

AN EVALUATION OF *MERDEKA* STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAM FOR EFL INBOUND STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract. This study aims to evaluate the *Merdeka* Student Exchange Program for EFL inbound students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. Hamka (UHAMKA). Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study explores the subjective experiences of exchange students while participating in the program. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six inbound students from different universities in Indonesia. The findings revealed two main themes: challenges and benefits. Challenges included adjusting to a new environment, cultural differences, and communication styles. Students also reported several benefits, such as meeting new people from different backgrounds, exploring new places, and experiencing a different classroom environment with different teaching methods and facilities. Significantly, students experienced personal growth through an increased understanding of global diversity, intercultural skills, and the development of qualities such as critical thinking, adaptability, and openness to difference. These findings are consistent with the literature highlighting the personal development of student exchange programs. The *Merdeka* Student Exchange Program at UHAMKA was proven to be a valuable initiative in promoting academic mobility, enhancing students' skills and knowledge, and fostering personal development. This research confirms the importance of exchange program in preparing students to become qualified global citizens capable of navigating the complexities of an interconnected world.

INTRODUCTION

In a globalized world, student exchanges become increasingly popular and desirable, not only by the students themselves, but also by university management as part of joint degree programs and the opportunities they offer to transfer innovations, improve competitiveness, and expand markets (Shopova & Arabska, 2013). It is defined that student exchange as the short-term movement of students between countries for learning, cross-cultural experiences, and skills development (Knight, 2012). In the context of academic enrichment and broader perspectives, student exchange program exposes participants to new teaching methodologies, research opportunities, and diverse academic fields (Czarnitzki, et al., 2021; Enomoto, et al., 2020). The student exchange program is an initiative to strengthen students' skills and expertise in dealing with global issues.

In line with the necessity of exchange program for students in promoting their learning skills and experiences, one of the activities in *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) or known as emancipated learning program is *Merdeka* student exchange program. MBKM is a policy of the Ministry of Education and Culture that aims to encourage students to master various skills that are useful in entering the world of work, and *Merdeka* student exchange program is one of the student exchange initiatives offered in Indonesia, and this learning program aims to make learning more meaningful (Supriati, et al., 2022). Moreover, the program provides students with access to academic activities at various universities across Indonesia, thus broadening their learning experience (Apoko, et al., 2022). Therefore, students are expected to broaden their perspectives, acquire new skills, and learn more. One of the universities participating in this program is Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. Hamka (UHAMKA), which accepts new students from other universities throughout Indonesia. It is important to assess how well this program is implemented to improve the skills and knowledge of UHAMKA students participating in the program.

Regarding emancipated learning curriculum (MBKM), it is a learning designed for students outside the study programs as their preferences to accommodate the experiential learning capacity. The curriculum characterization is on the curriculum structure providing some types optional learning activities and the course conversion with maximally 60 credits within three semesters (Yulianto, et al., 2023). Specifically in *Merdeka* student exchange program, it will encourage the students' skills, knowledge, and experiences. In addition, the program introduces the students to explore and learn Indonesian cultural varieties as well as to make friends with other students from different provinces (Tohir, 2020; Widana, 2020). A study shows that these programs contribute to personal development by increasing confidence, independence, and resilience qualities that are crucial for navigating an uncertain future (Suraya, et al., 2023). For those reasons, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology launched the *Merdeka* Student Exchange Program as one of learning activities in MBKM policy, which has been recognized as an innovative program aiming to promote academic mobility and enhance the skills and knowledge of students across Indonesia (Yoga Parwata, 2021).

Previous studies have shown that *Merdeka* Student Exchange Program has increased students' nationalistic insight, integrity, solidarity, and nationalism, improved their employability, and enhanced their personal development and professionalism (Hidayanto, et al., 2024). In addition to the activities of the *Nusantara* Module, the activities of the *Merdeka* Student Exchange Program can foster a sense of tolerance for diversity, which is in line with the main objective of the *Merdeka* student exchange (Naibaho, et al., 2023). By interacting with individuals from different backgrounds and cultures, students participating in the *Merdeka* student exchange program can develop a broader worldview and an appreciation of differences (Benavides, 2019). In addition, kind of student exchange program could increase students' participation, intellectual abilities and communication skills (Fitriasari, et al., 2022). This research attempts to identify and radiate the extent to which the *Merdeka* student exchange program contributes to developing the skills and knowledge of UHAMKA's inbound students, with the specific aim of assessing the development of exchange students - both personally and academically - throughout the program. The evaluation would examine students' personal growth in areas such as self-confidence, communication skills, and cultural awareness. Thus, the ultimate goal is to ensure that the student exchange program enhances

students' skills and knowledge so that they can take full advantage of their academic and personal development opportunities.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach (Sumandya & Widana, 2023). The phenomenological approach was chosen as this research aims to understand the subjective experiences of inbound students participating in the *Merdeka* student exchange program at UHAMKA. By using a phenomenological approach, researchers can explore and gain a deep understanding of the participants' meanings, perceptions, and interpretations of their experiences in the program (Cohen, et al., 2018).

This research was conducted at UHAMKA, Jakarta, Indonesia in the even semester of the 2023/2024 academic year. Participants in this study are EFL students who are officially accepted through the administrative selection stage by the government of Indonesia and also the receiving university, who then become UHAMKA inbound students through the *Merdeka* Student Exchange Program Batch 4. The participants agreed to participate in this descriptive qualitative research. There were six participants recruited from Haji Bokir's group as one of the names of group in the *Merdeka* Student Exchange Program at UHAMKA with 5 different universities in Indonesia with different semesters (see Table 1). The criteria for recruiting the participants were: (1) UHAMKA students who are actively registered, (2) Participating in the *Merdeka* Student Exchange Program as an inbound student in the even semester of the 2023/2024 academic year, and (3) Willing to participate in research.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

No.	Name	Origin of University	Gender	Semester	Age
1.	P1	Sumatera Selatan	Woman	6th	>= 20
2.	P2	Nusa Tenggara Timur	Woman	4th	>= 20
3.	P3	Aceh	Woman	4th	>= 20
4.	P4	Sulawesi Tenggara	Woman	6th	>= 20
5.	P5	Nusa Tenggara Barat	Woman	4th	>= 20
6.	P6	Aceh Darussalam	Man	4th	>= 20

The instrument used in this research is a semi-structured interview consisting of ten questions. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to ask open-ended questions that allow participants to provide more extensive and in-depth responses. The ten questions were used as a guide in the interview. The interview questions were conducted to the six selected students using WhatsApp audio, WhatsApp chat, and also by conducting questions in person at a place agreed upon by the interview participants. During the interview process the participants answered the questions without coercion and pressure to allow them to easily explore their experiences during their participation in the program.

In the process of data analysis, the results of interviews were transcribed from Indonesian to English. The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves systematically coding the data to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes in the data. The steps to be taken in analyzing the data include: (1) Transcribing the interview recordings verbatim, (2) Reading and coding the interview transcripts, (3) Searching for themes that emerged from the codes, (4) Reviewing and refining the themes found, (5) Defining and naming the final themes, and (6) Compiling the report by describing the themes found and providing quotes from the data that support each theme

(Creswell, 2018). The data analysis process was conducted carefully and thoroughly to ensure that the research findings accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Once the data was transcribed and qualitatively analyzed, the recorded data was archived for confidentiality reasons.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Challenges and Benefits are the two main themes in this research. Challenges include: (1) Departure and travelling; (2) Difficulty in adjusting. The benefits include: (1) Meeting new people and exploring new places; (2) The classroom environment and UHAMKA students; and (3) new insights.

Challenges

Regarding the departure and journey, the first impression of the students who were accepted at UHAMKA inbound before traveling to Jakarta was to make careful preparations. Besides that, some of them were very excited because they would travel quite far, and some of the UHAMKA inbound exchange students were the first time using an airplane. This made them a little nervous and tense. Below are the excerpts from the interview.

P1: "Before the flight to Jakarta, I felt very excited and a little nervous. I had done a lot of preparation, including gathering information about my destination and university."

P5: "My experience before the flight to Jakarta was very exciting because it was my first time on a plane. When I first boarded the plane, I felt a little tense when the plane started to take off."

P6: "The feeling of being able to learn in a different area and a new environment before going to another area was very happy."

In relation to students' self-adjustments, it is the biggest problem and challenge for the exchange students. When arriving in a new environment, exchange students often experienced adjustment difficulties, which was a common challenge faced by individuals in new and unfamiliar situations. The challenges experienced included difficulties in communication because the students came from different tribes. Communication became a difficult challenge as each student had a different dialect, which was a challenge in itself. In addition to communication, food was also a culture shock since each of them had a different food specialty. The different tastes, textures, and preferences were challenging and new to the exchange students. P1, P3, and P5 had their own views below.

P1: "I had to adjust to different cultures and customs, including different communication patterns and social norms."

P3: "The food in Jakarta did not suit my tongue and was quite expensive, and the culture in Jakarta was not very friendly where we had to be independent without any embrace."

P5: "The culture shock that I experienced at UHAMKA is that even though we talk to people who are older than us, we talk like we are with our peers as if there are no morals."

Benefits

Dealing with meeting new people and exploring new places, the student exchange program offered students the opportunity to meet new people from different cultural backgrounds and regions. This experience could broaden their horizons about cultural diversity and different ways of life. In addition, they also had the opportunity to explore new places, tasted local food, and explored the uniqueness of an area or city that was different from their daily

environment. Moreover, student exchange program also exposed the students to new relationships with people around them. Some excerpts from the interview are described below.

P2: "My impression is that I am very happy to meet friends and lecturers who are kind."

P4: "The first experience was meeting other PMM students from different ethnic groups, which increased my knowledge about other cultures."

P5: "The first time I went out of town, I felt a combination of excitement and awe. Seeing new places, tasting local food, and meeting people of different cultures made me feel like I was exploring a new and exciting world."

P6: "The first time I interacted with regular students, they shared their experiences and learned from each other."

Regarding the classroom environment and UHAMKA students, the situation of classroom is one of the most important platforms for students to acquire knowledge and develop skills. One of the benefits of an exchange program is a different learning experience in a new classroom environment. It was found that all the students felt impressed with the classroom facilities, and this made them comfortable to learn and practice English. They might also have access to learning facilities that might be different or more comprehensive than those on their home campus. Some excerpts from participants are described below.

P1: "My first experience at UHAMKA was very pleasant. I was also impressed by the modern campus facilities and the conducive learning atmosphere."

P5: "The experience at UHAMKA is being able to use very good learning facilities that are not available at my home campus."

P6: "The first experience I had when I saw the campus building was that it was nice and had complete facilities such as a library, a sports field, and so on."

The other benefit from this program is the new insights. *Merdeka* Student exchange program offered the students the opportunity to broaden their horizons about different cultures, traditions, and education systems. By being exposed to new environments, they could develop a deeper understanding of global diversity and improve their intercultural skills. These experiences could also enrich their learning by providing new perspectives and helping them develop skills such as critical thinking, adaptability, and openness to differences as P1, P3, and P4 view in the following.

P1: "Yes, the exchange program gave me new insights. I gained a broader understanding and the opportunity to learn about other cultures traditions, and different education systems, as well as valuable learning experiences that I wouldn't have had if I hadn't joined the program."

" P3: "It adds a lot because there are many things that are very useful for me and I will not forget and there are many things here that can be my life lessons."

" P4: "It adds new insights because I can see many things such as the history of the city of Jakarta, historical buildings of the city of Jakarta, etc."

Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the challenges and benefits experienced by international students participating in the *Merdeka* Student Exchange Program at UHAMKA. The research highlights the significant impact of this exchange program in broadening students' perspectives, promoting personal growth and enhancing

their academic experience. One of the main challenges faced by students is the adjustment process (Purnadewi et al., 2023). As they embark on their journey to a new environment, they experience difficulties in adapting to different cultures, communication styles, social norms, and academic atmosphere (Gong et al., 2021; Yanto & Trijayanto, 2022). The experience of culture shock is a common theme, with students struggling with unfamiliar cuisines, customs, and interpersonal dynamics. These findings are consistent with literature suggesting that cross-cultural transitions can be challenging and require significant adjustment (Zhou, et al., 2008).

Despite the challenges, students reported many benefits from their participation in the exchange program. The opportunity to meet new people from different backgrounds and explore new places was a very enriching experience. This exposure to cultural diversity not only broadened their horizons but also fostered a deeper appreciation of different ways of life (Gandasari, 2023). In addition, the exchange program allows students to immerse themselves in a new classroom environment where they experience different teaching styles, learning methods, and interactions with local students (Jaryono, et al., 2022; Romadhon, et al., 2023). This is also consistent with previous research highlighting the academic enrichment and broader perspectives gained through exchange program (Czarnitzki, et al., 2021). Specifically, students reported that they gained new insights and personal growth through their participation in the exchange program. They developed a deeper understanding of global diversity, enhanced their intercultural skills, and developed qualities such as critical thinking, adaptability, and openness to difference. These findings are consistent with the literature that highlights the personal development benefits of student exchange programs, including increased self-confidence, independence, and resilience (Hidayanto, et al., 2024; Suraya, et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the *Merdeka* Student Exchange Program at UHAMKA has played a significant role in improving the skills and knowledge of the students who participated in this program. Although students face challenges in adjusting to a new environment and cultural differences, the benefits gained from this experience are considerable, such as meeting more new people from different universities, broadening cultural diversity, increasing intercultural skills, having new insights, promoting academic skills and personal growth. However, this study has some limitations such as the small numbers of participants representing all the inbound students exchange in Indonesia and the time constraints in conducting the study. Therefore, future relevant research should involve more participants including multiple instruments to use. The implication of the study confirms the importance of such an exchange scheme in preparing students to be qualified global citizens capable of coping with the complexity of an interconnected world.

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