Adaptation and Student Life Dynamics in the International Student Exchange Program at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia

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Abstract

International student exchange programs are a form of higher education internationalization that provide students with opportunities to gain academic, social, and cultural experiences in different environments. However, participation in such programs also presents various challenges, particularly in adapting to learning systems, social environments, and new cultures. This study aims to analyze students' adaptation processes and examine the dynamics of their lives while participating in the International Student Exchange Program at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia. This research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation involving students participating in the international exchange program. Data analysis consisted of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that students experienced adaptation in several aspects, namely academic, social, cultural, and everyday life. Although they encountered challenges related to differences in learning systems, communication patterns, and environmental habits, students were able to adjust through active interaction, participation in campus activities, and support from the university, lecturers, and local students. Furthermore, the exchange program positively contributed to the development of communication skills, independence, self-confidence, cultural awareness, and students' readiness to face a global environment. Therefore, the International Student Exchange Program at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia provides not only academic experiences but also supports students' social and personal development.

Keywords : Student Adaptation; International Student Exchange; Student Life Dynamics; Higher Education Internationalization; Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia.

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Introduction

Globalization has brought significant changes to higher education, including the expansion of academic cooperation and student mobility across countries. Universities are no longer focused solely on improving the quality of learning at the national level; they also develop international programs to broaden academic experiences and build students' global competencies. In line with this development, internationalization has become an important direction in higher education in many countries. Higher education internationalization is the process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the core functions of higher education (Electra Lazari, 2025). One form of internationalization is the international student exchange program, which gives students the opportunity to participate in academic activities at overseas universities for a specific period.

International student exchange programs contribute to broadening students' understanding of cultural diversity, educational systems, and social environments at the global level. This view is consistent with the argument that international student mobility serves as an educational means of developing students' intercultural competencies (Przytuła Sylwia, 2024; Julia Zimmermann, 2021). Through these programs, students gain learning experiences that extend beyond academic achievement and help develop intercultural communication, international cooperation, independence, and the ability to adapt to new environments. These competencies are beneficial not only during the exchange program but also as preparation for professional life and institutional development (Natalya Hanley, 2026).

Nevertheless, participation in international student exchange programs also presents challenges. Language barriers, nonverbal communication, and differences in educational systems are among the main challenges faced by Indonesian students adapting to overseas higher education institutions (Rania Alvita Rahma Badri, 2024). The process of adjustment is therefore an important factor in students' success during an exchange program.

Student adaptation is a process of adjusting to a new environment that involves academic, social, cultural, and psychological aspects. Effective adaptation helps students gain a more positive and meaningful exchange experience. Among Indonesian students studying in Malaysia, sociocultural adaptation generally proceeds well. However, academic adjustment may remain challenging, particularly in relation to active classroom participation, critical-thinking expectations, and assessment systems (Ciptro Handrianto, 2024).

Malaysia is one of the destinations for international student exchange programs, particularly for students from Indonesia. Geographical proximity, cultural similarities, the use of the Malay language, and educational cooperation between the two countries contribute to Indonesian students' interest in studying in Malaysia. Despite these similarities, students may still encounter differences in academic systems, campus environments, communication patterns, and everyday life.

Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia (UMAM) is a higher education institution that develops an international academic environment through educational activities and cross-border cooperation. Its student exchange program enables students from diverse backgrounds to gain learning experiences in a multicultural setting. This diversity creates opportunities for students to interact, exchange experiences, and understand different cultures.

Previous studies, including research by Asti Gumartifa (2026), indicate that students' success in international exchange programs is influenced by several factors, such as the ability to adapt to local culture, social support, individual preparedness, and the academic environment. These factors can be strengthened by building social networks, improving language skills, and actively participating in local cultural practices. However, studies specifically examining student adaptation and life dynamics during international exchange programs at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia remain limited.

Based on this situation, the novelty of this study lies in its specific examination of the experiences of international exchange students as they adapt to and navigate daily life at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia. The study considers not only academic aspects but also social and cultural changes and students' personal development throughout the exchange program.

This study has two main objectives. First, it analyzes students' adaptation processes in responding to the academic, social, and cultural environments during the international student exchange program at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia. Second, it examines students' life dynamics during the program, including learning experiences, social interaction, and the development of personal competencies. Accordingly, this research is expected to provide an overview of student adaptation and life dynamics during the international exchange program at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia. The findings are expected to serve as an evaluation resource for higher education institutions in improving exchange program quality and creating an academic environment that supports the success of international students.

Literature Review

2.1 Student Adaptation in International Student Exchange Programs

Student adaptation in international exchange programs refers to the process through which individuals adjust to a new educational and cultural environment during the exchange period. Students participating in international programs generally experience several stages, beginning with interest in the new environment (the honeymoon stage), followed by challenges arising from cultural differences (culture shock), a period of adjustment, and finally the ability to accept and integrate into the new environment (adaptation) (Nazirah Abdul Rohman, 2025).

Adaptation is an important aspect of international student exchange programs because students studying abroad must meet academic demands while also adjusting to social life in a new environment (Hamanah, 2019). These changes include academic activities, social interaction patterns, and everyday habits that may differ from those in students' home environments. In higher education, international exchange students encounter differences in learning systems, academic communication methods, lecturer–student relationships, university regulations, and study habits. They must also understand local social and cultural values to build positive relationships with the surrounding community. Successful adaptation can influence students' comfort, participation in academic activities, and ability to gain positive international experiences.

Student adaptation in exchange programs can be examined through three aspects: academic adaptation, social adaptation, and cultural adaptation.

a. Academic Adaptation

Academic adaptation concerns students' ability to understand the learning system, teaching methods, academic regulations, and interaction patterns with lecturers at the host university. Exchange students often encounter differences in lecture methods, assessment systems, the use of educational technology, and academic expectations compared with their home universities. Differences in the host institution's learning system may create difficulties when students move from lecturer-centered learning to more independent learning. Academic adjustment is also influenced by students' ability to understand complex academic language and the learning expectations of a new environment (Eko Mulyadi, 2025). Students' ability to adjust to the academic environment helps them participate more effectively in learning. Support from lecturers, university academic services, and interaction with local students can accelerate academic adaptation.

b. Social Adaptation

Social adaptation relates to students' ability to build relationships with local students, other international students, and the surrounding community. Social interaction is essential to exchange students' lives because it helps them understand the new environment and reduce barriers during adjustment. Social adaptation is more likely to develop successfully when students build friendships with local students and receive support from their surroundings (Lea Simek, 2024).

Students who communicate effectively and remain open to new environments generally find it easier to establish social relationships. Support from peers, lecturers, and the campus community can help students overcome difficulties, reduce feelings of isolation, and improve their comfort during the exchange program.

c. Cultural Adaptation

Cultural adaptation concerns the ability to understand the values, norms, habits, and cultural characteristics of the host society. International exchange students often encounter cultural differences in communication patterns, everyday habits, food, social rules, and interaction within academic settings.

The ability to accept and respect cultural differences is important for building positive international experiences. Through cultural adaptation, students do not merely adjust to a new environment; they also gain broader insights into global cultural diversity. Intercultural communication is an important factor in the success of exchange programs because it supports students' adjustment to multicultural environments and different interaction patterns (Leoni Leoni, 2026).

2.2 Life Dynamics of International Exchange Students

The life dynamics of students participating in exchange programs describe the various changes they experience in social relationships, independence, communication skills, and personal development throughout the international exchange period.

Exchange students experience changes in various aspects of life because they pursue their education away from their home environment. This situation encourages them to become more independent in managing their time, completing academic responsibilities, meeting everyday needs, and making decisions responsibly.

In the academic aspect, exchange experiences provide opportunities to become familiar with different educational systems, gain new learning methods, and broaden academic perspectives. Differences in academic environments can improve students' critical-thinking skills and flexibility when responding to various learning approaches.

In the social aspect, exchange students' lives are shaped by interactions with local students and students from different countries. A multicultural environment provides opportunities to improve intercultural communication, build international networks, and understand different perspectives. Students' success in a new environment is also influenced by campus community support, positive interactions with lecturers and peers, and adequate language skills, allowing adjustment to occur gradually (Touheed Ahmed, 2024).

Furthermore, exchange programs influence students' personal development. Living in a new environment can improve self-confidence, independence, problem-solving skills, and readiness to face global challenges.

Through exchange experiences, students have opportunities to broaden their global awareness, improve their ability to adapt, and develop an understanding of cultural diversity. Therefore, students' life dynamics during an exchange program are not limited to education; they are also part of character and competency development in an international environment.

Research Method

Research methods are scientific procedures used to obtain data systematically in order to address research objectives (Sugiyono, 2010). This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. This approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of students' adaptation processes and life dynamics during the International Student Exchange Program at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia. The findings are presented descriptively based on facts and field observations; therefore, the study does not use statistical analysis or numerical data.

According to Bogdan and Taylor, as cited in Moleong (2007), qualitative research is a procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of spoken or written words and observable behavior. This approach is used to understand a phenomenon holistically based on informants' actual experiences and conditions during the exchange program. The research was conducted at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia. Primary data were obtained through interviews and observations of students participating in the International Student Exchange Program. Secondary data were obtained from supporting documents, including program guidelines, activity reports, documentation, scientific articles, books, and other literature related to student adaptation and international exchange programs.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which consists of three stages. The first stage is data reduction, namely selecting, focusing, and simplifying the collected data to align it with the research focus. The second stage is data display, which involves organizing the data into a systematic narrative to facilitate understanding of relationships among the findings. The final stage is conclusion drawing and verification, which involves interpreting the findings and rechecking the collected data to ensure that the conclusions are consistent with field evidence (Rijali, 2019).

Results and Discussion

4.1 Student Adaptation in the International Student Exchange Program

The implementation of the Kampus Berdampak Program through the International Student Exchange activities at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia provided students with various achievements, one of which was their ability to adapt to academic, social, and cultural environments. Based on observations, interviews, and documentation during the program, students' adaptation occurred gradually through active participation in academic and social activities at the university. This adjustment was reflected in their ability to understand the learning system, build social relationships, and adapt to the culture of the university environment.

At the beginning of the program, the most frequently experienced challenges were related to the learning process. Students had to adjust to lecture patterns that placed greater emphasis on discussions, presentations, group work, and active participation during classes. These differences meant that students needed time to understand the academic culture at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia. Initially, students experienced difficulties expressing their opinions because they needed to adjust to the classroom atmosphere and learning characteristics, which differed from those at their home universities.

However, this situation began to change after students attended several lectures and participated in various academic activities. International seminars, academic discussions, group presentations, and collaboration with Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia students helped them understand learning patterns and build confidence in expressing ideas. This experience shows that academic adjustment is not only related to understanding course materials but also to students' readiness to participate in a different learning culture.

In addition to academic adjustment, students also experienced social adaptation. During the program, they interacted directly with lecturers, local students, international students, and the surrounding community. These relationships developed through academic and non-academic

activities, such as seminars, cultural events, community service, and other student activities. Intensive interaction provided opportunities to become familiar with the new environment and understand how to communicate and cooperate with individuals from different backgrounds.

Active participation in campus activities also accelerated social adjustment. The more frequently students participated in shared activities, the easier it became for them to build relationships with the surrounding community. Support from lecturers, local students, and the academic community created an atmosphere that made students feel more comfortable during the program. This finding indicates that successful adaptation is influenced by students' ability to balance academic adjustment and social life in a new environment. This is consistent with Tanasy (2024), who states that exchange students face challenges in integrating academically and socially in order to adapt successfully to an unfamiliar environment.

The program also provided experiences of adjustment to social and cultural life in Malaysia. Although Indonesia and Malaysia share many similarities, students still encountered differences in academic culture, communication etiquette, everyday habits, and interaction patterns on campus. These differences provided new experiences that broadened students' perspectives on cultural diversity. Students learned to respect differences, adjust their behavior to local norms, and communicate more effectively in a multicultural environment.

These abilities did not develop instantly but evolved through experiences during the program. At the beginning, students faced various challenges in adjusting to the new environment; gradually, they became more comfortable participating in academic and social activities. This process is consistent with Aldi (2024), who explains that Indonesian students in exchange programs generally experience adjustment stages beginning with culture shock and eventually reaching adaptation to the new environment. The findings of this study show that direct learning experiences and continuous interaction accelerate this process.

Overall, students' adaptation during the International Student Exchange Program at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia developed through learning experiences, social interaction, and active involvement in various campus activities. This process not only helped students understand a new academic environment but also developed communication and cooperation skills, respect for diversity, and readiness to participate in international education settings.

4.2 Student Life Dynamics During the International Student Exchange Program

Participation in the International Student Exchange Program at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia provided experiences that brought changes to students' lives, both in academic activities and everyday life. The activities undertaken during the program not only broadened learning experiences but also shaped students' ways of thinking, communication patterns, and ability to face different environments. These dynamics developed through continuous interaction with lecturers, local students, international students, and communities around the campus.

In the academic aspect, students gained learning experiences that differed from those at their home universities. Lectures combined with international seminars, academic discussions, group presentations, and collaborative activities allowed students to encounter various approaches to learning. These experiences encouraged them to become more active in seeking information, expressing opinions, and developing critical-thinking skills when discussing issues. The variety of academic activities also broadened students' understanding of higher education practices in an international environment.

Students' life dynamics were also reflected in the development of their communication skills during the program. Daily interactions with students from different regions and countries provided opportunities to learn how to express opinions, listen to different perspectives, and communicate more openly. These experiences not only increased self-confidence but also

trained students to adjust their communication styles to the characteristics and backgrounds of the people they interacted with.

Another change experienced by students was increased independence in everyday life. During the program, students were required to manage lecture schedules, complete academic assignments, participate in campus activities, and manage personal needs independently. This situation indirectly trained them to become more responsible in making decisions, managing time, and overcoming challenges while living in the host country. Living away from family also provided opportunities to develop more mature problem-solving abilities.

The multicultural environment during the program provided valuable social experiences. Interactions with local and international students expanded friendship networks and enriched students' understanding of cultural diversity. Differences in language, habits, and perspectives did not prevent positive relationships; instead, they became opportunities to learn to respect diversity. Cultural activities, community service, and joint activities with Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia students enabled participants to understand local social values while strengthening tolerance and cooperation.

Experiences gained during the program also influenced students' personal development. Overcoming various challenges fostered self-confidence, the ability to adapt to change, and the courage to try new experiences. Students gained not only academic knowledge but also interpersonal skills that are useful in everyday life and the workplace. These findings are consistent with Ahmed, who explains that campus community support, positive interactions with lecturers and peers, and adequate language skills help students adjust gradually to a new academic environment.

Overall, the life dynamics of students participating in the International Student Exchange Program at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia demonstrate that overseas learning experiences have effects beyond academic achievement. Students had opportunities to develop independence, strengthen communication skills, expand international networks, and become more open to cultural diversity. These experiences provide valuable preparation for facing educational and professional challenges at the global level.

Conclusion

Based on the findings concerning student adaptation and life dynamics during the International Student Exchange Program at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia, it can be concluded that students experienced a gradual process of adjustment to a new environment. This adaptation involved academic activities, social relationships, culture, and everyday life. Although students encountered challenges such as differences in learning systems, communication styles, and environmental habits, they were able to overcome them through direct experience, interaction with their surroundings, and support from the university, lecturers, and local students.

The international student exchange program provided experiences that not only increased academic knowledge but also developed communication skills, independence, self-confidence, and understanding of cultural diversity. Through various activities during the program, students became more open, more capable of adapting to new environments, and better prepared to face global challenges. Thus, the International Student Exchange Program at Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia had a positive impact on students' academic and personal development.

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