



Thai International Students' Experiences in Studying Islamic Education in Indonesia: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: This study explores the experiences of international students from Thailand in pursuing Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia, focusing on the challenges and opportunities faced. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were obtained through observation, interviews, and case study analysis using the Cresswell (2016). The results of the study revealed that students faced major obstacles in the form of limitations in understanding the language of instruction, local cultural differences, and difficulties in understanding contextual religious terminology. Barriers to integrating technology into Islamic Education learning also exacerbated the existing challenges. However, significant opportunities also emerged, such as enriching religious knowledge through comparing theological perspectives, openness to religious interpretations, and learning experiences in an inclusive multicultural environment. In addition, limited support from peers and lecturers also helped Thai students overcome these obstacles. The contribution of these findings lies in a deeper understanding of the dynamics of religious learning in a cross-cultural context and the importance of adapting more inclusive teaching strategies. The results of this study can be a basis for educational institutions in designing learning programs that support international students, especially in overcoming linguistic, cultural, and technological challenges, in order to improve the quality of their learning experience in Indonesia.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman mahasiswa internasional asal Thailand dalam mengikuti Pendidikan Agama Islam di Indonesia, dengan fokus pada tantangan dan peluang yang dihadapi. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, data diperoleh melalui observasi, wawancara, dan analisis studi kasus dengan model Cresswell (2016). Hasil penelitian mengungkap bahwa siswa menghadapi kendala utama berupa keterbatasan dalam memahami bahasa pengantar, perbedaan budaya lokal, serta kesulitan dalam memahami terminologi agama yang bersifat kontekstual. Hambatan integrasi teknologi dalam pembelajaran Pendidikan Islam juga memperparah tantangan yang ada. Meskipun demikian, peluang yang signifikan juga muncul, seperti pengayaan pengetahuan agama melalui perbandingan perspektif

teologis, keterbukaan terhadap interpretasi agama, dan pengalaman belajar dalam lingkungan multikultural yang inklusif. Selain itu, dukungan terbatas dari rekan sebaya dan dosen juga membantu mahasiswa Thailand mengatasi hambatan tersebut. Kontribusi temuan ini terletak pada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang dinamika pembelajaran agama dalam konteks lintas budaya serta pentingnya adaptasi strategi pengajaran yang lebih inklusif. Hasil penelitian ini dapat menjadi landasan bagi institusi pendidikan dalam merancang program pembelajaran yang mendukung siswa internasional, khususnya dalam mengatasi tantangan linguistik, budaya, dan teknologi, guna meningkatkan kualitas pengalaman belajar mereka di Indonesia.

Keywords: Thailand international student, undergraduate, academic journey, Islamic education, Indonesia,.

INTRODUCTION

Thailand and Indonesia have racial similarities as Malay countries, this is one of the driving factors for the increase in the number of Muslim students from Thailand studying in Indonesia (Snodin, 2019). For example, at Walisongo State Islamic University Semarang, the number of Thailand students continues to increase every year with an increase of around 5-10 people per year from 2018 to 2024 (UIN Walisongo, 2024). Apart from Semarang, the distribution of students from Thailand is also significant in Yogyakarta, with the number reaching around 150 students (Jehamun, 2019). The same thing happened at UIN Sultan Thaha Jambi, which this year attracted the interest of nine students from Thailand (Handayani, 2024). However, differences in social, cultural, and religious backgrounds pose challenges for Thailand students in Indonesia, also influenced by the condition of Indonesia as a Muslim-majority country that offers a different environment from life in Thailand as a Muslim minority country (Tainthai & Thompson, 2007). These differences create adaptation challenges that include adjustments to the education system, social customs, and religious practices. However, for many Thailand students, the opportunity to study in Indonesia, which has historical and cultural proximity, and offers a

more in-depth Islamic education, makes the experience worthwhile and full of opportunities (Rabasa, 2005). This gap between opportunities and challenges is the main reason why the experiences of Thai students in Indonesia need to be studied, as an effort to improve future policies.

The increasing number of Thailand students studying in Indonesia has attracted researchers to pay attention to this phenomenon. They have a tendency to focus on three main aspects: socio-cultural adaptation, academic challenges, and language barriers. First, socio-cultural adaptation is an important highlight, especially in adjusting to the local environment and Islamic traditions in Indonesia universities. Chen (2019) dan Sawheny (2023) revealed that this adaptation process is often influenced by cultural differences and values embraced in the student's home country. Second, academic challenges are also often a major concern, especially regarding teaching methods, evaluation systems, and curricula that are different from Thailand's. Baklashova (2016) and Ozturgut (2009) highlighting the differences in pedagogical approaches as well as academic demands that can affect the achievement of international students. Third, language barriers are a prominent issue because Thai students have to adapt to the

language of instruction such as Indonesian or Arabic, which is often an obstacle in understanding academic materials (Tipperary, 2022). Sawir (2012) emphasizing that language skills are a crucial factor in the academic success of international students. However, special research on the experience of Thailand students in the context of Islamic education in Indonesia is still minimal. In fact, a deep understanding of their experiences is very important because it relates to the specific opportunities and challenges they face in the Islamic education system, so further research is needed to provide more comprehensive insights (Jones et al., 2008).

Based on these gaps, this study aims to analyze the experiences of Thailand international students in participating in Islamic Religious Education learning in Indonesia, focusing on the challenges and opportunities faced. This research was carried out at the State Islamic University (UIN) Walisongo Semarang, Indonesia, because this university has a multicultural academic environment and supports international students from various countries, including Thailand. The focus of the research includes three main aspects. First, the challenges faced by Thailand students in understanding PAI materials, especially related to language barriers and different cultural contexts, such as the use of Indonesian and religious terms that are not common in Thailand (Lutfiana et al., 2020). Second, this research will also explore the opportunities that Thailand students get, such as the enrichment of religious knowledge through different perspectives and openness to the diversity of Islamic practices in Indonesia (Schaefer, 2021). Third, this research will discuss how the academic and social environment in Indonesia, especially at UIN Walisongo, supports or hinders the learning experience of international Thailand students, both in terms of academic facilities, interaction

with lecturers and classmates, and social adaptation outside the campus (Wang et al., 2023). Thus, this research is expected to provide a deeper insight into the dynamics of PAI learning for international students in Indonesia.

The arguments in this study predict that the challenges and opportunities faced by Thailand students in studying Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia are very important because they help understand the dynamics of cross-cultural learning. Vygotsky (2012), in his theory of social development, emphasizes the importance of social interaction and language in the learning process, so that language barriers can slow down material understanding. In addition, Pierre Bourdieu (2005) With its concept of habitus, it explains how cultural background affects the way individuals interpret the world. Thailand students may find it difficult to relate Islamic Education material in their undergraduate program to the local cultural context, given that Islamic Education in Indonesia is often taught with examples that are relevant to the local community. However, studies in Indonesia also provide great opportunities for them, especially in enriching religious knowledge through a broader perspective and diversity. Theory of intercultural competence by Deardorff (2017) highlighting that cross-cultural interaction can increase openness to differences and enrich religious understanding. The academic and social environment in Indonesia, although diverse, can also be supportive through social networks and intercultural interactions, as explained by Bourdieu's theory of social capital (Grenfell, 2009). However, in the absence of adequate support, barriers such as social isolation can arise, slowing down the learning and adaptation process of international students.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative design with a case study approach to explore the experiences of international students from Thailand in participating in Islamic Religious Education learning in Indonesia, with a focus on the challenges and opportunities faced. The selection of informants was carried out purposively, where eight students from Thailand were selected as the main informants because of their relevance to the focus of the study. The informants consisted of four female students and four male students, who were selected based on the criteria of active involvement in learning and their ability to provide rich and in-depth information. To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher applied method triangulation using three data collection techniques, namely in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in English for 15 minutes per session with a total duration of 120 minutes, then transliterated into Indonesian to facilitate analysis. To increase the validity of the interview data, the researcher used the member checking technique, where the interview results were reconfirmed with the informants to ensure accurate data interpretation. Verbally, the informants stated that the interview data they provided was allowed to be duplicated.

In addition, field observations are conducted to observe the daily interactions between Thailand students and local students, as well as to see firsthand their academic activities in the classroom. Documentation studies are also conducted to obtain relevant additional information from academic records and related documents. This case study approach provides an opportunity to explore contextual and in-depth information,

especially in understanding the dynamics of adaptation and the challenges faced by international students in a new environment. The data obtained were analyzed using a thematic approach, which made it easier for researchers to identify the main themes related to the experiences of Thailand students in learning Islamic Religious Education, especially regarding cultural, linguistic, and self-development challenges.

Table 1: Informant Profile

It	Initials	Age	Position	Gender
1	TH1	23	Student	Man
2	TH2	23	Student	Man
3	TH3	22	Student	Woman
4	TH4	25	Student	Man
5	TH5	21	Student	Man
6	TH6	22	Student	Woman
7	TH7	24	Student	Woman
8	TH8	23	Student	Woman

Data validity techniques are carried out by member checking and triangulation, while the data analysis technique uses the Cresswell model which involves three main stages: data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with students to get their perspective on the challenges and opportunities faced during learning. This interview is complemented by direct observation during the teaching and learning process, which aims to identify interaction patterns and teaching methods used by Islamic Religious Education lecturers. In addition, document analysis is also applied, including a review of the syllabus, learning materials, and relevant educational policies. This analytical technique utilizes a thematic approach, where data from interviews, observations, and documents are categorized based on key themes, such as language challenges, cultural differences, and opportunities for social and spiritual integration. The data analysis process

was conducted iteratively, with the aim of understanding how Thailand students face difficulties in understanding Islamic religious concepts, as well as how they take advantage of opportunities to deepen their understanding of religion in different cultural contexts. The implementation of the Cresswell (2016) technique allows researchers to obtain a comprehensive picture of the student experience, as well as identify the factors that support or hinder their success in participating in PAI learning in Indonesia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1) Challenges in attending Islamic religious education courses in Indonesia

This study found that international students from Thailand who study at UIN Walisongo Semarang face several main challenges, especially in understanding the language of instruction used in the classroom. Indonesian Language, which is different from their mother tongue, makes the understanding of the lecture material less than optimal. In addition, adjustment to the local cultural context of Indonesia that is different from Thailand's cultural background is also a factor that affects their adaptation in the academic environment. This challenge is further aggravated by differences in understanding religious terminology, especially in the study of Islamic Education. Religious terminology often has contextual nuances that are difficult for foreign students to understand without a deep understanding of the local culture (Abunab et al., 2017). In addition, the integration of technology in learning, which should help facilitate access to

information, is also an obstacle in itself (Tosuntaş et al., 2019). Students from Thailand are often unfamiliar with the technology platform used in learning at UIN Walisongo, this slows down their learning process. These obstacles result in difficulties in understanding and following the lecture material properly.

Observations conducted on August 12, 2024 revealed that students from Thailand who study at UIN Walisongo Semarang have difficulty understanding Indonesian, especially when the language is used as the language of instruction in class. TH1, one of the students, revealed, "In the Fiqh Siyasah course, I felt confused when the lecturer explained the material in Indonesian. Sometimes, I have to look for translations on the app or ask a friend." The inability to adequately master Indonesian before starting lectures is a factor that exacerbates this challenge. According to TH7, "There is no Indonesian Language immersion here for foreign students, this makes it difficult for me." Thailand students, like TH2, also face the same challenge: "When I first came, I only knew a little Indonesian. It's very difficult to follow a quick class discussion." This difficulty forced them to work harder in understanding the material, as revealed by TH3, "I had to jot down all the new words and look them up in the dictionary after college." Difficulties in understanding Indonesian used in an academic context, which turns out to be different from everyday language, make Thai students have to face additional challenges in the teaching and learning process in the classroom.

In addition to language challenges, adaptation to the local

cultural context is a significant obstacle for Thailand students studying in Indonesia (Ratnasari, 2024). TH4 revealed, "In Thailand, our way of thinking about religion is a little different. Here, many aspects are new and difficult to understand." The differences include religious practices on occasions such as the Prophet's Birthday or *tahlilan*, which differ from the more common Buddhist traditions in Thailand. For example, *tahlilan* as a ritual of joint prayer to commemorate death is very foreign to Thailand students who are not used to similar ceremonies in their culture. TH5 added, "When there are religious events on campus, such as recitation before exams, I feel strange because in Thailand we don't have a tradition like this." This cultural difference is also seen in daily practices such as shaking hands with the opposite sex, which in some Muslim circles in Indonesia is considered disrespectful. Furthermore, TH6 said, "I was confused about how to communicate with the lecturers and friends here, because they use different body language and speech styles from Thailand." In Indonesia, the use of direct eye contact with lecturers can be considered a sign of confidence, while in Thailand it can be considered impolite. This difficulty illustrates that cultural adjustment involves many aspects, from religion to communication ethics, which overall slows down the adaptation process of Thailand students in Indonesia.

The cultural context in the study of Islamic Education presents additional challenges for students from Thailand studying in Indonesia. One of the courses that often causes confusion is the History of Islamic Civilization,

especially on topics that discuss the development of Islam in Indonesia. TH1 mentioned, "I often have trouble understanding the history of Wali Songo because we never discuss these figures in the curriculum in Thailand." In Thailand, the history of Islam focuses more on the spread of Islam in the Southeast Asian region involving the kingdoms of Pattani and Champa (Aljunied, 2019), while in Indonesia, the topic of history emphasizes more on the role of Wali Songo in spreading Islam on the island of Java (Kersten, 2017). Students like TH3 feel that "the theological terms used in the Aqidah Philosophy course are difficult to understand because they contain different cultural nuances." These differences in cultural contexts not only affect historical understanding, but also interpretations of theological concepts taught in Indonesia. As a result, foreign students often have to spend more time understanding the local context before they can understand the material well.

The integration of technology in learning, which aims to simplify the learning process, is actually a challenge for Thailand students who study at UIN Walisongo. One example is in the Islamic history course, especially in the section on the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia. Students are assigned to create presentations and essays using e-learning platforms, which is a particular difficulty for them. A TH6 student stated, "I am not used to using technology in learning. In Thailand, we still rely on physical books and face-to-face discussions." This situation is getting more difficult because many universities in Thailand, especially in regions like Patani, still implement a

manual administration system. TH7 added, "In Patani, I learned the traditional way. Incidentally, my home university is still small, and lacks support from the government." Students must adapt to new technologies, which affect their academic performance. TH1 students also expressed a similar challenge, "It takes time to learn how to use the e-learning platform." This shows that the difference in educational infrastructure and technological readiness in Thailand is a factor that affects students' ability to adapt to the technology-based learning system in Indonesia. As a result, they feel left behind and need more time to adjust.

Although the campus has tried to facilitate technology-based learning, Thailand students still face various obstacles in adjusting to these developments. One of the students, TH4, explained that despite the technology training provided, "the explanations were very quick and difficult to understand," indicating that the speed of delivery of technical materials was a big challenge for them. Another student, TH5, highlighted the significant differences between online systems in Indonesia and Thailand, which make adaptation even more difficult. "The online system here is very different from what we are used to in Thailand," he said, emphasizing that the difference in the digital learning environment is also an inhibiting factor. Although technology is expected to facilitate access to information and increase learning effectiveness, for Thailand students, a lack of understanding of how the technology used works actually slows down their learning process. They need

more time and intensive guidance to understand and master the technology. This illustrates the importance of more personalized support and the adjustment of more friendly technology learning methods for international students, especially those from countries with different digital learning ecosystems (Kamalova et al., 2020). Without a deep understanding of technology, students' learning progress can be disrupted.

In addition to technological challenges, the difference in academic systems between Indonesia and Thailand has also slowed down the adaptation of Thailand students. TH6 revealed, "The grading system here is different, in Thailand we focus more on written exams, but here there are a lot of presentation tasks." This condition makes it difficult for Thailand students to adjust to more interactive learning methods in Indonesia. TH7 added, "Here lecturers prefer group discussions, while in Thailand we usually listen to lecturers' lectures." Thailand students who are used to the passive learning system in their home country face challenges in actively participating in discussion-based and collaboration-based learning. Teaching methods in Indonesia that require student involvement in presentations and group work force them to step out of their comfort zone and adapt to different approaches. TH8 confirmed this by stating, "I have to try harder to adapt to tasks that require group collaboration." These differences not only affect the comprehension of the material, but also affect the communication and cooperation skills that Thailand students should further develop. Adapting to a new, more

dynamic and collaborative learning environment requires extra effort, both academically and socially, so students take longer to get comfortable with teaching methods in Indonesia.

Difficulties in adapting to teaching methods and technology not only impact international students' academic achievement, but also their psychological well-being (Can et al., 2021). TH1 described his experience, "I often feel stressed because I can't do well in my studies," pointing out how academic stress can affect emotional states. These challenges are exacerbated by language barriers and difficulties in understanding new cultures. TH2 states, "Sometimes I feel discouraged because I don't understand many things," which shows that the inability to fully understand the material can lead to frustration and despair. Thailand students in particular feel isolated in an academic environment that requires them to work harder than local students. TH3 admits, "Every day I feel like I'm falling behind my other friends," describing the feelings of inferiority they often experience. This combination of academic difficulties, cultural barriers, and social isolation emphasizes the importance of greater support from the campus, both in the form of mentoring programs, language guidance, and counseling services (Martirosyan et al., 2019). This support can help international students adjust more easily to a new environment, so that they are able to overcome the challenges they face and achieve both academic and psychological success (Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

The above cases can be explained by the Theory of Cultural

Adaptation, the Theory of Technological Readiness, and the Theory of Interlanguage Linguistics. According to the Cultural Adaptation Theory proposed by Kim (2017), difficulties in understanding the language of instruction, namely Indonesian Language, contribute to a suboptimal adaptation experience. The fundamental cultural differences between Thailand and Indonesia result in students having difficulty adjusting to the new social and cultural context, which also has an impact on their understanding of religious terminology in Islamic Education. In addition, the Theory of Technology Readiness, developed by Davis (Davis, 2018), emphasizing the importance of student readiness to interact with technology in the learning process. In this context, Thailand students who are not familiar with the technology platform used at UIN Walisongo face additional obstacles, slowing down their learning process. Meanwhile, the Interlanguage Linguistic Theory introduced by Selinker (1985) shows that students tend to experience errors in the use of language which reflects the transition phase in second language mastery. Thus, a lack of understanding of religious terminology and the non-optimal use of technology create additional difficulties in their learning process. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach and ongoing support to help students adapt and achieve academic success.

2) Opportunities for access to enrichment and interpretation of Islam

This study also found that there are significant opportunities for Thailand students to study Islamic

Education in Indonesia. They get the opportunity to broaden their understanding of religion through the comparison of different theological perspectives and religious practices, which they do not get in their home countries. The academic environment in Indonesia, which is known for being inclusive and multicultural, gives them space to explore and deepen the diversity of Islamic interpretations (Kristiana et al., 2022). This experience allows Thailand students to understand that Islam has many dimensions that can be understood through the lens of different cultures and contexts (Ningsih et al., 2022). However, they are not free from challenges, such as cultural and language differences, which sometimes hinder their learning process. However, support from peers and lecturers who understand these conditions plays an important role in helping Thailand students adjust to the new environment (Chayasat, 2020). This help, while not always consistent, is quite significant in alleviating the difficulties they experience. In this context, Thailand students' openness to differences and diversity in Indonesia is key to their success in religious education, which in turn also enriches their understanding of Islam on a global scale.

This research reveals that Thailand students who study Islamic Education in Indonesia get the opportunity to deepen their understanding of the religion in a different way than what they learned in Thailand. One of the informants, TH1, explained, "In Thailand, we are taught Islam from a very rigid and formal point of view. But in Indonesia, I began to see that there were many

ways to approach this religion." For example, material on worship rituals such as prayer and fasting is delivered in a very formal manner, with no room for discussion or deeper interpretation in Thailand. In Indonesia, students find a more inclusive approach, with the various perspectives of Indonesia's Islamic organizations open to discussion, "Here, I feel more free to discuss and express my opinions about Islam, without fear of being criticized for different views." This freedom is influenced by the academic culture in Indonesia which tends to be more tolerant of various points of view, so that students are not afraid of being blamed or marginalized because of differences of opinion. In addition, Thailand students also gain a new perspective on cultural integration in Islam. TH3 revealed, "When I saw how local traditions were combined with the teachings of Islam in Indonesia, I began to realize that religion can be very flexible and adaptive." TH4 added, "In Thailand, I rarely see open debates about religious practices, but here, differences are seen as something enriching."

The comparison of religious practices between Thailand and Indonesia is a special attraction for Thailand students who study in Indonesia. TH5 revealed, "In Thailand, Islam is taught more conservatively, probably because we are a minority. In Indonesia, I learned that there is more of an approach to Islam." This opinion was reinforced by TH6, who was surprised to see the openness of the Indonesian people in discussing differences in schools and religious views. "I was surprised to see how open the people here are to discussions

about different sects and religious views," he said. Thailand students also feel freer to explore religious aspects that may be considered taboo in their home country. TH7 explained, "Here I can ask questions and delve into things that were previously considered sensitive without feeling threatened." This shows that the academic environment in Indonesia provides a wider space for religious discussion and exploration. TH8 added that lecturers in Indonesia play an important role in encouraging a deeper understanding of religion through various perspectives. "Lecturers in Indonesia also encourage us to look at religion through various perspectives, which is very helpful in understanding Islam more comprehensively," he said. This experience makes Indonesia a more open place for Thailand students to explore and deepen their religious knowledge.

In addition to an inclusive academic environment, support from lecturers and peers in Indonesia also plays an important role in helping Thailand students adapt. TH1 mentioned, "I was greatly helped by my classmates who were always open to help me understand the lecture material," which showed how peers became a bridge to understand the material that may be difficult for foreign students. TH2 highlighted the role of lecturers, despite the variation in their approach, saying, "Some lecturers are very understanding of the difficulties we face as foreign students and help us adjust." This confirms that while not all lecturers have the same approach, those who are sensitive to the needs of foreign students provide significant support. A similar

experience was shared by TH3, who said, "There were moments where I found it difficult to attend lectures, but the help of local friends made the process much easier." This reinforces the importance of social support in the academic adaptation process. In addition, TH4 added, "The environment on campus is very supportive, so I feel more confident to share my views on Islam, even though it is different from others," signifying that the campus also creates a space for dialogue and diversity, which helps foreign students feel more comfortable and accepted.

Assistance from peers and lecturers in international lectures is often inconsistent. According to TH5, there are moments where they feel ignored, especially in the context of language differences, "Sometimes, we feel like we are not prioritized in class, especially when there is a language difference." This is also reinforced by TH6 which states that some lecturers pay less attention to foreign students, "There are some lecturers who seem to pay less attention to foreign students, so we have to try our best to keep up." Even so, there are signs of improvement, as revealed by TH7, "The support from the lecturers is slowly improving, especially after we convey the difficulties we are experiencing." This shows that after the problem was raised, there was a positive response from some lecturers. TH8 concluded that although the challenges remained, the support they received was quite helpful in the adaptation process, "Despite the challenges, overall, I feel that the support has been enough to help me adapt." This reflects the dynamics

experienced by international students, where support varies, but there are still positive developments in the academic environment.

Thailand students' openness to diversity in Indonesia is one of the important factors in their academic and social success while studying abroad. Thailand students who interact with Indonesia's culture find that differences in religion, customs, and values not only enrich their experience, but also provide useful new perspectives. As revealed by TH1, "I initially felt awkward about the differences, but over time, I began to understand that these differences are part of the learning process." This experience was reinforced by TH2, who felt that through observation and direct involvement, he learned valuable lessons from the people of Indonesia. "I learned a lot from the way Indonesians deal with religious and cultural differences. It taught me to be more open to things that I previously thought were wrong," he said. Another student, TH3, noted that differences are not considered a barrier in Indonesia, but as an opportunity to learn more, which ultimately enriches their understanding of pluralism. "Here, differences are not considered as a problem, but as something that can be learned," said TH3. This experience also gave them confidence and readiness to face similar challenges in the future, as TH4 felt, "I feel more prepared to interact with various Muslim groups outside of Thailand after studying here."

Thailand students studying in Indonesia feel that the experience greatly enriches their understanding of Islam in a global context. TH5 stated,

"I began to see that Islam is not just a religion in one form, but can be understood from many different points of view." This statement reflects how they began to realize plurality in religious understanding. TH6 added, "This experience gave me a new perspective on Islam, especially on how this religion can be interpreted according to the local culture," which shows that interaction with various Islamic traditions and practices in Indonesia opens up new insights into diversity. TH7 also admitted, "I learned that Islam has many dimensions, and I am very grateful for this opportunity to explore all of them," affirming that this experience not only expanded knowledge but also built a sense of gratitude for learning opportunities. Finally, TH8 closed with the statement, "My studies in Indonesia have really broadened my horizons about Islam, and I feel more prepared to apply this knowledge in my home country," reflecting the belief that the experience in Indonesia is not only academic, but also shapes their attitudes and perspectives towards Islam on a global level. This shows how important cross-cultural experiences are in building a more comprehensive understanding of religion.

The study of Islamic Education in Indonesia provides Thailand students with a deep and comprehensive understanding of Islam, revealing the dynamics of this religion in diverse social and cultural contexts. TH1 stated, "I learned not only about Islamic theology, but also about how this religion interacts with society and culture," emphasizing the importance of local context in understanding the teachings of Islam. This is reinforced

by TH2, who said, "This experience is very different from what I experienced in Thailand, and I feel that this will be very useful for me in the future." Students' involvement with the surrounding environment provides a new perspective that is very different from their experience in their home country. TH3 added that diversity in Indonesia enriches the learning process, "I not only learn from lecturers, but also from classmates who have different views on Islam," showing how intercultural interaction broadens their horizons. TH4 emphasized the importance of this inclusive education, saying, "Education in Indonesia gives me the opportunity to see Islam in a global context, which is very important for the development of my religious understanding." This overall experience not only equips students with theoretical knowledge, but also practical skills to interact with and understand multicultural societies, which are especially relevant in an increasingly connected world.

The findings of this study are relevant to Lev Vygotsky's Constructivism Theory and Edward Hall and Geert Hofstede's Intercultural Theory. Constructivism theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the learning process (L. Vygotsky & Cole, 2018). In this context, Thailand students not only learn about Islam academically, but also through dialogue and interaction with peers and lecturers in Indonesia's multicultural environment. This allowed them to construct a new understanding of religion that was rich in different perspectives, reinforcing Vygotsky's argument that knowledge is built through social experience. On the

other hand, Hall and Hofstede's Intercultural Theory (Hofstede, 2011) help explain how Thailand students deal with cultural and language differences that may be barriers. Their openness to diversity and the support they receive from the academic environment serves as a bridge to understand the new local context. Hall's concepts of "high-context" and "low-context" can also be seen in the way communication and interaction occur (Broeder, 2021), where Thailand students have to adjust to the nuances of Indonesia's culture that are richer in symbols and context. Thus, this inclusive learning experience not only enriches their understanding of religion, but also broadens their intercultural horizons, making them better prepared to understand Islam in a global framework.

3) Analysis of Findings and policy contributions

This research shows a significant alignment with the Theory of Cultural Adaptation by John W. Berry, which highlights the challenges individuals face when entering a new culture (Berry, 2005). In the context of Thailand students studying in Indonesia, limited understanding of the language of instruction in the classroom is the main barrier that hinders the learning process (Nguyen, 2011). Language is not just a means of communication; It also serves as a medium that shapes the way of thinking and interpretation of various contexts. This lack of understanding can cause difficulties in understanding lecture material and interacting with new social environments. In addition, the differences in the nuances of

religious terminology between the origin culture and the new culture complicate the integration of knowledge necessary to adapt (Özturgut & Murphy, 2009). Berry's theory also underscores the importance of social support in the adaptation process, where support from lecturers and peers can make a great contribution (Berry, 2006). Active involvement in study groups, for example, can help Thailand students feel more connected and supported, so they are better able to overcome language and cultural barriers. With this support, they can develop effective coping strategies, which not only accelerate their adaptation process, but also increase their academic and social engagement in Indonesia's educational environment. This shows that cultural adaptation does not only depend on the individual, but also on the support of the social system that exists around him (Kim, 2017).

Meanwhile, the opportunities for Thailand international students found in this study are in line with Edward Said's view of Orientalism's theory, where the interaction between cultures can create space for the enrichment of knowledge and experience. In this context, Thailand students studying in Indonesia have a unique opportunity to explore diverse theological perspectives and religious practices. This not only broadens their horizons, but also encourages them to be open to the diversity of religious interpretations that exist. This diversity and cultural interaction can be seen as a source of strength that not only enriches the educational experience, but also strengthens bridges between cultures. Education is supposed to serve as a

bridge between different cultures, making it not just a mechanism for knowledge transfer, but also a process of character development. Thus, Thailand students not only gain knowledge about the religion they are studying, but also learn to appreciate and understand the differences that exist. This is an important skill in an increasingly connected and global world, where the ability to interact with different cultural backgrounds is crucial.

The findings of this study show some similarities with previous studies, especially in language and cultural aspects. Dian and Huda's research (2024) highlighted that international students often face difficulties in understanding the language of instruction, an obstacle that is also experienced by Thailand students. The problem of different local cultures is another major challenge, as explained in Syafira's research (2024), who observed that academic adaptation is often hampered by differences in cultural norms. In addition, Duryat (2021) emphasized the importance of adjusting specific religious terminology in the context of Islamic education, which is also faced by Thailand students when trying to understand contextual theological concepts and religious practices in Indonesia. However, this research also finds great opportunities through the diversity of theological perspectives in Indonesia, which serves as a source of intellectual enrichment for Thailand students. This opportunity allows them to compare and understand religious practices more broadly, which has been underdiscussed in previous studies that have tended to focus on adaptation

challenges without exploring the academic benefits of such diversity.

On the other hand, some conflicting studies show different results regarding the findings of the study. Shahzad (2020) emphasized that language barriers often lead to a decline in academic performance without providing opportunities for students to take advantage of cultural diversity as a learning opportunity. In contrast to that, Zain (2020) concluded that cultural impact not only disrupts the learning process, but also negatively affects students' cultural identity. Their research contradicts previous findings suggesting that peer support, particularly within the international community, can help Thailand students adapt better in a multicultural environment. Roshima (2017) reinforces the idea that cultural identity issues can create confusion in the learning process, in contrast to the inclusive view identified by this study, where diversity is seen as a strength. Setiawan's findings show that there are major challenges in understanding how personal identities and cultures interact in the academic environment, especially in the midst of diversity. Thus, although cultural and language challenges are often faced by international students, the multicultural experience in Indonesia provides a unique opportunity to integrate such diversity as a learning force not seen in previous research.

To respond to the findings of this study, steps that can be taken are to strengthen an inclusive approach in a multicultural educational environment, especially in Indonesia. The finding that peer support helps Thailand students adapt demonstrates the

importance of creating a supportive learning community, where students from different cultural backgrounds feel welcome. This can be done with mentoring programs or cross-cultural discussion groups that emphasize collaboration, not only academically, but also socially. Given that some studies emphasize the negative impacts of culture and language, as revealed by Shahzad (2020) and Zain (2020), efforts to overcome these barriers need to be more structured, for example through additional language teaching and introduction to local cultures for international students. In addition, awareness of the diversity of cultural identities, as highlighted by Roshima (2017), needs to be increased through training for lecturers and academic staff to understand the dynamics of student identities and support them in the adaptation process. This approach can minimize the identity confusion that students may experience and open up opportunities for them to develop their academic and personal potential in the midst of diversity.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that Thai international students enrolled in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) program in Indonesia encounter both challenges and opportunities. A significant challenge is the language barrier, as Indonesian serves as the primary medium of instruction, accompanied by religious terminology unfamiliar in Thailand. Cultural differences also influence their social and academic adjustment processes. However, these challenges present opportunities for Thai students to deepen their religious knowledge.

Indonesia's inclusive academic environment enables them to explore diverse interpretations of Islam from multiple perspectives, enriching their understanding. Support from peers and lecturers plays a crucial role in helping them navigate these challenges, though further adaptation to learning technologies remains necessary. In summary, this study emphasizes that while Thai students face certain obstacles during their educational journey in Indonesia, they also gain valuable intellectual and spiritual growth, broadening their perspective on Islam in a wider context.

For this reason, Universities in Indonesia need to formulate policies that focus on strengthening the inclusivity and integration of international students in a multicultural educational environment. Based on the findings that peer support plays an important role in helping Thailand students adapt, universities can develop cross-cultural mentoring programs that facilitate interaction between local and international students. Cross-cultural discussion groups can also be a solution to strengthen collaboration, not only in academic aspects but also in social life. To overcome language and cultural barriers, there needs to be policies that support additional language teaching for international students as well as intensive introduction to local cultures. Given the adaptive importance of awareness of cultural identity, training for lecturers and academic staff is crucial so that they are able to support the dynamics of students from various backgrounds. This training can improve understanding of identity diversity and reduce identity confusion

that may be experienced by international students. With these, universities can create an educational environment that supports students' academic and personal development, as well as enriched cross-cultural interaction on campus.

This research excels because the case studies are able to explore the in-depth experiences of international students from Thailand, which provides insight into the challenges and opportunities they face in the context of Islamic education. By focusing on a single university, researchers can understand the local dynamics that affect the social and academic adaptation of the student. However, the main drawback of this study is the limitations in generalization, as the findings may not fully reflect the student experience at other institutions in Indonesia, given that each university has a unique context. In addition, qualitative approaches also risk subjective bias in data interpretation. Therefore, for future research, it is recommended that this study be expanded to several universities with diverse backgrounds, as well as consider mixed methods to combine qualitative and quantitative data, so that the results obtained are more representative and comprehensive.

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