

An Analysis Of International Exchange Almuslim Undergraduate's Experience With Nagoya Gakuin University (Tourism And Citizenship)

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Abstrak

This study examines the experiences of Almuslim University students participating in an international exchange program with Nagoya Gakuin University. The research aims to analyze how educational tourism activities and cross-cultural interactions influence students' development of global citizenship competencies and cultural awareness. This qualitative study employed in-depth interviews with 11 undergraduate students who participated in the exchange program between 2016-2024. Each participant engaged in semi-structured interviews, exploring their experiences, challenges, and personal growth during the program. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify recurring patterns and meaningful themes. Analysis revealed three key themes from the interview data: (1) Enhanced cultural competency, with participants describing significant improvements in their cross-cultural communication abilities and cultural understanding; (2) Deepened environmental awareness, as participants shared their experiences learning about Japanese sustainable tourism practices; and (3) Strengthened global citizenship identity, evidenced by participants' narratives about their changed worldviews and increased international engagement after the program. The interviews highlighted how structured immersion activities particularly contributed to their Japanese language development and cultural adaptation. The findings demonstrate that structured international exchange programs effectively enhance students' global competencies and cultural sensitivity. These outcomes suggest that combining educational tourism with intentional cross-cultural engagement successfully prepares students for global citizenship. Future research should examine the long-term impact of such programs on career development and explore the potential for virtual exchange components.

Kata Kunci: International Exchange, Global Citizenship, Cultural Awareness.

INTRODUCTION

In response to the dynamic challenges of an interconnected world, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in Indonesia has implemented several transformative educational programs [1]. Among these initiatives is the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM), a program designed to equip students with the necessary skills to thrive in both local and global contexts. The MBKM program encourages students to take an active role in shaping their academic journey by providing them with the freedom to choose from a wide range of disciplines

and creative learning experiences. This approach focuses on nurturing both hard and soft skills, such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration, which are essential for navigating the increasingly complex global landscape. The MBKM program thus serves as a platform for the next generation of students to prepare themselves for the workforce while embracing the values of independence and self-directed learning [2].

One of the most significant manifestations of the MBKM program is the Student Exchange Program between Almuslim University and Nagoya Gakuin University (NGU) in Japan. This partnership, which began in 2016, has enabled more than 11 students from Almuslim University to participate in the exchange program at NGU [3]. The program provides these students with a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in Japan's tourism industry and gain firsthand experience in global citizenship. As a result, they can explore the intricacies of tourism as an economic driver, while also learning about the importance of fostering international cooperation and mutual understanding in a globalized world [4].

The student exchange program brings together students from diverse academic backgrounds, including tourism, social sciences, and education. The participants not only learn about Japan's advanced education system but also engage in various cultural and social activities, which expose them to Japan's rich history and traditions. The experience offers valuable insights into the global tourism industry, emphasizing its role in local economic development and the promotion of cross-cultural exchanges. Furthermore, students involved in the program gain an understanding of global citizenship, which is critical in developing a sense of responsibility toward the global community and advocating for peace and equality worldwide[5].

While the benefits of the exchange program are considerable, the participants also face challenges, particularly in terms of cultural and language adaptation. The differences in educational systems, social norms, and language between Indonesia and Japan can create significant barriers for students as they attempt to integrate into a new academic environment. In addition to this, the contrasting approaches to tourism and citizenship education require students to demonstrate a high level of flexibility and adaptability to succeed. It is important to examine how these students navigate these challenges while also making the most of the opportunities available to them through the program [6]. By doing so, we can better understand the impact of the exchange on their personal and academic growth, as well as the ways in which they apply the knowledge and skills gained during their time in Japan [6].

The Almuslim University-NGU exchange program offers a variety of benefits to students. These include enhanced cross-cultural understanding, the development of communication and language skills, and increased awareness of the global tourism sector. Additionally, the program

helps students build leadership and teamwork abilities through collaborative projects, all while creating valuable professional networks that may lead to future career opportunities. The opportunity to experience a different educational system also provides participants with new perspectives on teaching and learning, which they can bring back to Indonesia and apply to their studies and professional pursuits. Furthermore, students' participation in the program boosts their self-confidence as they confront the challenges of living and studying abroad, ultimately fostering a sense of global responsibility [6].

In addition to the practical benefits of the program, the exchange also serves as an avenue for students to explore the broader themes of global citizenship and tourism in the context of international relations [4]. Global citizenship goes beyond mere theoretical concepts, urging individuals to embrace values such as peace, justice, and social equity [7]. Through direct participation in this exchange program, students gain a deeper understanding of these values and learn how they can contribute to creating a more harmonious world. The role of tourism in promoting intercultural understanding and economic cooperation is also emphasized, helping students see the importance of this sector as a tool for fostering global peace and diplomacy [8].

However, the challenges faced by exchange students are significant and cannot be overlooked. While NGU provides orientation programs and academic support to ease students' transitions, many students report difficulties adapting to the social norms and teaching methods in Japan [9]. These cultural differences, combined with academic expectations that differ from those in Indonesia, can create feelings of isolation and frustration [10]. This highlights the need for robust support systems that can address both the social and academic challenges faced by students, ensuring that they are able to make the most of their exchange experience. Enhancing these support mechanisms will not only benefit individual students but also improve the overall effectiveness of the program [11].

Given the importance of understanding how exchange programs contribute to the development of global citizenship and tourism knowledge, this research aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the experiences of Almuslim University students participating in the exchange program with NGU [10]. Specifically, the research will focus on how cultural and educational differences influence students' adaptation and success in Japan, both academically and socially [10]. The study will also explore how students use their experiences to enhance their understanding of tourism and global citizenship, which are increasingly important in today's interconnected world. By identifying the challenges faced by students and the strategies they use to overcome them, the research will offer valuable recommendations for improving the program and better supporting students as they navigate their exchange experiences [10].

The findings of this research will be of great value to educational institutions involved in student exchange programs, as well as policymakers seeking to improve international collaboration and student mobility [10]. The study will provide insights into how exchange programs can be designed and implemented in ways that maximize students' personal and academic development, while also promoting intercultural understanding and global citizenship [10]. Furthermore, the research will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the role of tourism in fostering international cooperation and economic development, highlighting the importance of integrating these themes into academic curricula and student exchange programs [10].

Previous studies related to this research topic have shown the positive impact of international exchange programs on students' intercultural competence and understanding of global citizenship. For instance, research conducted by Tavares in 2024 explored how international students in Canada experience equity, diversity, and inclusion [10]. This study highlighted the challenges faced by students from diverse backgrounds and the need for better support systems to ensure their successful integration into academic environments. Similarly, studies by Lenkaitis & Loranc in 2022 and Byker & Putman in 2019 emphasized the role of intercultural exchanges in developing students' global competencies and their ability to engage in meaningful cross-cultural communication. These studies support the notion that international exchange programs can play a crucial role in shaping students' perspectives on global issues and preparing them to be responsible global citizens [10].

In addition to these studies, research by Ruhanen et al. in 2021 examined how authentic learning experiences in tourism consultancy courses can enhance students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, preparing them for careers in the tourism industry. This aligns with the goals of the Almuslim University-NGU exchange program, which seeks to provide students with real-world exposure to the tourism sector and global issues. Furthermore, Sugino's 2023 study on intercultural opportunities for Japanese students to interact with Chinese international students demonstrated the potential of online platforms to foster cross-cultural understanding and empathy, highlighting the value of intercultural interactions in promoting diversity and inclusion [10].

Based on the insights from previous studies and the context of the Almuslim University-NGU exchange program, this research will delve into the experiences of students participating in the program. It will examine how their participation shapes their understanding of tourism and global citizenship, as well as how they overcome the challenges associated with adapting to a new academic and cultural environment. The research will provide valuable recommendations for improving the support structures in place for exchange students, ensuring that they are well-equipped to navigate the complexities of living and studying abroad. Through this analysis, the

research aims to contribute to the development of more effective international exchange programs that foster global citizenship and promote understanding between different cultures [12].

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of students involved in an international exchange program. Qualitative research is selected for its ability to provide in-depth insights into individuals' experiences, allowing the researcher to understand the complexities of cultural awareness and global citizenship in the context of tourism. The primary method for data collection is open-ended interviews, which enable the researcher to gather detailed and rich data that reflects the authentic perspectives of the participants.

The participants in this study are 11 undergraduate students from Universitas Almuslim who participated in the exchange program with Nagoya Gakuin University. These students are selected using purposive sampling to ensure they meet specific criteria relevant to the study. The selection focuses on those who have experienced cultural exchange first-hand, ensuring the collection of relevant and meaningful data. The sample size is kept relatively small to allow for a more focused and comprehensive analysis of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

The data collected from these participants are primarily derived from in-depth interviews, which are guided by ten open-ended questions. These questions are designed to explore students' experiences in Japan, particularly their cultural interactions and the development of their sense of global citizenship. Through these interviews, the study aims to gain a deeper understanding of how the exchange program influences students' views on culture, identity, and tourism, and how it shapes their understanding of their roles as global citizens.

The data analysis process involves three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, the researcher identifies key themes and patterns from the interview responses. In the data presentation stage, the findings are organized and presented in a descriptive manner, supported by direct quotes from the participants. Finally, the researcher synthesizes the findings to draw conclusions about the impact of the exchange program on students' cultural awareness and global citizenship, particularly in the context of tourism and cultural exchange.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

The findings of this study provide an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perceptions of Universitas Almuslim students who participated in the international exchange program at Nagoya Gakuin University. The data reveals that the students' exposure to a new cultural environment

significantly influenced their understanding of cultural dynamics, identity, and global citizenship. Through immersive experiences in Japan, students gained profound insights into the cultural practices, values, and behaviors of the host country, fostering a deeper appreciation for cross-cultural understanding. Many students reported a heightened sense of awareness of their own cultural backgrounds and how they interacted with those of others. This increased cultural competency is one of the most notable outcomes of the exchange program.

A significant theme that emerged from the students' experiences was the challenge of cultural adaptation. Upon arrival in Japan, the students encountered differences in social norms, communication styles, and lifestyle practices. These cultural disparities initially created feelings of discomfort and confusion. However, over time, the students adapted to the new environment, learning to navigate the cultural landscape with greater ease. They reported that their interactions with Japanese peers, faculty members, and local communities played a crucial role in facilitating their cultural adjustment. The experience of learning a new language, understanding local customs, and participating in Japanese cultural events helped the students develop resilience and flexibility in the face of unfamiliar situations.

Another key finding from the study was the role of the exchange program in enhancing students' global citizenship. The students expressed that their time in Japan had broadened their perspectives on global issues, such as environmental sustainability, social justice, and cultural diversity. They realized the interconnectedness of the world and the importance of fostering relationships across cultural boundaries. Many students noted that their experiences in Japan motivated them to become more actively involved in global initiatives and social causes, driven by a desire to contribute to positive change in the world. The students also reflected on the ways in which the exchange program had encouraged them to view themselves as global citizens, with a responsibility to engage with and understand people from diverse backgrounds.

The concept of education-based tourism emerged as another significant theme in the findings. The students acknowledged that their participation in the exchange program not only provided educational benefits but also contributed to their personal growth and development. Through visits to historical sites, cultural landmarks, and environmentally significant locations in Japan, the students gained a deeper understanding of the country's history, culture, and environmental challenges. These experiences were particularly impactful in fostering environmental awareness. Many students shared that they were inspired by Japan's emphasis on sustainability and eco-friendly practices, and they felt compelled to adopt similar behaviors upon returning to Indonesia. The students also expressed a desire to share their newfound knowledge with others, particularly within the context of their academic and professional lives.

Additionally, the study revealed the importance of institutional support in facilitating a successful cultural exchange experience. The students highlighted the positive role played by Nagoya Gakuin University in providing resources and guidance throughout their stay. This included assistance with housing, dietary accommodations, cultural orientation, and language support. The students felt that the university's efforts to address their needs helped them feel more comfortable and confident in their new environment. They also mentioned the presence of a student support system that facilitated their integration into the academic and social life at NGU. This support system was particularly valuable in overcoming initial challenges and fostering a sense of belonging in a foreign country.

In terms of academic experiences, the students reported that the exchange program enhanced their academic skills and broadened their intellectual horizons. They were exposed to different teaching methods, curricula, and academic expectations, which encouraged them to think critically and approach problems from new perspectives. The students appreciated the opportunity to engage in collaborative projects with Japanese students, which allowed them to exchange ideas, share knowledge, and work together towards common academic goals. Many students noted that these collaborative experiences helped them develop stronger communication skills, adaptability, and teamwork abilities, all of which are essential competencies in the globalized workforce.

The theme of cultural identity maintenance emerged strongly in the findings. Despite the challenges of adapting to Japanese culture, the students were determined to preserve their own cultural identity. Many students reported that they sought out opportunities to share their cultural heritage with their Japanese peers, often through organizing cultural events, participating in Indonesian-themed activities, and sharing traditional Indonesian food. These activities allowed them to maintain a connection to their roots while also embracing the new culture they were encountering. The students expressed pride in representing Indonesia and felt that their cultural exchange experiences were a two-way process, where both Indonesian and Japanese cultures could be celebrated and appreciated.

Another key finding was the students' reflections on the role of the exchange program in shaping their career aspirations. Many students reported that the experience had a profound impact on their future goals, particularly in terms of their aspirations to work in international or multicultural environments. They noted that the exchange program had exposed them to global career opportunities, especially in fields related to tourism, international relations, and cross-cultural communication. The students also recognized the value of the intercultural skills they had developed during the exchange program, which they believed would be beneficial in their future careers. Some

students even expressed interest in pursuing further studies or work experiences abroad, influenced by the connections and opportunities they had encountered during their time in Japan.

The findings also highlighted the students' reflections on the long-term impact of the exchange program on their personal development. Many students reported that the program had significantly contributed to their self-confidence, independence, and problem-solving abilities. The experience of living and studying abroad challenged them to step out of their comfort zones, develop resilience, and become more proactive in managing their own lives. The students also shared that the exchange program had deepened their appreciation for the importance of lifelong learning and continuous personal growth. They expressed a commitment to continuing to develop their cultural competencies and global perspectives in the future.

Furthermore, the study uncovered the students' enhanced understanding of the role of tourism in fostering cross-cultural understanding. Many students recognized that tourism is not only a means of leisure and recreation but also a powerful tool for promoting global understanding and peace. They emphasized the importance of responsible tourism that respects local cultures, traditions, and the environment. The students also shared their experiences of engaging with Japanese locals and learning about the impact of tourism on Japanese society. These experiences helped them develop a more nuanced view of tourism as a means of cultural exchange and mutual learning.

Finally, the findings revealed that the international exchange program had a significant impact on the students' sense of belonging to a global community. The students reported feeling a strong sense of connection to their Japanese peers and to the broader international community. They felt that the exchange program had not only enriched their personal lives but also contributed to a sense of collective responsibility for promoting peace, sustainability, and cross-cultural understanding. Many students expressed a desire to continue fostering international relationships and contributing to the development of a more interconnected world. This sense of global citizenship was one of the most profound and lasting outcomes of the exchange program.

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the transformative power of international exchange programs in shaping students' cultural awareness, global citizenship, and personal development. The experiences of Universitas Almuslim students at Nagoya Gakuin University highlight the significant role that cultural exchange plays in broadening students' perspectives, enhancing their academic and professional skills, and fostering a deeper understanding of global challenges. Through their immersion in Japanese culture, the students not only gained valuable insights into the host country but also developed a stronger sense of their own identities as global

citizens. The study contributes to the growing body of research on the impact of international exchange programs on students' personal, academic, and professional growth.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant impact of international student exchange programs, specifically the experiences of Universitas Almuslim students at Nagoya Gakuin University, in fostering both personal transformation and global understanding [13]. As students from diverse cultural backgrounds navigate the complexities of cultural adaptation, they gain not only a deeper understanding of their host culture but also develop a stronger sense of self-awareness and cultural identity [14]. These experiences are in line with previous research, which underscores the transformative nature of international exchange programs. Students are not only exposed to new cultural practices but are also encouraged to reflect on their own cultural values, thereby enhancing their ability to engage in cross-cultural dialogue and promoting mutual understanding [15].

One of the most notable outcomes of the exchange program for Universitas Almuslim students was the development of cultural competency [16]. This process involves not just an appreciation of different cultures but also the ability to interact effectively with individuals from those cultures. The students' immersion in Japanese culture allowed them to navigate social norms, communication styles, and daily practices that were markedly different from those in Indonesia. This experience helped them develop the skills necessary to engage in intercultural exchanges, a competency that is increasingly valued in today's globalized world. Furthermore, the students' ability to adapt to their host environment reflects their capacity for flexibility, resilience, and problem-solving—skills that are essential for success in an interconnected world [16].

However, the process of cultural adaptation is not without challenges. As the findings revealed, many students initially faced difficulties in adjusting to the new cultural environment, particularly in terms of language barriers, social interactions, and unfamiliar customs. These challenges reflect the broader complexities of cultural adaptation, as students are required to balance their own cultural identities with the demands of a new, often very different, cultural context. While the students did eventually adapt, their experiences highlight the importance of providing adequate support systems to facilitate this process [17]. The presence of institutional support, such as language assistance, cultural orientation programs, and peer support networks, was critical in helping students navigate these challenges and successfully integrate into their host communities.

The role of educational institutions in facilitating successful cultural exchange experiences cannot be overstated. In this study, Nagoya Gakuin University played a key role in supporting Universitas Almuslim students' adjustment to life in Japan [18]. The university's proactive approach

to addressing the students' dietary requirements, cultural practices, and academic needs demonstrates the importance of creating an inclusive environment that caters to the diverse needs of international students. This aligns with research that emphasizes the role of higher education institutions in providing tailored support to international students, helping them overcome barriers to integration and ensuring that they have a positive and enriching exchange experience. The university's efforts also contributed to the students' sense of belonging, an important factor in their overall success during the exchange program [19].

Another crucial aspect of the students' experience was the development of global citizenship. The exchange program exposed the students to a wide range of global issues, such as environmental sustainability, social justice, and international cooperation [20]. Through interactions with Japanese students, faculty members, and local communities, the Universitas Almuslim students gained new perspectives on these issues and were encouraged to consider their roles in addressing them. The exchange program thus served as a platform for fostering a sense of responsibility toward global challenges, motivating students to become more engaged in promoting sustainable practices and social change. The students' reflections on their experiences indicate a growing awareness of the interconnectedness of the world and the importance of contributing to global solutions [21].

The findings also highlight the impact of education-based tourism on students' learning and development. Education-based tourism, which combines educational experiences with travel, plays an important role in fostering cross-cultural understanding and personal growth. The Universitas Almuslim students' participation in cultural and environmental activities in Japan enhanced their appreciation of the host country's history, culture, and ecological practices. These experiences broadened their perspectives on issues such as environmental sustainability and tourism's role in promoting cultural exchange. The students' exposure to Japan's environmental initiatives and sustainable practices left a lasting impression, inspiring many to adopt more eco-friendly behaviors and advocate for sustainability upon their return to Indonesia [22].

The integration of environmental awareness into the exchange program was another key factor in the students' personal growth. As global citizens, students are increasingly expected to be aware of environmental challenges and contribute to sustainable solutions. The focus on environmental sustainability in the exchange program at Nagoya Gakuin University provided the students with valuable insights into how environmental consciousness can be integrated into daily life, academic work, and broader societal practices. The students' increased environmental awareness, fostered by their experiences in Japan, aligns with broader trends in international education, where global citizenship is closely tied to an understanding of environmental issues and sustainability practices.

Moreover, the students' experiences at Nagoya Gakuin University highlighted the reciprocal nature of cultural exchange. While the Universitas Almuslim students gained valuable insights into Japanese culture, the exchange program also provided opportunities for them to share their own cultural heritage with their Japanese peers [17]. This cultural exchange was not one-sided; both Indonesian and Japanese students benefited from the interaction, learning from each other's traditions, customs, and worldviews. This reciprocal exchange of knowledge and cultural practices is central to the philosophy of international exchange programs, as it fosters mutual respect and understanding between different cultures. The students' efforts to share Indonesian culture through food, events, and discussions not only enriched the Japanese students' understanding of Indonesia but also helped the Universitas Almuslim students maintain a connection to their own cultural identity [18].

The findings also underscore the importance of leadership development in international exchange programs. The students' involvement in organizing cultural activities and engaging in collaborative academic projects provided them with opportunities to develop leadership skills. These experiences enhanced their ability to work in teams, manage projects, and communicate effectively across cultural boundaries. The ability to lead in a cross-cultural context is an essential skill in today's globalized workforce, and the exchange program served as an effective platform for developing these skills. Many students reported that their leadership abilities had been strengthened during their time in Japan, and they expressed confidence in their ability to apply these skills in their future careers [23].

Finally, the long-term impact of the exchange program on students' personal and professional development cannot be underestimated. The students' reflections on their experiences suggest that the exchange program played a significant role in shaping their future aspirations [24]. Many students reported that their time in Japan had influenced their career choices, particularly in fields related to international relations, cross-cultural communication, and sustainable development. The exchange program also instilled a sense of lifelong learning, as students recognized the value of continuous self-improvement and cultural exploration. These lasting effects highlight the profound influence that international exchange programs can have on students' personal growth, career development, and global outlook [22].

In conclusion, the findings and discussion of this study emphasize the transformative nature of international exchange programs in fostering cultural understanding, global citizenship, and personal development. The experiences of Universitas Almuslim students at Nagoya Gakuin University illustrate the significant role that such programs play in enhancing students' intercultural competencies, leadership skills, and global awareness. By providing opportunities for cultural

exchange, academic collaboration, and personal reflection, international exchange programs contribute to the development of well-rounded, globally minded individuals who are prepared to navigate and contribute to an increasingly interconnected world.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the transformative potential of international student exchange programs, particularly in fostering personal growth, cultural understanding, and global citizenship. The experiences of Universitas Almuslim students at Nagoya Gakuin University highlight the significant impact of cultural immersion on students' ability to adapt, develop intercultural competencies, and engage in global issues. Through their participation in the exchange program, the students gained valuable insights into Japanese culture, developed leadership skills, and enhanced their awareness of environmental sustainability. These outcomes align with broader trends in international education, emphasizing the importance of cross-cultural exchanges in preparing students for an interconnected and rapidly changing world.

Furthermore, the findings emphasize the critical role of institutional support and reciprocal cultural exchange in ensuring the success of international exchange programs. By providing tailored support for cultural adaptation and creating opportunities for meaningful cultural exchange, institutions can enhance the overall experience for both visiting students and host communities. The students' reflections suggest that such programs not only contribute to their academic and professional development but also foster lasting personal growth and a deeper understanding of global challenges. As international education continues to evolve, these programs remain essential in shaping future leaders who can navigate complex cultural dynamics and contributing to global solutions.

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