Experiencing the advantages of Indonesian Islamic Higher Education: UIN Malang international student's perspectives and overviews

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Abstract

This study aims to deeply explore the perspectives and overviews of international students at UIN Malang regarding their experience on several advantages afforded by Indonesian Islamic higher education. As the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia has emerged as a compelling destination for international students seeking an education. Their experiences of studying and interacting with Indonesian lecturers and peers, as well as the advantages of Indonesian education can be a useful for every element of Indonesian policymakers. This study can be more crucial because there are many researches stated that Indonesian educational systems are relatively poor compared to other countries in term of teacher's quality, material, and learning strategies and often explored many disadvantages from Indonesian education. Using qualitative data with phenomenological design, this study explored 14 international students coming from 10 countries including Tajikistan, China, The United State of America, Yaman, Afghanistan, Comoro, Cambodia, Pakistan, Sudan, and Thailand. The result stated that there the international students of UIN Malang experienced four specific advantages within Indonesian Islamic higher education those are; the Indonesian lecturers are caring, friendly, and respectful, Indonesian classroom are interactive and full of strategies, the Islamic environment around university able to support the enjoyment of learning, and the existence of peer-teaching within Indonesian context of learning is contributed to the material understanding. The result of this study can be a proof that there are several advantages of Indonesian education that can be promoted to the realm of global education.

Keywords:
Indonesian Education; Islamic Higher Education; International Student; Student's Perspective

A. INTRODUCTION

The globalization of education has brought a significant impact to the opportunity of accessing worldwide education. This issue has significantly increased the mobility of foreign or international students studying outside their countries. As the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia has emerged as a compelling destination for students seeking an education that integrates modern academic sciences with profound Islamic values. Unfortunately, there are a lot of research which stated that Indonesian educational systems are relatively poor compared to other countries. Many researchers compared Indonesian system of education with another countries like Malaysia (Munastiwi & Marfuah, 2019; Noor, 2022; Suyantiningsih et al., 2023), Japan (Halawa et al., 2023), Uzbekistan (Shaturaev, 2021), (Marmoah et al., 2021), and Finland (Fitria, 2024; Setiawan, 2018). These several researchers concluded that there are several problems faced by Indonesian system of education including; disparities of teacher's quality and skills (Halawa et al., 2023; Wurdianto et al., 2024), excessive learning burden (Fitria, 2024), lack of conducive learning environment (Marmoah et al., 2021), unbalance education output, low quality of facilities and infrastructures (Madhakomala et al., 2022), and the issues of inequalities

(Welch & Aziz, 2022). A number of other researchers similarly identified a range of additional weaknesses within the Indonesian education system.

In fact, the aforementioned studies have articulated a range of alternative solutions intended to enhance the quality of the Indonesian education system. These strategies encompass a commitment to continuously develop a knowledge update (Wahib et al., 2022), maximally implementing a student-centered learning methodologies which already developed in the curriculum (Shaturaev, 2021), designing engaging learning programs towards students to give a valuable impact on their outcomes, and the commitment to adapt and integrate the newest Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the educational process (Aisyah & Matas, 2024). These alternative solutions are widely believed to be capable of improving the quality of Indonesian education system in the future. Furthermore, one particular study stated that despite the mentioned problems, the Indonesian education provided several advantages including the curricular prioritization of religious education as a consequence of the country's majority Muslim population and the good quality of education in urban areas (Munastiwi & Marfuah, 2019; Noor, 2022).

The prioritization of religious education within educational institution in Indonesia is practically manifested in its Islamic higher education institutions. A specific characteristic of these institutions is the integration of both modernity and spirituality. Currently, these Islamic higher education institutions are actively pursuing the internationalization of education. In line with this internationalization campaign, some Islamic higher institutions are increasingly attracting the attention of international students. As a university which aggressively promoting its internationalization effort, UIN Malang has become a significant magnet for international students pursuing higher education. The evidence of this case is the consistent and significant increase in the number of international students enrolled at the campus in recent years (Rosi, 2023; Rosi & Yousif, 2024). The increasing number of international students with the campaign of internationalization in recent years proved that Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions are having several advantages that need to be promoted to international world of education.

Despite the availability of quantitative data regarding the increasing number of international student enrollment in university, in-depth qualitative information regarding their actual experiences and perceptions remain limited. Currently, several studies often concentrate on educational policies and facilities in the case of internationalization, but limited on how international students interpret and perceive the specific advantages of their learning experience at UIN Malang. These advantages may encompass the teacher's strategies, academic and Islamic environment, and another linguistic interaction. Their perspectives are crucial for several reasons; first, it allows for measuring the successful effort of internationalization programs. The perspectives and perceptions of international students are vital as they serve as a primary indicator of the effectiveness of internationalization program. Second, understanding their perspectives while they undergo their education at UIN Malang contributed to the global promotion of Islamic education in Indonesia within the global educational realm. Third, the reviews and feedbacks from international students can serve as a vital reference for enhancing the quality of education in Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions in the future.

Based on these backgrounds, this study aims to deeply explore the perspectives of international students at UIN Malang regarding their experience on several advantages afforded by Indonesian Islamic higher education. Specifically, this study will focus on identifying the academic and spiritual perceived by international students during their studies at UIN Malang, their experiences of studying and interacting with Indonesian lecturers and peers, the advantages of learning based on their actual condition, and their testimony and review of Indonesian Islamic higher education. These focuses will be explored deeply in this study.

B. METHODS

This study used qualitative data in nature with phenomenological design. Phenomenological design used to explore deeply the experienced faced by international student

in their daily academic environment. As phenomenology design try to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals regarding a specific phenomenon by describing the essence of that experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 1996; Moleong, 2000). This exploration examined through in-depth interviews and observations. Interviews were conducted with 14 international students coming from 10 countries such as Tajikistan, China, The United State of America, Yaman, Afghanistan, Comoro, Cambodia, Pakistan, Sudan, and Thailand. Additionally, observations were carried out inside classroom while the international students studying in university to explore the lived experience of studying in Indonesian Islamic higher education. The result of interview than analyzed by Miles and Huberman's qualitative data analysis which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). The question provided to the international students are related to their direct experiences and reviews on the advantages of Indonesian Islamic higher education that can be a tool for promoting Indonesian institutions represented by UIN Malang to the global realm of education.

C.   RESULT & DISCUSSION
Indonesian Lecturers are Caring, Friendly, and Respectful

The Indonesian educational framework is widely acknowledged for integrating moral, social, and spiritual values as essential elements of the learning process. The finding of this study stated that teachers' interactions with their students experienced by international students at UIN Malang are characterized by caring, friendliness, and respect. Such qualities constitute some of the most notable features observed by international students studying in Indonesia and subjected in this study, particularly at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang.

Indonesian Lecturers are Caring

One of the defining characteristics of Indonesian lecturers, as perceived by international students is their genuine sense of care. Data from the study indicate that almost all international students regard Indonesian teachers and lecturers as highly attentive to their students' well-being and learning progress. A Yemeni student shared that lecturers in Indonesia frequently inquire about their students' emotions, daily activities, and academic needs. To him, such gestures reflect a level of personal attention seldom encountered in his home country, where teachers generally concentrate only on the delivery of instructional material. Likewise, a Thai student noted that Indonesian lecturers show great patience when assisting international students who face challenges in using the Indonesian language.

This concept aligns with Nel Noddings' theory of the pedagogy of care, which asserts that effective teachers embody empathy, recognize students' individual needs, and cultivate positive emotional relationships that render the learning experience meaningful (Noddings, 2013). This framework is reinforced by a number of studies conducted in Indonesia. For example, Triono demonstrated that caring teacher behavior has a substantial impact on students' motivation and engagement in learning (Triono, 2021). Similarly, Bali emphasized that exemplary teachers and lecturers in Indonesia are those who display genuine care, attentiveness, and moral integrity toward their learners (Bali, 2013). Hence, caring behavior should be regarded not merely as an emotional trait but as a vital dimension of teacher professionalism that shapes the overall learning experience. Within the Indonesian educational context, such caring attitudes represent a humanistic and faith-based pedagogical approach that places human values at the core of education.

Indonesian Lecturers are Friendly

The warmth and openness exhibited by Indonesian lecturers are among the qualities most valued by international students. A Cambodian student observed that the classroom atmosphere in Indonesia tends to be more welcoming, relaxed, and collegial compared to that in their home country, where interactions between teachers and students are often more formal and distant. Indonesian lecturers are viewed as approachable and communicative, frequently incorporating light humour to foster a friendly and non-threatening learning environment. Likewise, a Chinese

student mentioned that such friendliness helps them feel comfortable and confident in asking questions, as lecturers consistently respond with encouragement and appreciation.

These results correspond with the findings of Amrullah, who emphasized that interpersonal communication among lecturers is vital in establishing a supportive and positive learning climate in both schools and universities (Amrullah et al., 2024). Similarly, the findings of Lusiana reported that teachers' friendliness enhances students' enthusiasm and participation in learning by cultivating a sense of being appreciated and emotionally accepted (Lusiana et al., 2025). These observations are consistent with James F. Andersen's (1979) notion of *teacher immediacy*, which encompasses verbal and nonverbal behaviors that minimize the psychological distance between teachers and students, thereby promoting greater motivation and learning effectiveness (Croghan, 2008). Moreover, Vygotsky's constructivist perspective also connects friendliness with the learning process, proposing that a friendly demeanor functions as a form of scaffolding or social support that enables students to explore and experiment with new ways of learning (L. Vygotsky & Sean, 2018). Consequently, the friendliness demonstrated by teachers in Indonesia can be interpreted as an effective pedagogical approach and a vital component of a multicultural learning environment that fosters comfort, inclusivity, and active engagement.

Indonesian Lecturers are Respectful

Beyond their caring and friendly nature, international students also note that Indonesian educators demonstrate a strong sense of respect toward their students, both within and beyond classroom settings. A student from Sudan mentioned that teachers in Indonesia interact with students courteously, without showing any form of discrimination, and consistently communicate using polite language. Similarly, a student from Thailand observed that educators value every student's perspective and refrain from humiliating them in public, even when mistakes in language use occur. The respectful demeanour exhibited by Indonesian lecturers embodies the principles of equality and humanity that are deeply rooted in Islamic education and the broader academic culture of Indonesia. Based on interview data, a Yemeni student noted that lecturers in Indonesia do not assume an authoritarian role focused solely on giving directives; instead, they act as mentors who engage in open dialogue and show attentiveness to students' viewpoints. At UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, lecturers are described as teaching with sincerity and empathy, allowing students to feel appreciated not only as learners but also as individuals undergoing personal growth and development.

This perspective is reinforced by Tajuddin and Zulfikar (2022), who emphasized that lecturer–student interactions founded on Islamic principles cultivate a sense of mutual respect (Tajuddin, 2023). In a similar vein, Tormey (2021) contended that respectful teaching entails acknowledging students' agency and resisting hierarchical or oppressive power dynamics (Wirastuti et al., 2024). These viewpoints correspond with Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1978), which advocates for an educational relationship grounded in dialogue and equality, wherein both teachers and students act as co-participants in the learning process (Freire, 1978). Within this framework, the relationship between lecturers and students in Indonesia is not hierarchical or transactional, as in the dynamic between superiors and subordinates, but rather humanistic, egalitarian, and dialogical. Communication occurs openly and is built on mutual trust and respect. This relational pattern reflects Freire's notion that education should be "rooted in dialogue and mutual respect between teachers and students, rather than authority and subordination," thereby positioning both as equal partners in the learning process (Wang, 2024).

These observations align with our findings, particularly those shared by a Chinese student named Majun, who noted that while educators in his home country tend to maintain a formal and distant relationship with their students, academic interactions in Indonesia are characterized by warmth, closeness, and a familial atmosphere. This aligns with Muhimma's (2022) research, which highlights that within Indonesia's inclusive higher education context, "there are no distinct boundaries between superior and subordinate relationships, as all members of the institution interact as a family within the learning community" (Kasmiatun et al., 2025). Therefore, the

respectful demeanor exhibited by Indonesian educators is evident not only in their courteous language and formal conduct but also in their capacity to cultivate balanced, ethical, and human-oriented professional relationships. This form of interaction reflects the principles of *ta'dib* (education grounded in proper conduct) and *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) within the Islamic educational tradition, which underscores the integration of knowledge transmission and moral development throughout the learning process.

Indonesian Classrooms are Interactive and Full of Strategies

The learning experiences of international students at Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University in Malang show that learning in Indonesia is considered more interesting, more lively, and less monotonous. In their learning, they feel that they are given ample space for interaction between lecturers and students. This type of learning is therefore a special attraction for international students. The dynamics of interactive classes show a paradigm shift, where students are no longer positioned as passive recipients but are replaced by active students in building knowledge. Additionally, varied strategies and innovations in teaching can create a wider space for interaction, such as student-centered learning (student engagement), project-based learning, the use of technology in learning (learning media, quizzes, AI, etc.), the availability of free access learning resources, and adapting to the students' language.

Student-Centered learning Strategy

Based on Lehtimäki's (2025) research in The International Journal of Management Education, the application of this approach through arts-based learning methods has been proven to significantly increase students' emotional, cognitive, and social engagement. This research is in line with Kahu's (2013) views on Student Engagement Theory. Student Engagement Theory explains that students' behavioral, cognitive, and affective aspects are influenced by a sense of ownership of the learning process and environmental support. The application of Student-Centered Learning strategies in higher education can develop students' personal and social competencies by fostering self-confidence, empathy, and cross-cultural communication skills (Lehtimäki et al., 2025; Li & Ding, 2023).

Previous research related to the conditions of students at Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University in Malang found that students from Tajikistan considered learning in Indonesia to be in line with their habits at their old school, which implemented the Cambridge curriculum. The Cambridge curriculum emphasizes presentations, active discussions, and critical thinking skills. On the other hand, students from Yemen assessed that learning in Indonesia is collaborative and reflective because lecturers involve students in open dialogue about their experiences and feelings during the learning process. This perspective proves that there is an appreciation for individual learning experiences as part of the learning process. This reflects the main principle of student engagement, where students are actively involved through dialogue, reflection, and direct practice, which makes the learning process more meaningful and contextual.

Thus, the student-centered learning and student engagement approaches are effectively applied in the context of higher education. Students tend to be more active in speaking and discussing when they are involved in interactive and hands-on learning activities (learning by doing). This is in line with Bonwell & Eison (1991) on the theory of Active Learning, which emphasizes that students understand concepts better when they actively participate through discussions, experiments, or simulations rather than just listening to explanations from teachers or lecturers. In addition, Vygotsky's (1978) research on Social Constructivism theory also emphasizes that effective learning occurs through social interaction, where students learn from their peers through dialogue and collaboration.

Project-Based Learning Strategy

Project-based learning refers to a discovery-based teaching method that involves students in the construction of knowledge by having them complete meaningful projects and develop real products (Guo, Saab, Post, et al., 2020). At the college level, project-based learning is relevant in

building work competencies, complex problem solving, and cross-disciplinary collaboration. According to Thomas's (2000) research, project-based learning is a process of in-depth investigation of real-world problems. In addition, this is reinforced by Vygotsky's (Kozulin et al., 1978) theory of Constructivism and Kolb's (1984) theory of Experiential Learning. Both theories explain that knowledge is acquired through direct experience and reflection. Project-based learning is categorized as interactive learning because it encourages students to think critically, work together, discuss, and complete projects gradually and collaboratively.

The Utilization of technology in The Classroom

International students from Pakistan compared that in their home country, learning is more theoretical, whereas in Indonesia it is more practical and hands-on. Thus, this learning shows a shift from theoretical learning to project-based learning. Meanwhile, students from Yemen revealed that learning methods in class are very diverse, such as group work, presentations, and projects. This diversity can strengthen the dimensions of interactivity and collaborative learning and is a key means of developing 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving (Guo, Saab, & Admiraal, 2020; Priyanto et al., 2024). Thus, learning in Indonesia as experienced by international students can be categorized as the implementation of interactive and contextual Project-Based Learning. Interactivity arises not only from verbal communication such as discussions, but also from hands-on practice in creating products together with the group. Therefore, the involvement of international students in project creation is not only technical in nature but also supports the social and emotional aspects of learning.

International students from Cambodia and Pakistan revealed that when attending school in their countries, they did not rely on digital resources but used books to find all information. In Indonesia, however, they had to adapt to using digital resources such as AI, Google, and so on. In Mayer's theory (2009), learning media is mentioned not only as a delivery tool but also as a mediator of interaction and meaning between students, the environment, and content. On the other hand, UNESCO describes OER (2019) as online learning resources that can increase inclusion and adapt materials to students' needs to support the independent learning process (Ossiannilsson et al., 2023). In addition, international students also experience interactive technologies such as digital quizzes to strengthen student engagement through rapid feedback, personalization, and adaptive analysis. This learning model is in line with the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (Mayer, 2009). International students' perspectives on the use of technology can transform the learning experience into a more practical and interactive one. Instead of just listening to lectures or reading textbooks, students can now search for their own sources, take online quizzes, and use AI tools for independent exploration. Thus, the use of learning technology is not only an additional tool, but a mechanism that strengthens student interactivity, collaboration, and reflection to support higher quality learning.

Availability of free access learning resources and adaptation to student's languages

One of the international students who takes advantage of freely accessible learning resources such as books is from Afghanistan. This student said that he really enjoys studying in the library. In addition, Yemeni students also always try to learn by adapting to the language used in everyday life, namely Indonesian. If they are unable to improve their skills, they look for other learning resources such as YouTube. This shows that language adaptation can be achieved through intensive learning, the use of digital translations, and collaboration with friends.

The availability of open educational resources (OER) has opened up wider access for global students to obtain learning materials without being limited by costs and licenses (Ossiannilsson et al., 2023). In a multilingual and cross-cultural context, the application of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principle is important: by providing materials in various formats, languages, and modes of representation, OER can be adapted to meet the needs of international students (Gagne et al., 2024). Thus, the use of open learning resources tailored to the language needs of international students confirms that free access alone is not enough but must be accompanied by material design that is responsive to language and cultural variations.

University Islamic Environment Support the Enjoyment of Learning

One of the important aspects that contribute to the comfort of international students studying at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang is the campus environment based on Islamic values. The Islamic academic atmosphere is not only reflected in institutional policies, but also in the daily culture of the academic community that embodies religious values, tolerance, and mutual respect. In many classes, lecture schedules are flexibly arranged so as not to interfere with obligatory prayer times, allowing students to fulfill their spiritual duties without sacrificing academic activities. Religious practices in class, such as reciting prayers before lessons or integrating Islamic values into the learning process, foster a sense of calm and spiritual closeness that enriches the students' learning experience (Zuhdi, 2023).

Islamic education in Indonesia strives to accommodate the diverse backgrounds of students and instill values of inclusivity, tolerance, and mutual respect in daily learning interactions. These findings are consistent with the atmosphere on campus, where religious practices and moral values foster peace, understanding, and respect for diversity among both local and international students (Supriyatno & Ubabuddin, 2019). Thus, it can be concluded that the Islamic environment of the university not only functions as an institutional identity, but also as an important factor that supports the enjoyment of learning. An Islamic, tolerant, and humanistic academic atmosphere creates a sense of security and emotional connection that strengthens the motivation to learn among both local and international students. This is evident from the results of our interviews. Lu Jane, a student from the Middle East, said that she felt facilitated by campus employees in performing her prayers. Although she could not walk to the mosque, campus employees kindly allowed her to borrow a prayer robe and mat for prayer. This attitude shows support and understanding for the spiritual needs of students, and reflects an Islamic and inclusive campus environment.

The Assistance of Peer-Teachings and their Contribution of Understanding Material

At UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, peer teaching is one form of academic support that plays a major role in helping international students adapt to the Indonesian learning system. In several courses, lecturers appoint local students to assist international students in understanding course material, enriching their academic Indonesian vocabulary, and helping them understand the social and cultural context of the campus environment. This activity does not only take place in the classroom, but also outside of class hours, for example through informal discussions, study groups, or light tutoring before exams. Peer teaching plays a significant role in the education system, especially for international students who are adapting to a multilingual environment. Through interaction with peers, students can build confidence, deepen their understanding of concepts, and hone their cross-cultural communication skills. For local students, involvement in peer teaching trains empathy, leadership, and pedagogical skills that are important assets in the world of education. And learning assistance from peers can eliminate awkwardness, as the language of peers is easier to understand (Mahsup et al., 2020).

In the context of international students at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, the role of local peers who accompany international students serves as a form of temporary scaffolding that enables them to achieve a higher level of understanding of the material. And the role of international student peers is able to bridge the language gap between one student and another. In our interview, one of the international student lecturers explained that in the learning process in the classroom, international students often play an active role in helping lecturers and fellow students to understand the language used, especially when there are terms or sentences that are instructional or explanatory in nature. A study conducted by (Graham et al., 2022) shows that students who receive peer mentoring at the beginning of their studies experience an increase in academic achievement of up to 10% and a greater sense of belonging to the campus environment. These findings confirm that peer mentoring plays an important role not only in helping academic understanding, but also in building social interactions and a sense of belonging in a multicultural learning environment.

In addition, (Hertiavi & Kesaulya, 2020) emphasize that peer teaching plays an important role in creating a collaborative learning atmosphere that fosters mutual trust and openness among students. Meanwhile, (Febrian Afriadi et al., 2024) Collaborative learning is becoming an increasingly popular pedagogical approach in higher education because it is considered to improve the effectiveness of the student learning process. In a multicultural campus environment, collaboration between local and international students is beneficial, and described by (Belianti et al., 2025) peer teaching can enrich academic experience.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that the international students at UIN Malang identified four several advantages of Indonesian Islamic higher education. These four identifications identified through their experiences for studying in several years. Based on international student's experiences, the first advantage of Indonesian Islamic higher education is related to the lecturers. Indonesian lecturers identified as a caring, friendly and respectful compared to their past experience in their own countries. The second advantage is related to the classroom which have the interactive atmosphere and the use of many strategies. The strategies that identified as joyful strategy including; any of student-centered learning strategies, project-based learning, the utilization of ICT, and the many languages used within the classroom. the third advantage is related to the academic environment which tend to maintain the Islamic atmosphere. According to the international students at UIN Malang, the Islamic environment inside university is a part of contributing factor that contributed to the joyful of learning without any curiosity of late praying time and other thing related to the Islamic teaching application. The last identification which is listed as a part of advantage in the Indonesian context of education is the existence of peer-teaching. Peer-teaching is also suggested as a very useful contribution that can fully contributed to the material understanding of international students. This last identification mostly experienced in their first year of study. The peers are contributed mostly in understanding Indonesian language and culture. Beside these advantages, this study having several limitations which are the absence of the disadvantages of learning in Indonesia as well as the challenges faced by them in different year of study. These limitations can be further identified in the future research.

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