

## **Sociocultural Adaptation Experiences of Students in Student Exchange Program: A Phenomenological Study**

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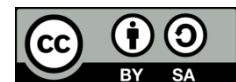
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### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to explore the social and cultural adaptation experiences of students in the *Merdeka* Student Exchange Program (MSEP) 4 in a new campus environment using a phenomenological approach. This study employs a qualitative method using purposive sampling, involving participants who have completed one semester of the program outside their home region. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews, followed by analysis using phenomenological stages, including the identification of significant statements, the formulation of meaning, the grouping of themes, and validation through member checking. The results revealed five main themes: initial experiences and impressions of the new environment; dynamics of social interaction and cultural differences; the adaptation process and challenges faced; adaptation strategies and environmental support; and the meaning of adaptation in the context of diversity. Students faced various challenges, for instance, emotional, social, academic, and cultural. Nevertheless, they were able to overcome these by actively developing adaptation strategies through social interaction and support from their surroundings. This study concludes that adaptation is a multidimensional process that not only enhances students' ability to adjust but also shapes their perspective on valuing diversity.

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## **Introduction**

Student academic mobility is a key strategy for enhancing the quality of higher education in today's globalized era. This mobility aims to provide students with opportunities to study in new campus environments, thereby broadening their academic

horizons, improving their adaptability, and building broader social networks. This activity also fosters cross-cultural interaction among individuals with diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Kokroko & Hall, 2026; Wardani et al., 2025; Lyu, 2024). Furthermore, learning experiences in a new campus environment can help enhance independence, expand academic networks, and improve readiness to face future global challenges (Rubio-Alcala et al., 2026; Hidayat et al., 2025).

Support for student mobility within the context of higher education in Indonesia is driven by the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) policy, which provides students with the opportunity to gain learning experiences at other universities. The implementation of this policy is the *Merdeka Student Exchange Program* (MSEP). This program is an inter-island student exchange to study at another university for one semester, providing experiences of diversity and culture (Wijayanto et al., 2023). This program is designed to provide academic experiences while broadening students' perspectives on diversity through interactions with students from various regions with different cultural backgrounds. Through academic activities and supporting programs such as the Nusantara Module, it is hoped that students can understand Indonesia's cultural diversity and develop attitudes of tolerance and adaptability in a new campus environment (Taçain, 2025; Agbai et al., 2024; Wulan et al., 2023).

Previous research has examined students' experiences in participating in student exchange programs regarding adaptation to a new campus environment. Some research indicates that students participating in exchange programs often experience *culture shock* when in a new campus environment (Rahayu et al., 2025; Samira et al., 2024; Ardila, 2023). These differences include culture, language, and social customs, which serve as factors in the students' adjustment process. These conditions encourage students to adapt both socially and psychologically so they can interact effectively in both academic and social settings. Research (Rahayu et al., 2025; Agustini et al., 2023) indicates that students participating in exchange programs also face adaptation challenges such as differences in food, local customs, and environmental conditions that differ from their home regions. Therefore, the Modul Nusantara program was implemented to help students become familiar with local culture, facilitate their understanding of cultural diversity, and develop their social interaction skills.

Although various studies have examined students' experiences in participating in student exchange programs, most of these studies have focused primarily on the benefits of the program or general adaptation challenges. Previous research has also tended to use descriptive or quantitative approaches that focus on measurable variables, making it difficult to delve deeply into the subjective experiences students encounter while in a new campus environment. In fact, social and cultural adaptation in the MSEP program is a complex phenomenon with personal significance (*lived experience*). Therefore, a phenomenological approach was chosen in this study as the appropriate methodological foundation to uncover the internal dynamics of students that are often overlooked.

Based on the background and research gaps outlined above, this study aims to explore the social and cultural adaptation experiences of participants in the MESP Program within a new university environment. This study seeks to deeply understand how students adjust to cultural differences, social customs, and academic environments that differ from their home campus. Through a phenomenological approach, this study is expected to reveal the dynamics of students' experiences during their participation in the student exchange program, including the challenges they face and the strategies they employ in the adaptation

process within the new campus environment. The findings of this study are expected to provide policy recommendations grounded in students' real-life experiences, rather than mere institutional assumptions.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative method (Gill, 2020) with a phenomenological approach. This approach was chosen to understand the essence of the lived experiences of students participating in the Merdeka Student Exchange Program (MSEP) 4 as they adapt socially and culturally to a new campus environment. Phenomenology allows the researcher to explore the deep meanings of participants' subjective experiences without being constrained by measurable variables. Through this method, each personal narrative is deeply explored to capture the complexity of psychological dynamics and intercultural interactions they encounter. This approach also facilitates a holistic understanding of how these students make sense of their cultural transition process. Consequently, the findings of this study are expected to provide a comprehensive picture of authentic and meaningful adaptation.

The research participants were selected *purposively*, comprising 8 participants who met the following criteria: (1) active students who had participated in the MSEP 4 program for one semester, (2) students from outside the island (cross-cultural), and (3) willing to openly share their adaptation experiences. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of *data saturation*, which occurs when the information obtained becomes repetitive and no significant new information emerges. This purposive selection ensures that the chosen informants possess direct, rich insight into the phenomenon under investigation. Furthermore, involving cross-cultural students from diverse regional backgrounds enhances the richness and variety of the qualitative data collected. Ultimately, reaching saturation guarantees that the qualitative findings are both robust and reliable for establishing comprehensive thematic patterns.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured *in-depth* interviews. The interview guide focused on students' initial experiences upon arriving at the new campus environment, the obstacles they faced, their adaptation strategies, and the meanings constructed from cross-cultural interactions. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured *in-depth* interviews. The interview guide focused on students' initial experiences upon arriving at the new campus environment, the obstacles they faced, their adaptation strategies, and the meanings constructed from cross-cultural interactions. This semi-structured format allowed the researchers to maintain conversational flexibility while ensuring that all core thematic areas were thoroughly addressed. Additionally, probing follow-up questions were utilized dynamically to encourage participants to elaborate on their personal reflections and emotional responses. This flexible yet focused approach ultimately yielded rich, detailed transcripts that accurately reflect the nuances of the students' lived experiences.

Data analysis was conducted using a phenomenological model that allows researchers to explore deep meanings through seven main stages: (1) Reading all interview transcripts, (2) Identifying *significant statements*, (3) Formulating *meanings*, (4) Clustering meanings into *themes*, (5) Developing explicit descriptions, (6) Generating fundamental descriptions, and (7) Validating the results with participants (*member checking*). This systematic procedure ensures a rigorous and transparent transformation of raw qualitative data into coherent psychological insights. By systematically moving from specific textual statements to overarching thematic structures, the analysis accurately captures the structural

and textural essences of the students' adaptation process. Finally, member checking serves as a crucial validation step to guarantee that the final interpretations truly reflect the authentic perspectives of the participants.

To ensure data validity, this study applied a credibility test through *member checking*, while maintaining consistency (*dependability*) and objectivity (*confirmability*) throughout the research process. Additionally, this study addressed ethical considerations, including obtaining informed consent from participants, maintaining participant anonymity by using initials, and ensuring participants' right to withdraw at any time. These rigorous quality standards guarantee that the research findings remain trustworthy, accurate, and free from researcher bias. Furthermore, strict adherence to ethical guidelines establishes a safe and respectful environment, protecting the rights and confidentiality of every student involved. Ultimately, this combination of methodological trustworthiness and ethical responsibility strengthens the overall integrity and academic credibility of the study.

## Results and Discussion

Based on the data analysis conducted on 8 student participants of the MSEP, five main elements were identified that describe the essence of social and cultural adaptation experiences. These core dimensions emerged systematically from the rich thematic clustering of the interview transcripts. Each identified element highlights a distinct facet of how these students navigate and internalize their new academic and social surroundings. Consequently, these findings provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of cross-cultural student adjustment.

### *Theme 1: First Experiences and Impressions of the New University Environment*

This theme describes the students' emotional responses and initial perceptions upon first arriving at their destination campus. Most participants expressed feelings of joy, enthusiasm, and excitement, although some also felt a bit nervous about having to adapt to the new campus environment. One participant stated, "This is my first experience participating in the MSEP program and experiencing an academic atmosphere different from my home campus" (P2). First impressions are heavily influenced by the differences in academic atmosphere from the home campus and initial social interactions among students (**Figure 1**).

"When I first joined the program and arrived at the destination campus, I felt enthusiastic yet a bit nervous about having to adapt to the new campus environment" (P1).

**Figure 1.** Students' responses pertaining University Environment Adaptation

These findings indicate that students' initial experiences are not merely emotional but also serve as a foundation for shaping their perceptions of the new university environment. Consistent with research within a phenomenological context, students' first impressions are influenced by the initial process of self-adjustment to the new campus environment (Samira et al., 2024; Agustini et al., 2023). Other research explains that feelings of nervousness and enthusiasm are part of the adaptation process that shapes an individual's psychological state in the new campus environment (Zhu & Peng, 2026; Harnimayanti, 2025). Thus, it can be said that first impressions constitute a crucial phase influencing students' adaptation process.

### *Theme 2: Social Interaction and Cultural Differences*

This theme describes the dynamics of the relationships between MSEP students and local students, as well as their perceptions of existing social and cultural differences. Some participants reported differences in communication and language, customs, character, and learning methods practiced at the host campus. However, over time, they began to adjust and adapt. Initially, these contrasting cultural norms presented minor interpersonal hurdles that required conscious effort to overcome. As familiarity grew, mutual respect and open-mindedness replaced early hesitations, fostering a more inclusive campus atmosphere. This gradual evolution highlights how exposure to diverse cultural practices effectively builds resilience and cross-cultural competence (**Figure 2**).

“In my opinion, the most noticeable difference is the way students communicate and their social customs” (P3).

“My interactions with local students have been quite good; they’ve been quite open and helpful when I’ve had trouble understanding the campus environment or academic activities” (P4)

**Figure 2.** Students’ responses pertaining Social Interaction and Cultural Differences

These findings indicate that social interaction serves not only as a platform for communication but also as a process for understanding and adapting to a new culture. Social interactions foster the ability to understand, accept, and adapt to other cultures (Chen et al., 2026; Zahram, 2025). Students can adapt to linguistic and cultural influences in their communication styles and social activities to ensure they proceed smoothly (Rubio-Alcala et al., 2026; Kojoh et al., 2022). Therefore, social interaction and cultural differences play a crucial role in students’ adaptation process within a new campus environment. Through continuous engagement with diverse peers, students gradually bridge cultural gaps and build meaningful interpersonal connections. This active participatory process ultimately transforms potential cross-cultural barriers into valuable opportunities for personal growth and social integration.

### *Theme 3: The Adaptation Process and Experienced Difficulties*

This theme describes the dynamics of specific obstacles faced by students during the process. These challenges are not only social but also academic and emotional. Students reported feeling pressure in adjusting to the academic system, managing their time, and experiencing homesickness. One participant stated, “My adaptation process began by trying to interact more actively with local students and other participants in this program” (P5). Another participant also noted that “At first, there were some difficulties, particularly in adjusting to different communication styles and social customs” (P6).

These findings indicate that the adaptation process is a complex experience involving simultaneous social, academic, and emotional challenges. From a phenomenological perspective, the difficulties faced by participants represent an individual’s process of coping with and making sense of environmental changes. This is supported by research Vigna et al. (2025) showing that individuals tend to experience confusion when facing cultural, social, or academic transitions. Therefore, students’ successful adaptation is closely tied to the strategies they employ in addressing various difficulties, social, academic, and emotional, which support their adjustment to the new social environment (Rifqi & Nurhayati, 2025;

Agbai et al., 2024). Thus, the adaptation process and the strategies students use to navigate the new campus environment are critical factors in shaping their adjustment.

#### *Theme 4: Problem-Solving Strategies and Support from the Environment*

This theme describes the dynamics of the adaptation strategies students develop to face the challenges they encounter. The focus of this theme is on how students overcome obstacles, whether through social interaction, academic adjustment, or leveraging support from the surrounding environment. One participant shared their experience, stating, “To overcome difficulties in the adaptation process, I tried to be more open and didn’t hesitate to ask friends or professors when there were things I didn’t understand” (P6). Another participant also noted, “Yes, there was support from friends, professors, and university staff that helped me during the adaptation process” (P7).

These findings indicate that the adaptation strategies employed by participants are active and reflective, relying not only on environmental conditions but also on individual initiative in building social relationships and seeking support from the surrounding community. From a phenomenological perspective, these experiences reflect individuals’ efforts to interpret all challenges as part of the learning and development process in life. This aligns with research (Noviastanti, 2025), which states that exchange students tend to utilize language and cultural orientation programs with local residents or communities to support their adaptation. Students utilize these orientation programs to better understand the local language, enhance interaction with the local community, and gain social support from peers and the academic community at the educational institution (Rohimah et al., 2025). Thus, adaptation does not occur passively but through a series of conscious actions aimed at creating comfort and meaning within the new campus environment.

#### *Theme 5: The Meaning of Adaptation and Diversity*

This theme describes the dynamics of the most memorable experiences held by PMM students. The focus of this theme is on how students interact with peers from various regions, enabling them to learn about cultural differences, customs, languages, perspectives, and expand their understanding of diversity in Indonesia. One participant stated, “The most memorable experience during the program was observing the month of Ramadan and celebrating Eid al-Fitr at the host campus. I felt a different Ramadan atmosphere because I was far from my family, but the camaraderie with new friends made the moment feel warm nonetheless” (P4). Another participant also stated, “The MSEP experience has shifted my perspective from merely acknowledging diversity to celebrating it” (P8).

These findings indicate that the meaning of adaptation not only fosters the ability to adjust but also shapes a deeper way of understanding diversity. Within the phenomenological framework, these experiences reflect a transformation in how individuals perceive differences as a positive aspect of social identity. Consistent with research by (Sinaulan et al., 2025), which states that camaraderie among students fosters friendships that are inseparable within social, psychological, and academic contexts. Furthermore, peer support plays a crucial role in helping exchange students navigate the social and psychological difficulties and challenges arising from being far from their home regions (Zhu & Peng, 2026; Syawitri, 2025). Thus, interactions and camaraderie among students from diverse regions with differing linguistic, cultural, and customary backgrounds can foster a sense of kinship and diversity among students.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the process of social and cultural adaptation for students participating in the Student Exchange Program (MSEP) 4 within a new university environment is a complex and multidimensional experience, encompassing emotional, social, academic, and cultural aspects. The research results reveal five main findings: initial experiences and impressions of the new campus environment; the dynamics of social interaction and cultural differences; the adaptation process and challenges faced; adaptation strategies and environmental support; and the significance of adaptation in the context of diversity. Adaptation is not solely influenced by external factors but also by individual initiative and reflection in interpreting the experiences encountered. From a phenomenological perspective, these experiences not only foster the ability to adjust but also drive a transformation in students' perspectives regarding how they understand and value diversity. These findings offer a novel perspective by emphasizing that student adaptation in the MSEP 4 program is not merely a process of adjustment but also the formation of personal and social character. Therefore, the results of this study are expected to serve as a solid foundation for the development of policies and support programs that are more responsive to students' adaptation needs in a cross-cultural environment.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization: DNA, MAI; Methodology: DNA, MAI, FFW; Formal analysis: DNA, MAI, AYM; Investigation: FFW, AYM, FAA; Writing – original draft: MAI, FFW; Writing – review & editing: DNA, MAI, AYM; Supervision: DNA, MAI.

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors used Gemini for language editing and grammar improvement. The authors reviewed and verified all AI-assisted revisions and take full responsibility for the final content.

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