Unveiling the Lived Experiences of Western Indonesian Students in Javan Higher Education Institutions: A Phenomenological Exploration

Sri Hartini Jatmikowati*
Public Administration, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Universitas Merdeka Malang, Indonesia

Received: 28 January 2024; Reviewed: 28 January 2024; Accepted: 21 May 2024
*Corresponding Email: sri.hartini@unmer.ac.id

Abstract

This qualitative research embarks on an exploratory journey into the lived experiences of a specific group of students—young minds from western Indonesia who are embarking on an academic journey in the dynamic ecosystem of higher education institutions in Java. In the literature synthesis, it is clear that while the experiences of international students have been studied extensively, the experiences of certain subgroups within a country remain relatively unexplored. This phenomenological exploration of the life experiences of West Indonesian students in Javanese institutions not only enriches academic discourse but also informs practical strategies for enhancing the educational journey of these students. The study identified several major challenges faced by these students, including language barriers, misunderstanding of culture and social norms, variations in academic expectations, adaptation to local cuisine, and the formation of social networks. While these challenges were formidable, the narratives of these students also reveal their resilience and capacity for personal growth. These findings offer valuable insights that go beyond academia. Recommendations include establishing a standardized and accessible cultural orientation program, fostering a network of peer support, and recognizing the need for academic guidance tailored to the unique challenges facing Western Indonesian students. This research not only contributes to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural adaptation and personal growth but also has practical implications for policymakers and educational institutions.

Keywords Cultural Adaptation; Western Indonesia Students; Public Policy Enhancement; Phenomenological Study.

INTRODUCTION

In a world characterized by rapid globalization, higher education has emerged as a transformative force that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016; Punti & Dingel, 2021). As students embark on academic journeys that extend far beyond their place of origin, the educational landscape becomes a canvas for the convergence of diverse cultures (Agyeman & Erickson, 2012; Hora & Millar, 2023). Within this context, Indonesia, an archipelago nation woven from myriad cultures, languages, and traditions, presents a rich tapestry of diversity. Settled within this nation are the western provinces. These provinces serve as the homes of countless aspiring scholars, who, in their quest for knowledge, venture eastward to the academic enclaves of Java. In this process, they traverse not only physical distances but also navigate the intricate tapestry of cross-cultural interactions, academic pursuits, and personal growth.

The academic institutions of Java stand as emblems of intellectual rigor and cultural dynamism, offering a mosaic of educational opportunities that attract students from various corners of the archipelago. Beyond their academic offerings, these institutions host a vibrant convergence of cultural perspectives, fostering an environment where new friendships are forged, cross-cultural dialogues unfold, and identities transform.

In this era of global interconnectedness, higher education mobility has gained prominence as students from various corners of the archipelago engage with diverse cultures and viewpoints. This exposure challenges their preconceived notions and expands their intellectual horizons (Hoff, 2014). The process of intellectual and personal growth is heightened in cross-cultural educational environments (Montuori & Fahim, 2004; Tomin et al., 2016), where students grapple with new ideas and perspectives.

Academic institutions play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of students studying away from their place of origin. They provide an environment that fosters learning (M. M. Zhang et al., 2016), interaction (Arkoudis & Baik, 2014), and personal development (Senyshyn, 2019). Research has highlighted the significance of context influences how individuals negotiate their roles and relationships (Kasworm, 2010). In this connection, cultural identity, both individually and collectively, shapes behaviors, perceptions, and interactions (Tear et al., 2020; D. C. Wu et al., 2021). Research has highlighted the interplay between cultural identity and adaptation, emphasizing that a harmonious negotiation of identities can lead to successful integration and personal growth (Stathi & Roscini, 2016; Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Moreover, international students often face challenges related to language barriers, academic expectations, and cultural differences (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010; Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016; H. Wu et al., 2015). The ability to cope with these challenges can influence their overall experiences and academic success (Cao et al., 2021; Musizvingoza, 2020). In line with this, existing research has explored the coping strategies employed by international students to navigate these challenges, ranging from seeking social support to developing cultural competence (Ra, 2023).
institutional support, cultural integration programs, and a welcoming academic community in facilitating the adaptation of international students (Bastien et al., 2018; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). In this connection, investigating the role of Javan higher education institutions in supporting the adaptation of Western Indonesian students contributes to the enhancement of support mechanisms. While the convergence of diverse cultures enriches the educational experience, it also presents challenges. Language barriers (Dilshodbek & Khalilullo, 2023; Ospina & Medina, 2020), cultural misunderstandings (Dilshodbek & Khalilullo, 2023; Sherry et al., 2010), and identity conflicts (Kim, 2012) can emerge in cross-cultural interactions. However, these challenges are accompanied by opportunities for personal growth (Stathi & Roscini, 2016), the development of global competencies (Barker, 2000), and the cultivation of empathy and understanding (Wright et al., 2022).

While research on international student experiences has explored the challenges and opportunities they encounter during this process (for example see Li et al. 2017; Wang and Hannes 2014; Zhang 2016), there remains an underexplored terrain within the context of national borders - the experiences of subgroups such as the Western Indonesian students studying in Javan institutions. Thus, exploring the coping mechanisms utilized by Western Indonesian students in Javan institutions provides valuable insights into their adaptation process. Understanding how Western Indonesian students navigate their dual identities within Javan institutions offers insights into the complexities of cross-cultural encounters. Furthermore, the exploration of the lived experiences of Western Indonesian students in Javan higher education institutions not only contributes to the academic understanding of cross-cultural adaptation and personal growth but also holds significance for public policy analysis.

This study aims to bridge theoretical frameworks with practical implications by exploring the lived experiences of Western Indonesian students in a Javan higher education institution. Through a phenomenological lens, this study seeks to delve into the layers of their experiences, perceptions, and emotions throughout their academic journey. By focusing on this specific subgroup, this investigation aims to contribute to the broader understanding of cross-cultural adaptation and personal growth within the Indonesian higher education landscape.

This research begins a phenomenological exploration of the lived experiences of Western Indonesian students who choose to pursue higher education in the academic field in Java. The ultimate goal is to delve deeper into the layers of their experiences, perceptions, and emotions throughout their academic journey. Through this exploration, the research seeks to capture the essence of their adaptation, identity negotiation, and personal growth in the typical context of higher education institutions in Java.

In addition, this research contributes to the development of knowledge about students’ experiences and adaptation in a globalized world. While research has examined the experiences of international students, there is still a lack of research that focuses on national students who move between regions in Indonesia. By exploring the narratives of Western Indonesian students, this study aims to reveal the intricacies of their academic and socio-cultural adaptation. These findings have implications for educational institutions, providing insights that can inform the development of tailored interventions to improve student experiences in Western Indonesia. Furthermore, this study acknowledges the diversity of cultural identities and enriches the discourse of cross-cultural interaction in the realm of
higher education. The researcher investigated the complex and diverse world of West Indonesian students at higher education institutions in Java. Therefore, the following research questions were provided to guide this study:

1. How do Western Indonesian students perceive and navigate the challenges of cultural adaptation within the realm of Javan higher education institutions?
2. How do the experiences and challenges faced by Western Indonesian students in Javan higher education institutions inform potential recommendations for public policies to enhance the support and inclusivity of a diverse student population in the Indonesian higher education system?

**RESEARCH METHODS**

This research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Western Indonesian students studying in Javan higher education institutions. Phenomenology offers a fitting approach to exploring the lived experiences of individuals within a specific context. Rooted in the philosophy of understanding the essence of phenomena as experienced by participants, phenomenology captures the depth of personal experiences and emotions. It enables researchers to uncover the meanings attributed to lived experiences and how individuals make sense of their world (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Thus, this methodological choice aligns to capture the depth and essence of participants’ experiences. In the context of this study, phenomenology serves as a methodological framework to unravel the intricate layers of the adaptation and transformation experienced by Western Indonesian students in Javan higher education.

The participants of this study will be selected through purposeful sampling, ensuring a diverse representation of Western Indonesian students across various disciplines and academic levels in a Javan higher education institution. The sample will encompass individuals who have spent at least one academic year in Javan institutions, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of their experiences. The participants comprised 10 students from a private university in Java. However, the sample size remains limited, comprising only 10 participants from a single private university in Java, which may affect the generalizability of findings.

A brief overview of the purpose of data collection was provided to help students understand the main objectives of the research. All of the participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. Table 1 provides the participants’ demographic information. To protect the personal data of participants, anonymity was ensured.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Study year level</th>
<th>Duration in Java (in years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In collecting the data, semi-structured interviews will be the primary method. This approach allows for flexibility in exploring participants’ experiences while ensuring that key themes are addressed (Flick, 2022). The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, the participants’ native language, to encourage open and authentic expression. The interview protocol was developed based on the research questions, covering topics such as cultural adaptation, identity negotiation, linguistic diversity, and personal growth.

Regarding the interview questions, the study explores the theme of Cultural Adaptation through various questions and objectives. Question 1 focuses on participants’ experiences related to cultural adaptation, aiming to investigate how students perceive and navigate challenges within the academic context of Java. Questions 2, 3, and 4 delve into specific challenges encountered by participants and their efforts to overcome these challenges. These questions’ objectives were to investigate how these students perceive and navigate the challenges of cultural adaptation within the academic context of Java.

Moving on to Policy Recommendations, questions 6 and 7 address participants’ perceptions regarding how higher education institutions and policymakers can better support students from diverse backgrounds. The overarching objective for these questions is to utilize participants’ experiences and challenges to inform potential recommendations for public policies. These recommendations are intended to enhance the support and inclusivity of a diverse student population within the Indonesian higher education system.

Finally, the collected interview data undergo thematic analysis, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). To do so, familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and creating the final report, was involved during the process. Thematic analysis allows for the identification of patterns, recurring concepts, and meaningful insights that emerge from the participants’ narratives.

Regarding this study’s limitation and enhancing the study’s robustness, future research might consider expanding the sample size and including participants from multiple institutions across Java. This approach would offer broader representation across diverse contexts within Javan higher education institutions, thereby strengthening the generalizability of the study’s findings. Additionally, as this study acknowledges challenges encountered during data collection and analysis, such as participant recruitment difficulties or language barriers, future research might provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research process. These steps would contribute to the overall rigor and validity of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main goal of this study is to comprehensively explore and understand the lived experiences of Western Indonesian students studying in Javan higher education institutions. This exploration is driven by several interconnected objectives. In essence, this study seeks to gain a deep understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by Western Indonesian students, with the ultimate aim of improving their educational journey and contributing to the enhancement of higher education policies and practices in Indonesia. The results of the interviews were transcribed and then imported into NVivo 12 Software for analysis, focusing on three primary keywords: ‘perception and navigation of cultural adaptation challenges,’ ‘broader insights regarding their lived experiences in the context of
cross-cultural higher education pursuits,' and 'recommendations for Public Policy enhancement.' To present the result of the study, the researcher translated responses from Indonesian to English. A breakdown of each characteristic will be provided in the following sections.

**Perceptions and Navigation of Cultural Adaptation Challenges**

This subsection presents the findings related to how Western Indonesian students perceive and navigate cultural adaptation challenges within Javan higher education institutions. The first and second questions asked the participants to respond to the query on participants’ experiences related to cultural adaptation. From the coding, all the participants (n=10, 100%) showed positive cultural experiences during their study in Javan higher education institutions. One student elucidates their response. 

"I found the cultural diversity in Java fascinating. Interacting with students from different regions exposed me to various traditions and customs, broadening my horizons, as I met new friends from various islands." (Participant 2)

Interestingly, although they showed positive perceptions, some students also mentioned the challenge to adapt in Javanese culture. Participant 4 mentioned the difficulty in adjusting to a new environment.

"Initially, adapting to Javan culture was challenging, particularly in terms of language, and social norms. Sometimes, I felt like an outsider. But over time, I learned to appreciate the local customs. And the friendships I developed with local students played a significant role in this integration. It's amazing how cultural adaptation can generate a deep sense of appreciation." (Participant 4)

This response highlights: first, the initial challenges of adapting to Javanese culture as the respondent faced significant challenges when initially adapting to Javanese culture, especially in terms of language and social norms. These challenges made her feel like an outsider in the new cultural environment; second, the gradual improvement in the adaptation process as the respondent's experiences improved over time. This suggests that she was able to overcome the language and social norm barriers and gradually become more comfortable within the Javanese culture; third, the growing appreciation for local customs, and the crucial role of friendships in cultural integration. As time passed, the respondent learned to appreciate the local customs of Java. This indicates that she not only understood but also valued and respected the cultural traditions. The respondent emphasizes the role of friendships with local students in her cultural integration. These friendships likely provided support, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for cultural exchange, making the adaptation process smoother; finally, it reflects how cultural adaptation can be a transformative and ultimately rewarding experience. The response underscores the transformative nature of cultural adaptation. It can lead to a profound sense of appreciation for the host culture. This implies that the process of adapting to a new culture can be not only challenging but also personally enriching.

The third, fourth, and fifth questions asked the participant to mention the challenges that the participants encountered as well as their efforts to overcome these challenges. In analyzing the result, the researcher used NVivo 12 and identified six codes from the participants’ responses. Table 3 shows the detailed responses as well as the themes coded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Found in interview</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Academic expectation</td>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cultural and Social norm misunderstanding | Participants 2, 6, 7 and 10 | 50%
Language barrier | Participants 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10 | 70%
Adapting to local cuisine | Participant 4 | 10%
Social network | Participant 8 | 10%

The analysis of participants' responses to the question about challenges in adapting to the cultural environment revealed several key themes. Firstly, the theme of "Language barrier" was prevalent, identified in interviews with Participants 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, and 10 (n=7), with a significant representation of 70% of the participants. This theme encompassed the struggles faced by participants in effectively communicating in the local language, Javanese. Participant 1 expressed:

"Yes, adapting to the cultural environment in Java has presented me with some specific challenges. One of the main challenges I encountered was related to language. Initially, I had difficulty communicating effectively in the Javanese language, especially outside the class. For instance, in the early stages, I struggled to participate actively in group discussions and understand complex group discussions outside the class as sometimes it is conducted in the Javanese language. This language barrier sometimes made me feel isolated. However, I realize that my friends were not purposively speaking in their native language, as they realized that I missed in the conversation, they instantly changed into Bahasa Indonesia." (Participant 1)

Another prominent theme was "Cultural and Social Norm misunderstanding," identified in interviews with Participants 2, 3, 6, 7, and 10 (n=5), representing 50% of the participants who provided this response. This theme highlighted the challenges associated with adapting to social norms and customs in Java, particularly in social interactions and etiquette, where misunderstandings arose due to differences in cultural practices. One participant expressed his opinion:

"I realized that social interaction in Java is different from what I usually do back home. For example, the way people greet each other or engage in social activities can be very different. Understanding and adapting to these things takes time, and I sometimes find myself accidentally breaking the norms of Javanese society." (Participant 3)

Additionally, "Academic expectation" was a theme identified in the interview with Participant 5 (n=1), accounting for 10% of the participants providing this response. This theme indicated challenges related to academic expectations and differences in teaching methods or assessment approaches experienced by some participants. One student elaborated:

"While I need to understand different accents and dialects when interacting with people, including the lecturer, I also felt challenged by the academic expectations in Javan institution. Academic expectations in Java are quite different from what I experienced before. The teaching methods and assessment approaches were sometimes unfamiliar for me, so I had to adjust my study habits." (Participant 5)

Similarly, "Adapting to Local Cuisine" and "Social Network" were less prevalent themes, each identified in interviews with one participant (Participant 4 and Participant 8, respectively), representing 10% of responses each. These themes touched upon challenges related to adjusting to the local food culture and building a social network in a new cultural environment. Following are the statements from both students.

"Being away from home, sometimes I feel homesick, especially when it comes to local cuisine. Although Javanese cuisine is rich and varied, it is different from what I am used to. Initially, I was not familiar with these dishes and some of them were quite new to me. However, as time went by, I learned to adapt and even enjoy Javanese..." (Participant 4)

"While I need to understand different accents and dialects when interacting with people, including the lecturer, I also felt challenged by the academic expectations in Javan institution. Academic expectations in Java are quite different from what I experienced before. The teaching methods and assessment approaches were sometimes unfamiliar for me, so I had to adjust my study habits." (Participant 5)
cuisine, which became part of my experience in getting to know Javanese culture" (Participant 4)

"Initially, building a social network and making friends was a challenge. Most of the local students are making friends with the other locals. However, as time passed, I gradually formed connections with both locals and students from another island, which made the transition easier." (Participant 8)

Overall, these themes collectively reflect the multifaceted nature of challenges faced by Western Indonesian students in adapting to the cultural environment in Java, encompassing language barriers, social norm misunderstandings, academic expectations, culinary adaptation, and social connection.

**Recommendations for Public Policy Enhancement**

This subsection addresses how the experiences and challenges faced by Western Indonesian students inform potential recommendations for public policies aimed at enhancing support and inclusivity within the Indonesian higher education system. While the responses to questions number 6 and 7, which focus on their perception of how higher education institutions and/or policymakers better support students from diverse backgrounds, were varied, there were common threads and valuable insights that can inform policy recommendations.

Firstly, the majority of respondents expressed the importance of cultural orientation programs. They highlighted this initiative as essential for bridging language and cultural gaps. As a result, a potential policy recommendation could be the establishment of standardized and accessible cultural orientation programs for all incoming Western Indonesian students. In an international education setting, a plethora of studies mentioned the importance of cultural orientation programs (for example see McKinlay et al., 1996; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Youn & Lee, 2012). By implementing this recommendation, policymakers can proactively address the challenges faced by Western Indonesian students during their transition to Javan higher education institutions. This approach not only facilitates smoother adaptation but also promotes a more inclusive and enriching educational experience for all students, irrespective of their cultural background.

Secondly, students also mentioned the need for having support from their peers, which suggests the need for policies promoting peer support and integration. Implementing comprehensive mentorship programs, connecting new Western Indonesian students with experienced local peers, and formalizing this process within universities could enhance the overall student experience. Peer support is not new. Many studies highlight the positive effect of peer support in a formal education setting to provide social support for new students (see Elliott et al., 2011; O'Shea et al., 2022; Peterson & Macleod, 2014).

Thirdly, studies mentioned that language support services play a pivotal role in ensuring the academic success (Akanwa, 2015; Walsh et al., 2009). Thus, recognizing the linguistic diversity among Western Indonesian students, particularly those whose native language may not be Bahasa Indonesia or Javanese, it is imperative to establish comprehensive language support programs tailored to their specific needs. These services can encompass a variety of initiatives, not only in the format of general Bahasa Indonesia courses but also in tutoring sessions facilitated by language experts that promote peer-to-peer learning. By offering these language support services, universities can effectively address language barriers and empower Western Indonesian students to fully engage in academic activities, participate in campus
life, and develop a sense of belonging within the university community. Moreover, these initiatives contribute to fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment where linguistic diversity is acknowledged and accommodated.

Lastly, the necessity for academic advising tailored to Western Indonesian students indicates the need for policies that ensure academic support services are inclusive and sensitive to the unique challenges faced by this group. The recognition of the necessity for academic advising tailored to Western Indonesian students highlights a crucial aspect of their educational experience. These students, while sharing the common pursuit of knowledge and personal growth, often encounter unique challenges that stem from their cultural backgrounds, linguistic diversity, and the transition to a different educational system. In response to this, the need for policies that ensure academic support services are inclusive and sensitive to the unique challenges faced by this group becomes apparent. These policies should advocate for the development of academic advising programs that are not only culturally sensitive but also attuned to the academic and linguistic requirements of Western Indonesian students.

The diverse responses to questions about support mechanisms and initiatives offer valuable insights for shaping public policies aimed at improving support and inclusivity within the Indonesian higher education system. These recommendations can help create an environment that fosters cross-cultural understanding, academic success, and overall well-being for all students, particularly those from Western Indonesia studying in Java.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative phenomenological study investigates the experiences of Western Indonesian students pursuing higher education in Java, shedding light on the intricacies of cross-cultural adaptation. The research uncovers challenges such as language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and academic variations, alongside the students' resilience and determination. Key recommendations include standardized cultural orientation programs, peer support networks, and tailored academic guidance. These insights not only enrich academic understanding but also offer practical implications for policymakers and institutions. By implementing these recommendations, educational entities can create inclusive environments, fostering cross-cultural understanding, academic success, and overall well-being for all students, transcending geographical boundaries. The narratives of Western Indonesian students underscore the transformative power of higher education, contributing to a global educational mosaic and showcasing the resilience and limitless possibilities inherent in seeking knowledge beyond national borders.

REFERENCES


Elliott, J. S., Beltman, S., & Lynch, E. (2011). If you make a difference, you have changed someone’s life’: Outcomes from a university student mentor program. First Year in Higher Education Conference Held in Fremantle.


