

# Indonesian Postgraduate Students studying in Australia: An Examination of their Academic, Social and Cultural Experiences

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Isvet Amri Novera

School of Social and Behavioural Science, Swinburne University of Technology  
inovera@hotmail.com

*Prior studies suggest that adjustment is a significant contributor to the academic success of international students, and cultural differences can lead to adjustment problems. However, while Australia takes many international students from Indonesia, and there are substantial cultural differences between Indonesia and Australia, there has been little research on the adjustment of Indonesian students in Australia. The study investigates the adjustment experiences of 25 Indonesian postgraduate students (8 female, 17 male) studying in universities in Victoria, Australia, using an open-ended questionnaire. The results confirm the importance of cultural issues in the adjustment process, particularly in relation to classroom interaction and student-teacher relationships. The main problems faced by the Indonesian students concern the use of academic English, and Australian academic requirements, and the lack of specific facilities for Muslim students. The study suggests recommendations for improvements in pre-departure training programs and degree programs in Australia.*

International education, Indonesia, Australia, cultural differences, adjustment, postgraduate students

## INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of tertiary students now undertake their education in a country other than their country of citizenship. Australia is a major global provider of international education, and is the third largest provider at degree level after the United States and the United Kingdom. In 2003, there were 210,397 international students enrolled in Australian higher education, including more than 155,000 on shore in Australia, who were 22 per cent of all students. This was 13.7 per cent more international students than in 2002 and constituted 22 per cent of all students enrolled in Australia. The largest source countries in order were Singapore, Hong Kong China, Malaysia, mainland China, Indonesia and India. In 2003 11,865 students from Indonesia were enrolled in Australian higher education institutions, of whom 8307 (70.0%) were in either Business Studies (5590) or Information Technology (2717) programs and 1065 enrolled in Engineering (OECD, 2003; DEST, 2004).

In economic terms, international education is very important to Australia, providing 13 per cent of the revenues of higher education institutions (DEST, 2004) and injecting \$5 billion into the national economy in 2003 including student expenditures on transport, accommodation, food and other living expenses (Nelson, 2003). Education is Australia's third largest services export (Cameron, 2002). International education enhances university engagement with Asian nations and has the potential to broaden the cross-cultural experiences of local students. Nevertheless, international education will only continue to contribute to Australia if it produces adequate benefits for the international students themselves and constitutes a successful experience for them.

One key to the success of international students is their adjustment, not only to the academic demands of Australian universities but to the social and cultural environment. Academic success enhances personal confidence and status, helping students to fit in; and research (for example, Hellsten, 2002; Hedges and Soutar, 2003) suggests that social and personal adjustment to life in the host country, and its characteristics inside and outside the classroom, are keys to academic adjustment.

While the literature contains a large number of studies touching on issues of the adjustment of international students, few specifically focus on Indonesian students and most investigate international education in the United States rather than Australia (e.g. Huntley, 1993; Wan, 1999; Nicholson, 2001; Toyokawa and Toyokawa, 2002). Little research has focused specifically on the adjustment of Indonesian students in Australia. Hasanah (1997) and Philips (1994) note that Indonesian students encounter difficulties in fulfilling certain Western academic requirements, particularly in relation to critical thinking. These studies do not explore the broad range of academic and social problems. Yet this is a fruitful area for research, not just because of the importance of Indonesian students to Australia, and the importance of the Australia-Indonesia relationship to both neighbouring nations, but also because adjustment problems are magnified by cultural differences. There are clear differences between Indonesian and Australian cultures, so that a study of Indonesian students in Australia might also be of broader academic interest.

The study used a background (demographic) questionnaire and an open-ended questionnaire to investigate the academic social and cultural experiences of 25 postgraduate Indonesian students during their period of study in a number of universities in Victoria, Australia. The study aims to help Australian academics to understand better the experiences faced by Indonesian students both in adjusting to academic work, and to the larger cultural and social setting in which that academic work takes place, particularly the cultural environment of the universities themselves. Because the number of students in the study is relatively small, and the study is confined to universities in Victoria, the study cannot be seen as definitive of Indonesian students studying in Australia. However, the open-ended questionnaire data are detailed, and the findings produce certain clear conclusions that are indicative of directions for further research.

### **INTERCULTURAL ADJUSTMENT**

All people who embark on a new program of work face adjustment issues, more so in a new institution, and much more so in a new country. Adjustment is a psychological process that directly impacts the performance and functioning of the individual (Robie and Ryan, 1996). Miller (1993) states that students who experience adjustment problems or stresses or what is termed 'culture shock' (see below) can experience a range of negative responses, from mild symptoms such as tiredness, to severe reactions such as the feeling of being victimised, paranoia, and the refusal of most or even all aspects of the host culture. Poyrazli, et al. (2001) agree that not being able to adjust to a new environment can affect students psychologically, for example by generating stress and depression; and physiologically, for example by triggering headaches. Both reactions are likely to cut into potential academic performance. Poyrazli and colleagues also note that adjustment problems are more likely to occur when students live and work in a culture different from their own. Barker et al. (1991) note that problems experienced by international student are often affected by unfamiliarity with host nation cultural norms, and cultural difficulties are often manifest as difficulties in adjustment.

Studies of international student adjustment discuss a range of problems, including the pressures created by new role and behavioural expectations, language difficulties, financial problems, social difficulties, homesickness, difficulties in dealing with university and other authorities, academic difficulties, and lack of assertiveness inside and outside the classroom (Charles and Stewart, 1991; Hayes and Lin, 1994; Barratt and Huba, 1994; Parr, Bradley and Bingi, 1992). These factors can

combine, exacerbating problems of adjustment and the anxieties and performance lags that result. For example, Poyrazli and colleagues (2001) report that students under sponsorship had more problems than those without scholarship support, suggesting that this was due to the additional bureaucracy that sponsored students dealt with, and expectation of superior academic performance. Barker and colleagues (1991) report that some Asian students find it difficult to engage in tutorials and seminars. They are not accustomed to having to participate in the Australian manner and a lack of language competence and self-confidence further affects their capacity to do so.

But inter-cultural adjustment is not solely determined by the international students themselves: it is shaped in relationships with others and affected by differences in values. Wanguri (1996, p.456) notes that “we tend to like people who are similar to us and dislike those who are dissimilar”. Among the most influential work on the values dimension of cultural difference is Hofstede (1997), who conducted empirical studies in a large multinational cooperation in 40 countries to investigate cultural differences in value systems. He identifies four main dimensions in which differences in values can be identified, describing these as: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity and femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. Of these dimensions the masculine-feminine concept is less relevant to this study, but the other three concepts are used in data analysis (see the discussion below of Findings):

- **Power distance** is about how a culture deals with status inequality and authority; “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 1997, p.28). Hierarchical relationships are more readily observed in Asian cultures than in Western cultures. In social interactions most Asian students are conscious of “who is older and who is younger, who has a higher level of education, who has a lower level, who is in a higher institutional or economic position and who is lower, or who is teacher and who is student” (Scollon and Scollon, 1995, p.81).
- **Individualism versus collectivism** refers to relationships between individual and others. Most Asian people live in the societies that value what is referred to as ‘togetherness’, and think of themselves as a ‘we’ group. They typically relate to extended not nuclear families and “are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups which continue throughout a lifetime to protect in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Jandt, 2001, p.200). In individualist Western cultures people think more in terms of ‘I’ than ‘we’ and focus on the interests of themselves and their immediate family. In an individualist culture the cardinal values are creativity, bravery, self-reliance, and solitude. In a collectivist culture they are reciprocity, obligation, duty, security, tradition, dependence, harmony, obedience to authority, equilibrium and proper action (Triandis, 1994).
- **Uncertainty avoidance** refers to “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertainty or unknown situations” (Hofstede, 1997, p.113). People from strong uncertainty avoidance cultures are active, expressive of their feelings, aggressive, emotional, compulsive, security seeking, and intolerant; while those from weak uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as Southeast Asian cultures (Clyne, 1994) are contemplative, less aggressive, unemotional, relaxed, accepting personal risk, and relatively tolerant (Jandt, 2001). The latter cultures also tolerate ambiguity and value harmony. Jandt asserts that students from high uncertainty avoidance cultures expect their teachers to know all the answers, whereas in low uncertainty avoidance cultures, students do not expect their teachers to know everything.

## UNDERSTANDING INDONESIA

### Indonesian Collectivism

Indonesia is characterised by linguistic, cultural, religious and local diversity; but is also unified in certain respects, as indicated by the widespread use of Bahasa Indonesia and the national flag, and the dominance of Islam in religion. Indonesia's national motto is *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, an old Javanese phrase meaning 'They are many; they are one', usually translated as 'Unity in diversity' (Turner, et al., 2000; Sneddon, 2003). The Ramayana and the Mahabrata story, performed through the Wayang puppets, reflects the Indonesian value system. This includes cooperative harmony, decision by consensus (*musyawarah mufakat*) and mutual assistance (*gotong royong*) in accomplishing economic tasks (Draine and Hall, 1986). In terms of Hofstede's individualism or collectivism, Indonesian culture is definitely collectivist. Indonesians maintain traditional family values, group concerns are more important than individual concerns. People are very courteous. Western individualism is seen as odd and selfish. "Criticisms are not spoken directly and they will often agree with what you say rather than offend. They will also prefer to say something rather than appear as if they don't know the answer" (Turner, et al, 2000, p.59).

### Education in Indonesia

The relationship between Indonesian teachers and students is circumscribed by their respective social positions and traditional beliefs about learning.

The teacher is seen to be a moral authority and students are expected to defer to all their superiors, including teachers. Teachers are also viewed as the fountain of knowledge – while knowledge is viewed as a more or less fixed sets of facts to be transmitted and digested by thirsty learners, later to be regurgitated in test (a deficit model of learning). (Lewis, 1997, p.14)

In the typical secondary school classroom teachers mostly dominate talk. Teachers urge the students to listen, to obey and to memorise things (Buchori, 2001). Indonesian school students are not encouraged to ask questions of their teacher, and are reluctant to ask questions even when they are invited to do so. Questioning is seen "to challenge teacher's authority, and to demonstrate one's arrogance or ignorance – to risk the possibility of punishment or personal humiliation (loss of social face)" (Lewis, 1997, p.13). This can have negative long-term implications, given the need to formulate questions and develop critical thinking in tertiary education. Nevertheless,

A cultural tradition can clearly shape the dynamic of the learning environment... The imposition of a 'western' model of learning, or aspect of it, in such a culturally sensitive environment carries with it a degree of cultural presumption. Such a model might not be responsive to (or even valid within) this context given the specific characteristics of the Indonesian education system. (Meyer and Kiley, 1998, p.289)

When students are in a foreign language context, language becomes a key factor in adjustment, as the Findings will make clear. In Indonesia English is learnt as a foreign language; and though it is one of the compulsory subjects in secondary and tertiary education, it is taught for only three hours per week in Lower Secondary School and four hours a week in the Upper Secondary School. Moreover, "English is seldom used in the classroom as teachers tend to use Bahasa Indonesia to carry out their English lessons in the classroom – except, perhaps, when greeting students before the sessions get started and then when students are dismissed" (Mustafa, 2001, p.306).

## Islam

Islam is not only the predominant religion in Indonesia but part of the framework of Indonesian moral values. Its day-to-day customs and requirements directly affect most Indonesian students in Australia. Muslims are required to pray five times a day: at dawn, at noon, afternoon, sunset and at night. Islam prohibits alcoholic beverages and eating pork; and animals such as cows and chickens must be slaughtered in accordance with Islamic religious requirements before they can be consumed<sup>1</sup>. The strictest Muslims are very careful with the ingredients in various food items available in the supermarket, and in relation to detergents, soaps, toothpaste and shampoo.

### STUDY METHODS

The 25 participants in the study were aged between 24 and 42 years, from a diversity of locations in Indonesia, from a mixture of academic fields, and enrolled at a number of universities in Victoria, Australia. There were 17 men and eight women students; and 17 of the 25 students were Muslim; the remainder were Christian (seven) and Buddhist (one). All were postgraduate students because it was expected that their relative maturity and experience would enable more thoughtful reflections. Similarly, all were required to have lived and studied in Australia for at least one year. In addition, all were coursework students rather than research degree students, to ensure that they attended classes on a regular basis and their classroom experiences could be investigated. All participants were self selected (volunteers), contacted through the Indonesian society.

The background questionnaire was designed to provide detailed information about the participants, covering such areas as age, gender, religion, prior learning experiences, experiences of living abroad, and details of their course of study and other arrangements in Australia. The open-ended questionnaire sought information from the participants concerning any difficulties they had experienced in relation to their course of study, and social and cultural life in Australia, and asked them to identify positive aspects of Australian education and socio-cultural life. In part the questionnaire was adapted from Robertson et al. (2000).

### STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### Issues in the academic setting

##### *Language and learning*

The study confirms the results of many others (for example, Robertson, et al., 2000; Li, et al., 2002; Bayley, et al., 2002) in finding that language difficulties are a significant barrier to learning by Indonesian students, and a major factor in their cultural and educational adjustment. In total 23 out of the 25 participants in this study reported at least some difficulties in the use of English in academic situations. Making oral presentations and writing essays were the areas of difficulties most often cited. The specific difficulties are shaped not just by unfamiliarity with English *per se* but by the linguistic character of Indonesian, the approach to English learning in Indonesia, and what happens when the two different pedagogical and linguistic traditions intersect. Although both English and Indonesian use the same script, there are differences particularly in their grammatical and syntactical structures. For Indonesian students, grammatical mistakes are almost inevitable, and this can be a source of frustration for some students, especially in relation to writing tasks. For the students in the study English was more problematic in academic situations than in social contexts. In normal social interactions there was less at stake for the participants, for

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<sup>1</sup> The term *halal* (permitted under Islamic law) can be used in the context of food such as *halal* meat, or it can be used with things like *halal* income, meaning income earned by using halal means (Saeed, 2003).

example in making grammatical mistakes, though they were concerned about conversational rules such as how to start a conversation or topic selection. Likewise, Cummins (1984, in Borland and Pearce, 2002, p.109) notes that it takes longer for language learners to become competent in the academic context. He finds that children in the Canadian context could perform well in basic interpersonal communication skills within a short time span, but took years to acquire cognitive academic language proficiency.

Five participants stated that they were nervous about speaking, or lacked the confidence to participate in classroom discussion, or did so only because it was to be assessed. Several noted the speaking skills taught in their bridging program were insufficient, and others emphasised that classroom presentations had not been part of their prior educational experience. As a result, local students dominated the classroom. Not only did the Indonesian students experience difficulties of communication but often the topics of the discussion were unfamiliar. One student commented that:

*The main difficulty within my course of study is the ability to follow and get involved in classroom discussions that are heavily dominated by local students. Since international students have no idea about things like work experience in Australia, discussions that are going on in the class simply get out of context... When international students come to those local issues, the result is they become passive with total confusion and loss of understanding.*

Nine participants specifically mentioned difficulties with writing in English. Some participants noted that when writing in English, they faced the difficulty that their own language system structured essays in a different manner. One participant also remarked that:

*Writing was and is a problem as well. The main criterion for assessment in the course I'm taking is based on writing skills. We have to submit two to three papers to pass a unit (a course). What makes writing difficult is that it was not a skill that received prominence in my prior education. I hardly wrote for my bachelor's courses except a thesis in the final semester.*

Three participants felt the reading materials required a very high level of English comprehension, though one noted that local students had the same difficulty. Participants found it hard to develop both their reading and their content knowledge at the same time, especially under examination conditions when both elements had to be addressed within a time constraint.

### ***Cultural differences in learning***

For many participants, their difficulties in academic spoken English academic learning intersected with cultural differences in learning styles so as to affect their educational progress. Indonesia is one Asian country that highly values what Hofstede (1997) calls 'power distance'. This can be a barrier for Indonesian students in adjusting to their new environment, in two ways: it can be difficult to manage a less hierarchical teacher-student relationship, and difficult to assert themselves within the classroom as required. Indonesians are expected to obey and to respect older people, for example by using a particular language code to refer to a person senior or older than themselves. This is not the way it is in Australia, where professors and lecturers are often addressed by their first names. A number of participants stated that they found this awkward, even after learning how to do many things in the Australian context. As one participant put it:

*In Australia if I want to communicate with an older person, I just mention his or her name without any formality or title. It is contrary with my culture: in Indonesia, I have to refer to her or him by 'pak' (sir) or 'bu' (madam) to communicate with the older person respectfully.*

In Indonesia students manifest their respect for older people such as teachers by being obedient and listening to them; and because Indonesian culture embodies strong commitments to collectivity and harmony, students often prefer to give indirect signals than to argue directly with lecturers. Interrupting lecturers in the middle of the presentation is considered rude, and criticising the lecturer is even worse. Three participants said that they found it intrinsically difficult to provide critical comment on what lecturers said. Behaviour that is culturally appropriate in Indonesia can be interpreted as classroom passivity in Australia. This further mars teacher-student relationships. Again, in this respect the study confirms previous findings. Barker et al. (1991, p.83) argue that “the reluctance to deal with higher-status figures generally may mean that the student-lecturer relationship is a fragile one”. Chalmers and Volet (1997) and Biggs (2001) agree that international students from high power distance cultures tend to participate less in classrooms, and often lack the critical skills required in Western learning. But to change Indonesian education in this respect is difficult. Dardjowidjojo states that:

Changing the role of the learner and that of the teacher takes up a deep down into our fundamental values and traditions which, whether we realise it or not, have shackled our ways of thinking and behaving... The culture that allows people to express their views freely, to be direct in what they say, and, if necessary, to be critical of their elders, is just not with us. Conformity, rather than individuality, is still the most dominant rule. (Dardjowidjojo, 2001, pp.314-316)

Likewise Kaplan (1966, p.10) notes that in writing, speakers and readers of English expect linear development as an integral aspect of communication. Asian traditions often involve more indirect presentation. The difficulties faced by international students who are unfamiliar with the more direct form of argument are magnified by linguistic constraints.

Nevertheless, the cultural differences in learning were not always seen as negatives. The very elements that were the source of learning difficulties, such as teacher-student intimacy, and the emphases on individual integrity and self-expression, were also valued by the students.

*The thing that I like about the Australian education system is that it gives me independence in the sense that I am the one who is responsible for the success of my study. That's why I have to read a lot of articles, books, journals in order for me to gain what I am supposed to understand from the unit I am taking.*

*The policy of honesty and genuineness are some of the things I most like about Australian education system. In Indonesia the same policy exists, but does not really work in many educational institutions. Students become uncreative, lazy and poor in the outcome, since punishment or law reinforcement on plagiarism has not really been established.*

One participant liked the fact that “students can give their opinion and express what they think without being afraid they will be judged to be wrong or right”. Another participant noted that critical thinking in essay writing - questioning, analysing and evaluating – was very valuable, training students to be creative rather than just to memorise. Students were being motivated to read a lot and to do their own research; this was good. Some mentioned the two-way interaction between lecturers and students in classroom discussion, and lecturer ‘friendliness’ as a plus.

### ***Academic servicing***

There were some differences between the participants and their universities in relation to workloads and completion times for assignments. Seven participants found the study program

very difficult. They were not accustomed to doing this many assignments while also completing lengthy reading programs. It was difficult to manage their time<sup>2</sup>.

One stated:

*The main difficulty that I had to overcome in the early months of my academic life in Australia was to get used to the habit of reading a lot. My prior education in Indonesia did not really require me to read a lot, a condition that inevitably influenced my way of behaving in academic life. Brought into an Australian academic culture, at first I found it difficult to cope with a pile of reading materials prior to a lecture. It was beyond my imagination that before attending a class I had to read four to five chapters or articles related to what was going to be discussed in the class. This at first was quite stressing!*

The findings in relation to academic staff support are mixed, and varied obviously from case to case. Clearly, some staff provided good support for international students. They were friendly, accessible, punctual, resourceful and helpful, they understood the difficulties, and they showed respect for the students, for their efforts. These staff members encouraged and trained students to be active in group discussion and gave students sufficient time to prepare themselves for an examination. On the other hand, several participants noted that some lecturers appeared to have not had any experience with international students, and a couple suggested the University should address this in its professional development programs. A key issue was the difference between many of the participants and their academic staff on the amount of help international students could require. Lecturers expected students to be independent and solve their own study-related problems. Twelve participants saw a positive side to this expectation about independence, but others were unhappy (20 participants). What was at stake here was not just differences in learning philosophy but differences about the allocation of resources, differences about whether international students were entitled to special help as international students and second-language learners, and even differences about whether as fee-paying students they were receiving value for money.

The common feeling among participants was that in cases where students faced course-related difficulties, there was insufficient help from either the international student unit or the university administration. Some participants were clearly unhappy with the level or type of academic support provided by their university, particularly in relation to language learning. One participant noted that extra language help was provided to scholarship students but not to full fee paying students. This student had to hire a private tutor to proofread essays, which was very costly. Some participants stated directly that in its handling of academic programs, the University discriminated against international students; that they were being treated as a 'gold mine' without little concern for their academic progress or for themselves as people. They felt that international students were being left to flounder educationally, with most failing at least one subject per semester.

### ***Other dealings with the university***

In some universities in the study, the international student advisers played a great role in supporting international students, and participants emphasised this. As one stated: "*it is a friendly, encouraging and relaxing atmosphere that the international student body has created. This condition has helped me focus on my study, and this is the most important thing*". Several participants also cited the family support programs organised by the university. International

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<sup>2</sup> Whether local students express similar views is beyond the scope of this study. If they do, this may suggest the need for reconsideration or re-evaluation of syllabuses.

students with families enjoyed excursions and other programs organised on a semester basis. Other services mentioned positively included computer laboratories, sporting facilities, student clubs and the union, and libraries with their books, e-journals, computers and discussion spaces. Participants appreciated the fact that the library was open during week-ends. The internet-based administration enrolment, examinations and timetable also drew positive comments.

On the whole, participants were more positive about non-academic servicing and support than about academic support, particularly in relation to language where many of their difficulties lay.

## **Social and Cultural and Issues**

### ***Day-to-day interactions***

Participants had fewer problems in adjusting to socio-cultural life in Australia than to its educational demands. Almost half the participants (11 out of 25) stated that they had no problems at all in response to the question 'What difficulties, if any, have you experienced with adjusting to social life in Australia? One difficulty mentioned frequently was the toilet system. In Australia as in many Western countries toilet tissues are common; in Indonesia a wet bathroom is used.

In relation to daily interactions with local people, some participants reported that the problems lay not so much in language itself but in selecting topics of conversations. Lack of knowledge of 'footy' could be a barrier to making friends: it forced the Indonesian students to be silent, inhibiting the flow of conversation. Another difficulty was the lack a shared alcohol culture.

### ***Islam***

The most fundamental problem of a social-cultural nature was that day-to-day Muslim practices were not always understood or appreciated in Australia. Seven participants specifically mentioned difficulties in this area. Finding a place for praying, and washing prior to praying, was a serious issue. A Muslim is required to pray five times a day: at dawn, at noon, afternoon, sunset and at night. As the Muslim students in this study spend most of their time outside their houses, much of it on campus, finding a place to pray is one of their principal daily concerns. Participants also complained it was difficult to find halal food:

*Due to my religious beliefs, it's quite difficult for me to find halal food (chicken, beef, lamb), you know my kids like pizza very much. Only certain markets provide stores or stands selling halal food, and reaching them is quite a problem for me.*

Some found it hard to accept public gestures of affection. One participant commented:

*When I came here for the first time I could not cope with Australian social life, maybe because I grew up with religious background that was totally different from Australia. I was very shocked when I saw two girls kissing each other in front of me. Why they did it in front of public, since not every one will respect their social life style?... Now I don't care anymore what they do. I try to understand that I live in a different environment.*

Students from a Muslim background experience different adjustment problems to those facing non-Muslim students. There has been little written about the potential of international students' religious backgrounds to affect their socio-cultural adjustment to a new environment. The present study suggests that this is an important area of inquiry.

### ***Difference and discrimination***

Dei (1992) notes that international students can be exposed to discrimination and racism; and previous studies have noted discrimination in relation to employment opportunities, and the

curriculum and materials provided in educational program (Dei, 1999; Arthur, 2004). In contrast with these previous studies, two participants in the present study linked discrimination to academic practices. It was suggested that lecturers failed international students in at least one subject per semester, to increase the number of times those students would have to pay fees.

Participants also felt vulnerable in other, more public ways. Several were concerned that they were exposed to the so-called 'soft marking' debate, which presented international students as people with low academic standards who did not deserve to pass, and even suggested that international students were responsible for lowering the standard of Australian education. No one had proved these things, but they were still being said, and this harmed all international students. Participants also faced prejudices that were specific to Indonesia. The Bali bombing, especially, and the Marriott bombing in Jakarta, exposed them to anti-Indonesian and anti-Muslim attitudes. After these incidents prejudices were expressed more openly. Reports of attacks on mosques and on women for wearing the hejab (head-covering) affected some participants. It was more difficult to be an Indonesian student in Australia, with so much criticism in the media and ordinary conversation about 'radical Islam' and 'terrorism', and with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. One participant stated that:

*I was very sad when the Bali bombing happened. It influenced Indonesians who live here. I was stressed when Australian or Westerners asked where I came from. I saw on TV many Indonesians being arrested as they were suspected to be involved in Bali bombing. One Australian said that Indonesian is not good anymore to visit. I realise that many Australian are very angry and upset with what happened in Bali, but we are only students here and do not deserve to be blamed. What had happened in Bali could happen everywhere.*

### ***Belonging and adjustment***

Most participants responded positively towards aspects of Australian culture. They valued Australia's clean environment, and friendly punctual people. As many saw it, Australia is a multicultural society, containing many differences, and people are taught how to respect differences. Australian people did not interfere with each other's business; and they also respected disabled people and the elderly, who were given priority and easy access. Some participants emphasised that they saw Australians as very open and tolerant of differences.

Being involved and accepted in local community activities facilitates adjustment, providing relationships that enable the students to enter Australian social life. This facilitates more rapid learning. One participant acknowledged the benefit of involvement in a very welcoming Australian church community that fostered social adjustment. Likewise other studies have highlighted the importance of social networks in migration, particularly the supporting role of churches, civic groups, rotary and student clubs (Massey, et al., 1998; Tilly, 1990; Vertovec, 2002).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As noted in the introduction, a sample of 25 postgraduates does not permit firm conclusions to be drawn about the whole Indonesian student population, but it does enable firm conclusions about the experiences of these students. Their experience, which is largely consistent with the findings of the other studies mentioned above, suggests both areas that are worthy of further investigation, and possible strategies for improving international education programs and provision.

Education in a new cultural context can be an exciting and rich experience. This experience is constrained by unfamiliarity, not only with the academic customs, but also the social and cultural environment, and the two aspects tend to affect each other. Many of the problems faced by

Indonesian students during their course of study, as outlined in these findings, can be explained in terms of differences between Indonesian cultural values and Australian values. This confirms previous studies that identify cultural difference as a key factor in difficulties of adjustment. What stands out in this study are Indonesian students' difficulties with English, particularly in the classroom, the combined power of the language and culture, and the importance of Muslim identity as part of participants' Indonesian cultural background. Issues related to power distance, individualism or collectivism and uncertainty avoidance recur frequently. It is clear that Indonesian preferences for ambiguity, collectivism, non-confrontation and formality in dealing with authority affect these participants. The study also confirms previous findings about the benefits for adjustment of positive social interactions between locals and internationals.

The participants' difficulties with English probably derive in part from insufficient exposure to English in Indonesian education, given that English is taught as a foreign language, with limited hours per week. Indonesian students need more prior exposure to real communication contexts. Unfortunately, this study suggests that the preparatory courses in English, provided to Indonesian students before their degree course in Australia, are insufficient to compensate for the weakness of English language learning in Indonesia. This suggests the need for more language support in the country of study. Most universities provide language assistance for international students, through language advisers, but as Coley (1999) notes, the ratio of international students to academics in charge in language assistance tends to be high. The rapid growth of international enrolments is placing more pressure on language assistance. Universities need to recruit more staff in this area.

In relation to the cultural differences in learning styles, between Australia and Indonesia, educational institutions in Indonesia, and the preparatory courses in English provided before commencement of the degree program, should make this issue explicit and train students in how to handle it. For example, international students should be made aware of different styles of writing, and how to modify their own approach so as to meet Australian university requirements. In addition, orientation programs that prepare international students in Australian academic, social and cultural life should more strongly encourage students to use English actively in the classroom, participate in discussion and develop conversation skills. And many lecturers could better sensitise themselves to the silent ways of Indonesian students, not by condemning that silence but by positively encouraging students to ask questions or make comments and so acquire Australian classroom skills. Australian university lecturers should always remember that they are facing a diverse cultural group of students with various approaches to learning.

Most universities now pay more attention to the needs of Muslim students as Muslims. Most Indonesian students find aspects of Australian culture unacceptable for both cultural and religious reasons. Drinking alcohol is not part of Indonesian culture and not acceptable according to most students' religion. This should be better understood by Australian institutions, and people from other cultures, to avoid negative stereotyping of Muslim students. Facilities for prayer are a major issue. Muslim student associations are appropriate bodies for arranging facilities for religious activities, including venues for praying. Universities should provide support for these student bodies. Another important issue is the provision of halal food in campus canteens and restaurants.

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