UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' MULTICULTURAL ATTITUDES IN NORTH SUMATRA:
Insights for Multicultural Education in Indonesia

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Abstract: This study examines the multicultural attitudes of university students in North Sumatra, Indonesia, and explores their implications for advancing multicultural education in higher education. Using a phenomenological case study approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with fifteen students representing diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The findings indicate that students consistently demonstrated tolerance, empathy, and appreciation of cultural diversity, but also faced challenges in intercultural communication, particularly due to language differences. These results underscore the urgent need for universities to strengthen multicultural education by addressing linguistic diversity and implementing inclusive pedagogical practices. The novelty of this study lies in its contextual evidence from North Sumatra, which enriches the discourse on multicultural education that has often been dominated by theoretical discussions. Accordingly, this research provides both empirical and practical insights that can inform the development of more inclusive policies and practices in Indonesian higher education.

Keywords: Multicultural attitudes, multicultural education, diversity, tolerance

Introduction

Indonesia is one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world, with more than 300 ethnic groups, hundreds of local languages, and multiple religious affiliations living side by side. Such diversity, while enriching, also brings challenges in maintaining harmony, inclusivity, and tolerance among citizens. Higher education institutions play a pivotal role in nurturing multicultural attitudes among young generations, particularly university students who are expected to be future leaders of a plural society. As James A. Banks argues, multicultural education is not only about acknowledging diversity but also about empowering students to engage critically and constructively with cultural differences.[1] This idea resonates with Geneva Gay's emphasis on culturally responsive teaching, which integrates students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles to make learning more relevant and effective.[2]

Multicultural skills encompass three primary learning objectives: 1) Enhanced self-awareness regarding one's own cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs; 2) Enhanced understanding of the cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs associated with various worldviews; and 3) The cultivation of culturally appropriate interpersonal skills.[3] These objectives can be further deconstructed into the following categories: a) attitudes and beliefs, b) knowledge and comprehension, and c) the skills that are essential for the continuous development of multicultural capabilities. By effectively achieving these three objectives, it is possible to foster a more inclusive and harmonious environment, prevent cultural conflict, and foster a greater sense of mutual understanding. Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven have identified a number of multicultural personality characteristics, such as emotional stability, flexibility, social initiative, open-mindedness, and cultural empathy.[4] It is anticipated that individuals with positive attitudes such as these

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will be more successful in establishing positive relationships with individuals from a variety of cultural backgrounds and adapting to various cultural environments. Conversely, negative attitudes, including racism[5] and intercultural communication anxiety,[6] can impede the development of multicultural skills and result in discord and discord in interactions between cultural groups.

Engaging in productive discussions with individuals who hold different worldviews is crucial for enhancing multicultural abilities.[7] These types of discussions are commonly known as intergroup dialogues, racial dialogues (when specifically discussing racial identity), or, as we will refer to them, difficult dialogues.[8] This conversation holds significant value in fostering mutual understanding and appreciation for cultural differences, while also seeking to establish common ground amidst this diversity. By engaging in open and respectful dialogue, people from diverse cultural backgrounds can exchange perspectives, address misunderstandings, and collaborate on solutions to navigate challenges or conflicts stemming from cultural[9]. In personal life, having a strong understanding of different cultures can greatly enhance one's ability to connect with individuals from diverse backgrounds.[10] By having a deep understanding and respect for cultural differences, individuals can effectively navigate through potential misunderstandings, conflicts, and prejudices that frequently occur when there is a lack of knowledge about other cultures. Having a strong understanding and appreciation for different cultures can greatly enhance one's personal life. It provides the opportunity to gain new insights, broaden perspectives, and foster personal growth through meaningful interactions with diverse cultures.

Several recent studies have explored multicultural attitudes in higher education. Julián J. Leiva and Juan M. Carretero, for instance, examined Spanish university students' attitudes toward

cultural diversity, finding that higher exposure to multicultural environments correlates with stronger intercultural competence.[11] Similarly, Adnan Musa and Halimah Yusof in Malaysia revealed that religious tolerance and multicultural awareness among students significantly contribute to social cohesion.[12] In the Indonesian context, S. Rahman and Wulandari emphasized that universities are key sites for fostering multiculturalism, yet challenges remain in integrating multicultural values into curricula and daily student interactions.[13] These studies highlight the growing importance of multicultural education worldwide, yet suggest the need for more context-specific research. At the theoretical level, Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode underline that multicultural education must be framed not merely as cultural appreciation but also as a struggle for equity and social justice, reinforcing the urgency of context-based inquiry.[14]

Despite the increasing global scholarship, research on university students' multicultural attitudes in Indonesia is still limited, particularly in regions with complex social fabrics such as North Sumatra. Previous studies have generally addressed multicultural education in Indonesia at the policy or curricular level, with less focus on students' lived experiences and attitudes. Melinda Sari and R. Ardiansyah, for instance, show that while multiethnic student interactions occur in North Sumatra universities, they are not always accompanied by strong multicultural values.[15] Moreover, existing works often examine tolerance and pluralism broadly but do not capture the nuanced ways in which students perceive and negotiate cultural differences in everyday academic life. As Christine Sleeter and Carl A. Grant stress, effective multicultural education requires both structural and attitudinal change in order to move beyond tokenistic diversity.[16]

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the multicultural attitudes of university students in North Sumatra, Indonesia.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How do students perceive cultural and religious diversity on campus? (2) What challenges and opportunities emerge in cultivating inclusive academic environments? By focusing on students' perspectives, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on multicultural education while offering insights that are both locally grounded and globally relevant.

Method

This study explores students' attitudes in a multicultural campus setting. A qualitative method with a phenomenological case study design was adopted to capture students' lived experiences. Phenomenology is "a theoretical framework that allows studying the lived experience of a phenomenon from the point of view of the people who experience it."[17] This design enabled the researchers to focus intensively on eliciting unique perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of participants, producing rich descriptive data on students' perspectives about cultural diversity in higher education. Phenomenological case studies are particularly useful for exploring the complexity and uniqueness of institutions, programs, or social systems in real life.[18] To ensure methodological rigor, the study was also guided by Creswell and Poth's framework for qualitative inquiry, which emphasizes systematic data collection and analysis to capture meaning-making processes.[19]

Participants were recruited using a preliminary survey distributed via Google Forms. The study focused on undergraduate students from several universities in North Sumatra, representing various ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. From the initial survey, 15 students who met the inclusion criteria were selected: (1) being actively enrolled in a university with high levels of cultural diversity, (2) having regular cross-cultural interactions, and (3) willingness to share their experiences.

The final participants consisted of 15 students (8 females, 7 males), aged between 20 and 23 years old, representing multiple ethnic groups including Javanese, Batak, Acehnese, Malay, and Minangkabau, as well as different religious affiliations (Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic). Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the aims, procedures, and confidentiality of the study. Pseudonyms (P.1, P.2, etc.) were used to protect anonymity. Table 1 provides the demographic profile of participants.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Ethnicity	Religion
P.1	Female	Javanese	Muslim
P.2	Male	Javanese	Muslim
P.3	Male	Batak	Protestant
P.4	Female	Batak	Catholic
P.5	Female	Acehnese	Muslim
P.6	Male	Batak	Protestant
P.7	Male	Malay	Muslim
P.8	Male	Batak	Protestant
P.9	Female	Minang	Muslim
P.10	Female	Acehnese	Muslim
P.11	Male	Batak	Protestant
P.12	Female	Javanese	Muslim
P.13	Female	Tionghoa	Buddhist
P.14	Male	Batak	Catholic
P.15	Female	Batak	Protestant

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect in-depth data.[20] This approach allowed participants to freely share their experiences, while ensuring the discussion remained focused on the research objectives. The interview guide contained open-ended questions covering students' experiences of interacting with peers from different backgrounds, their perceptions of multiculturalism, and challenges they faced. Sample questions included: (1) How do you perceive ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity on your campus? (2) What challenges have you faced in a multicultural learning environment?

Each interview lasted 25–40 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' availability. With consent, all interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. To enhance descriptive adequacy, the study applied imaginative variation as suggested by Seidman.[21] Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework.[22] This involved familiarization with the data, coding, generating themes, reviewing, defining, and naming themes. Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield provide updated guidelines for thematic analysis that highlight its flexibility and reflexivity, ensuring that themes are not only patterned but also theoretically meaningful.[23]

To strengthen the rigor of analysis, Nowell et al. suggest applying criteria of trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—in thematic analysis.[24] Accordingly, this study employed member checking, peer debriefing, and thick description to enhance credibility. Additionally, the standards for reporting qualitative research recommended by Levitt et al. were followed to ensure methodological transparency.[25] The analysis produced two overarching themes: (1) Students' attitudes toward diversity (tolerance, empathy, and inclusiveness), and (2) Challenges in multicultural education (language barriers, cultural stereotypes, and intergroup tensions).

Results and Discussion

Through the thematic analysis process[26] on the multicultural attitudes of the students we interviewed, we found that participants showed positive attitudes toward diversity. They acknowledged the importance of understanding and respecting differences in terms of ethnicity, religion, and social background. Despite these positive attitudes, there were several challenges faced by participants in implementing multicultural attitudes. Some participants

felt that stereotypes and prejudices still existed, both consciously and unconsciously, which sometimes hindered harmonious interactions. The themes of this study are organized into two categories: students' attitudes in facing diversity (tolerance, and empathy) and challenges faced by students in the realm of multicultural education (language differences, and cultural differences).

Students' attitudes in facing diversity

The interviews conducted have revealed a range of attitudes and perspectives among students. The diverse campus environment plays a role in shaping the multicultural attitudes of participants. Based on these findings, it is evident that the most prevalent attitudes exhibited by students in relation to diversity are tolerance and empathy.

Tolerance as the foundation of diversity

The majority of the participants in this study indicated that the initial attitude that must be exhibited in a diverse environment is mutual respect or tolerance. Every individual should possess the attitude of treating all individuals equally, irrespective of their ethnic, cultural, or religious background. Furthermore, the surrounding environment's diversity in terms of ethnicity, culture, and religion also piques the interest of participants in learning more about subjects that are distinct from their typical knowledge, as evidenced by the following statements:

"Through embracing tolerance, we can expand our understanding of the rich ethnic and cultural tapestry that exists among individuals who may differ from us, thereby enhancing our knowledge."[27]

"Diversities are appealing to me because they elevate our individuality in the eyes of others. I am also of the opinion

that tolerance and the acceptance of diversity and differences in society are crucial for the development of a more harmonious life."[28]

Other participants also reflected on the importance of tolerance and all agree on its utmost relevance:

"Being open-minded and valuing every culture and religion in our campus helps me feel connected to everyone, even those whose background is very different from mine."[29]

"I realized that even small gestures of respect, like acknowledging others' customs or greeting them in their language, can significantly improve relationships."[30]

"I try to avoid assumptions about people based on their ethnicity or religion. I see every difference as an opportunity to learn."[31]

"Tolerance is not just about avoiding conflict; it's about actively seeking to understand and include others in group activities and discussions."[32]

"Living in a multicultural campus has taught me that respecting diversity is a lifelong skill, not just a requirement for school."[33]

Ultimately, all participants recognized that valuing and respecting differences fosters constructive relationships among individuals and groups, serving as a crucial factor in promoting harmony and peace. In other words, being tolerant of internal culture or religion is social capital for building intercultural or interreligious tolerance. At the university level, there is a prevalence of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity due to the presence of students, lecturers, and staff from various backgrounds.[34] The presence of diverse perspectives and ways of seeing in the student body enhances the learning experience, as it offers a variety of viewpoints and makes daily life more engaging and

vibrant.[35] Moreover, engaging with individuals from diverse backgrounds can enhance tolerance among people[36] and contribute to the mitigation of prejudice and negative stereotypes.[37] Diversity can enhance social cohesion by fostering collaboration and recognizing differences as assets, thereby promoting unity. Diversity enhances social networks and fosters advantageous relationships across multiple domains of life.[38]

Social Empathy towards Diversity

The subsequent attitude is empathy for diversity, which involves attempting to comprehend and experience the same emotions as others, despite their differences. Empathy in a multicultural context is essential because it enables students to develop more harmonious and inclusive relationships in diverse environments. One of the participants stated that having an empathetic attitude involves attempting to comprehend the emotions, experiences, and perspectives of others, particularly those from diverse backgrounds or cultures.

> "Giving attention and empathy to others of different ethnicities and cultures is very important to build a more harmonious, peaceful and tolerant life."[39]

Participant 4 stated that empathy is essential in order for each person to provide a sense of attention as if they were in their position, thereby preventing actions that could potentially offend or hurt others' feelings. The attitudes that are most frequently demonstrated by participants toward diversity in Indonesia are tolerance and empathy, particularly in the lecture environment where students come from a variety of ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds and must be aware of how to behave in response.

In a manner similar to Participant 4, other participants also asserted that empathy has the capacity to transform differences

into mutual understanding and to foster a profound understanding of existing diversity, as indicated in the following statements.

"Not disrupting their events and customs, allowing them to be alone, and refraining from insulting or offending them due to their differences. Additionally, acquiring knowledge of the traditions, values, and practices of other ethnicities, cultures, and religions."[40]

Other participants further emphasized empathy as a key attitude in multicultural campus life:

"Listening carefully to others' experiences helps me understand their perspectives and avoid misunderstandings."[41]

"Showing empathy is not just about feelings, it's about being considerate in our interactions and respecting others' cultural norms."[42]

"I make an effort to understand what students from different backgrounds are going through, especially if their culture is very different from mine."[43]

"Empathy allows me to engage better in group work and class discussions because I can appreciate everyone's viewpoints."[44]

"Understanding emotions and reactions from students of other cultures improve both social cohesion and personal growth."[45]

Accordingly students' viewpoints on the variety of individuals in their surroundings enhance their comprehension and appreciation of diversity. This, in turn, inspires them to engage in activities that expose them to different experiences, all while being respectful and considerate of these differences. An understanding of compassion develops within the human heart not due to cultural or racial similarities, but rather because of our shared human nature. We are all interconnected in a world that is meant to be experienced

and shared with others. People who have a positive perception of diversity tend to understand that each individual brings different values, beliefs, and traditions. They are not only aware of diversity but also strive to understand the background of others without prejudice.

Additionally, a diverse educational environment fosters the cultivation of social and emotional competencies, including empathy and cooperation, which are critical components of both personal and professional life.[46] Students' attitudes toward diversity are not only respectful of differences in culture, religion, or social background,[47] but they are also actively engaged in listening to and comprehending the experiences of others. This empathetic nature is demonstrated by their capacity to actively listen to the experiences and viewpoints of others without prejudice or stereotypes.[48] Life in any social and cultural context is inherently characterized by diversity.[49] The ability to comprehend diverse perspectives can have a substantial positive influence on the development of future generations who are more empathetic and willing to accept differences.

Challenges faced by students in the realm of multicultural education

Based on the analysis of interviews with students, two primary challenges commonly arise in the realm of multicultural education: language barriers and cultural disparities. These obstacles significantly affect the social interactions that students engage in on a daily basis.

Language Differences

Indonesia is home to a diverse array of tribes, each of which has its own unique language. Many students have been using their local language as their mother tongue or first language

since childhood, and they frequently employ it to communicate in daily life. Additionally, students from a variety of tribes employ the regional language they have acquired since childhood to communicate with their peers, particularly fellow tribe members. It is occasionally challenging for students to communicate effectively with their friends from different tribes due to language barriers, as stated by one of the participants below.

> "I often encountered difficulties in understanding the language used due to the mixture of Indonesian and local languages, resulting in frequent misunderstandings."[50]

Participant 2 encountered challenges when conversing with individuals who not only speak Indonesian but also occasionally incorporate it into his native language. Without their knowledge, individuals who frequently employ the local language in their communication will frequently invoke specific terms from their native language, despite the fact that they are fluent in Indonesian. Consequently, their message may not be entirely accessible to all listeners. Communication with academic staff or fellow students from diverse cultural backgrounds can be significantly impeded by the use of different languages.

Participant 7 also expressed the same sentiment, stating that the language barrier disrupted his learning process in a multicultural environment.

> "I encountered several challenges during the learning process, including language and communication differences, misunderstandings, and biases."[51]

Participant 7's learning process was frequently hindered by the language barrier, as indicated by his statement. The presence of linguistic disparities that hinder mutual comprehension is a frequently encountered issue in the surrounding milieu, particularly in an academic setting characterized by a diverse

student body representing various ethnicities and cultures. The variations pose a difficulty in the realm of lectures, where both instructors and students must possess the ability to employ languages that are mutually comprehensible. This ensures effective communication between lecturers and students hailing from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Both lecturers and students must possess the ability to adjust to these differences in order to prevent any negative impact on the learning process in the future.

Language barriers frequently pose the primary challenge for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds in a multicultural education setting.[52] Communication barriers commonly arise in student environments when students employ local languages to convey information, resulting in a lack of comprehension among students from different regions, leading to miscommunication. Given the diverse ethnicities, cultures, and religions in Indonesia,[53] it is crucial for individuals to comprehend, honor, value, and acquire knowledge about the existing differences in order to foster harmonious interpersonal connections.[54] Promoting collective consciousness and reverence for diversity necessitates first establishing respect within one's own culture, prior to fostering an appreciation for other cultures.[55]

Cultural Differences

Another challenge that students frequently encounter in the realm of multicultural education is cultural disparities. Every culture possesses its unique set of norms and habits, which, if disregarded by individuals from other cultures, can lead to conflicts or feelings of unease. As expressed by one participant:

"Every culture has its own norms and customs. For example, the way we behave or the way we eat can be vastly different. This can make us misunderstand or feel awkward."[56]

The data indicates that cultural distinctions significantly influence multicultural education and peer interactions. Habits ingrained from a young age shape students' communication, interpersonal skills, and behavior. Customs of different tribes may sometimes conflict with one another, yet these differences also offer opportunities to broaden understanding and appreciation of other cultures.

Stereotyping was highlighted as a key challenge. One participant described how assumptions based on names or ethnic background could affect social interactions:

> "I had a friend who was initially hesitant to engage with me due to his shyness or reluctance. He believed that I had an advantage, such as my name "Cut," which is considered a descendant of nobility in Aceh, which made him insecure about forming a friendship with me."[57]

Other participants shared similar experiences of subtle exclusion or hesitancy based on cultural assumptions:

> "Sometimes, students judge each other based on perceived cultural habits. It can make people reluctant to interact freely, even in group activities."[58]

> "I noticed classmates avoiding certain topics because they fear offending peers from different cultural backgrounds."[59]

> "Cultural habits, like greeting styles or mealtime practices, sometimes create minor misunderstandings in group projects."[60]

These narratives illustrate that each person's interaction style is influenced by unique cultural backgrounds. Challenges related to communication, social norms, stereotypes, and discrimination are commonly observed in multicultural education settings. Such barriers can result in miscommunication, discomfort, and occasional social isolation, emphasizing the need for cultural awareness and sensitivity.

In line with recent scholarship, understanding cultural differences is recognized as essential not only for minimizing misunderstandings and potential conflicts but also for encouraging empathy, inclusion, and constructive collaboration in diverse educational settings.[61] Scholars emphasize that awareness of cultural norms, values, and practices equips students with the capacity to navigate diversity more effectively, thereby fostering intercultural competence that supports both academic achievement and social integration.

Multiculturalism is significantly dependent on the recognition and respect of cultural diversity, which encompasses a variety of practices and belief systems.[62] Cultural backgrounds, including varying values, norms, customs, and communication styles, are brought to Indonesia by students from various regions. Misunderstandings and discomfort are frequently the result of these distinctions in daily interactions.[63] Different communication norms, such as the manner in which individuals greet, argue, or express their opinions, can result in social isolation or conflict. The development of cultural awareness can be facilitated by differences.[64] Consequently, it is imperative to cultivate the habit of respecting and appreciating other cultures in order to construct intercultural tolerance.[65]

Conclusion

The attitudes of students toward multiculturalism in Indonesia are crucial in the establishment of a harmonious and peaceful educational environment. A society is rendered more vibrant by its diversity. Each culture, religion, and ethnicity in society possesses unique characteristics that distinguish it from the others. Awareness of the values of diversity among individuals can be enhanced through mutual tolerance and empathy toward all ethnic, cultural, and religious deviations. Respect for the values and norms of various cultures, as well as the capacity to

listen to and comprehend the viewpoints of others, are all components of this attitude. It is imperative that students are provided with positive attitudes and support in order to overcome obstacles such as language and cultural barriers.

The implications of this research are profound in regard to a variety of societal aspects of higher education. In the field of education, the findings of this research can be applied to the development of a curriculum that is more inclusive of cultural diversity, thereby enhancing the efficacy of learning and cultivating attitudes of tolerance among students. Overall, this research has the potential to enhance social cohesion and foster a more tolerant and harmonious society by recognizing diversity as a shared asset.

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