



NEGOTIATING LEARNING AND ACADEMIC ADAPTATION: THAI INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN INDONESIAN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION

Ismail¹(✉), Silviatul Hasanah², A.M. Wibowo³, Joko Tri Haryanto⁴

^{1,2}Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia

^{3,4}Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional, Jakarta Indonesia

Article History:

Received: October 2025

Accepted: April 2026

Published: August 2026

Keywords:

Negotiating Learning, Academic Adaptation, International Students, Students's Experience.

(✉)Correspondence to:

ismail@walisongo.ac.id

Abstract: This study aimed to explore the academic adaptation challenges experienced by Thai international students at UIN Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia. A qualitative case study was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation involving Thai international students and analysed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that academic adaptation occurred through a gradual and integrative process. The university supported students by contextualising Indonesian academic language and learning norms, developing analytical and critical learning skills, facilitating classroom discussions and presentations, guiding academic writing, and introducing technology-supported learning through LMS, digital libraries, and electronic journals. Lecturer-student interaction and peer engagement with local students also strengthened adaptation. These supports helped students address challenges related to language, learning culture, academic norms, communication, and digital learning. Adaptation was therefore reciprocal, involving both student adjustment and institutional responsiveness while students maintained their cultural identities. The findings highlight the importance of comprehensive institutional support programmes that address linguistic, cultural, academic, social, and digital needs of international students in Islamic higher education.

Please cite this article in APA style as:

Ismail, I., Hasanah, S., Wibowo, A. M., & Haryanto, J. T. (2026) Negotiating Learning and Academic Adaptation: Thai International Students' Experiences in Indonesian Islamic Higher Education. *Edureligia: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 10(2), 410-427.

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education has become one of the strategic instruments in building global influence, strengthening educational diplomacy, and increasing the competitiveness of universities in the era of international academic mobility (Iqbal et al., 2025; Kurniawan et al., 2025). In the Indonesian context, this phenomenon can be seen from the increasing number of

international students who choose to continue their studies at State Islamic Religious Universities (Erdogdu, 2024; Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025). Data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia in 2024 shows that the number of international students at PTKIN has increased by 37 percent since 2020, with students from Thailand accounting for 18 percent of the total 12,450 foreign students studying at various Indonesian Islamic universities (Mohammad, 2024; Suhendi et al., 2025).

However, the increase in academic mobility is not always directly proportional to the success of academic adaptation. Data shows that the dropout rate of Thai international students studying at Islamic religious faculties has reached 22 percent in the last three years, far exceeding the national average of 9 percent. This finding presents an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the Patani region in Southern Thailand has a long historical relationship with the archipelago's Islamic scientific network. However, on the other hand, Thai students actually experience various academic difficulties when dealing with the Islamic scientific tradition that is developing in Indonesian Islamic universities. This phenomenon demonstrates that shared religious identity does not automatically result in epistemological closeness within cross-border learning processes. This is despite the fact that Walisongo State Islamic University has been actively accepting international students (particularly from Thailand) for over a decade.

Although Thai students both have Muslim identities, the construction of understanding of concepts such as monotheism, Sufism, *ushul fiqh*, the authority of the *ulama*, and the relationship between religion and the state is formed through different historical experiences. When Thai students enter an academic environment dominated by Indonesia's Islamic scientific tradition influenced by the interaction of Arab, Persian, and Javanese cultures (Hill et al., 2023; Peng-Keller et al., 2025; Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025), Thai students not only face linguistic challenges, but also experience a complex process of negotiation of meaning (Erdogdu, 2024; Haq & Kwok, 2024; Solodka et al., 2023). This situation suggests the possibility of epistemic dissonance, which is a condition when the individual's knowledge framework is not fully compatible with the knowledge system he encounters in the new academic environment. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is still rarely a concern in the study of the internationalization of Islamic education.

The existing literature has tended to explain the experience of international students through the perspective of cultural adaptation, social integration, and global educational mobility. Muhammad et.al explained how academic mobility is used as an instrument of soft power in expanding the influence of the state (Efstratopoulou et al., 2023; Sinaga et al., 2026). Alasmari (2023) and Bilan et al. (2026) showed the increasing competition between countries in attracting international students as part of the post-pandemic human resource development strategy. De Boer (2026); Gul Muhammad et al. (2026) and Hayati & Ninuk Sholikhah Akhiroh (2026) examined Malaysia's success in attracting international Muslim students through a combination of scholarship policies and

an adaptive curriculum. Meanwhile, Saini (2026) and Sudajit-Apa & Hasamoh (2026) highlighted the coping strategies of Vietnamese students in dealing with culture shock and language barriers in Australia.

Despite this, the studies still focus on the structural, social, economic, and cultural dimensions of international student mobility. Explanations of how students build an understanding of new knowledge systems that differ from their original epistemological background are still relatively limited. In other words, previous research has focused more on how students adapt to new social environments, but has not explained how Thai students negotiate with different knowledge frameworks, academic languages, scientific authorities, and intellectual traditions. These limitations become even more important when associated with the context of Islamic higher education. In contrast to public universities, Islamic colleges not only transmit academic knowledge, but also reproduce certain intellectual traditions, systems of meaning, and religious authorities. In this context, Thai international students face a unique situation. Most come from minority Muslim neighborhoods in Southern Thailand that thrive in a social, cultural, and religious configuration that is different from that of Indonesia. Based on the literature review, there are at least three research gaps that have not been adequately addressed. First, there is a conceptual gap because previous research has highlighted more social, cultural, and linguistic adaptations of international students, while the dimensions of epistemic adaptation in Islamic higher education are still poorly explored. Second, there is a contextual gap because most of the studies are conducted in public universities or major study destination countries such as Australia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, while the context of Indonesian Islamic universities that accept students from Thailand's Muslim minority community has not been extensively researched.

To fill this gap, this study analyzes the epistemic navigation of Thai international students at the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training UIN Walisongo Semarang. Different from previous research that focused on social aspects or internationalization policies, this study uses a phenomenological approach to reveal students' lived experiences in dealing with academic difficulties stemming from differences in knowledge frameworks, academic language, intellectual traditions, and religious culture. This focus is important because the internationalization policy of education is often built on the assumption that all Muslim students have a relatively homogeneous capital of religious knowledge, when in reality this is not the case. Therefore, this research is directed to answer three main questions: (1) what is the form of academic difficulties experienced by Thai international students in the learning process at Indonesian Islamic universities; (2) how strategies Thai students developed to navigate the epistemological differences faced; and (3) how cultural responsiveness-based policy models can be developed to support the academic success of international students.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore in depth the experiences of academic difficulties experienced by international students from Thailand at the State Islamic University (UIN) Walisongo Semarang. This design was chosen because it allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the interactions between individual experiences and the institutional contexts that shape their academic adaptation process. UIN Walisongo was chosen as the research location because it is one of the Islamic universities in Indonesia that accepts a relatively large number of Southern Thai students, thus providing a rich context to understand how differences in language, academic culture, and epistemological traditions affect the learning experience of international students. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences. The study involved 12 international students from Thailand from Pattani, Yala, and Songkhla, with diverse backgrounds of study programs and semesters. The selection of participants was carried out purposively based on their experience as active students who have undergone an academic adaptation process at UIN Walisongo.

Interviews were used to explore subjective experiences and academic adaptation strategies, observations were conducted to observe the interaction of learning and the academic environment, while documentation studies of curriculum, academic policies, and supporting documents were used to provide institutional context to research findings. The profiles of the 12 Thai international students who participated is four male students and eight female students. This variation in gender, academic discipline, semester level, and provincial background provided diverse perspectives on the learning and academic adaptation experiences of Thai international students in Indonesian Islamic higher education. The data analysis follows the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (in Brennen, 2025; Bryda & Costa, 2023; Missier, 2025) which includes data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. All interview transcripts and observation notes were analyzed through an iterative thematic coding process to identify patterns of academic difficulty, factors influencing adaptation, and strategies developed by students. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the study applied source triangulation through the comparison of data from interviews, observations, and documentation, as well as member checking by involving participants in the process of confirming the interpretation of the analysis results. The combination of procedures enhances the trustworthiness of the research and ensures that the findings accurately and contextually represent the academic experience of international students.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Thailand International Student Adaptation Strategy through the Integrative Islamic Education Ecosystem

This study focuses on the supporting role of the integrated Islamic education ecosystem at State Islamic University (UIN) Walisongo in Semarang, Indonesia, for international students' cross-cultural adaptation. Observations from this study find that international students at the university developed three types of diversified adaptation strategies by relying on this unique ecosystem. Four types of campus carriers that integrate Islamic values, which underpin the implementation of this ecosystem, have provided solid support for international students' adaptation efforts. This study rejects the one-sided perception that cross-cultural adaptation is determined solely by students' individual capabilities. It clarifies the core value of this ecosystem, which integrates academic, religious, social, and cultural dimensions to form mutually complementary support. The ecosystem also allows international students to retain their home countries' cultural and religious backgrounds, while gradually adjusting their own learning methods, interaction patterns, and academic identities. This work corrects the limitations of previous studies, which only analyzed adaptation issues from the perspective of individual traits.

Rather than relying solely on individual efforts, participants described adapting to academic life through collaborative learning, participation in student organisations, involvement in religious activities, and continuous interaction with lecturers and Indonesian students. These experiences enabled them to strengthen their academic competencies while simultaneously becoming more familiar with the learning culture of Indonesian Islamic higher education.

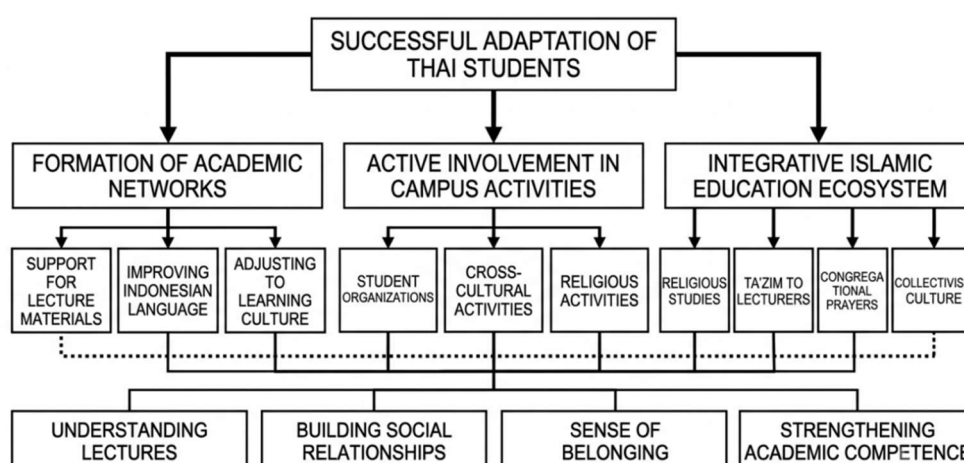


Figure 1. Thailand International Student Adaptation Strategy through the Integrative Islamic Education Ecosystem

One of the most frequently reported strategies involved establishing informal academic networks with lecturers, Indonesian classmates, and fellow Thai students. Participants explained that these relationships became an important source of academic assistance, particularly when Thai students

encountered difficulties in understanding course materials, preparing presentations, or improving their Indonesian academic language proficiency. Collaborative learning activities also increased students' confidence in participating in classroom discussions. As one participant revealed that Indonesian friends were the most helpful in their learning process. When Thai students experienced difficulty understanding the course material, their friends were willing to re-explain it using simpler language and invited them to study together prior to presentations or exams. This experience not only improved their understanding of the material but also built their confidence in using Indonesian during class discussions.

Observational evidence supported these experiences. During student organisation activities, Thai international students were consistently observed participating alongside Indonesian students in academic discussions, organisational meetings, and collaborative programmes. These interactions extended beyond organisational responsibilities and frequently developed into opportunities for discussing coursework, exchanging academic information, and providing mutual learning support. Such interactions expanded students' academic networks while fostering a stronger sense of belonging within the university community.

Participants also described active involvement in student organisations as an important avenue for developing communication skills, expanding social relationships, and becoming familiar with the norms of campus life. Initially motivated by the desire to improve their Indonesian language proficiency, sustained participation gradually enabled students to understand classroom communication patterns, collaborative learning practices, and broader aspects of university culture. A student explained that deliberately joined student organizations to become closer with Indonesian students. Although initially aimed only at practicing their Indonesian language skills, over time Thai students learned how to engage in discussions, express opinions, and understand the campus culture, which ultimately made them feel more accepted as part of the UIN Walisongo community.

Organizational participation serves as an effective medium for acculturation, where intensive social interaction helps international students understand academic norms and feel fully accepted into the campus community. Furthermore, the status of these international students from Thailand is not an obstacle for them to obtain the same rights and carry out the same learning obligations as other students at this institution. Beyond academic and organisational activities, participants consistently highlighted religious programmes as important settings for strengthening interpersonal relationships with lecturers and Indonesian students. Shared participation in congregational prayers, Islamic study circles, and other religious activities created regular opportunities for informal interaction that extended beyond classroom settings. Participants described these activities as facilitating mutual understanding and encouraging supportive relationships grounded in shared Islamic values. One participant stated that various activities, such as lectures, congregational prayers,

and international student meetings, made them feel closer to lecturers and friends in Indonesia. Thai students added that shared Islamic values made it easier for them to understand and support one another when facing challenges during their studies, despite coming from different countries.

These accounts were further corroborated by observations conducted during campus religious activities. Thai international students were regularly observed attending congregational prayers, Islamic learning sessions, and character development programmes together with lecturers, Indonesian students, and university staff. These activities created informal spaces where academic information, personal experiences, and practical advice regarding university life were exchanged naturally, while simultaneously strengthening social relationships and students' familiarity with the institutional culture of the university.

Finally, participants indicated that successful adaptation did not require abandoning their cultural identity as Thai students. Instead, Thai students described adaptation as a gradual process of integrating previous cultural experiences with the academic and social practices encountered within the university. Participants perceived that lecturers and Indonesian students generally respected cultural differences, enabling them to participate actively in academic life without experiencing pressure to relinquish their cultural background. One participant explained that did not feel the need to abandon their Thai culture in order to adapt; rather, Thai students learned to combine their original habits with the academic culture in Indonesia. The recognition and appreciation from lecturers and peers regarding these differences made it easier for them to adapt without losing their identity as a Thai student.

Based on field observation evidence, international students from Thailand routinely perform congregational prayers alongside the UIN Walisongo academic community, which has been proven effective in encouraging social interaction and fostering a sense of belonging within the campus environment. Additionally, their active participation in Qur'anic studies and Islamic discussion forums serves as an important medium to facilitate familiarity with the university's academic and institutional culture. Informal interactions established after religious activities are also utilized by students to exchange information regarding course assignments, academic procedures, and adaptation experiences. This positive relationship is further strengthened by peer support between Indonesian and Thai students, who naturally share academic advice. Lastly, participation in campus organizations and religious activities enables Thai students to expand their social networks while maintaining their original cultural identity through a process of integration, rather than assimilation. Overall, the findings demonstrate that international students employed interconnected academic, social, organisational, cultural, and religious strategies throughout their adaptation process. These strategies were supported by continuous interaction with lecturers, Indonesian peers, fellow international students, and the wider university community, enabling students to gradually develop academic competence, expand social networks, strengthen their

participation in campus life, and negotiate their place within the academic community while maintaining their cultural identity.

Challenges of Academic Adaptation of Thai International Students in the Islamic Higher Education Environment

This study conducted research on Thai international students enrolled at Indonesia's Semarang-based Walisongo State Islamic University (UIN Walisongo Semarang). Its core finding is that this group faces multiple categories of adaptation challenges in the academic settings of this comprehensive Islamic university. Specifically, these challenges include: barriers to understanding academic Indonesian; difficulties mastering course materials that require support from critical thinking; poor performance in class discussions, presentations, and completion of rule-compliant assignments; obstacles to using digital tools such as the learning management system (LMS), digital library, and electronic journals; and difficulties building effective academic communication with local teachers and students. This study corrects the one-sided perception that links academic adaptation only to academic ability, and proposes that academic adaptation is a negotiation process of reconciling old and new academic expectations within a higher education ecosystem that integrates scientific quality, educational technology, and Islamic character cultivation.

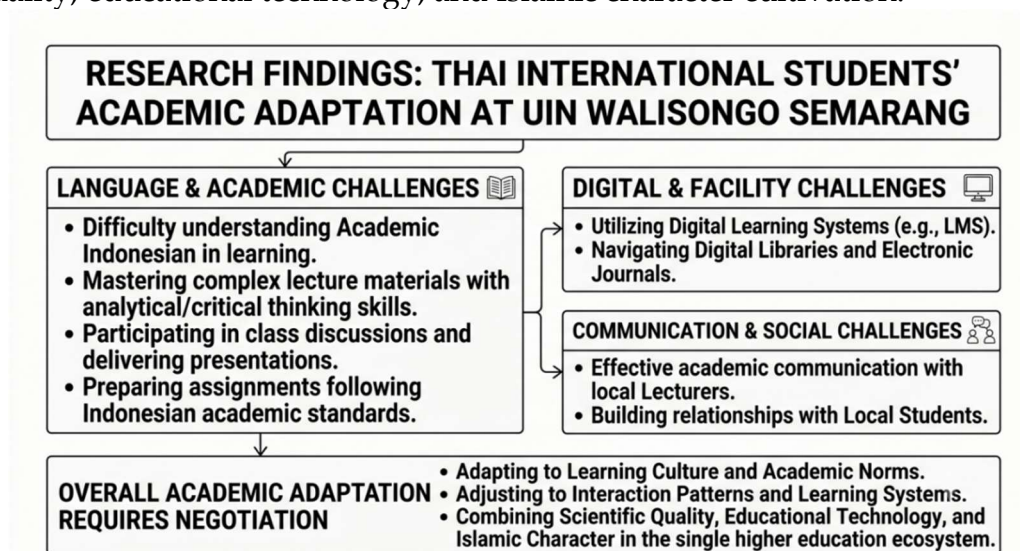


Figure 2. Challenges of Academic Adaptation of Thai International Students

These challenges extended beyond language proficiency and encompassed adjustment to unfamiliar academic expectations, classroom participation, digital learning systems, and academic communication with lecturers and peers. Participants consistently described academic adaptation as a gradual process of becoming familiar with new learning practices while simultaneously developing the competencies required to participate effectively in higher education.

One of the most frequently reported challenges involved understanding Indonesian academic language used in lectures and scholarly literature.

Although participants generally experienced little difficulty communicating in everyday Indonesian, Thai students encountered considerable obstacles when engaging with theoretical explanations, analysing academic texts, and completing course assignments that required critical interpretation. One participant recounted that at the beginning of their studies, Thai students understood everyday Indonesian, but often struggled to follow the line of discussion when lecturers explained theories or assigned scientific journal analyses. Thai students had to reread the material multiple times and seek help from Indonesian friends to ensure a solid understanding of the lecture content before completing their assignments.

Participants also identified differences in learning culture as a significant source of academic adjustment. Several students explained that their previous educational experiences had emphasised listening to lecturers, whereas classroom learning at the university required active discussion, critical reflection, collaborative learning, and oral presentations. These differences initially reduced students' confidence in expressing opinions during classroom discussions. As one participant recounted that the difficulties Thai students faced were not only limited to language barriers, but also involved differences in learning cultures. Thai students explained that the learning method in Thailand focuses more on listening to lecturers' explanations, whereas the academic system in Indonesia requires students to actively participate in discussions, criticize opinions, and present study results. This difference initially made them feel less confident when speaking in front of the class during their first semester.

These experiences were consistently supported by classroom observations. During lecture sessions, Thai international students were frequently observed listening attentively while participating less actively in classroom discussions than their Indonesian peers. When lecturers invited students to ask questions or express opinions, Thai students often consulted briefly with fellow Thai students before responding. Their participation became noticeably more active when lecturers provided additional explanations using simpler language or when Indonesian classmates encouraged them to contribute to the discussion.

In addition to classroom participation, participants described challenges in adapting to the university's digital learning environment. Difficulties were reported in navigating the Learning Management System (LMS), accessing digital library resources, locating scholarly articles, and applying institutional standards for academic referencing and citation. One participant revealed that Thai students experienced difficulties using the Learning Management System (LMS), searching for journals in digital libraries, and understanding how to cite references according to campus rules. Thai students explained that lecturers assumed international students were already accustomed to using these facilities, even though Thai students only learned them after studying in Indonesia, which meant that adjustment took additional time.

Observational evidence further confirmed these experiences. Observations conducted in the university library and computer laboratories showed that Thai

international students frequently sought assistance from librarians and Indonesian students when searching electronic databases, downloading academic articles, navigating the LMS, and uploading course assignments. These interactions indicated that students were simultaneously developing digital academic literacy while adapting to the technological infrastructure supporting teaching and learning at the university.

Based on field observation evidence, international students from Thailand initially experienced early difficulties in utilizing digital academic resources, such as asking librarians and fellow students for assistance to access electronic journals and download academic articles. Additionally, several students required special guidance when logging into the university's Learning Management System (LMS) to submit assignments and check course materials, until their digital literacy gradually developed through continuous practice and peer support. In the classroom, Thai students tended to listen attentively and take notes, although their active participation in class discussions during the initial weeks was still relatively limited. A initial lack of confidence was also evident in their tendency to approach lecturers individually after class to clarify course materials rather than asking questions in the classroom forum. Nevertheless, this academic adaptation process went smoothly thanks to collaboration in the computer laboratory and the significant role of Indonesian students who actively helped explain academic instructions and classroom procedures.

Participants also described academic communication with lecturers as an important aspect of their adaptation process. Although lecturers were generally perceived as approachable and supportive, several students initially hesitated to ask questions or participate in academic conversations because Thai students lacked confidence in their Indonesian language proficiency and were concerned about making mistakes. One participant explained that communicating with lecturers was actually not difficult, but often hesitated to ask questions out of fear that their Indonesian was incorrect or that their questions would be considered inadequate. After a few months, Thai students began to gain the confidence to engage in discussions because the lecturers and peers provided positive and helpful responses.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that academic adaptation involved simultaneous adjustment to academic language, learning culture, classroom interaction, digital learning technologies, and academic communication practices. These challenges emerged throughout students' transition into the university and gradually diminished as Thai students accumulated learning experiences, developed greater familiarity with institutional academic practices, and increased their participation in the academic community.

Institutional Support in Facilitating Academic Adaptation Negotiations

This study examines the current status of institutional support for international students' academic adaptation at Islamic universities in Indonesia. It finds that the effectiveness of international students' academic adaptation

directly depends on whether universities can build an inclusive Islamic university environment that supports transitional adjustment. At present, the International Offices and Vice Chancellors for Student Affairs at these institutions only deliver basic administrative services, such as international student enrollment, immigration document management, and student activity coordination. Core support services including academic tutoring, enhanced academic Indonesian proficiency training, adaptation to the learning culture of Indonesian Islamic universities, targeted tutoring programs, and social and religious guidance have not yet been developed in a systematic and sustainable way. This gap forces international students to rely solely on informal networks built with lecturers, student organizations, and religious communities to obtain assistance. Based on these findings, this study argues that academic adaptation relies on both students' individual capabilities and universities' capacity to develop an integrated campus environment. Building an inclusive, integrated, all-dimensional service ecosystem for international students can significantly improve the efficiency of academic adaptation coordination work.

Participants consistently acknowledged that institutional services provided by the International Office and the Office of Student Affairs facilitated their initial transition into the university, particularly through assistance with student admission, immigration administration, visa processing, academic registration, and the coordination of international student activities. These services reduced administrative barriers during the early stages of arrival and enabled students to complete formal enrolment procedures more efficiently. However, participants also consistently reported that institutional support became considerably less visible once regular academic activities commenced.

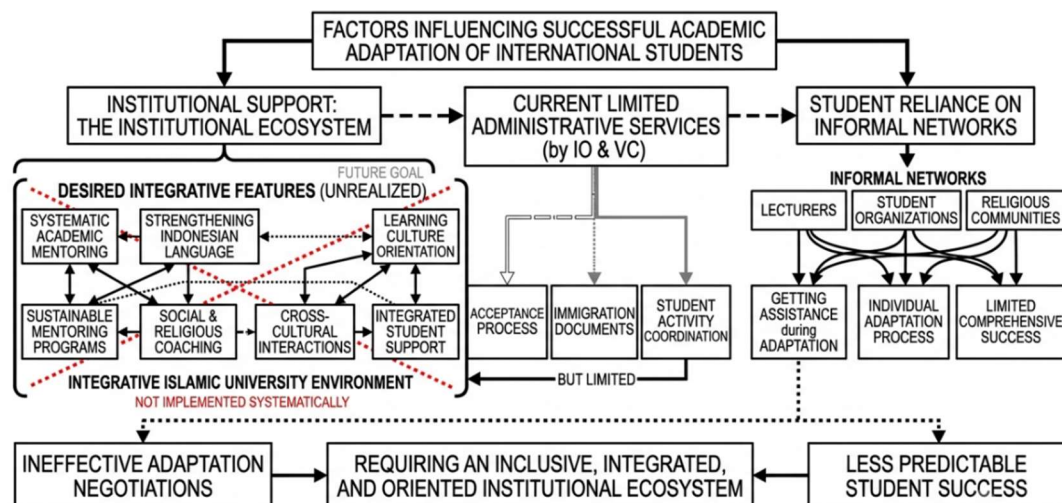


Figure 3. Thailand International Student Adaptation Strategy through the Integrative Islamic Education Ecosystem

Several participants described the absence of structured programmes specifically designed to facilitate academic adjustment throughout the first semester. Rather than receiving systematic guidance regarding academic expectations, Indonesian academic language, learning management systems,

scientific writing, or the learning culture of Indonesian Islamic higher education, students reported developing these competencies independently through personal experience and informal assistance. One participant explained that the International Office was very helpful during their initial arrival, particularly regarding document processing, visas, and university registration. However, after lectures began, international students often sought assistance independently from lecturers and Indonesian friends when struggling to understand course material, as there was no regular academic support in place.

A similar experience was expressed by another participant, who highlighted the need for a structured orientation programme introducing international students to the academic culture of Indonesian higher education. Another participant added the need for a specialized program at the beginning of the semester covering explanations on study methods, learning system usage, scientific assignment writing, and academic culture in Indonesia. These interview findings were consistently supported by observational evidence. Observations conducted at the International Office revealed that institutional services remained predominantly focused on administrative responsibilities, including student registration, immigration documentation, visa-related procedures, and the coordination of official activities involving international students. While these services effectively supported students during their initial arrival, no structured initiatives were observed that provided continuous academic mentoring, Indonesian academic language development, orientation to academic learning practices, or systematic transition programmes for international students throughout their first semester.

As a consequence of the limited availability of formal academic assistance, participants described relying extensively on informal support networks established with lecturers, Indonesian classmates, senior students, and religious communities within the university environment. These interpersonal relationships became the principal source of academic guidance, enabling students to navigate learning management systems, locate scholarly literature, prepare classroom presentations, and understand academic expectations. One participant explained the participants acknowledged that Thai students had been learning gradually through personal experience alongside assistance from seniors and local peers who taught them how to use the LMS, search for journals, and prepare presentations.

Observations within classrooms and student activities further corroborated these experiences. International students were frequently observed seeking assistance directly from lecturers, Indonesian peers, senior students, and members of campus religious communities whenever Thai students encountered academic or social challenges. Such support emerged naturally through everyday interpersonal interactions rather than through institutionalised mentoring programmes. Consequently, the continuity and effectiveness of academic assistance depended largely on the availability of individual social networks rather than on a coordinated institutional support system.

Although participants generally perceived the university environment as socially welcoming and religiously supportive, Thai students also noted that various forms of institutional assistance operated independently instead of functioning as components of an integrated support framework. Academic guidance, language development, religious activities, and student affairs were available through separate institutional channels without systematic coordination throughout the adaptation process. As one participant stated although the campus environment is considered highly supportive and welcoming, Thai students noted that the existing support operates individually, expressing hope that the university could provide an integrated program combining academic, language, and social mentoring within a single system.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that institutional support for international students was characterised by comprehensive administrative services during the initial stage of university entry, whereas structured academic mentoring, academic language support, orientation to Indonesian Islamic higher education, and integrated transition programmes remained limited. Consequently, informal relationships with lecturers, Indonesian students, senior students, and campus religious communities emerged as the primary mechanisms through which international students navigated academic adaptation throughout their first year of study.

Discussion

This study adopts the classic stress-adaptation-growth cross-cultural adaptation model first proposed by Young Yun Kim (in Tang & Zhang, 2023; Zuhdi & Syarief, 2023), and combines it with the perspective of cross-cultural personality formation that Kim added (in Efstratopoulou et al., 2023; Hayati & Ninuk Sholikhah Akhiroh, 2026; Solodka et al., 2023) to construct its analytical framework. It maps each specific observed stressor, including difficulties understanding Indonesian academic language, barriers to participating in discussion-based learning, discomfort using Learning Management Systems (LMS) (Handayani et al., 2025; Kusuma et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2025), and the need to adapt to local Indonesian academic norms (Fitriya, 2023; Nuraini et al., 2025), to the corresponding nodes of the theoretical framework. Finally, it returns to its core claim to confirm that this group's adaptation predicament is a complex, multifaceted problem that emerges during the cross-cultural transition process.

The degree of a student's integration into a university's academic and social systems greatly impacts their retention and development throughout their higher education journey. Adapted to the research context of integrated Islamic universities in Indonesia, this study adjusts the academic adaptation dimension, proposing that academic adaptation is influenced not only by students' individual ability to meet learning requirements, but also by their ability to build connections within the local ecosystem. This study identifies three types of integration practices: participating in student organizations, engaging in academic interactions with Indonesian faculty and peers, and taking part in

religious activities, and observations confirm that all three forms of integration occur simultaneously.

Drawing on prior research Chen et al. (2023); Haq & Kwok (2024) and Zafar & Abu-Hussin (2025) argued that international students' success is jointly shaped by their academic ability, communication skills, and capacity to participate in campus life. 'Aziz & Aditya Hidayah (2024) and Rexhepi & Bajrami (2025) proposed that social connections, cross-cultural friendships, and participation in campus activities support international students' academic and psychological adaptation. In comparison, the integration dimensions of this study are broader, as Thai students add the religious activity integration pathway, a core component of Islamic universities. This study ultimately concludes that the higher education environment of integrated Islamic institutions is an ecosystem that unites academic, social, and religious dimensions, and can effectively support students' integration process.

This study argues that the successful adaptation of international students is the outcome of two-way interaction between individual capabilities and the characteristics of an institution's environment. This study observes that these two theoretical frameworks can complement each other in the context of comprehensive Islamic universities. For international students at these institutions, adaptation requires not only meeting academic requirements, but also integrating into an institutional environment that centers on four core components: learning activities, Islamic value cultivation, cross-cultural interaction, and student support. This environment plays a dual role: it serves as both the setting where international student adaptation occurs, and a mediator that facilitates the academic, social, and religious transition process. Through this analysis, this study extends the classic theories, which were originally only applicable to the context of general higher education, to the setting of Islamic universities, filling the research gap that has failed to position the religious dimension as a core component of international student adaptation and integration.

The challenges faced by Thai students studying in Indonesia, including academic comprehension of Indonesian, adaptation to the active learning culture, and building communication with local faculty and peers fully match the aforementioned consensus. However, the unique incremental contribution of this study lies in that beyond the widely discussed cross-cultural transfer process, the unified educational ecosystem of integrated Islamic colleges, which connects academic activities, Islamic character development, social life, and campus religious culture, is a core factor that actively shapes the dynamics of international students' academic adaptation (Kuniawan et al., 2025; Lin & Jiang, 2023; Nuraini et al., 2025; Strielkowski et al., 2025). Institutional environments are far more than just sites where adaptation occurs; Thai students are core factors that shape adaptation dynamics, clearly drawing a cognitive boundary that separates this study from prior research.

This study proposes an analytical approach that integrates five interconnected environmental factors, namely integrated academic services,

cultivation of Islamic values, cross-cultural social interaction, student organizations, and institutional support. The study finds that the effectiveness of international students' adaptation depends more on the quality of an integrated institutional ecosystem, rather than on scattered, independently operating support programs. This system can help international students complete their academic adaptation, build a sense of belonging on campus, deepen cross-cultural interactions, and internalize moderate Islamic values, ultimately restructuring the logic of internationalization evaluation: outcomes should not be measured solely based on the growth in the number of international students; instead, evaluation must center on building an institutional ecosystem that supports students' academic success and overall academic well-being. This conclusion also expands the core discourse system of the internationalization of Islamic higher education.

This study's core conceptual contribution to the field of higher education internationalization is framing the comprehensive Islamic higher education environment which integrates four dimensions of academics, religion, society, and institutional systems as an independent institutional factor that impacts adaptation. It expands the field's original student-centered research framework into an institutional ecology-based adaptation perspective that emphasizes two-way interaction, clarifying that this environment is by no means a passive backdrop, but rather a core mechanism that shapes international students' academic experiences, social development, and identity construction. This conceptual framework can not only support the expansion of research on international student adaptation at values-oriented higher education institutions, but also serve as a reference model for Islamic higher education institutions in countries worldwide with similar sociocultural characteristics to develop internationalization policies.

CONCLUSION

This study takes Thai international students at the State Islamic University of Walisongo (UIN Walisongo Semarang), Semarang, Indonesia, as its research subjects, and presents the core findings, theoretical contributions, research limitations, and future research directions of this empirical study on academic adaptation: This study finds that Thai international students' academic adaptation is a multi-dimensional process shaped jointly by individuals' ability to cope with their academic needs and the quality of their host university's multi-dimensional integrated institutional environment. This process is underpinned by five core dimensions. The four types of challenges the students encounter together form an interconnected cross-cultural adaptation process that drives the development of their academic and cross-cultural competencies, and ultimately, Thai students achieve successful adaptation relying on four categories of self-directed adaptation strategies. At the theoretical level, this study extends the two cited theories—Young Yun Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory and Vincent Tinto's student integration theory. Within the specific context of Islamic higher education, this study proposes that an

integrated institutional ecosystem consisting of five components is the optimal pathway to promote international students' academic adaptation, and accordingly outlines practical directions for the internationalization of Islamic universities. This study also clarifies the inherent limitation of its single-case study design, that is, the limited transferability of its conclusions. Based on this, three types of future research paths are proposed: comparative research on cross-regional Islamic higher education institutions, contrastive research between Islamic and non-Islamic higher education settings, and in-depth exploration of this topic adopting longitudinal or mixed research methods.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to express his deepest gratitude to the authors who contributed to this research. He hopes this collaboration will continue and benefit the development of science and education.

REFERENCES

- 'Aziz, H., & Aditya Hidayah, M. (2024). Critical Reflections on the Role of Islamic Early Childhood Educators in Building Tolerance Awareness in Educational Setting. *Al-Athfal: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak*, 10(2), 151-163. <https://doi.org/10.14421/al-athfal.2024.102-05>
- Alasmari, A. A. (2023). Challenges and Social Adaptation of International Students in Saudi Arabia. *Heliyon*, 9(5), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e16283>
- Bilan, Y., Oliinyk, O., Mishchuk, H., & Štreimikienė, D. (2026). Ensuring the Quality of Higher Education and its Impact on Country Attractiveness for International Students. *Contemporary Economics*, 20(1), 23-37. <https://doi.org/10.5709/ce.1897-9254.580>
- Brennen, B. S. (2025). Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies, Fourth Edition. *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies, Fourth Edition*, 1-283. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003457411>
- Bryda, G., & Costa, A. P. (2023). Qualitative Research in Digital Era: Innovations, Methodologies and Collaborations. *Social Sciences*, 12(10). <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12100570>
- Chen, Y., Chuang, H.-H., & Lacaste, A. (2023). A Pedagogical Framework of Cross-Cultural Online Collaborative Projects in English as Foreign Language (EFL) Classrooms. *Journal of Education and Learning (EduLearn)*, 15(2), 223-233. <https://doi.org/10.11591/edulearn.v15i2.19950>
- de Boer, P. (2026). Beyond the Mobility Imperative? Work Values and Peripheral Young Adults' Spatial Aspirations. *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 13(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2026.2620939>
- Efstratopoulou, M., Elhoweris, H., Eldib, A. A., & Bonti, E. (2023). Assessing Children 'at Risk': Translation and Cross-Cultural Adaptation of the Motor Behavior Checklist (MBC) into Arabic and Pilot Use in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). *Journal of Intelligence*, 10(11), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jintelligence10010011>

- Erdogdu, F. (2024). ICT, Learning Environment and Student Characteristics as Potential Cross-Country Predictors of Academic Achievement. *Education and Information Technologies*, 27(5), 7135–7159. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10848-x>
- Fitriya, N. (2023). Seamless Learning Model; Teachers' Perception of Learning Adaptation in Madrasah. *Jurnal Teknologi Pendidikan : Jurnal Penelitian Dan Pengembangan Pembelajaran*, 8(2), 373–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2024.2390393>
- Gul Muhammad, Khalid Hussain, & Shakeel Jan Vighio. (2026). Pakistan's Soft Power in International Relations: A Case Study of Cultural Diplomacy and Media Influence. *The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies*, 4(1), 4648–4659. <https://doi.org/10.59075/ve0s4m73>
- Handayani, N., Subagyo, A., Hadi, M. S., & Anggoro, W. (2025). Management Strategy, Character Formation and Modern Civilization Principles for Islamic Education in Indonesia. *Dinasti International Journal of Education Management And Social Science*, 6(5), 4241–4249. <https://doi.org/10.38035/dijemss.v6i5.4843>
- Haq, S. U., & Kwok, R. Y. keung. (2024). Encountering "the Other" in Religious Social Media: A Cross-Cultural Analysis. *Social Media and Society*, 10(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241303363>
- Hayati, A. N. S., & Ninuk Sholikhah Akhiroh. (2026). Rethinking Foreign Culture and Social Studies: Students' Perspective in A Southern Thailand Muslim School. *AJARCDE (Asian Journal of Applied Research for Community Development and Empowerment)*, 10(1), 313–319. <https://doi.org/10.29165/ajarcde.v10i1.935>
- Hill, A., Emery, S., & Dymont, J. (2023). Introduction to the Australian Curriculum Sustainability Cross-Curriculum Priority. *Geographical Education*, 33(2), 8–10. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.593627849941446>
- Iqbal, M., Wahyuni, B. D., & Ridwan, W. (2025). Sowing Harmony: Inclusive Education for Active Tolerance in Multicultural Schools of the Land of Rafflesia. *Edureligia : Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 09(01), 154–165. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.33650/edureligia.v9i1.10488>
- Kuniawan, A., Suryatna, Y., Saifuddin, Yusup, Carnawi, & Muspiroh, N. (2025). Examining Leadership, Digital Adaptation, Organizational Culture, and Lecturer Performance as the Predictors of Enhancing Competitiveness of Cyber Islamic University. *Journal of Lifestyle and SDGs Review*, 5(3), 4914. <https://doi.org/10.47172/2965-730x.sdgsreview.v5.n03.pe04914>
- Kurniawan, M., Hasnur, J., & Siska, S. Y. (2025). Character Building in University Students: Comprehension of Islamic Value & Discipline. *Edureligia : Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 09(01), 48–67. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.33650/edureligia.v9i1.11342>
- Kusuma, M. T. A., Muharom, F., & Jandra, M. (2025). Transformation of Pesantren Education Management in the Digital Era (Analysis of Tradition Adaptation Through Educational Innovation Theory). *Educational Studies*

- and Research Journal, 2(1), 48–56.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.60036/1q2rm780>
- Lin, Z., & Jiang, Y. (2023). Character Strengths, Meaning in Life, Personal Goal, and Career Adaptability Among Impoverished College Students: A Chain-Mediating Model. *Heliyon*, 9(2), e13232.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e13232>
- Missier, C. A. (2025). A Qualitative Study of Digital Religious Influence: Perspectives from Christian, Hindu, and Muslim Gen Y and Gen Z in Mumbai, India. *Religions*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16010073>
- Mohammad, M. (2024). Al-Qur'an-Based Paradigm in Science Integration at the Al-Qur'an Science University, Indonesia. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 80(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9459>
- Nuraini, D., Jannah, N., & Meliana, A. (2025). Character Education Curriculum Adaptation Assistance to Build Students' Religious Culture. *Applied Community Services Journal*, 1(2), 75–86.
<https://doi.org/10.61987/acs.v1i2.1250>
- Peng-Keller, S., Balboni, M., Balboni, T., Haussmann, A., Haythorn, T., Mösl, P., Neuhold, D., Nuzum, D. R., Smeets, W., & Swift, C. (2025). Spiritual Care at the Crossroads: An Ecumenical White Paper on the Future of Christian Healthcare Chaplaincy. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 64(2), 1031–1046.
- Rahman, T. U., Shah, S., Hassan, S., & Fahad, S. (2025). Food Security Challenges and Adaptation Strategies in China Amidst Global Climate Change. *Journal of Umm Al-Qura University for Applied Sciences*, 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-025-02255-0>
- Rexhepi, B., & Bajrami, A. (2025). Ethno-Pedagogical Module: A Theoretical Exploration of Knowledge Transmission in Ethnobiological Systems. *International Journal of Environment, Engineering and Education*, 7(1), 1–12.
<https://doi.org/10.55151/ijeeedu.v7i1.181>
- Saini, S. (2026). Navigating the Australian Higher Education Landscape: From the Lens of Mature-Aged International Students. *Coresource* 4, 12(1), 101–119.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83662-226-020261006>
- Sinaga, M. N. A., Fadhli, M., Al Fawaz, A. A., & Aulia, F. (2026). Digital Library-Based LMS with TRINGO Strategy: Cross-Tradition Approach for Technological Content Knowledge Development. *Educational Technology in Developing Countries*, 1(1), 43–62. <https://doi.org/10.64929/etdc.v1i1.65>
- Solodka, A., Filatova, O., Hinkevych, O., & Spanatiy, O. (2023). Cross-Cultural Language Learning: Interpretative Engagement. *Arab World English Journal*, 12(3), 82–96. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol12no3.6>
- Strielkowski, W., Grebennikova, V., Lisovskiy, A., Rakhimova, G., & Vasileva, T. (2025). AI-Driven Adaptive Learning for Sustainable Educational Transformation. *Sustainable Development*, 33(2), 1921–1947.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.3221>
- Sudajit-Apa, M., & Hasamoh, A. (2026). Thai-Muslim Young Adults' Narrative Identities as Multilingual Learners: Intersections of Individualization, Language Ideologies, and Ethnic Accent Bullying. *International Journal of the*

- Sociology of Language*, 21(2), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2025-0063>
- Suhendi, S., Khoiruddin, H., Ihsan, M. N., & Nasir, T. M. (2025). Hasyim Asy'ari's Dimensions of Multicultural Spiritual Leadership: Harmony in Education and Society in Indonesia. *Al-Hayat: Journal of Islamic Education*, 9(1), 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.35723/ajie.v9i1.50>
- Tang, L., & Zhang, C. (2023). Global Research on International Students' Intercultural Adaptation in a Foreign Context: A Visualized Bibliometric Analysis of the Scientific Landscape. *SAGE Open*, 13(4), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231218849>
- Zafar, M. B., & Abu-Hussin, M. F. (2025). Religiosity and Islamic Work Ethic: A Cross-Cultural Comparison in Majority and Non-Majority Muslim Countries. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 105(December 2024), 102115. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2024.102115>
- Zuhdi, M., & Syarief, K. (2023). Constructing the Concept of Student Well-Being within Indonesian Islamic Higher Education. *Religions*, 14(9), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091140>