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From Fear to Belonging: Learning Experiences of Muslim Minority International Students in Islamic Education in Indonesia

Ismail

Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia

[ismail@walisongo.ac.id*](mailto:ismail@walisongo.ac.id)

Suja'i

Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia

sujai@walisongo.ac.id

Mohammad Ridwan

Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia

mohammadridwan@bungabangsacirebon.ac.id

Novita Siswayanti

Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional, Jakarta, Indonesia

novi037@brin.go.id

Umi Masfiah

Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional, Jakarta, Indonesia

umim001@brin.go.id

ABSTRACT: *This study explores the academic shock experienced by international students from Muslim minority countries in Asia—Thailand, China, and Cambodia—who enrolled in an undergraduate Islamic Education program in Indonesia. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, data were collected through unstructured interviews with participating students. Findings reveal a significant shift in students' perceptions during their studies. Initially influenced by media portrayals of terrorism and conflict, many students arrived with fear and uncertainty about studying in Indonesia. Over time, however, their academic and social experiences challenged these assumptions. Through inclusive*

interpretations of Islam, local cultural engagement, and dialogical learning, students encountered values of tolerance, hospitality, and mutual respect. This transformation encouraged them to promote religious moderation, interfaith dialogue, and humanistic education upon returning to their home countries. The study extends the concept of academic shock across intellectual, psychosocial, and spiritual dimensions.

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Academic Editors: Hak-Seon Kim, PhD, Professor and Dean of Global College, Kyungseong University | Feyissa Israel Fisseha, PhD, Assistant Professor and Director of the Global Migration and Integration Research Center, Global College Kyungseong University

INTRODUCTION

Muslim minority international students have the potential to face a high degree of anxiety and fear upon their early arrival in their host country during the acculturation period. These physical and perceived insecurities are sometimes linked to their religious affiliation; these children feel isolated and stressed (Bateer et al., 2019). Such students might also experience unseen challenges, briefed on Islam-related challenges that some Muslims have encountered in a majority-Muslim population, such as Indonesia (Iorga et al., 2020). Social fears might become “infected” and interfere with optimal functioning at school, affecting pupils’ mental health and capacity to learn (Herrmann-Werner et al., 2018).

The additional burden of acculturating to a new culture in which sex and gender may be defined differently can compound anxiety regarding living as an international with gender disability, affecting students’ ability to focus, form positive relations with peers, or engage the campus community (Hühn et al.). In the absence of requisite support systems such as cross-cultural orientation programs or psychosocial counseling, these students are at significant risk of isolation. They may resist studying (or returning) to higher education (Byrne et al., 2019). Thus, higher education institutions should offer targeted resources and support systems to better integrate international students into the academic culture (Fu et al., 2023).

The international students of Islamic education in Indonesia are an interesting phenomenon to observe and have become the main focus of study on religious moderation, intercivilizational relations, and identity change. Notable studies, such as those conducted by Helmy VO07 et al. (2021) about the internationalization of Islamic education and Nasir & Rijal (2021), which touch

on how multicultural experiences influence attitudes of tolerance, need to be emphasized as an explanation for how moderate perspectives are actually needed in the Indonesian landscape of Islamic education. However, little is known about the emotional and psychological experiences of international students, particularly from Muslim-minority countries. Research indicates that many international students undergo a “culture shock” that revolves around fear and anxiety, similar to more general research on acculturation stress as a significant hurdle for Muslim students (Pazil, 2022; Tineo et al., 2021).

In addition, the adaptation phase is often overlooked in research on migrant students from other parts of Cambodia and Southern Thailand. This deficit requires additional qualitative, in-depth exploration of students’ subjective adjustment to academic experiences in Muslim-majority environments (Pramesti et al., 2022). Improved understanding of this significant transition period could help fill gaps in current knowledge and provide a fuller understanding of the complexity of managing emotional distress among international students. This insight may be useful in crafting more nuanced support systems and pedagogical approaches to promote healthy identity development and more effective acculturation (Aghbas & Kasmani, 2024).

Addressing academic shock and emotional distress suffered by international students hailing from Muslim minority countries while studying in Indonesia is indeed important for the establishment of school transformation and activities to build student character. First, understanding prearrival fears, such as discrimination against students, helps explain how they initially perceive themselves in a Muslim-majority society (Pinariya & Sutjipto, 2021). 2) Second, as students establish connections with the local community and experience a successful host culture-based lifestyle in the overseas environment, their initial anxieties are often transformed into positive feelings of security that assist them in acclimating to and becoming cognitively fluent (Commander et al., 2022).

In addition, the Islamic Education curriculum in Indonesia, which is inclusive and draws on local wisdom, has played a significant role in facilitating students’ comprehension and learning. The role of integrative education as a mediator in attitudes toward intermarriage among ethnic groups (Maryati et al., 2019; Muthmainnah, 2020) is also supported. It is important to note that the positive academic and social experiences they received in Indonesia were beneficial not only to their own situation but also, upon returning home, served as a motivational force in achieving a peaceful society (Nadifa & Ambarwati, 2024).

This study, therefore, fills a significant gap in the academic literature and offers empirical insights into educational strategies that promote global peacebuilding and diplomacy through religious moderation, intercultural understanding, and character development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Distress as a Catalyst for Transformative Learning Among Muslim-Minority International Students

The academic difficulties that help explain the poor performance of Muslim international students in Asia are many and varied: linguistic problems, differences between their structures as learners and systems within which the host country operates, cultural shock, and social isolation (Hirai et al., 2015; Yamada et al., 2014). For students from other places where there may be a history of intercommunal conflict and systemic disempowerment — southern Thailand, say, or China’s Uyghur regions — this pain is exacerbated by an identity-based vulnerability. In addition, while they set up camp on Muslim-majority ground (86 percent of Indonesia’s 275 million people are Muslims), nowhere have they done so with the heightened religious scrutiny and communal friction that is their destination further inland.

This irony creates the paradox that, as much like others in sharing the faith of Islam and how they understand and practice Islam, it is nothing or very little, such as what is common in Indonesia (Ghosh et al., 2021; Lockard et al. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory refers to such dissonance arising from mismatch as “disorienting dilemmas” (Chua et al., 2018). These dilemmas, in turn, are spawning academic anxieties about their coursework and the travails of identity and belief concerning faith, authority, and community. Thus, academic discomfort is a salience threshold of deep cognitive and emotional engagement rather than a deficit.

Most importantly, this very model of adaptation being healthy and evolving (and often related to the emergence of a portfolio/s) shows that emotional adaptability can change widely in response to complexity, meaning that facing academic stressors brings radical personal evolution and reform in and among itself (Scofield et al., 2017; Korn et al., 2023). The academically distressed are hence also viewed in a more redemptive light, not simply as a problem to be solved, but also as a site of transformational learning and identity formation amid the religious and cross-cultural dynamics these students encounter.

Transformative learning theory (TLT), developed by Jack Mezirow (2018), provides a solid model of how adults withdraw their deeply ingrained preconceptions and reflection itself, reconstructing them critically through learning opportunities. At the heart of this theory is the concept of a frame, which includes mental habits and points of view that influence how individuals make sense of the world. “It all begins with a question: How do people come to believe so strongly in new things that they alter who they are? Transformation happens through a process called disorienting dilemma — an event or experience is encountered that challenges learner’s existing understandings (the way one thinks, feels, values),” e.g., major life transition such as the loss of loved one; cultural shock when entering a new culture; profound discrepancy between expectation and reality. This destabilization initiates stages of critical reflection, where individuals explore the sources and legitimacy of their assumptions, argue with

others about these issues, and then work to reconstruct a view that is more inclusive, differentiated and critically reflective (Moniz et al., 2021). TLT has been usefully operationalized across fields of study to uncover the dynamics of transformation within different educational settings. In higher education, the model has been employed to understand how students develop critical consciousness and leadership capacity as a result of difficult academic and social experiences. In professions such as nursing and social work, TLT has shed light on how practitioners develop their clinical judgment and ethical reasoning when they encounter real-life dilemmas (Jack Mezirow, 2018). The theory has even more recently been used to explicate international student experience in cross-cultural transitions and the experiences of educators faced with rapid technological changes in teaching.

TLT is a model that explains how traumatic experiences can result in large-scale changes in one's psychological and philosophical understanding of the world. As proposed by Mezirow, such transformation occurs through the processes of critical self-reflection and peer dialogue (Watson, 2016). For Muslim-minority students in Indonesia, this transformative process is frequently invoked through encounters with diverse understandings of Islam and pedagogies that privilege inquiry over routinized learning (Moniz et al., 2021). Adequate support, in which challenges are not too great, accompanies transformative learning. This is reflected in Indonesian Islamic universities that incorporate the *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) national philosophy into their curricula (David et al., 2023). In these spaces, students are usually invited to compare their local religious practices with broader manifestations of Islam, thereby promoting comparative religious literacy and self-awareness (Moniz et al., 2021). In this way, what starts as epistemic unsettlement may provide a basis for students to interpret their faith as adaptable rather than solely bounded (Chinn et al., 2020).

The emotional complexity of academic frustration among students, particularly those subject to religious discrimination and identity erasure, is substantial. Research suggests that students like these enter into spaces of normalizing and celebrating religion on campus with a variety of emotions, from relief to confusion, and perhaps even guilt. Transformative learning is also related to the emotional domain, where cognitive and affective elements are interdependent, as noted by Palés et al. (2015). Such an emotional reconfiguration is consequential in educational settings with norms of support, such as those evident in the junior high schools we studied, where students and teachers have diverse ethnic and sectarian backgrounds, and where mutual academic practices nurture learning experiences. In addition, students frequently report shifting from states of anxiety to curiosity and from defensiveness to openness as they travel down the road, allowing a reimagining of their religious identities with more inclusive and hardy expressions (Ameline et al., 2019; Crenshaw, 2017). This viewpoint indicates that an affirming educational environment not only facilitates educational success but also helps shape an identity over the years in favor of peace and inclusiveness (Scheitle et al., 2023).

Navigating Religious Identity and Building Peace Through Indonesian Islamic Education

Our minority students are often Muslim and bring with them assumptions shaped by stereotypes about Muslim majority countries. Islam has been used as a label for discrimination in southern Thailand and Xinjiang that embodied Islam in a discourse of resistance, at least to an authoritarian state that highlights the visibility of anxiety about the cultural hegemony (Suparjo & Hidayah, 2023); however, the Islamic schooling system in Indonesia—most notably the ones with *rahmatan lil ‘alamin* (blessing for universe) ideology (places Islam as source of blessing within all creatures)—provides an alternative counternarrative toward this stereotype. This pedagogical paradigm presents Islam as a thriving tradition aspiring to local values of *gotong royong* (cooperation), tolerance, and morality rather than as a stagnant pool of dogma (Parjiman et al., 2023). Consequently, through experiential activities, they are exposed to a pious and pluralistic form of Islam, dispelling stereotypical perceptions and reorienting their cognitive and affective development (Suparjo & Hidayah, 2023). As a result, the classroom becomes a place of academic and “intercultural healing,” where fear is transformed into curiosity and trust, highlighting Islam as a religion of reason and compassion that values coexistence.

Beliefs and the Socio-Religious Context of Indonesia Indonesia’s socioreligious landscape play a crucial role in fostering interfaith harmony and democratic values, generally considered “moderate Islam” or *Islam Nusantara* (*Islam Nusantara*) by scholars (Hasbiyallah, 2024). Being part of this environment provides international students with an important antidote to essentialist understandings of Islam. When students interact with Muslims whose devotion, if any, is combined with open-mindedness—men and women who maintain both traditionalist and modernist beliefs—they experience Murray et al.’s contact hypothesis: significant forms of intergroup contact can lead to reduced prejudice against Muslims, at least when such contact occurs under conditions of equality and cooperation (2022). In Islamic universities in Indonesia, these conditions are institutionalized through tangible outcomes—group projects, interfaith dialog, and community service assignments—that enable the active engagement of both social groups that are constantly in tension with one another. Research has provided evidence that when high-quality interactions occur in these environments, significant reductions in prejudice occur; meta-analyses have supported the conclusion that intergroup contact can substantially reduce prejudice across a range of contexts (Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013). These types of experiences begin to feed into the complexification of students’ internalized religious identity—i.e., being able to appreciate diversity, yet feel steadfast in their beliefs; a change that is not purely intellectual but rather a deeply personal one that puts under strain their conception of ‘being Muslim’ within an increasingly globalized world (McKeown & Dixon, 2017) by the time students complete their course of study. These insights, taken together, underscore the potential for an education within the Islamic moderate context to foster inclusion and understanding across the divides of religious communities.

METHOD

In this study, a qualitative design of narrative inquiry research is employed in reference to the RSFI, which intends to uncover how the academic shock phenomenon is experienced on their own during their academic years as Asian international students (AIS) from Muslim minority countries within their period of an undergraduate Islamic Education program in Indonesia. They argued that academic shock is a subjective experience that could be better attended to if one is based on the accounts of narrative reflections from people involved in their personal mismatched expectations and adjustment to different educational systems and practices (Hidayati & Rosyid, 2023); (Adhikari, 2021). The narrative approach offers researchers the opportunity to address these complexities in life stories that are full of meaning; therefore, it emphasizes how time, situation, and social interaction affect students' experiences of meaning (Taopan & Siregar, 2021; Herwiana et al., 2023). In so doing, this study examines how minority cultural and religious backgrounds shape students' understanding of the Islamic educational landscape in Indonesia (Dian-jian, 2022; Herwiana et al., 2023). By attending to participants' voices and lived realities, this study not only aims to describe the symptoms of shock but also to reveal transformative learning processes unfolding during the research process (Adhikari, 2021). As a result, narrative inquiry offers an appropriate methodological approach for exploring the affective, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of this cross-cultural academic experience (Rieger et al., 2023; Carlson, 2020).

The current study was guided by the goal of gaining an in-depth understanding of how international students experience themselves and their lives in Australia using comprehensive, unstructured interviews that satisfied the researchers' purposes (see Slaten et al., 2016). Interviewees: Six students from mainland China, Thailand and Cambodia who were chosen to be highly diverse in their backgrounds among different cultures and religions, including Muslim minorities. The interviews were commissioned for 50 minutes per person, totaling 6 hours, and were conducted over 4 days. Interviews were held in English, a common academic language that all could understand and generally communicate more effectively (Baldassar & McKenzie, 2016), reducing the potential for confusion and affording opportunities for reflection. All interviews were digitally recorded on a smartphone to ensure data accuracy and translated into Indonesian before being transcribed verbatim for analysis via thematic coding to explore factors as they operated on patients' described experiences (Bristowe et al., 2016). al., 2015). This process also reveals that the ethics of research moved all ten to provide informed consent, which included not disclosing their names or identities, so it was felt that it was enough to speak about their educational experience (Hook, 2011).

Table 1: Informan Profile

No.	Initials	Country of Origin	Place of Study	Religion
1	TH1	Thailand	Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, UIN Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia	Islam
2	TH1	Thailand	Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, UIN Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia	Islam
3	CN1	Tiongkok	Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, UIN Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia	Islam
4	CN2	Tiongkok	Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, UIN Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia	Islam
5	CM1	Cambodia	Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, UIN Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia	Islam
6	CM2	Cambodia	Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, UIN Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia	Islam

Credibility, transferability and dependability of qualitative research methodology were achieved using member checking, triangulation and audit trial (Suyitno) and presented by data. Member checking is performed by returning a copy of the interview texts or findings to informants and asking whether the meanings produced through research are in accordance with such interpretative sources (Pahleviannur et al., 2022). In addition, triangulation of sources allowed comparisons of the narratives among participants from different national backgrounds to delineate similarities and differences in their experienced patterns. Transparency and accountability of the research process were ensured by documenting all processes, including the research questions, field notes, and analytic decisions, as audit trials. Analysis followed Polkinghorne’s (21) narrative analysis model, using narrative analysis to extract themes and meanings from participants’ stories through several systematic steps (Septeri, 2023). This process was conducted reflexively and iteratively using NVivo software to consistently handle qualitative data (Annur et al., 2024).

RESULT

Facing the Shadow of Conflict

These results indicate that before coming to Indonesia, international students from Cambodia, Thailand, and China were under a heightened level of anxiety regarding social and security threats in their studies at the Bachelor of Islamic Education. This is due to the image of Indonesia that they obtain from global media, which tends to emphasize conflict with religious undertones, such as the

Sampit War in Kalimantan (1999–2001) and the Bali Bomb terror attack (2002). They fear that, as a Muslim minority within their home country, they will actually become a “double minority” in Indonesia (ethnic foreigners and religiously susceptible) because they regard Indonesia as a majority-Muslim country, which may be intolerant of diversity. Moreover, Indonesia’s vibrant democracy and at times politically charged atmosphere generate a sense of despair for the stability of the academic milieu. Although there are some restrictions on religious freedom in their countries, the social environment is comparatively safe and well-controlled. These variations in context make it easier for them to be afraid of being discriminated against, becoming radicalized, or even experiencing verbal and sometimes physical violence. Such fears are the equivalent of early academic trauma: Dismal expectations built through stories from people who do not own that reality.

Before they departed for Indonesia, international students from Thailand, China, and Cambodia harbored a ‘great fear’ of social and security threats once they started in the Bachelor of Islamic Education. “The fear is based on the global media and TV news stories that sometimes depicted Indonesia as a country of religious conflict.” TH1 replied, “I was so scared to go here because I would always hear about the bombing and interfaith riots in Indonesia.” “China doesn’t understand Indonesia, only hears bad news — Bali, Kalimantan, all conflict,” CN1 added. I am worried about being twice a foreigner: not just an outsider but also a different Muslim.” CN2 also conceded: “I feel that Indonesians are very conservative and truly do not want to accept differences.” CM2 argued: “In my country, it’s safe even though freedom is not total. Here, I’m afraid of saying the wrong thing.” TH1 ends with an introspective note: “I think of a campus as having a lot of ideological pressure on it. Examples of the hard stuff they’d seen included coverage of reruns of the 2002 Bali bombings that aired on Chinese national television, as well as social media stories about the Sambas (1999) and Poso (2000–2007) riots, which had gone viral on platforms such as WeChat and Facebook. This story is one of the factors contributing to the perception of Indonesia as an insecure place, which becomes something like ‘academic shock’, caused by the fear of intolerance they no longer encounter there.

These anxieties are reinforced by the perception that Indonesia, as a Muslim-majority country, may not accept their different Islamic practices—either because of their conversion background, local traditions, or more liberal religious understanding. TH1 stated, “I’m afraid that the way I pray or dress will be misunderstood by my friends here.” CN1 added, “I’m afraid they will judge me because I’m a convert and don’t know much about Islam.” CM1 expressed his concern: “In Cambodia, we learn very little jurisprudence, so I am afraid of being ridiculed for not understanding the basics.” CN2 confessed, “I think everyone here is very strict in practicing the sharia, and I’m not ready for that.” CM2 emphasized, “I imagine a campus environment like a strict pesantren that does not leave room for error.” TH1 added, “I feel like I’ll always be watched because I’m not Arab or Malay.” However, the reality on the ground suggests otherwise—the academic environment at UIN Walisongo is inclusive and supports a diversity of Islamic interpretations, which is slowly eroding their initial anxieties and opening

up space for a more authentic exploration of religious identity. These results indicate that before coming to Indonesia, international students from Cambodia, Thailand, and China were under a heightened level of anxiety regarding social and security threats in their studies at the Bachelor of Islamic Education. This is due to the image of Indonesia that they obtain from global media, which tends to emphasize conflict with religious undertones, such as the Sampit War in Kalimantan (1999–2001) and the Bali Bomb terror attack (2002). They fear that, as a Muslim minority within their home country, they will actually become a “double minority” in Indonesia (ethnic foreigners and religiously susceptible) because they regard Indonesia as a majority-Muslim country, which may be intolerant of diversity. Moreover, Indonesia’s vibrant democracy and at times politically charged atmosphere generate a sense of despair for the stability of the academic milieu. Although there are some restrictions on religious freedom in their countries, the social environment is comparatively safe and well controlled. These variations in context make it easier for them to be afraid of being discriminated against, becoming radicalized, or even experiencing verbal and sometimes physical violence. Such fears are the equivalent of early academic trauma: Dismal expectations built through stories from people who do not own that reality.

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Uncertainty about Indonesia's democratic system is also a source of initial academic anxiety intertwined with this negative image. CN1 said, "I heard that politics in Indonesia is very hot, and it makes me afraid that the campus atmosphere will not be conducive." CM1 added, "In my country, everything is under control. Here, I am worried that demonstrations or political issues will interfere with my studies." TH1 admitted, "I don't know if freedom of opinion here is safe for foreign students." CN2 stated, "I'm afraid of being misrepresented about religion or politics and being seen as provocative." CM2 said, "I imagine a campus full of fierce debates that make me uncomfortable." TH1 added, "I am worried that campus policies are changing due to political pressure." However, direct experience shows that the dynamics of Indonesian democracy actually create a healthy space for dialog. International students find that academic freedom is valued and that differences of opinion are managed through discussion, not conflict—a reality that contrasts with their initial narrative of fear and serves as the foundation for transforming their perspectives on religious and democratic life in Indonesia.

Concerns about social isolation also emerged, exacerbated by stories from Indonesian women workers working in China. CN1 revealed, "I thought I wouldn't have any friends because I don't speak Indonesian well." CM1 added, "I'm afraid I won't be able to get along because the way I interact is different." TH1 admitted, "I'm worried about being considered weird because of my eating habits or the way I speak." CN2 stated, "I think Indonesians don't like foreigners who don't understand their customs." CM2 said, "I imagine eating alone in the cafeteria every day." TH1 added, "I'm afraid of misinterpreting when communicating and being offensive." One of the TKWs said that when he returned home, he had difficulty adjusting because he was considered "too Chinese" by his neighbors—an experience that made students afraid of experiencing similar things in reverse. However, the reality on the ground is quite the opposite: they are active in campus communities such as UKM Arts and the International Forum, invited to village events such as recitations and thanksgiving, and guided by "local friends" appointed by the campus. These interactions not only reduce alienation but also reinforce a sense of belonging, which becomes an important basis for their social and spiritual transformation during the study.

Concerns about radicalism were also an integral part of the initial academic shock, reinforced by national coverage of real cases such as the terrorist attack on the Surabaya Church (2018) by the families of perpetrators affiliated with Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), the bombing at the Medan Police Headquarters (2019), and the arrest of ISIS networks in various cities. They also see social media reports

of acts of intolerance, such as the dissolution of Ahmadiyya recitation or the rejection of the establishment of the church. CM1 stated, “I heard of many extreme groups in Indonesia, so I was afraid to go to religious college.” CN1 added, “I am worried about being taught a harsh ideology that is not in line with my family’s values.” TH1 admitted, “I think all the lecturers here have rigid religious views.” CN2 stated, “I am afraid that the discussion in class will become a place for radical preaching.” CM2 said, “I imagine the lecture material is full of narratives of hostility toward non-Muslims.” TH1 added, “I’m worried about having to choose between my faith and my safety.” However, first-hand experience on campus shows that religious education at UIN Walisongo emphasizes moderation, tolerance, and a critical academic approach. The lecturers explicitly criticized the radical narrative and taught Islam Nusantara as a model of peaceful Islam. This sharp contrast became a turning point in their perceptions.

Academic uncertainty also arises from concerns about the difficulty of following the Arabic-based curriculum and pesantren traditions, which seem foreign to those coming from secular or nonpesantren backgrounds. CN1 said, “I had never learned Arabic before, so I was afraid I wouldn’t graduate.” CM1 added, “I’m worried that I don’t understand the yellow book because my background is secular.” TH1 admitted, “I think all the courses are going to be very theological and difficult to access.” CN2 stated, “I’m afraid lecturers are impatient with foreign students who are slow to learn.” CM2 said, “I envisioned a rote exam with no room for contextual understanding.” TH1 added, “I am concerned that the grading system is unfair for international students.” However, in reality, the faculty provides academic mentoring, language classes, and an adaptive pedagogical approach. Lecturers actually provide space for international students to study according to their backgrounds, even encouraging them to compare the Islamic context in their home country with that in Indonesia.

Concerns about ethnic and religious discrimination were also part of the initial shock that was intertwined with all previous layers of anxiety. CM1 stated, “I am afraid of being looked down upon because I am from a Muslim minority country.” CN1 added, “I’m worried about being made fun of because my face doesn’t look like an Arab.” TH1 admitted, “I think Indonesians only respect Middle Eastern Muslims.” CN2 stated, “I’m afraid of not being considered a ‘real’ Muslim because my way of worship is different.” CM2 said, “I imagine not being invited to a religious event because I am considered a foreigner.” TH1 added, “I’m worried that my voice isn’t being heard because I’m not from the majority.” However, direct interaction with campus and local communities proves otherwise. Instead, they are accepted as part of an inclusive religious community and are often invited to share Islamic perspectives from their home countries in class forums and community activities.

Overall, the initial academic shock experienced by international students is rooted in a false external narrative, ignorance of Indonesia’s socioreligious reality, and concerns about security, radicalism, isolation, and discrimination. However, through direct interactions on campus, in the community, and in daily life, all those fears slowly collapse. TH1 concluded, “All my fears turned out to be just shadows—Indonesia is much more peaceful than I thought.” CN1 added, “I came

with fear, but went home with respect.” CM1 admitted, “I misjudged the tolerance of Indonesians—they taught me the true meaning of Islam.” CN2 stated, “The experience here changed the way I look at religion and differences.” CM2 says, “I learned that Islam doesn’t have to be rigid—it can be gentle, inclusive, and loving.” TH1 closed with a deep reflection: “Indonesia taught me that diversity is not a threat, but a grace.” This transformation is not only personal but also potentially widespread: when they return to their home countries, they bring the values of moderation, tolerance, and peace that they learned in Indonesia.

From Fear to Understanding

Through lectures and holistic engagement with the community, negativity gradually dissolved. The results of this study indicate that international students learn from Indonesia’s pluralism, as the country’s diverse ethnicities, languages, and beliefs create a powerful context for practicing daily tolerance and harmony. They saw how Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians lived together in an atmosphere of mutual respect, with each group celebrating its own festive days and cooperating in social life. The main factors conducive to harmony include itself (local values such as *Gotong Royong*, *Musyawahar*, and *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which are not merely slogans but are internalized in public policy and education). More importantly, dark episodes in their pasts, such as the Sampit War and the Bali Bomb, are part of collective learning. The government and civil society have taken affirmative measures such as the Law on the Prevention of Religious-Based Violence, religious moderation programmes in schools or campuses, and anti-violence campaign literacy. The Islamic schools where they are learning permeate peace values within their material and present Islam as a religion of *rahmatan lil ‘alamin*.

The initial introductions of international students to the Indonesian academic context are often infused with anxieties and phenomena that have recently shaped the global narrative on Islam and religious confrontation. However, when I actually connected with the campus and local community, that impression changed dramatically. They understand that Indonesia, a Muslim-majority nation, has been a laboratory for tolerance. “We came thinking that all the Muslims here are radicals, but it turns out they are very open,” said TH1. Here, CN1 said, I discovered that Islam is more than just about worship; it’s also about coexistence. CN2 said, “Even my Christian friends went to the *takjil* and recited *syukuran* in the open space of the street—it was strange but beautiful. I see Buddhists and Hindus with us celebrating Eid,” CM1 added. CM2 wrote, “Our teacher often said: ‘Islam is a blessing for humanity, not just Muslims. “I was mistaken all this time — Indonesia shows me what religious moderation means,” TH1 says.

Local values such as cooperation and deliberation are the main foundations in shaping students’ new understanding of peaceful religious life. Daily interactions on campus and in the surrounding community show that differences are not a barrier but rather a reinforcement of social solidarity. CN1 explains, “When the flood hits, all religions intervene—no one asks for faith first.” CN2 said, “We were invited to the RT meeting even though we were not

indigenous citizens—that was my first experience in deliberation.” CM1 said, “We participate in social activities with the residents—cleaning the environment, for necessities, regardless of religion.” CM2 adds, “There is no discrimination—all are treated equally in service work.” TH1 stated, “I learned that togetherness is more important than differences.” CN1 emphasized, “Gotong Royong is not just a tradition, but a way of life that binds us all.” This experience reinforced their belief that social harmony is not the result of chance but of deliberate cultural practices passed down through generations—practices they later see reflected in formal education policies.

The religious education curriculum at UIN Walisongo also plays a significant role in shaping international students’ views. They not only study religious texts but are also invited to reflect on universal values such as justice, compassion, and respect for differences. CN2 said, “Our lecturers always emphasize that Islam is *rahmatan lil’ alamin*—not just for Muslims.” CM1 said, “We learned the history of religious conflicts, and then were invited to find a peaceful solution based on the Qur’an.” CM2 stated, “The religious moderation course changed the way I view other religions.” TH1 said, “I think Islamic studies are rigid, but they are very contextual and inclusive.” CN1 added, “We were invited to discuss with priests and monks — it was an eye-opening experience.” CN2 concluded, “Education here does not teach hatred, but dialog.” This learning not only changed the way they understood religion but also paved the way for authentic and respectful interfaith interactions—interactions they then experienced firsthand in their daily lives.

Interfaith interaction in the campus environment and society becomes a transformative experience that reshapes students’ religious identities. Although UIN Walisongo is an Islamic institution, residents of various faiths have respected each other’s religious practices without formal campus celebrations. CM1 revealed, “I saw Christian neighbors helping Muslim neighbors prepare suhoor meals.” CM2 said, “During Eid, non-Muslim residents come to visit and congratulate them.” TH1 said, “My Hindu friend respects my prayer time—even offers a quiet place.” CN1 stated, “During Chinese New Year, Muslim friends come to our dormitory with symbolic *angpao*.” CN2 added: “We exchange food during the holidays—no one is disturbed.” CM1 concluded, “Here, differences are celebrated, not feared.” These experiences deepened their understanding that tolerance is not just a passive attitude but an active participation in the lives of diverse communities.

The principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is not only a national slogan but also manifested in education policies and daily life. The students witnessed how diversity was valued as a strength rather than a threat. CM1 revealed, “In class, we learned folk songs from all tribes—it brought us together.” CM2 says, “We were asked to present each other’s cultures—and they were all appreciated.” TH1 said, “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is not only on the walls, but in the hearts of the people here.” CN1 stated, “When I speak Khmer, my friends are curious and want to learn.” CN2 added, “Language and cultural differences are actually interesting topics for discussion in class.” CM1 concludes, “I feel valued as myself—not as an ‘outsider.’” It is the recognition of individual identity within the framework of

national togetherness that makes them feel safe and accepted—a condition that, in turn, triggers a profound emotional and spiritual transformation.

The long-term impact of the academic experience in Indonesia can be seen in the students' commitment to becoming agents of peace in their home countries. They plan to bring the values of religious moderation and dialog learned in Indonesia to their communities. CM1 revealed, "I will open an interfaith community in Phnom Penh." CM2 said, "I want to teach children that religion is not an excuse to hate." TH1 said, "I will campaign for the Thai version of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*." CN1 stated, "I will write a book about my experience in Indonesia." CN2 added, "I want to be a bridge between Chinese Muslims and the world." CM1 concluded, "Indonesia gave me a new mission: spreading peace, not conflict." Thus, their transformative experiences in Indonesia do not end when they leave campus; rather, they become the seeds of a global peace movement that grows from the roots of moderation, empathy, and respect for universal humanity.

Experiencing Inclusive Islam

The results of this research indicate that Indonesian Islamic Education undergraduates have three specific functions that differentiate them from other countries in responding to the shock-to-in-depth inclusive understanding journey of international students. They acknowledge that, first, the inclusion of local wisdom values in the curriculum has helped students see how Islam engages with archipelagic culture, such as the *tahlilan* tradition, *slametan*, and respect for local scholars, which they believe differs from the formalist Islamic image they are familiar with. Second, participatory and dialogical methods of learning, which are characteristic of contemporary Islamic boarding schools and state Islamic universities, push students not only to take the textuality of teaching for granted, i.e., students should not merely receive knowledge as a given) but also to be encouraged to try, challenge or even reflect upon what is taught and emphasize this in a social life context. (C) The third is direct community-integrated experience—whether through teaching practicums, community service, or the *pesantren* living environment—which allows for on-the-ground observation of how Islam is lived out in Indonesia within a framework of tolerance, cooperation, and diversity. Synergistically, these roles of the three institutions help international students, especially Asians, ease the shock of differences in religious practice between Islamic rituals and gradually impart the understanding that Islam practiced in Indonesia is not merely about rituals but also encompasses inclusive, humanist social ties. They encountered a dimension of Islam that was not only theologically pure but also sensitive to the difficulties of human life.

"In my Philosophy of Islamic Education class, the lecturer said: 'Knowledge without empathy is blind,'" TH1 pointed out, lifting the veil that Indonesian Islamic education has raised on knowledge. The inclusion of local wisdom in this curriculum not only preserves the tradition of *tahlilan*, or *slametan* but also leads toward an understanding that Islam is a religion of living—the teaching is not just from up above (from heaven) but also provides benefit for humankind. CN1 said, "I learned that Islam is not just about heaven and hell but also about how to deal with neighbors, or merchants selling in the street or trees. This was manifestly

unanticipated for students who had been raised on a formalist Islam, but it opened the door to considering religion sensibly as an inclusive social force. At first, I was like, ‘Why do we have a Javanese prayer being recited on campus?’ said CN2. ‘However, then I realized: this is how Islam grows roots in the archipelago.’ CM1 explained, ‘We were taught that science should be for humans rather than simply copying texts.’ Even CM2 concluded, ‘Islam here is not floating in the sky; he walks on the ground with the people.’

This understanding is deepened through participatory and dialogical learning methods, creating a safe space for critical questions. ‘The lecturer didn’t get angry when I asked about the differences in schools—instead, they invited a long discussion,’ CN1 said, describing a classroom atmosphere that encourages exploration, not memorization. Discussions often involve real-life case studies—for example, how to respond to interfaith conflicts in schools—so that religious theory is not separate from social reality. CN2 added, ‘We learned not only the Qur’an’s interpretation but also how it lives in society.’ ‘In class, we often argued about tolerance—it made me rethink absolute truth,’ CM1 says. This approach allows students to develop a nondogmatic understanding.

The academic environment itself reinforces these values through daily interactions on campus. ‘My first lecturer said: ‘Don’t be an arrogant scholar—knowledge should serve, not master,’” CM2 said, describing a humble ethos. Different from the rigid image of religious universities, UIN Walisongo Semarang emphasizes humility, dialog, and openness. TH1 added, ‘The lecturer never imposes opinions, but invites us to reflect on ourselves through open-ended questions.’ Interactions in the canteen, group projects, and academic seminars build a climate of togetherness that respects differences. ‘I thought the Islamic campus was exclusive, but it turned out to be full of laughter and family,’ said CN1. Even in academic forums, students are encouraged to read both Western and Eastern thinkers. ‘The lecturer invited us to read Western and Eastern thinkers equally,’ said CN2. CM1 affirmed, ‘Here, I learned that Islamic science must be responsive to social realities.’

The experience was then tested in a real context through field experience practice (PPL) at UIN Walisongo Semarang partner schools. ‘When PPL at SD Negeri 03 Semarang, I saw Christian students praying together—but that’s normal here,’ said CM1, describing the diversity that is lived, not just taught. The PPL program not only trains teaching skills but also serves as a space for the transformation of tolerance values. CN2 added, ‘I was shocked to see Muslim teachers honoring non-Muslim students’ holidays—it’s a life lesson.’ Over the course of eight weeks, students engage in the dynamics of a pluralistic classroom, manage diversity, and build student character through an inclusive pedagogical approach. ‘Teaching in the village taught me that Islam is simple: honest, kind, and caring,’ TH1 said. They are also guided by teachers who emphasize empathy. ‘I learned from local teachers how to explain tolerance without high rhetoric,’ CN1 said. CM2 asserts, ‘The kids don’t care where I’m from—they just want me to be a good teacher.’ CN2 concludes: ‘PPL made me realize: religious education is not about doctrine, but character.’

Community service complements the process by placing students directly in the midst of people's lives. "We help people build prayer rooms—but more importantly, we learn cooperation," CM1 said, describing Islam as a social religion that embraces all. TH1 adds, "In the village, I see that Islam is not separated from everyday life—it's beautiful." Activities such as literacy training or MSME assistance are imbued with humanist Islamic values. "I taught them to read the Qur'an, but the people taught me the meaning of humility," CN2 said. This direct interaction reinforces the belief that religion must provide concrete benefits. "Islam here is not exclusive—it is present in every aid for neighbors, regardless of religion," CM2 said. Even CN1 concluded, "Devotion makes me understand: religion is not only for heaven but also for this world."

This journey changed the way they viewed differences. "At first I thought the way they prayed was wrong, but over time I saw that the intentions were sincere," CN1 said, describing a shift from shock to appreciation. Academic and social experience broadened the definition of "truth" in religion. CN2 added, "I learned that truth isn't always black-and-white—there's room for other colors." Differences in practices, such as the use of flowers in tahlilan, are no longer seen as deviations but rather as legitimate expressions of locality. "In Cambodia, we are taught one way, but here I see many paths to God," said CM1. Class discussions and hands-on observation support this process. "Differences are not threats—it's the wealth taught by lecturers and the community," CM2 said. Even TH1 admitted, "I used to be afraid of being wrong, now I'm afraid of closing myself off from another perspective." CN1 concluded, "Indonesia taught me that Islam is vast—like an ocean, not a small pond."

Bringing Peace Home to Their Countries

The learning experience in Indonesia not only transforms international students' perspectives on Islam and Muslim society but also instills values of peace when they return to their home countries. The results of this study demonstrate that international students from Cambodia, southern Thailand, and the Muslim minority region in China acknowledge facing high tension and discrimination in their territories. However, by observing and participating in Indonesia's multifaith lifestyles, they gain practical knowledge of how to teach interfaith dialogue, resolve differences without resorting to violence, and promote moderation in religious practice. Some of the students said they planned to be "peace agents" in their home communities, either by creating interfaith panels, designing a revised religious education curriculum, or simply using the internet to share a message of tolerance. They also imbibed an Islamic mode of education that stressed values such as moral decency, compassion, and social justice rather than doctrinal exclusivism.

There is a radical change in the perception of Islam and its practices among international students from their native countries when they study at higher learning institutions in Indonesia. In the contexts of southern Thailand, Cambodia, and the Muslim minority region in China, religious narratives are formed against a background of identity struggle and marginalization. Instead, at the UIN Walisongo campus in Semarang, they saw how Islam is taught through a

curriculum focused on morality, dialog, and inclusion. Here, I was taught that Islam is not just ritual but also how we treat each other with kindness.’ TH1 “I saw, to my amazement, that first of all, some non-Muslim scholars were teaching Islamic courses with great gratitude,” CN1 added. I thought Islam was closed, but here I am, and Muslims are praying with other religions in events on campus. CN2 reported, “The religion classes here teach us not to judge but more so to understand.” CM2 said, “I started to understand that to be a Muslim does not mean that I have to hate others.” TH1 underscored, “Indonesia taught me that Islam can be a bridge, not a wall.”

For international students from Muslim minority communities, Indonesia exists as a space for social experimentation that offers an alternative model of religious life in a tolerant Muslim-majority society. They observed how Indonesian society manages ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity without falling into polarization. TH1 said, *“In Thailand, we are always vigilant, but here I feel safe even though I am of a different ethnicity.”* CN1 said, *“I’ve never seen so many Muslims remain friendly to non-Muslims.”* CM1 shared, *“In my village, Muslims are considered a threat, but here it’s the opposite.”* CN2 said, *“I learned that the majority does not have to oppress the minority—that’s a big lesson from Indonesia.”* CM2 stated, *“Campus life taught me that diversity is beautiful, not a threat.”* TH1 added, *“Indonesia proves that Islam and peace can go hand in hand.”* These observations reinforce the idea that Indonesia serves as a “peace laboratory,” offering empirical evidence that a Muslim-majority society can build an inclusive and peaceful society. Students witnessed firsthand how local traditions, such as cooperation and deliberation, were integrated with Islamic values to create social harmony. They were also impressed by the way Islamic boarding schools and campuses teach moderation without sacrificing religious identity. This experience gave them hope that the situation in their home country—one marked by tension and prejudice—could change if a similar approach was applied.

While learning the theory of interreligious dialog among international students in Indonesia, they can also directly practice it through campus activities or social life. They practice concrete strategies — active listening, refraining from generalizations, fostering safe spaces for conversation. “We do interfaith dialog on campus a lot, and it taught me don’t be scared of differences,” CN1 said. CM1 said, “I learned how to speak about religion without offending other people’s feelings.” TH1 said, “Here, we are invited to dialog, not to argue — that’s an enormous difference.” CN2 said: “I see how the lecturer leads the discussion in an impartial way; it’s one of those techniques I want to take home with me.” CM2 also said, “I began inviting non-Muslim friends to our religious events and they were happy. TH1 wraps it up: “Dialog isn’t for winning and losing, but understanding one another — that’s the challenge I’m facing here.” These strategies represent valuable social capital that they will put to use in their home countries to help bridge the divides between communities where prejudice prevails.” They understand that the absence of safe spaces for dialog tends to intensify identity conflicts in the home region. In Indonesia, dialog can be manifested through cultural festivals, interfaith student forums and even in

everyday interactions at campus cafeterias. This demonstrates that tolerance is more than an abstract ideal; it is an implementable and transferable practice.

The experience in Indonesia inspired many international students to become peace agents when they returned to their countries. They set up various initiatives, from interfaith forums to social media campaigns, to promote the values of tolerance they believe in. CM1 said, “I want to build an interfaith youth community in Phnom Penh like I saw in Semarang.” CN2 commented, “Using social media, I will show the world that Islam is peace just like my living experience here.” TH1, “I have a plan to teach at one of the small pesantrens in Thailand south with the approach that I learned in UIN Walisongo.” CN1 wrote: “I want to create inclusive religious education modules for schools in Xinjiang.” CM2” I will call Muslim youth in my village and talk to Buddhists and Christians.” TH1 stated, “The experience in Indonesia gave me a mission: homecoming and peace.” This proves that education in Indonesia is an agent of change not only in personal transformation but also social transformation at local scope.

The Role of Islamic Education in Instilling Religious Moderation Among International Students in Indonesia (Case Study at UIN Walisongo) 21 ISTIQBQ, Vol. The differences with their home countries are stark: a curriculum built around universal values of justice, empathy and social responsibility. “We teach Islam here not as a religion of hatred, but love,” CN1 quoted him as saying. CM1 said, “Our lecturers always tell us that morals are more important than religious appearance.” TH1 explained, “I determined being pious meant defending the weak, not praying five times only.” “The Philosophy of Islamic Education course changed the way I look at God and others,” CN2 added. CM2 said, “I never learned about pluralism in my country, but here it is part of the curriculum.” TH1 ends: “Education here does not draw a line between faith and reason — that is what makes it revolutionary.” This all-round strategy does a good job of embedding contemporary, humanistic and responsive understandings of Islam into social ills. Students come to understand that religion is not just a vertical act of worship but also a horizontal responsibility to other people. In addition, they impressed upon us how the lecturers made a connection between sacred text and real-world issues such as poverty, discrimination, and gender justice. It gave them a wider perspective on the place of Muslims in contemporary society. They also learned that moderation had nothing to do with the dilution of beliefs but the strengthening of beliefs through openness and criticism. Such education is urgently needed in the country of origin, they argue, where religious narratives are often appropriated for political or narrow identity purposes.

What was seen at first as an academic shock — the teaching of Islam openly, inclusively and peacefully — simmered into a social mission with global implications. International students are not only passive recipients of knowledge but also ambassadors of peace, spreading Indonesian values in their respective communities. TH1 said, “It confused me at first, but now I understand why I came here: to bring home light.” CN1 said, “I came here to learn Arabic but returned home with a new vision of Islam.” CM1 said, “I feel like I’m reborn as a more open Muslim.” Indonesia, CN2 added, “made me go from being a spectator to

being a peacemaker.” “I will never be the same knowing how Islam can unite and not divide,” CM2 added. TH1 ends: “It is not just a study, it is an invitation to live.” This metamorphosis shows the transcendental potency of cross-cultural education to generate a universalist Muslim generation that will strive for reconciliation, justice, and intercivilization dialog. They’re now part of a transnational network that shares, in their view at least, a vision for a peaceful and inclusive Islam.

DISCUSSION

This study shows a diversion in the mindset of international students from Southeast Asia, whose countries were dominated by Muslims such as Cambodia, Thailand and China to want to continue their studies on the Bachelor of Education programs Islamic in Indonesia. Initially, they arrived fearful due to international news stories about religious conflicts in Indonesia, such as the Sampit War and Bali Bombings. They feared that torn between suspicion and hatred of a foreign ethnic-religious identity, they would risk becoming a “double minority” in an intolerant Muslim-majority state. However, their first-hand experiences while in school belied those prejudices. What they found was Indonesia’s reality where multiethnic, multireligious, and multicultural people live side by side while living in peace due to local cultural values: Cooperation (gotong royong) and literally translated into Unity in Diversity. Islamic Education in Indonesia serves strategic roles through at least three mechanisms, namely, by incorporating local knowledge into the curriculum, through dialogic learning methods that stimulate critical reflections, and by being directly involved with communities that practice Islam rahmatan lil ‘alamin (blessing for the universe). This metamorphosis not only helps students adjust to their first academic culture shock but also encourages them to become peacemakers in their homeland. That they took home the message of religious moderation, interfaith dialog, and a humanist approach to education, however, “enriched” Indonesia’s status as a “peace laboratory”; it shows that there is no reason why the Muslim majority should not be able to dwell in an inclusive and tolerant manner.

The study results can be examined using Jack Mezirow’s Perspective Transformation Theory, which is based on the constructivist tradition and focuses on a change in paradigm through disorientation, critical reflection, and meaning (re)construction, drawing on theories from Lundgren & Poell (2016). Muslim students from various countries, predominantly minority Muslim communities in Cambodia, Thailand, and China, experience this ‘disorienting dilemma’: disjuncture between negative stereotypes they internalized of religious conflict reported by global media and the inclusive-tolerant social reality with which they are faced in Indonesia (Shidiq & Rafli, 2045). As a result of their lived experiences in the learning environment, they critically reflected on what it meant to be Muslim majorities, with identity assumptions challenged (Lundgren & Poell, 2016; Khoshlessan & Das, 2019). With Islamic education that combines local wisdom, dialogical learning, and the Quranic value of rahmatan lil ‘alamin, it is in the hands of Muslim students to reconstruct not only their religious perspective

but also new commitments for peace agents (Shidiq & Rafli, year). This transformation lies at the core of Mezirow's theory of transformation, in which people move from one-dimensional, biased attitudes to more differentiated, empathic attitudes, grounded in a belief in soundness and humanity (Lundgren & Poell, 2016).

The results of the present study contrast with those of 5 previous, related studies. The first is that because the drivers of transformation are focused on currency and interest rates, this dimension shows us that instead of being reflections based on Joséhorizontal dimension—me oriented individual reflection as see Mezirow's (2015) general perspective transformation— data suggest international students learn from a direct exposure to empirical events rather than global narrative stories with only affectivist space, which is not sufficiently dealt with in the conventional structure. Second, unlike Wang et al.'s (2022) investigation of international students at a Western university, which underscored intercultural contact as the key to attitudinal transformation, this study shows that the inclusive Muslim-majority context presented here lays a foundation for change unavailable elsewhere in secular Western environments. Third, scholarly work on Islamic education, as found in Ifashabayo et al. (2025), which tends to pay attention to domestic curricula or institutions, shows how Indonesian Islamic education works as a transnational mechanism by integrating local wisdom, dialogical methods, and community participation to develop a humanistic approach to understanding Islam that has not been written earlier. 4 Fourth, while Hafidz's (2021) study emphasized the religious moderation of local Islamic boarding school students [santri], this study widens the canvas to illustrate how some minority Muslim students from Cambodia, southern Thailand, and China — an underresearched group – undergo significant transformation through the experience of academic-cultural life in Indonesia.

Fifth, where Mubarak's (2007) study of the effects of study abroad on religious identity tended to conclude with "mere" personal attitude change, this finding shows that the students' dedication to peace building in their home countries is now long-term and yet another example of taking what was worked out in Indonesia back home as transnational social capital. This study is unique in that its novelty lies in combining three key components: (1) subjects from minority Muslim communities in Asia experiencing an identity struggle; (2) the broader setting of Indonesia, a democratic and multicultural state with Islam constituting the majority religion; and (3) Islamic education as a medium through which local value transformation occurs. The theoretical novelty is important as it extends the theory of perspective transformation with new empirical, cultural, and transnational dimensions and, in doing so, provides hard evidence for a champion of toleration within the Muslim majority, which translators can help bring about through education diplomacy, global religious moderation, and cross-identity reconciliation. The theoretical and practical implications of this study for the three domains are also discussed. First, in theory, the contribution of this paper is to enrich Transformative Learning Theory by including contextual, affective, and transnational (specifically in a progressive, open Muslim-majority context)

aspects that have not been adequately addressed within Mezirow's or Taylor's theories, as reflected in Idris et al. (2024).

The need to connect transformative experiences to the challenges these perspectives face, especially in regions such as Southeast Asia and China, indicates that identity construction in higher education is important to the transformational learning process (Yi, 2005; Bateer et al., 2019). Second, empirically, this study fills a gap in the literature on the experiences of Muslim minority international students, emphasizing the significance of representation in cross-cultural research (Ali, 2019). Third, the practical implications of the research findings conclude that Islamic education in Indonesia is capable of becoming a global model to promote religious moderation through integrated interfaith dialog and peaceful leadership combined with local values such as *gotong royong* (cooperation) and *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), a means for us to see how the integration between interfaith dialog and education could be used to create religious tolerance among multicultural society. Does Dialog Promote Religious Tolerance? Some policy recommendations could include the formulation of curricular modules on local wisdom and the provision of scholarships for students from minority groups to further buttress the relationship between education, social integration, and educational diplomacy (Haider et al., 2024). Accordingly, this study can contribute to academic knowledge and provide a groundwork for religious moderation policy-making in dynamic fields in Indonesia.

Contributions

There are three main contributions to this work. Theoretically, it extends the notion of academic shock in a cross-cultural and religious context, taking Muslim-minority international students studying in a Muslim-majority environment. This shows that academic shock is not purely an intellectual process but also has psychosocial and spiritual aspects. Second, normatively and practically, the findings of this article have important implications for Islamic higher education in Indonesia regarding how it can contribute to its role as an intercultural space to cultivate religious moderation and world peace through a humanistic and dialogical curriculum. Third, from a social and diplomatic perspective, this paper indicates that international students' positive experience at an Indonesian Islamic higher education institution can be a bridge to build cultural diplomacy, which helps Indonesia's image as an ideal site for an inclusive and peaceful Islamic education center, particularly about tolerant Islam in Southeast Asia. In so doing, this study goes some way toward establishing a new paradigm for Islamic education, peace, and cross-cultural change.

Conclusion

This study reveals a profound transformation in the perspectives of international students from Asian countries with minority Muslim communities—particularly Cambodia, Southern Thailand, and China—after enrolling in a Bachelor's program in the Faculty of Education at an Islamic university in

Indonesia. Surprisingly, although they arrived with acute anxiety due to the negative image of Indonesia shaped by global news coverage of religious conflicts such as the Sampit War and the Bali Bombings and fears of being a “double minority” amidst a Muslim majority they imagined to be intolerant, their first-hand experiences disproved these prejudices. Instead, they found an inclusive social reality, which is characterized by the coexistence of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity that exists harmoniously along with local values such as cooperation (gotong royong) and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity). Within this context, Islamic education in Indonesia has an important role through three mechanisms: integrating local wisdom into the curriculum; implementing dialogical learning methods that trigger critical reflection; and being actively involved in communities practising Islam rahmatan lil’ alamin (blessing for the universe). This transformation not only goes beyond their original shock but also unleashes their qualities to be missionaries of peace in the homeland that bring religious moderation, interfaith dialog and humanist education — making Indonesia a “laboratory for peace” that shows the Muslim majority can affectively live inclusively and tolerant.

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- None
- Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- Some sections, with extensive editing
- Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- Entire work, with extensive editing

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Bios

Ismail is a senior lecturer in the Department of Education and Teacher Training at Walisongo State Islamic University in Semarang, focusing on research on Islamic education and learning. He can be reached at ismail@walisongo.ac.id

Suja'i is a senior lecturer in Arabic at UIN Walisongo Semarang. Given his proficiency in Arabic, he is very interested in researching the adaptation of international students, especially Muslim students. He can be contacted at sujai@walisongo.ac.id

Mohammad Ridwan. He is a doctoral student in Islamic studies at the Postgraduate Faculty of UIN Walisongo Semarang. Focuses on research in Islamic Economics and international student adaptation management. He can be reached at mohammadridwan@bungabangsacirebon.ac.id

Novita Siswayanti is a senior researcher at the National Research and Innovation Agency, Jakarta, Indonesia. She is an expert in religious education, particularly in the study of multiethnic Islam. She can be contacted at novi037@brin.go.id

Umi Masfiah is a senior researcher at the National Research and Innovation Agency, Jakarta, Indonesia. She is interested in gender issues and the adaptation of foreign students in Indonesia. She can be contacted at umim001@brin.go.id
