



Exploring the Life and Academic Experiences of International Students at the University of Jambi, Indonesia: A Case Study

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Abstract

The increasing number of international students in Indonesia's higher education sector urges institutions to improve the quality of their services, facilities, and education. The teaching and learning environment is critical, encompassing the effectiveness of instructional methods, classroom interactions, and the academic support systems provided by the university. Additionally, their socio-experiences, including integration into the campus community and interactions with peers, play a crucial role in their overall well-being and academic success. This study aims to explore the life and academic experiences of international students in undergraduate International Programs at the University of Jambi in Indonesia. This research employed a mixed-method approach, combining a questionnaire adapted from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and in-depth interviews, with a total of 13 international students from international classrooms participating in the study. The research highlights significant challenges for international students at the University of Jambi, including inadequate classroom and laboratory facilities, poor lighting, and insufficient resources, particularly in Animal Sciences and Agriculture. Language barriers due to Indonesian being the primary medium of instruction further hinder learning. Students express high dissatisfaction with services such as insurance, health facilities, extracurricular activities, and counseling, though library services are well-regarded. Recommendations include adopting English for instruction, providing bilingual training for lecturers, and improving infrastructure and student services to enhance the overall academic experience for international students.

Keywords: EFL Learners, international student, students experience, challenge, culture shock.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, the ease of connecting and interacting with people worldwide has significantly impacted numerous fields, including [education \(Karacabey, et](#)

al., 2019; Scott et al., 2015). According to Yamada (2021), educational institutions, particularly those in higher education, are profoundly influenced by globalization. This influence manifests in various ways, driving the need for institutions to adapt and evolve to meet new global standards and expectations. The process of internationalization in higher education brings several positive aspects. As Jibeen and Khan (2015) highlight, it leads to the improvement of academic quality by fostering an environment where internationally oriented staff and students can thrive. Furthermore, internationalization diversifies and improves the learning environment, increases public access to education, and establishes international networks. These networks facilitate collaboration and exchange between institutions worldwide, enabling the sharing of knowledge, resources, and best practices.

The internationalization process involves integrating various elements such as the curriculum, administration, management, collaborative academic research, and student and lecturer exchanges (Liu & Dai, 2011). This intentional process of incorporating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education aims to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff while making a meaningful contribution to society (De wit, 2015). The strategies for internationalizing higher education have been designed to address growing challenges and to integrate higher education institutions and their stakeholders into the evolving global knowledge economy and society (Arregle et al., 2021). As higher education continues to adapt to the demands of globalization, the benefits of internationalization will remain a crucial factor in the development and success of academic institutions worldwide.

In Indonesia, the internationalization of higher education has focused on various aspects of academic life, including curriculum development, teaching methods, lecturer exchanges, and the enhancement of educational facilities (Abduh et al., 2018). Several Indonesian universities have embraced internationalization by establishing international classes and programs and facilitating student and faculty exchanges. The University of Jambi, a state university in Indonesia, is in its third year of accepting international students. This acceptance is facilitated through a university aid scholarship, available only for bachelor's degree programs in certain fields. Founded in 1963, the university currently offers 92 study programs, seven of which have international programs: Law, Economics, Indonesian Education and Literature, English Education, Agribusiness, Forestry, and Animal Sciences. To fulfill the professional commitments of Indonesian universities and remain competitive with other leading academic institutions, it is crucial to address the joys and challenges that international students face in adapting to different socio-cultural and academic environments (Hapsari & Hamamah, 2019; Halpern et al., 2022).

International students often encounter significant cultural challenges when they move to a new country for their education. These challenges include adjusting to different social norms, customs, and values (Alasmari, 2023). The process of cultural adaptation can be particularly daunting as students navigate unfamiliar social settings and cultural practices. For instance, students may struggle with understanding and adhering to new societal expectations or feel out of place in social interactions. Additionally, social integration is another critical challenge for international students. Forming new friendships and building a social network in a foreign environment can be intimidating. Students might find it difficult to connect with their peers due to language barriers, cultural differences, or simply

the fear of not being accepted (Robinson et al., 2019; Cao & Meng, 2020). Moreover, academic integration presents another set of challenges for international students. Language barriers are one of the most significant hurdles, as many students are required to study in a language that is not their first (Ali et al., 2020). This can make understanding lectures, participating in discussions, and completing assignments particularly challenging.

Several studies have explored various aspects of internationalization and students' experiences in higher education. Research by Rosyidah et al. (2020) outlines multiple strategies for promoting internationalization in universities, such as establishing a clear vision, obtaining international accreditations, and setting up specialized study centers. Additionally, publicizing programs and activities through various media and building international collaborations through good interpersonal communication and trust-building activities are essential. On the other hand, the internationalization of higher education also poses various challenges for international students, including culture shock. Syawaludin et al. (2020) conducted research at Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (UMM) in Indonesia and found that international students often experience loneliness, homesickness, and social relation issues such as discrimination and stereotypes. These issues stem from external factors like language barriers and lifestyle differences, as well as internal factors like personality traits and expectations. Moreover, research by Ali et al. (2020) investigates acculturative stress among international students at Airlangga University in Indonesia. The study highlights the importance of comprehensive support systems to help international students cope with these challenges, facilitating smoother integration into their academic and social environments.

Given the limited literature on students' experiences in the internationalization of higher education in Indonesia, this research seeks to fill that gap and contribute to the ongoing efforts to internationalize higher education in Indonesia, ensuring that it meets the needs of international students and supports their success. This study aims to explore the life and academic experiences of international students in undergraduate International Programs at the University of Jambi, which is in its third year of accepting international students. Specifically, the objective is to examine the socio-cultural adaptation processes of international students, identifying both challenges and successful strategies. Additionally, the study provides recommendations for improving the support and integration of international students to enhance their overall academic and social experience..

METHOD

This study was conducted at the University of Jambi in Indonesia. To address the research questions, a case study method was employed. The case study approach is particularly useful to employ when there is a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event or phenomenon of interest, in its natural real-life context (Crowe et al., 2011). Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews, with a total of 13 international students participating in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the University of Jambi and audio-taped for accuracy. Each interview session was transcribed to ensure data originality and trustworthiness, allowing for precise data analysis and interpretation (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The research team then collaborated to create domain analysis worksheets, which included semantic relationships, statements of

form, example sentences with cover terms, included terms fitting the selected semantic relationship, and their locations in the transcripts. Triangulation of data was crucial to ensure the accuracy and validity of the results.

The collected data were analyzed according to their classification and group. For identifying input, learning resources, curriculum, and content, the research used an adapted checklist. In exploring the process and input, the recorded interviews were analyzed. To measure satisfaction levels, data from a Likert scale (1-4) were analyzed categorically. This multi-faceted approach helped ensure a comprehensive understanding of the international students' experiences. By combining quantitative data from questionnaires with qualitative insights from interviews, the study provided a nuanced view of the challenges and successes faced by international students at the University of Jambi. This methodological rigor supports the reliability and validity of the findings, contributing valuable insights into the internationalization of higher education in Indonesia.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Academic experience International students

The feedback from international students highlights several issues related to the classroom facilities at the University of Jambi. Although the basic facilities are generally adequate, there are notable concerns about comfort and functionality. Student 2 stated *"The classroom facilities are generally sufficient, but there are some issues with comfort. The classrooms are often too small, and the lighting is inadequate. It becomes problematic when the lights go out because the classroom gets dark, and we lose access to slides and the internet."* One significant issue raised is the size of the classrooms. Students reported that the classrooms are often too small to comfortably accommodate all students, which can affect their ability to focus and participate in the learning process. According to [Jin and Peng \(2022\)](#), the perception of space and dimension is a critical factor in enhancing students' engagement in learning activities. Additionally, inadequate lighting in the classrooms was a common concern. Poor lighting conditions not only make it difficult for students to take notes and follow lectures but also strain their eyes, leading to discomfort and reduced attention span ([Golmohammadi et al., 2021](#)).

Moreover, the feedback from international students highlights significant issues related to the availability and adequacy of laboratory facilities at the University of Jambi, particularly in the Faculties of Animal Sciences and Agriculture. Student 5 expressed concerns about the limited and inadequate laboratory facilities in the Faculty of Animal Sciences. She emphasized that students often have to share equipment, which can hinder their ability to perform certain experiments. Student 5 stated, *"The laboratory facilities in the Faculty of Animal Sciences are quite limited and inadequate. We often have to share equipment, and sometimes we can't perform certain experiments due to the lack of necessary tools and resources."* Similarly, Student 7 from the Faculty of Agriculture reported that the labs are not only limited in number but also in resources. This shortage forces students to work in larger groups, reducing the individual hands-on experience that is vital for understanding and skill development. Student 7 shared, *"In the Faculty of Agriculture, the labs are not only limited in number but also in resources. This shortage forces us to work in larger groups, which reduces the individual hands-on experience that is vital for our understanding and skill development."*

Both students' experiences indicate a pressing need for improved laboratory facilities. The current limitations, such as inadequate equipment, insufficient laboratory space, and outdated resources, negatively affect the learning experiences and academic performance of international students (Yangambi, 2023; Brew et al., 2021). Addressing these issues by investing in more laboratory spaces, modern equipment, and better resource management is essential for providing a high-quality education that meets the needs of all students, particularly those in science and technology-related fields. This improvement is crucial for ensuring that students can gain the practical skills and knowledge necessary for their future careers.

The language barriers also present a significant challenge for international students, particularly in the context of the medium of instruction used in their courses. Student 9 noted a critical issue regarding language use in the classroom. Despite the lecturers' expertise, the use of Indonesian as the medium of instruction poses a substantial obstacle for many international students. Student 9 expressed, *"Our lecturers are very knowledgeable, but there's a significant issue with the medium of instruction. Some lecturers still use Indonesian, which is a foreign language for most of us. This makes it difficult to fully grasp the concepts being taught."* This language barrier hinders students' ability to understand and engage with the course material effectively.

In line with this, Student 11 stressed the importance of conducting all lectures in English to better accommodate the linguistic needs of international students. They suggested, *"I suggest that all lectures in the international program should be conducted in English, as it is the common academic language understood by all international students. Additionally, lecturers should be provided with training in bilingual education techniques to better support our learning needs."* This recommendation highlights the need for systemic changes to support international students more effectively. In addition, student 1 stated that *"I understand the necessity of using Indonesian for certain local contexts, but for international students, it's more effective to use English. It helps us understand the material better and keeps the learning process smooth."*

These insights point to a crucial need for policy adjustments and enhanced support for lecturers. Implementing English as the primary medium of instruction in international programs and providing lecturers with training in bilingual education techniques can significantly improve the educational experience for international students (Floris (2014)). Such measures are essential for creating a more inclusive and effective learning environment, ensuring that all students can fully benefit from their academic programs and succeed in their studies.

Adaptation and social interaction of international students

The adaptation experiences of international students at the University of Jambi reveal a blend of challenges and positive interactions, significantly influenced by cultural and linguistic factors. Student 3 highlighted the difficulty of adjusting to a new cultural environment, particularly regarding food. He stated, *"I experience culture shock and difficulty with food. It was hard to adjust to the different types of food available here, and it took some time to get used to the local cuisine."* This statement underscores the challenges that international students face when adapting to different dietary habits and food availability, which is a common aspect of cultural shock (Amoyaw et al., 2022).

In contrast, Student 8 described a more positive social adaptation experience. She shared, *"I have met many other international students as well as local students. We share and learn about each other's cultures, which has been a wonderful experience. My native language is Malay, so communicating with locals has been easier for me."* This experience highlights the benefits of having a linguistic and bilingual advantage and the enriching nature of cultural exchange among international and local students (Romanowski & Jedynak, 2018). The ability to communicate more easily with locals due to linguistic similarities can significantly enhance the adaptation process and social integration.

Student 13 discussed the initial challenges posed by the language barrier but emphasized the supportive nature of the local community. He remarked, *"Although I faced some initial challenges with the language barrier, the friendly and kind nature of the local society made it easier to adapt. I have found the local community and campus environment to be very welcoming."* This statement illustrates how the welcoming attitude of the local community and campus environment can mitigate some of the difficulties associated with language barriers, facilitating a smoother adaptation process.

Overall, the experiences of these students underscore the varied nature of adaptation challenges faced by international students at the University of Jambi. While culture shock and language barriers are significant hurdles, positive interactions with the local community and fellow students, as well as linguistic advantages, can greatly enhance the adaptation experience (El Masri & Khan, 2022). Addressing these challenges through targeted support services and fostering a welcoming environment are crucial steps in improving the overall experience for international students.

Service activity unit and student organization

The student activity and organization units serve as the core of student engagement at Jambi University. However, interviews indicate that international students have limited opportunities to participate directly in most university activities. This limitation is due to the absence of a dedicated unit for international students, such as an "International Students Association." Currently, international student activities are primarily managed by the International Office, which functions as an International Technical Executive Unit. Additionally, data on student services highlight significant gaps in areas such as insurance, health facilities, extracurricular activities, soft skills development, and counseling and psychological support for international students.

Feedback from international students revealed significant dissatisfaction with these services. A notable 33.6% of respondents felt unsatisfied, and an additional 27.3% expressed being very dissatisfied. These figures indicate that more than half of the students had negative experiences with the services provided, culminating in a total of 60.9% negative feedback. This overwhelming sense of dissatisfaction highlights a critical area for improvement in the support and services offered to international students. With only 38.5% of students reporting a positive experience, it is clear that the current student services are not meeting the expectations or needs of a majority of the international student body.

Feedback on academic administration services shows a similar trend of dissatisfaction. Only 25% of international students reported being satisfied, whereas a substantial 45% felt unsatisfied, and 30% were very dissatisfied. This suggests that the administrative processes, support, and interactions with academic staff are not meeting the

expectations of a majority of students. Such results underscore the need for administrative reforms and better communication strategies to enhance student satisfaction in this area. Student responses regarding teaching facilities reflect considerable dissatisfaction. Only 25% of students expressed satisfaction with the facilities, while 35% were unsatisfied, and 40% were very dissatisfied. This indicates that a significant majority of students encounter issues with the teaching facilities provided, suggesting a need for substantial improvements in the quality and availability of these resources to better support student learning (Barrett et al., 2019; Hanaysha et al., 2023)

In contrast to other services, the results for library services remain positive. A substantial 48.9% of international students felt very satisfied, and 33.6% were satisfied, resulting in a total of 82.5% positive feedback. This high level of satisfaction highlights the library as a significant strength of the institution. The positive perception of the library services reflects the quality and accessibility of resources, the supportive environment, and the overall effectiveness in meeting students' academic needs. These findings reinforce the library's crucial role in the academic experience of international students (Hughes et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

The research findings reveal significant challenges faced by international students at the University of Jambi. Key issues include inadequate classroom and laboratory facilities, with students reporting small classroom sizes, poor lighting, and insufficient laboratory resources, particularly in the Faculties of Animal Sciences and Agriculture. These infrastructural problems hinder students' learning experiences and academic performance. Additionally, language barriers pose a substantial obstacle, as many courses are taught in Indonesian, making it difficult for international students to fully understand the material. Recommendations include adopting English as the primary language of instruction in international programs and providing bilingual education training for lecturers.

Student services also received considerable criticism, with many international students expressing dissatisfaction with insurance, health facilities, extracurricular activities, and support services such as counseling. The administrative processes and interactions with academic staff also need improvement. In contrast, library services were positively received, highlighting the library's crucial role in supporting students' academic needs. Addressing these concerns through targeted infrastructure investments, enhanced language support, and improved student services is essential for creating a more supportive and effective learning environment for international students at the University of Jambi.

However, This study is limited by its focus on a single institution, the University of Jambi, which may not provide a comprehensive representation of the experiences of international students across different universities. Additionally, the sample size of international participants was relatively small, which could limit the generalizability of the findings. The study's scope may not capture the full diversity of challenges and experiences faced by international students in other educational contexts. Future research should expand to include multiple universities with larger and more diverse international student populations to provide a broader understanding of the issues identified. Comparative studies across different institutions can help identify common challenges and effective practices in

supporting international students. Additionally, longitudinal studies following international students over their entire academic journey could provide deeper insights into how their experiences and needs evolve over time.

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