities, and daily social interactions.

Reflective Journal Documentation: Students are required to write a reflective journal during the exchange program, which is then analyzed as primary data that is rich in participants' subjective experiences.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out by following the interactive analysis model of Miles and Huberman (1994) which included three stages: (1) Data Reduction – the process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying data relevant to the focus of the research; (2) Data Presentation – organizing data in the form of narratives, matrices, or diagrams to facilitate understanding; and (3) Conclusion Drawing and Verification – the formulation of findings based on the data that has been analyzed and verification of their validity through triangulation and member checks.

Data Validity

To maintain the validity of the data, the researcher uses source triangulation techniques (students, supervisors, UMAM staff), triangulation methods (interviews, observations, documentation), and member checks with informants to ensure that the researcher's interpretation is in accordance with the reality experienced by the participants (Moleong, 2017).

Results Overview of Student Exchange Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Malaysia

Universitas Muhammadiyah Malaysia (UMAM) is an Islamic higher education institution located in the Wisma MAIPs Building Block S1, Student Village Complex, Uniciti Alam, 02100 Padang Besar, Perlis, Malaysia. As a Muhammadiyah-based institution, UMAM has an academic orientation that is in line with moderate Islamic values which is also the foundation of Muhammadiyah universities in Indonesia. The student exchange program is carried out for a full semester with a study load of between 18-20 credits, including formal lectures, field practice at local institutions, as well as selfdevelopment and cross-cultural activities.

Based on the results of the interview, PIAUD students who were the subject of the research stated that the academic environment at UMAM was very conducive and supportive of the learning process. Students can attend lectures in Malay and English, access complete digital library facilities, and interact with students from various ASEAN countries.

PIAUD Students' Academic Experience

The results of the study showed that PIAUD students experienced significant academic enrichment during student exchanges. They gained insight into the early childhood education curriculum in Malaysia known as the National Preschool Curriculum Standard (NPCS) which has a holistic and competency-based orientation. This difference in approach provides a new perspective for students in understanding various models of early childhood education implementation.

One of the important findings is that the learning system at UMAM uses more inquiry-based learning and project-based learning approaches, which are different from the approaches they often encounter at their home campus. This encourages students to be more active, independent, and critical in the learning process. As expressed by one of the participants: "Here we are required to think for ourselves, lecturers are only facilitators, not those who provide all the answers. It was difficult at first, but over time it actually made me more confident."

In addition, students also gain practical experience at Mengaji institutions in Malaysia, which allows them to compare the pedagogical practices of Islamic-based children's education in the two countries. This experience strengthens their professional competence as prospective early childhood educators with an international perspective.

Socio-Cultural Experiences and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Although Indonesia and Malaysia have many cultural and linguistic similarities, PIAUD students still experience an adaptation process that is not always easy. The results of the study identified several aspects of socio-cultural adaptation experienced by students, including: (1) differences in Malay dialect and vocabulary, (2) differences in local traditions and customs, (3) differences in academic systems and lecturer expectations, and (4) differences in the rhythm of campus life.

However, most students have managed to overcome these challenges through active adaptation strategies, such as actively interacting with local students, participating in student activities, and utilizing support from local supervisors. This adaptation process is in line with the U-Curve of Adjustment theory put forward by Lysgaard (1955), where individuals experience a honeymoon phase, culture shock, adjustment, and finally adaptation.

On the positive side, cross-cultural interaction actually enriches students' insight into the diversity of Islamic practices in daily life. They observed how Islamic values are implemented in early childhood education in Malaysia with different local characteristics but still based on the same teachings. This experience strengthened their Islamic identity while fostering tolerance and appreciation for diversity.

Impact on Professional Competency Development

The student exchange program at UMAM has a significant impact on the professional competency development of PIAUD students. Based on the results of data analysis, there are four dimensions of competence that have increased, namely:

Pedagogic Competencies: Students develop a broader understanding of early childhood learning approaches and strategies, especially in integrating Islamic values with innovative and play-based learning methods.

Personality Competencies: Independent living experiences in other countries strengthen students' confidence, independence, resilience, and problem-solving skills in dealing with unfamiliar situations.

Social Competence: Intensive interaction with Malaysian students and society develops intercultural communication skills, empathy, and collaboration across backgrounds.

Professional Competencies: Students gain new knowledge of Islamic early childhood education standards and practices at an international level, which broadens their perspective as aspiring and competent educators.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of the Program

Supporting factors for the success of the program include: (1) institutional support from the home campus and UMAM in terms of financing, academic guidance, and administration; (2) the similarity of cultural and linguistic backgrounds between Indonesia and Malaysia that facilitate adaptation; (3) an Islamic campus environment in UMAM that is in harmony with the background of PIAUD students; and (4) an open and supportive attitude from UMAM local lecturers and students.

Meanwhile, the inhibiting factors identified include: (1) limited academic English preparation before departure; (2) differences in assessment systems and academic standards that require adaptation; (3) limited communication with family and support networks in Indonesia; and (4) the lack of structured assistance during the program. These findings are in line with Panggabean's (2018) research which emphasizes the importance of comprehensive pre-departure preparation in international student mobility programs.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the research and discussions that have been conducted, it can be concluded that the Impact Campus Program through student exchanges at the University of Muhammadiyah Malaysia has a significant positive impact on the holistic development of PIAUD students' competencies. This program not only expands students' academic horizons on early childhood Islamic education systems and practices in an international context, but also develops the personality, social, and professional competencies that are urgently needed by aspiring early childhood educators in the global era.

The cross-cultural learning experience at UMAM has been proven to strengthen students' Islamic identity while fostering an open, tolerant, and adaptive attitude towards diversity. The challenges faced, such as language and cultural adaptation, are actually an effective means of learning in shaping the character of resilient and independent students.

However, to maximize the outcomes of the student exchange program, it is necessary to strengthen the aspects of pre-departure preparation, structured assistance during the program, and the systematic integration of international experiences into the PIAUD study program curriculum. Strong institutional support from home campuses, international partners, and governments is a key factor in the program's long-term success.

This study recommends that PIAUD's student exchange program to international Islamic educational institutions such as UMAM can be used as a superior program that is managed professionally, with a transparent selection mechanism, adequate financing, and a structured monitoring-evaluation system. Thus, more PIAUD students can enjoy the benefits of this crosscultural learning experience in order to prepare a competent and globally minded generation of Islamic early childhood educators.

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