

Navigating cross-cultural classrooms: Adaptation experiences of Indonesian ISMA students abroad

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Abstract

This qualitative study employed a narrative-based thematic analysis to explore the adaptation experiences of five Indonesian ISMA students studying abroad. Drawing on participants' reflective narratives, the study identified five major themes: Initial Cultural Shock, Academic Adjustment, Language Barriers and Opportunities, Social Integration, and Personal Growth and Reflection. Findings reveal that students initially faced cultural, academic, and social disorientation as they navigated unfamiliar educational systems, classroom dynamics, and intercultural norms. However, these early challenges gradually evolved into opportunities for meaningful learning, cross-cultural engagement, and personal transformation. The adaptation process was found to be dynamic and multidimensional, shaped by emotional resilience, social integration, and reflective self-awareness. The study concludes that studying abroad is not merely an academic pursuit but a transformative journey that fosters intercultural competence, self-efficacy, and global-mindedness among Indonesian students.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's integrated world, students' mobility across national borders has become a defining feature of higher education; particularly at the university level. International exchange programs provide students with opportunities not only to enhance the educational knowledge but also to engage with diverse cultural environments (Dawya & Okvitawanli, 2023). Thereby, it is about broadening the students' global perspectives. In Indonesia, the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) has emerged as a flagship government initiative.

Being Administered by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, IISMA equips undergraduate students with the skills to navigate both academic and cultural contexts abroad while preparing them for the demands of a competitive global workforce (Pho & Schartner, 2021). Its emphasis on cross-cultural engagement underscores the growing recognition that intercultural competence is as essential as academic excellence toward students in the area of university (Sudarwati et al., 2024).

In reality, navigating foreign academic and cultural settings, however, presents various challenges (Sabarniati et al., 2024). Many Indonesian students are accustomed to teacher-centered classrooms, yet abroad they often encounter more student-centered, discussion-driven, and critical-thinking-oriented environments (Nastiti, 2023). Such pedagogical differences reflect the process of academic adjustment, which can create both opportunities for growth and barriers to effective



participation (Song & Xia, 2021). Beyond academics, students often experience the early-stage cultural disorientation when adapting to new social norms, communication styles, and unfamiliar cultural expectations (Bukhari et al., 2025). Added to this are language barriers, particularly in engaging with academic discourse and specialized terminology in English, which may initially hinder but can also present valuable opportunities for linguistic and intellectual development.

In understanding the challenges faced by international students, one of the widely recognized frameworks is the *U-Curve* model. It is related to the cultural adaptation as being proposed by Lysgaard in (Wray et al., 2025). This model suggests that individuals undergoing cross-cultural transitions typically experience a dynamic emotional trajectory shaped like the letter *U*. At the initial stage, students often encounter a *honeymoon phase* characterized by excitement and curiosity about the host culture. However, as daily realities emerge, students may enter a phase of culture shock; marked by frustration, homesickness, and feelings of disorientation (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024).

The urgency of studying these adaptation experiences lies in the fact that cross-cultural adjustment is not automatic; it is shaped by a complex interplay of personal, academic, and sociocultural factors. Misunderstandings stemming from divergent communication norms, for instance, may lead to feelings of isolation or reduced classroom confidence. Conversely, successful social integration with peers and host communities enhances engagement, academic achievement, and long-term intercultural competence (Makeeva et al., 2021). Equally important, the journey abroad often fosters personal growth and reflection, as students reassess their identities, broaden their perspectives, and build resilience in the face of challenges. Although the IISMA program is relatively new, early cohorts have highlighted both the difficulties and opportunities encountered abroad, emphasizing the need for systematic scholarly inquiry into these experiences.

The existing literature on cross-cultural adaptation offers several useful frameworks. The reference of students' adaptation (Yılmaz & Temizkan, 2022) points out that, adaptation as a dynamic process of stress, adjustment, and growth. According to (Alasmari, 2023) outlines the strategies of assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization, while the Process Model of Intercultural Competence highlights skills such as empathy, adaptability, and tolerance of ambiguity. While these models provide valuable lenses, there remains a paucity of empirical research on Indonesian students' adaptation in non-Indonesian classroom contexts (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023).

The former research on international students has predominantly focused on large, long-established sending countries such as China, India, or South Korea. While valuable, these findings may not fully capture the distinctive experiences of Indonesian students, whose linguistic, educational, and cultural backgrounds differ significantly from those of other Asian countries (Gong et al., 2021). Moreover, IISMA students participate in short-term (for example: one semester) mobility programs, which may shape their adaptation strategies differently from those of students in longer-term degree programs. This phenomena in the literature creates a compelling case for a focused study on IISMA participants' adaptation experiences.

Previous research on student adaptation has often relied on qualitative surveys, longitudinal tracking, or experimental designs, each offering useful but limited perspectives. These methods tend to prioritize measurable outcomes while overlooking the depth of personal narratives and the subjective meaning-making process inherent in adaptation. Consequently, there remains a gap in understanding how IISMA students personally experience and navigate the adaptation process, especially from their own perspectives. This study addresses that gap by employing a qualitative, narrative-based approach to foreground the voices of participants, capturing the nuanced challenges they face and the strategies they develop to overcome them.

Furthermore, this study situates its inquiry within the framework of Cross-Cultural Communication Theory, which underscores the role of language, cultural norms, and nonverbal cues in shaping interactions across cultures. The integration of Language and Academic Discourse Theory is particularly relevant, as IISMA students often navigate academic jargon, specialized terminology, and discipline-specific expressions in English, a language that, while widely taught in Indonesia, is not the primary medium of instruction for most students. The Narrative Study approach complements these theoretical lenses by allowing a holistic examination of the interplay between cultural adjustment and academic engagement.

While numerous studies have explored the adaptation of international students in Western contexts, there is limited research focusing specifically on Indonesian participants of the IISMA program, particularly from universities that are in the process of strengthening their international networks, such as UBSI (Bina Sarana Informatika University). Existing literature often centres on students from larger, research-intensive universities, thereby overlooking the unique adaptation experiences of those from teaching-focused institutions. Most prior works address cultural adaptation in general terms, without giving equal attention to the nuanced stages such as: the onset of cross-cultural disorientation, academic adjustment, language barriers, opportunities for personal growth, and the process of social integration. These dimensions are crucial to understanding the holistic journey of adaptation.

The study adopts a narrative inquiry approach, which is widely recognized for its ability to capture the depth and complexity of individuals lived experiences across cultural boundaries. As (Wei, 2021) emphasizes, narrative inquiry allows researchers to explore how people make meaning of their experiences through personal stories. In the context of intercultural studies, this approach has been effectively used to understand identity negotiation and adaptation processes among students studying abroad.

This gap highlights the need for an in-depth exploration of how Indonesian ISMA awardees from UBSI navigate cross-cultural classrooms, overcome challenges, and leverage opportunities to contribute academically and personally, both to themselves and their home institution. The significance of this research extends beyond the immediate experiences of IISMA students. By identifying key factors that facilitate or hinder adaptation, the findings can inform program designers, host universities, and policy-makers in refining pre-departure orientations, support systems, and intercultural training programs. Additionally, the study contributes to the broader academic discourse on international student mobility, offering insights that may be transferable to other short-term exchange contexts. Much of the existing targeted-university on international students focuses on South Korea, Malaysia, Spain, and Poland; while overlooking the distinctive experiences of Indonesian students whose linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds differ significantly. Moreover, IISMA participants engage in short-term mobility programs, which may shape their adaptation differently from long-term degree-seeking students.

This study addresses that issue by employing a qualitative, narrative-based approach to foreground the voices of IISMA participants. Also, it is to capture the nuanced challenges, strategies, and transformative experiences; including cultural shock, academic adjustment, language barriers, social integration, and personal growth and reflection, that characterize their academic adaptation journeys.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

The narrative inquiry was used to reconstruct each participant's adaptation story, focusing on the sequence of experiences, turning points, and transformative moments encountered during their study abroad journey. This narrative lens allowed the researcher to trace how students' experiences unfolded over time, from initial culture shock to eventual personal growth. Meanwhile, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to explore the subjective meanings participants attached to their experiences. This interpretative process sought to understand how and why each student made sense of their challenges, coping strategies, and identity transformations. Integrating both approaches allowed the analysis to move beyond simply describing what happened (Narrative Inquiry) toward interpreting what those experiences meant to the participants (IPA).

The interview data were analyzed using a combination of Narrative Inquiry, as outlined by Connelly and Clandinin in (Puspitasari, 2023) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), employing the six-step thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke in (Naeem et al., 2023). This methodological integration enabled a comprehensive understanding of the students' adaptation processes, both as stories of lived experiences and as interpretations of meaning derived from those experiences. In addition, within this study the generation of themes followed an inductive coding approach, allowing patterns and meanings to emerge directly from the participants' narratives

rather than from predetermined theoretical categories. This inductive process ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the data and closely reflected the lived experiences of the selected-five IISMA students from Bina Sarana Informatika University.

The researcher conducted multiple coding cycles that involved thorough reading, open coding, categorization, and refinement of emerging themes. All coding was performed manually without the use of specialized software; instead, the researcher employed detailed notes and spreadsheet matrices to organize codes, track analytical decisions, and maintain consistency. This systematic and transparent approach strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the thematic interpretation. The combination of Narrative Inquiry and IPA thus allowed the study to portray both the chronological development of adaptation and the deeper interpretative meanings underlying each experience. This dual perspective provided a richer and more holistic understanding of IISMA students' cross-cultural adaptation, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with five IISMA students who had completed their study abroad programs. Due to geographical distance, all interviews were held online via *Zoom Meeting*, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy and completeness. All recordings were later transcribed verbatim by the researcher, followed by careful verification to maintain fidelity to the participants' original expressions. This approach allowed for rich, detailed narratives that captured both the linguistic and emotional dimensions of their adaptation experiences.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analyzed using a narrative-based thematic analysis. The procedure involved familiarizing the researcher with the transcripts, generating initial codes, and identifying patterns that were subsequently organized into themes. These themes were then reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to capture the essence of participants' experiences. Throughout the process, validity and trustworthiness were ensured through triangulation, member checking, and systematic documentation.

The findings of this study show that IISMA students experience a multilayered adaptation process shaped by cultural, academic, linguistic, and social transitions. Although their early stages abroad were marked by disorientation and adjustment challenges, these difficulties gradually evolved into valuable opportunities for learning and self-development. Social integration and reflective engagement emerged as key factors that supported their ability to navigate unfamiliar environments. Overall, their narratives illustrate how study abroad experiences foster not only academic adaptation but also meaningful personal growth and increased intercultural resilience.

Researcher Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

The researcher recognizes that professional background as a lecturer who has supervised IISMA students may have shaped how it approached and interpreted the stories. Maintaining reflexivity was therefore essential throughout the research process. The researcher consciously reflected on assumptions, positionality, and potential influence during data interpretation to ensure that participants' voices remained authentically represented.

All participants voluntarily took part in this study after providing informed consent. Their anonymity and confidentiality were carefully protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were handled with respect for participants' privacy. The research complied with ethical standards for qualitative inquiry involving human participants and aimed to uphold transparency, trust, and respect throughout the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organized thematically, integrating the participants' narratives with the researcher's interpretative insights. Five key themes emerged from the analysis: *The Initial Cultural Shock*, *The Academic Adjustment*, *Language Barriers and Opportunities*, *Social Integration*, and *Personal*

Growth and Reflection. Each theme below combines participants’ raw accounts with analytical interpretation to illustrate how IISMA students navigated their cross-cultural adaptation journeys as follows.

Table 1. Students’ Data of IISMA

No.	Name	Study Program	Targeted University	Country
1.	S.D.	English Literature	Hanyang University	South Korea
2.	A.H.	English Literature	Universiti Kebangsaan	Malaysia
3.	S.C.	English Literature	Universitat Pompeu Fabra	Spain
4.	A.S.	English Literature	University of Warsaw	Poland
5.	A.D	English Literature	Daegu Catholic University	South Korea

Initial Cultural Shock

The first major theme, it is the Initial Cultural Shock, encapsulating the students’ early encounters with unfamiliar cultural landscapes, which subsequently triggered feelings of confusion, discomfort, and disorientation. Participants consistently reported significant discrepancies upon arrival in areas such as social norms, communication styles, academic expectations, and daily behaviors when contrasted with their experiences in Indonesia. These immediate reactions align precisely with the seminal work of Oberg, the Canadian anthropologist who originated the fundamental theoretical framework for cultural adaptation and first popularized the term “*culture shock*” in the 1960 (Bai & Wang, 2024). The first theme highlights how students initially experienced confusion and disorientation when encountering new cultural environments.

S.D -who spent a semester at Hanyang University in South Korea- shared that “*everything felt overwhelmingly different, the language, the food, even the way people interacted,*” capturing the disorienting nature of the early days abroad. Everyday tasks such as navigating public transportation or interpreting subtle social cues became unexpectedly challenging, and the feelings of being lost and homesick reflect what Oberg in other relevant study (Okafor, 2024) describes as the emotional turbulence characteristic of the initial stage of cultural shock. This specific shift strongly resonates with Ward and Kennedy’s conceptualization of progressive cultural adjustment, as detailed in (Ammigan et al., 2022). Within this framework, students do not merely react to an unfamiliar environment; they actively reinterpret it. This reinterpretation is achieved through active engagement with the environment and reflective learning, transforming the initially foreign setting into something understood and adopted

A similar sense of dislocation was experienced by A.S. at the University of Warsaw, who recalled feeling “*like an outsider,*” and unsure how to connect with local peers. The strategy of joining student organizations and attending cultural events illustrates the role of intentional participation in fostering social belonging, an insight consistent with Kim’s integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation in (Guerriche & Grimshaw, 2024), which emphasizes interpersonal interaction as a catalyst for internal transformation.

The narratives of S.D. and A.S. reveal that cultural shock is not a uniform emotional crisis but a multilayered process involving confusion, negotiation, and eventual reorientation. Although they studied in distinct cultural regions (East Asia and Eastern Europe) their descriptions converge on how early feelings of unfamiliarity gradually gave way to meaningful personal growth. This finding extends existing research by highlighting that IISMA students experience cultural shock not merely as a disruptive phase but as a transformative entry point that reshapes their worldview, interpersonal sensitivity, and sense of self within global contexts.

Academic Adjustment

The academic adaptation represented another major challenge, as students were required to navigate unfamiliar learning systems, classroom dynamics, and pedagogical expectations that differed significantly from what they had previously experienced. This included adjusting to new assessment styles, more independent learning structures, and a greater emphasis on critical participation and self-directed inquiry. For many of them, understanding professors’ expectations, engaging in open debates, and completing assignments with different academic conventions demanded a considerable

amount of cognitive flexibility and emotional resilience. These shifts illustrate that academic adaptation is not merely about understanding course material, but about internalizing new academic cultures and redefining one's role as a learner within an international environment.

A.H., who studied at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, recalled that, the early academic experience was inseparable from a broader phase of cultural adjustment. That student noted *"everything felt foreign, the language, social norms, and daily routines,"* and this sense of unfamiliarity seeped into classroom interactions where expectations and learning habits differed from what that student had previously known. As A.H. immersed more deeply in these unfamiliar environments, then beginning to *"connect with others and appreciate differences,"* suggesting a process of academic socialization that involves not only learning new systems but also reinterpreting one's place within it (Anson, 2024). The reflection on challenges enhanced resilience. Thus, this underscores the idea that academic adjustment is a developmental journey shaped by emotional, cognitive, and intercultural growth

Following S.C., studying at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Spain- described a similar sense of disorientation, stating that both the *"environment, language, and classroom dynamics were vastly different,"* from the academic experience in Indonesia. This echoes (Whittaker & Montgomery, 2022)'s argument that students often confront a dual adjustment challenge: coping with unfamiliar academic expectations while simultaneously negotiating new cultural landscapes. The shift from seeing differences as the context of both *"obstacles,"* to viewing them and *"the opportunities to grow,"* align closely with transformative learning theory Mezirow in (Zhao & Liu, 2022), which highlights how disorienting educational contexts can stimulate critical reflection and personal reinvention.

The narratives of A.H. and S.C. illustrate that academic adjustment is not merely about mastering coursework or understanding institutional procedures. Rather, it involves navigating unfamiliar pedagogical expectations, negotiating new communication norms, and reshaping personal identity as a learner within global academic landscapes. Both students demonstrate that academic adjustment unfolds through an intertwined process of cultural, emotional, and intellectual adaptation, extending existing scholarship by showing how Indonesian ISMA students transform academic challenges into catalysts for resilience, belonging, and intercultural maturity

Language Barriers and Opportunities

Language emerged as both a barrier and a bridge to integration, shaping not only how students communicated but also how they perceived themselves within unfamiliar academic and social environments. For many of them, limited proficiency in the host-country language initially created hesitation, misunderstandings, and a sense of distance from local peers. Classroom discussions, casual conversations, and academic tasks often felt intimidating, affecting their confidence and willingness to participate. Over time, language also became a powerful medium through which they built relationships, accessed cultural knowledge, and gained a deeper sense of belonging

For many students, language functioned as both a source of anxiety and an avenue for connection, shaping how they participated academically and socially in their new environments. S.C., studying at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Spain, described the language barrier as *"one of the biggest challenges,"* emphasizing that, although English was widely understood, everyday interactions often shifted into Spanish or Catalan. This shift made feeling *"left out,"* revealing how linguistic exclusion can subtly influence students' sense of belonging. The initial hesitation to speak for fear of making mistakes aligns with Krashen's concept of the affective filter in (Malik et al., 2021), which suggests that anxiety can impede language acquisition.

A comparable experience emerged in A.D.'s account from Daegu Catholic University in South Korea. Although the reflection initially focused on the broader cultural shock, it is evident that language differences amplified his sense of being overwhelmed. That student's efforts to *"observe surroundings, learn local interactions, and adapt gradually,"* mirror the principles of sociocultural learning theory (Lantolf & Poehner, 2023), which views language acquisition as embedded in social interaction and mediated by participation in community practices.

Together, the narratives of S.C. and A.D. illustrate that language challenges are not merely obstacles to communication but pivotal turning points in students' adjustment journeys. Their experiences reinforce the idea that language simultaneously constrains and enables, initially reinforcing feelings of exclusion, but ultimately opening pathways to cultural understanding, confidence-building, and intercultural competence. These insights extend existing scholarship by highlighting how Indonesian ISMA students reinterpret linguistic barriers as catalysts for meaningful engagement with their host communities.

Social Integration

Social connection proved crucial in reducing isolation and supporting cultural adjustment, functioning as an essential anchor for students navigating the unfamiliar social and cultural landscapes of their host countries. Meaningful interactions with peers, host families, and local communities provided emotional reassurance, practical guidance, and a sense of belonging that counterbalanced the disorientation often associated with early stages of adaptation. Through shared activities, collaborative academic work, and informal conversations, students gradually developed interpersonal trust and cultural understanding, allowing them to reinterpret their surroundings not as intimidating spaces but as environments filled with opportunities for growth.

A.H.'s experience at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia illustrates how social integration becomes a gradual process shaped by uncertainty, curiosity, and intentional engagement. She recalled feeling hesitant to approach others because she worried about unintentionally violating social norms, a concern that echoes (Collins et al., 2022)'s findings that early-stage international students often struggle with anxiety over social appropriateness. The participation in student activities and community events created opportunities to build meaningful friendships, allowing to discover the importance of openness and respect in forming cross-cultural relationships.

A similar trajectory can be seen in A.S.'s account from the University of Warsaw, where that person initially struggled to connect due to the more reserved social culture encountering. The uncertainty about initiating conversations or joining group activities aligns with Berardo and Deardorff's argument in (ElKaleh & Stryker, 2023) that differing communication styles often create invisible barriers that hinder early social engagement. Realizing that integration required effort, A.S. began attending campus events, joining discussions, and approaching others with "*genuine curiosity*," demonstrating agency in creating the own social pathways.

A.D.'s experience at Daegu Catholic University in South Korea highlights the complex and often non-linear process of developing social belonging in a new cultural context. He initially felt disconnected from the campus community, noting that "*most local students already had their circles*," a sentiment commonly reported among international students navigating established social networks (Mohamed & George, 2025). The added challenge of language differences made everyday conversations more intimidating, reinforcing the position as "*an observer rather than a participant*," However, meaningful change occurred when A.D. took the initiative to join student clubs and volunteer in campus activities, demonstrating how structured social spaces can serve as effective entry points into host communities.

Across the experiences of A.H., A.S., and A.D., social integration emerged as a multidimensional process shaped by cultural norms, communication styles, and students' willingness to engage with their host environments. Although each of them encountered distinct forms of social hesitation, ranging from concerns about appropriateness in Malaysia, navigating reserved social norms in Poland, to overcoming established peer circles in South Korea, their narratives collectively reveal that initial social distance is a common phase rather than an indication of failure. Participation in campus activities, student clubs, community events, and intercultural gatherings served as key turning points that transformed unfamiliar settings into supportive social spaces.

Personal Growth and Reflection

Finally, students described how the entire process of living and studying abroad led to profound self-transformation, shaping not only their academic identities but also their personal values, worldviews, and sense of agency. The challenges they encountered, ranging from cultural disorientation to

linguistic barriers and social uncertainty, became catalysts for introspection and resilience, prompting them to reconsider their assumptions and adapt to unfamiliar contexts with greater flexibility. As they navigated new responsibilities, forged intercultural relationships, and engaged with diverse perspectives, students developed heightened emotional maturity, independence, and confidence.

The personal reflections shared by the students illustrate how studying abroad became a deeply transformative journey that extended far beyond academic achievement. S.D., who spent a semester at Hanyang University in South Korea, noted that the time abroad taught “*to be independent and adaptable*,” emphasizing how challenges that once triggered self-doubt eventually revealed the strengths and thresholds. Then, it grows ability to articulate opinions, make decisions confidently, and step outside the comfort zone aligns with Chickering and Reisser’s theory in (Cirugeda et al., 2024) of identity development, which highlights how unfamiliar environments encourage students to refine autonomy, competence, and emotional maturity.

A similar path of self-transformation was described by A.D., also studying in South Korea, who explained that adaptation gradually became a process of self-discovery. That individual reflected on how living far from home required to “*take responsibility*,” manage time wisely, and find comfort in solitude, experiences that resonate with Mezirow’s in (Hill et al., 2023) transformative learning framework, where critical reflection in unfamiliar contexts reshapes personal meaning structures. That person realizes that, solitude could serve as “*a moment for reflection rather than discomfort*,” suggesting a shift toward deeper self-awareness and emotional resilience.

As a whole, the experiences of S.D. and A.D. demonstrate that, personal growth during international mobility is a cumulative process shaped by sustained engagement with adversity, reflection, and intercultural encounters. Their narratives show that IISMA students not only adapt to new environments but also reconstruct their sense of identity, agency, and purpose through the challenges they navigate abroad. These insights extend existing literature by emphasizing that personal transformation is not a peripheral outcome of student mobility but a central dimension that equips students with lifelong capacities, confidence, empathy, resilience, and global mindedness

The overall findings of this study reveal that the adaptation journey of IISMA students abroad is not a linear transition but a complex and evolving process. Each participant’s experience reflected a combination of emotional, social, linguistic, and academic dimensions that interacted dynamically throughout their stay. Initially, students encountered cultural disorientation and academic challenges that tested their comfort zones. However, these struggles became essential learning moments that fostered resilience, intercultural understanding, and personal development. Language emerged as both a barrier and a bridge, limiting communication at first but later opening pathways to deeper cultural connection and friendship. Social integration was identified as the most influential factor in transforming isolation into belonging. By participating actively in campus life and local communities, students found meaning and confidence in their new environments. Ultimately, the process of adaptation led to significant personal growth, reshaping how students viewed themselves, others, and the world.

To provide a clearer overview of the students’ adaptation experiences, Table 2 summarizes the thematic findings that emerged from the analysis. Each theme represents a major dimension of the participants’ cross-cultural journey, encompassing emotional, academic, linguistic, and social aspects. The “*Frequency*” column indicates how many of the five participants experienced each theme, while the “*Key Insight*” column highlights the core meaning and interpretative essence drawn from their narratives. This summary serves as a bridge between individual stories and the broader thematic synthesis, illustrating how shared experiences collectively portray the dynamic and multidimensional nature of adaptation among IISMA students abroad.

The thematic coding of IISMA students’ experiences reveals that adaptation abroad is a complex process shaped by overlapping themes rather than isolated challenges. Initial cultural shock, academic adjustment, language barriers, social integration, and personal growth all emerged across participants’ narratives with varying degrees of emphasis. While cultural shock and social integration appeared most frequently, academic and linguistic challenges also played significant roles in shaping students’ journeys. Importantly, personal growth was consistently linked to the ways

Table 2. Summary of Thematic Findings

No.	Theme	Frequency	Key Insight
1.	The Initial Cultural Shock	3/5	Students reported feelings of disorientation and stress when facing new cultural norms. However, they emphasized that these challenges gradually transformed into opportunities for growth.
2.	The Academic Adjustment	3/5	Adapting to independent learning and interactive class discussions was difficult but became a catalyst for developing time management, confidence, and collaborative skills.
3.	The Language Barriers & Opportunities	2/5	While initially intimidating, language challenges encouraged students to practice more, leading to improved communication skills and deeper cultural understanding.
4.	The Social Integration	4/5	Building friendships and joining communities were essential for reducing isolation and fostering belonging, though this process required effort and openness.
5.	The Personal Growth & Reflection	2/5	Experiences abroad enhanced students' independence, resilience, and self-awareness, often through reflection and coping with homesickness or uncertainty.

participants navigated these struggles. Together, the findings suggest that adaptation is multidimensional, requiring resilience, reflection, and intercultural competence. To provide a clearer understanding of the students' adaptation journey, their narratives were organized into key recurring themes. This classification highlights both the shared and unique aspects of their experiences while studying abroad. For ease of reference, the thematic coding of IISMA Students' Experiences is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of Thematic Coding

No.	Students of IISMA	The Initial Cultural Shock	The Academic Adjustment	The Language Barriers & Opportunities	The Social Integration	The Personal Growth & Reflection
1.	S. D.	√	√		√	√
2.	A. H.		√		√	
3.	S. C.	√	√	√		
4.	A. S.	√			√	
5.	A. D.			√	√	√
Frequency		3	3	2	4	2

The thematic coding above reveals that IISMA students' adaptation is shaped by overlapping challenges and opportunities. Cultural shock and social integration appeared most frequently, while academic adjustment and language barriers also influenced their journeys in meaningful ways. Personal growth emerged as a unifying theme, reflecting how students transformed struggles into resilience and intercultural competence. Overall, the findings highlight adaptation abroad as a dynamic and multidimensional process.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the adaptation experiences of IISMA students abroad, highlighting the multifaceted challenges and opportunities they encountered. Through thematic analysis, five recurring themes were identified: initial cultural shock, academic adjustment, language barriers and opportunities, social integration, and personal growth and reflection. The findings suggest that while students initially struggled with disorientation, unfamiliar academic practices, and communication barriers, these experiences ultimately fostered resilience, confidence, and intercultural competence.

Social integration played a crucial role in reducing isolation, while personal growth emerged as an enduring outcome that extended beyond the academic sphere. Collectively, these themes illustrate that adaptation is not a linear process but rather a dynamic negotiation of challenges and resources across cultural contexts. The study underscores the value of international programs such as IISMA in preparing students to become globally minded individuals equipped with adaptability, empathy, and reflective capacities essential for navigating an increasingly interconnected world.

Despite its valuable insights, this study acknowledges several limitations. The small sample size of five participants, all from a single institution, limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the participants shared relatively similar demographic backgrounds, which may not fully represent the broader diversity of Indonesian students studying abroad. Future research could expand the participant pool across multiple institutions and include more diverse profiles to offer a more comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural adaptation experiences.

The findings highlight the importance of providing stronger pre-departure cultural and academic preparation for IISMA participants. Stakeholders and program designers should incorporate structured orientation programs focusing on cultural awareness, communication skills, and adaptive learning strategies. Educators at both home and host institutions are encouraged to offer ongoing mentorship and intercultural support to help students navigate adjustment challenges more effectively. By integrating these insights, IISMA and similar programs can enhance students' readiness, resilience, and capacity to thrive in diverse international academic environments.

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