

## Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Darmasiswa International Students in Central Java Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

The research probed the cross-cultural adaptation of international students who participated in the Darmasiswa program in Indonesia. They have various cultural backgrounds; they lived in Java and interacted with Javanese cultures. The Darmasiswa students' varied experiences brought particular attention to their competence to adapt to a host country. This study aims to discover how Darmasiswa students overcome the assimilation process, embrace the psychological elements of intercultural communication, and how they handle the adaptation process. It also seeks to discover the efforts to make this program successful and recognise how the participants deal with the challenges of adapting to the local culture. This study used a descriptive qualitative method and employed an in-depth interview to approach the research participants. The participants came from Myanmar, Japan, Singapore, India, Hungaria, Timor Leste, and Thailand. They joined the Darmasiswa program in 2019 to study and learn bahasa Indonesia, the arts, and the cultures. They studied at four universities in Semarang for one year in Central Java Province, Indonesia. Findings showed that the Darmasiswa students' adaptation and interaction processes were varied. The culture shock experienced by the students were influenced by their family value from their home countries. Internal and external factors played an essential role in influencing the success of the Darmasiswa students' adaptation. The factors include; communication system, symbolic interaction, social life, personal mindset, the host society's motivation, and the Darmasiswa students' involvement with the host country's cultural activities. Those factors affected the students' adaptation levels and learning achievement in the program.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural Adaptation, International students, Darmasiswa, Bahasa Indonesia, Central Java

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's government offers scholarships to global scholars, including the Darmasiswa program. The program provides international scholars to learn the Indonesian language, the arts, and cultures. It is a fully-funded scholarship offered by The Ministry of Education and Culture, which started in 1974. Initially, it was provided within the scope of ASEAN countries, and only ASEAN citizens could participate. After running the program for two years, in 1976, the countries' participants were expanded, and it has reached 111 participants, coming from various countries by now (Indonesia, 2019). It becomes interesting to probe students of the Darmasiswa program from multiple cultural backgrounds.

Explicitly, they expressed their interest in learning the language and cultures because it is important for language learners to have the awareness independence in speaking skills. They also kept an implicit intention that some would like to see Indonesia, which offers nature's grandeur. Surprisingly, tourism motivated many students to participate in the program instead of learning the language, the arts, and the cultures. It is necessary to understand the non-academic challenges faced by the Darmasiswa students. It was urgently conducted because it related to the program's sustainability and development and better understanding of the phenomenon.

Knowing that some institutions conducted some of the students' motivation related to tourism as the primary purpose instead of learning the language, an initiative to see the students' language mastery becomes one way to understand their learning achievement in Bahasa Indonesia's ability (Wilujeng, 2015). The perspective to perceive this matter was beyond the scope of the syllabus and the classroom contexts.

This study aims 1) to discover how Darmasiswa students overcome the assimilation process, 2) how the Darmasiswa students embrace the psychological elements of intercultural communication, and 3) how they handle the adaptation process. Learning a language and culture are like two sides of a coin where they are attached as it is described that learning a language is inseparable from understanding the culture (Muslim et al., 2020; Zacharias, 2012). Language and culture are one because they are socially inherited and manifest into a habit and belief that becomes a living system in a particular society. In this case, Darmasiswa students might need to be made aware that adaptation is necessary (Furnham, 1997) when interacting with local people so that both parties can reach their living convenience. What they need to do in adaptation process is called as a coping strategy (Taylor, 2009) who defines it as the way a person's mind and behaviours were employed to manage the internal or external demands in a pressing situation. It becomes a part of self-adaptation and it indicates how an individual reacts towards stress and pressure of dealing with new situation. This study is significant because teachers who deal with this type of student need to

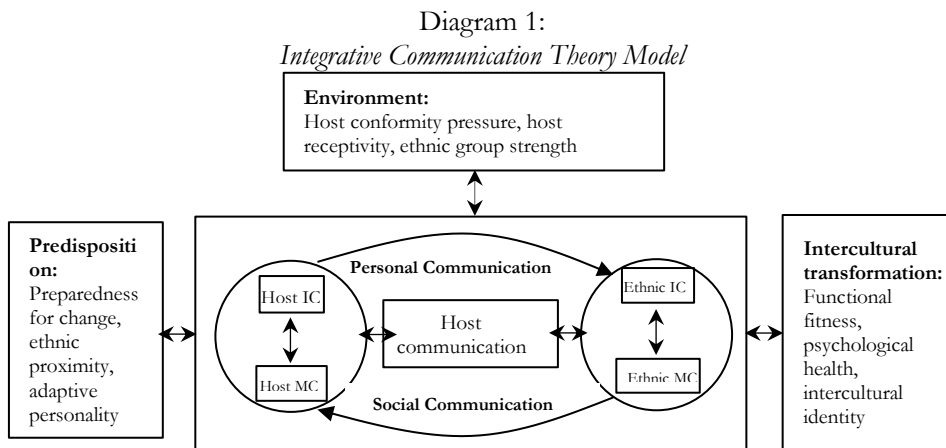
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understand the struggle of being Darmasiswa students so that they can facilitate them in accepting the Indonesian culture and life as a part of their identity.

Darmasiswa students' adaptation to a particular society with different cultures might trigger crucial issues that need analysis (Furnham, 1997). It is necessary to conduct the study because the case has yet to be explored in greater detail. The information was needed to reconsider the program's sustainability and the betterment of the curriculum by knowing the problems. Darmasiswa students have challenges when adapting to Indonesian culture, including interpersonal adaptation (Burgoon et al., 1995). Cultural background differences offer challenges like accepting the host culture while still embedded in their original culture. However, adaptation is inevitable because they are now in the context where a new culture becomes their environment (Bochner, 2003). The phenomenon where individuals experience difficulties adjusting their perception of certain new cultures is called culture shock (Bochner, 2003; Furnham, 1997; Shor & Roelfs, 2019). This phenomenon is what Darmasiswa students are experiencing, thus, the researchers investigated international Darmasiswa students who studied at universities in Central Java, Indonesia.

The investigation analysed Darmasiswa students' adaptation during the study using an adaptation theory modeled by Kim (2001), which says that social creatures usually interact with society. Each individual's ability to communicate with the host culture's norms depends on Darmasiswa students' adaptation process, as explained and supported by Kim (2001). The definition is described in Diagram 1 as the following.



Source: The structure of cross-cultural adaptation. From becoming intercultural: an integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation (p. 87), by Y. Y. Kim, 2001, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Copyright 2001, reprinted with permission.

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The model in Diagram 1 shows that the elements required to adapt to a new environment are environment, predisposition, intercultural transformation and how an individual hold their communication skills. In a simpler description, it takes the internal and external elements of skills to blend in a new environment. A person's personal and social communication skills are essential in their engagement with the environment and vice versa. The response from their new environment will boost the overall integration process. Therefore, it can be concluded that it takes two to tango, in terms of intercultural adaptation to be successful.

#### *Factors influencing cross-cultural adaptation*

The cross-cultural adaptation structure explains that adaptation factors are classified into six: personal communication, host social communication, ethnicity, social communication, environment, and predisposition, which all can affect intercultural transformation (Blagojević & Dumančić, 2021; Shin & Jeon, 2018). In this case, change is a process to achieve functional fitness, psychological health, and cross-cultural identity (Rozin, M., Herminingrum, S., 2016).

Personal communication happens when a person feels there should be a reaction from a living environment (Byram, 2021). The response may bring meaning to the person when reacting to something or with others. At this phase, a person uses communicative competence through cognitive, affective, and operational systems, where it happens in each individual. Bennet (2011) stated that social communication occurs among individuals with the same cultural background. For instance, a Darmasiswa students interacts with another person with the same cultural experience. Not only that, but there are also the host's social communication and ethnic social communication, which belong to the same kind of interpersonal and mass communication categories (Goulart & Torres, 2021; Meer et al., 2021). Interpersonal communication is an interaction of an individual with other people that communicates on an interpersonal level. Host social communication happens when a Darmasiswa student comes to a host country. They interact with other individuals from the host country to create a cross-cultural situation.

Meanwhile, ethical, social communication occurs when individuals from the same cultural background interact (Furnham, 1997; Lopez, 2010; Okken et al., 2019). Berry (2006) mentions acculturation, and Deininger (2015) explains culture shock. They correlate acculturation and culture shock as parts of the adaptation process. Berry (2006) says that acculturation is a process of adopting a new culture in which they adopt values, attitudes, and habits. Thus, acculturation explains when a person comes from a culture that is in touch with another culture. It is identified by the emergence of physical and mental changes as prerequisites to making a functional existence of diverse cultures.

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During the acculturation period, it is normal for sojourners to experience stress. It can lead to mental changes, as explained in an acculturative stress theory that motivates changes. The argument is outlined by Berry (2006), who defined that acculturative stress might cause the weakening of expectations, dreams, and careers, as well as cause depression and suicidal intentions. In addition, according to Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) culture shock is a series of emotional reactions that happened due to the missing part of the previous culture reinforcement. Misunderstandings towards new and different experiences then strengthen it.

Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) elaborated four approaches to identifying culture shock: cognitive, behavioural, phenomenology, and sociopsychology. The first point is the cognitive approach, an individual cross-cultural adaptation where the process depends on the individual's ability to create relevant attributes toward cultural values, faith, behaviours, and norms in the community (Kim, 2001). The second approach is taken from the behaviour perspective. The behaviour approach affected the smoothness of communication. It depends on whether the message can be interpreted precisely from verbal or non-verbal communication. Thirdly, a phenomenological approach is a transitional experience from a lower awareness of self and other cultures directed to a higher understanding of the culture of self and different cultures. Fourthly, the socio-psychological approach is the gap culture between the original culture and the new culture. The situation created a strange feeling of loneliness and missing in the new environment. It happens when the individual does not have sufficient information about the unique culture to interact with the new domain (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004).

## METHOD

This research employed a descriptive qualitative method (Berg & Lune, 2012), describing the data from the participants during their Darmasiswa time in Indonesia. This approach was chosen because the qualitative data provides deep and thorough information for analysis. This design also allowed the researcher to explore the participants' experiences in adapting to the Indonesian culture. The scope of this study was limited to the Darmasiswa participants to ensure that the experience shared in this study was exclusive to their perspective.

The research participants were Darmasiswa students who studied at two state universities and two private universities in Semarang. The stages of recruiting the participants began when the authors contacted the universities where they studied. After getting consent from the gatekeepers of the universities, the authors contacted all the Darmasiswa students. The participants were recruited by sending out invitations via email and WhatsApp messages to take part in this study. Out of the ten students from all universities, seven of them indicated willingness to be the participants. The

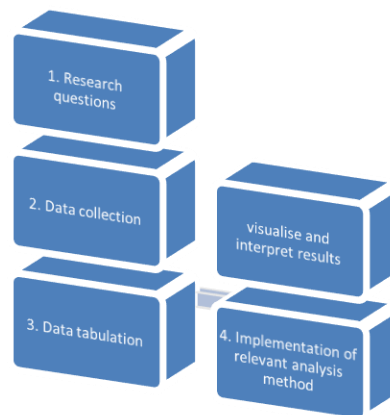
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students were from Myanmar, Japan, Singapore, India, Hungaria, Timor Leste, and Thailand. Of the seven participants, four were invited to interview sessions to gain in-depth and honest answers from the participants.

Based on the research question, data was gathered by interviewing the participants. The data was interpreted by analysing, eliminating the unrelated data, serving the data, and summing up the data. As stated by Kriyantono and Sos (2014) data analysis could be processed in several stages. The first step was to eliminate irrelevant information from the participants. The next step was to acquire data that was described, and categorised based on the specified data sources. then to perform deep analysis from the selected information. The next step was to tabulate the data, or by conducting thematic analysis based on the available data. The data was presented according to the theme taken from the framework that the authors used in this article. In summary, the research process is presented in Diagram 2 below:

Diagram 2:  
*Data analysis process*



## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Language barrier*

To respond to the research question of what factors affected the adaptation process of the Darmasiswa students (participants) during the first few weeks of their arrival in Indonesia, they elaborated on two stages of adaptation.

The first stage was how they communicated with Indonesian people involved in their assimilation process. Three elements ensured the communication flowed freely: a message sender, medium instruction, and message receiver. In the case of the participants, the message sender could be the students or the Indonesian individuals. The medium of instruction in terms of communication could be English or Indonesian, depending on how long they have stayed in Indonesia. The third element was the message receiver. To communicate fluently, the communication process between

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message sender and receiver involves decoding and encoding messages. This process happened when a participant interacted with a new culture for them. The experience affected their adaptation process when they were absorbing the new culture, a process called enculturation. The participants had to embrace language problems because they needed to speak more fluent Indonesian, and the host family needed to speak English. However, because they are considered as basic speakers of bahasa Indonesia (Nisa, et al., 2022), their communication ability is a challenge on its own. For example, they used Indonesian when they spoke with the host family members. However, when they met their friends from the same country, they talked using their mother tongue, and when meeting with other international students from different countries, they used English. Indonesian language was used throughout the class sessions.

The second adaptation stage was when they overcame the challenges by improving their communication skills. As they became more involved with the local culture, they adjusted the way they interacted with the host family and teachers of the university. They experienced resistance to adopting the new culture, particularly in the aspects of psychological, norms, and behaviour changes. Gudykunst (2004) stated that the motivation of each person to adapt is various. In this case, Darmasiswa students had different communication skills when siding with the new culture's new norms. It happened because the Darmasiswa students' different levels depended on their efforts when experiencing self-adjustment or adaptation. The transformation challenge was various among other Darmasiswa students. Gudykunst (2004) stated that each individual had to adapt when meeting or interacting with the local community and the different cultures.

The Darmasiswa students' assimilation process also showed the implementation's results, demonstrated from the host culture's interaction. Another effect of the students' adaptation achievement was adjusting the communication strategies (Mulyana & Qomariana, 2023) with the local people. The behaviors were reflected in intercultural adaptation, which explains an interactive process applied in communication practiced by individuals with a new culture Gudykunst (2004). This research interprets transformation as a communication adjustment between Darmasiswa students as the sojourners and the host country's communication strategies. In this case, the communication strategies were built upon internal and external factors. The internal factors came from the interpersonal things of an individual (Darmasiswa student) while external factors came from varied cultures. The manifestation of adaption performance triggered the Darmasiswa students to adapt and try to have the same thinking ground as the host culture. They had to learn to respect diversity to prevent overreaction when experiencing culture shock.

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Internal communication involved activities between Darmasiswa students and the lecturers where they used Indonesian to communicate. When the situation occurred, internal communication occurred vertically, horizontally, and diagonally. The communication's embodiment was varied, and suited with Darmasiswa students' activities to implement effective communication. Meanwhile, external communication was communication between the Darmasiswa students and the campus where they studied and the other outside parties related to other matters dealing with their studies. In this situation, the authors identified the communication strategies noted by Vardhani and Tyas (2018), including paraphrasing, borrowing, appealing for assistance, mime, and avoidance.

#### *Transformation process*

There are factors that influence the assimilation process. The first factor was the perceptual mutualism. This instance occurred when a participant performed active involvement with the culture while responding to the social environment. The increased functional fitness explained that learning new cultures through repeated activities could synchronise the internal response available within the person by performing the external demand of the environment, called perceptual mutuality. Hence, the Darmasiswa students acted out to harmonize themselves with activities offered by the environment. Adaptation as a perceptual communication process where the Darmasiswa students received messages and information, they tried to understand and digest the meaning caught during the interaction.

#### *Participants' internal transformation*

Visible changes could be recognised from the way participants behaved in a social setting. However, a deeper transformation that the participants experienced contributed even greater changes in the way they perceived their new environment. In terms of psychological health, data indicated that the participants displayed signs of happiness from the way they responded to their environment.

*I think it was great that I had learned Indonesian language culture before I arrived here, so it was not so shocking and easier to adapt. – Pong, 25, M /Thai.*

The quote from the interview with a participant from Thailand indicated the relief they felt because they prepared before they came to Indonesia. The feeling of being welcomed was strong and they felt less like a foreigner because the new organisation accepted them and helped them to adapt to that new environment. The Thai student prepared in advance to find information related to Indonesian culture and people and learn bahasa Indonesia independently before coming to Indonesia. The self-pre-departure

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preparation helped them familiarise themselves and establish communication with local students and local volunteers from the institution. The people around them accepted them and they became a supportive factor in integrating with the new culture. Other students from Timor Leste and Myanmar also had similar experience.

Another factor that helped the participants mingle better was the accompaniment of the local volunteers. These volunteers worked for the organising university. Thus, they were trained to help the Darmasiswa students develop an understanding of the context where they conducted the program. By introducing the participants to a new culture, they embraced a different way of life and language, developed a new identity to integrate with their old one (Fen & Baijing, 2014; Talwar, 2015) and adjusted their behaviour to match with the host society.

In this case, it was found that Darmasiswa students also experienced the situation. Speaking further about effective communication in interaction, Deiningner (2015) explains symbolic interaction as a concept that comes from society, self, and thoughts used to communicate with people in a particular culture. Symbolic interaction is also crucial in communication. It is carried out by an individual that shows how a sociocultural tradition focuses on a meaning created from an interaction process.

#### *Classroom engagement*

Interaction between the teachers and the Darmasiswa students in and out of the classroom was used to gain information related to politeness in their social contexts. The narratives from the participants indicated that their involvement with the locals evoked good and bad things. The bad ones were shown in their lack of knowledge of politeness in Indonesian culture.

*My classmates are nice and friendly, they taught us a few phrases to say to our lecturers in bahasa Indonesia and the lecturers introduced us to their community so we felt familiar with the society. They helped us with getting around the campus area, and taught us how to go from my homestay to campus and back again safely using the local transport. – Nina, 22, F / Myanmar*

In the classroom, their classmates offered to help them in many ways, such as teaching them short phrases and words of common courtesy. They also helped the Darmasiswa students how to go around and get things from the local market. Meanwhile, the teachers helped them by listening to their stories and assisting them to have better interaction with people around them. The approach occurred because they had access to a personal process, a symbolic interaction, built between the teachers and the Darmasiswa students. Therefore, they could act with better manners to suit their behaviours to being more friendly and polite. The students' behaviours

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improved, as well as their views related to approaching people in person and respecting different values towards others. The teachers felt changes in the symbolic interaction manifested in their verbal and nonverbal communication when expressing the Darmasiswa students' intentions with the local people.

#### *Psychological elements of intercultural communication*

One of the most prominent psychological changes in the participants was how they perceive the interaction between the members of the society. Being in a foreign land, they felt detached from their true identity and social contexts. This detachment caused anxiety. It occurred when the participants were in a confusing or uncertain situation. As stated by (Stephan & Stephan, 1985), stress is an inconvenience, tense, worried, and anxious feeling experienced by oneself, and these were the things experienced by the participants. The culture shock was one of the main triggers to cause anxiety and stress (Oberg, 1960). They became temperamental and closed off. They refused to mingle with the locals and refused to interact with others. The anxiety symptoms could be seen from their lack of sleep or poor academic performance. The participants needed more preparation to deal with stressful situations before they came to Indonesia. They had high expectations but wanted to be more satisfied with the reality of living in Indonesia (Salmah, 2016).

#### *Acceptance and adaptation*

Oberg (1960) developed four adaptation phases for those who leave their hometown to live in a different environment. The first phase is that they feel optimistic, happy, enthusiastic, full of hope, and euphoria as anticipation before having in touch with a new culture. The second phase comes with cultural problems, a new environment, language barriers, transportation system, campus environment, responses served by the local community, facilities, and formal and informal local language in communication. In this phase, it was found that Darmasiswa students experienced disappointment and dissatisfaction. Darmasiswa students were disappointed with the facility, they lived in their local environment in their boardinghouses.

A simple example is when they live in their home country, they use a standard toilet, but a squat toilet is available when they live in Indonesia. Thus, conditions could make them irritated and change their mood. The situation is critical because they experienced culture shock, affecting their psychological state. Psychologically, the culture shock experience confused and dumbfounded them. They wanted to protest something because of their self-rejection towards particular situations (Bochner, 2003; Salmah, 2016). The situations triggered negative emotions like being hostile, insensitive, impatient, and incompetent with their learning achievement. The third phase is when Darmasiswa student can understand and accept the new culture. In

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this phase, getting understanding and acceptance could enable them to adapt. As a result, they started to extend their knowledge and collaborate to get along with the new culture and community. By the time they keep practising, they can adapt and get used to it and feel confident to run their activities.

The fourth phase is the phase that can release pressure. In this last phase, the students gain an understanding of the host culture, which helps them find ways to adapt better. It was shown by being self-committed to acting according to the accepted norms and values. They chose to use preferred and acceptable communication styles. Due to the repeated actions, they experienced self-awareness and adapted well to the environment and the culture. Thus, it implies that communication is needed to handle various barriers when culture shock occurs, like explaining ways of thinking, sensing, and acting in particular situations.

Dealing with culture shock, Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) conveyed that culture shock occurred when there was a problematic experience between an individual as a temporary resident who stayed in another country and the host country's people. Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) statement is in line with the finding that higher interaction with the local people caused Darmasiswa students to experience lower culture shock. Less interaction with local people means that Darmasiswa students will experience a higher level of culture shock. The explained situation captured the status of the culture shock of Darmasiswa students, revealed by the teachers' interaction. Culture shock emerged due to two factors: the first one is the lack of personal understanding of the new culture, and the other one is the lack of interaction between the teachers and the students. However, the situation caused the students' cultural integration between their native and host cultures. Having a more significant gap between the students' native and host cultures lowers the intensity of the student's interaction. It happened because there was a huge gap between the students' native and host cultures, making them uneasy interacting with the community.

It was also found that the woven interaction among Darmasiswa students could have helped them more in solving their culture shock. Therefore, to minimise the culture shock level, individuals' willingness to learn new cultures and effort to adjust themselves to the unique cultures had to be put into their earnest efforts. In this situation, Darmasiswa students experienced societal pressure to adapt to the local culture. The case occurred because they had to be involved with local activities in the campus environment. They tried to adjust to different situations when using formal or informal language in daily communication and the Javanese customs. They also watched traditional Javanese arts and performances at universities or other local organisers' events. Eventually, by the end of the program, Darmasiswa students experienced many things during their adaptation process. Having experienced living in two different countries: the home country, and the visited country, they conveyed that they were satisfied with

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the adaptation phases they faced. Some students said they would like to return and participate in another program to stay in Indonesia.

Darmasiswa students' learning of language and culture in Central Java come to a point where each individual can adapt and achieve communication skills acquired during their stay in Indonesia. The communication skill was adjusted to their community's norms and cultural values. Furthermore, Darmasiswa students' self-adaptation process is demonstrated diversely due to the culture shock situations they experienced differently. Handling Darmasiswa students' culture shock is done by the teachers and the local students' volunteers by approaching them personally. The institutions also apply professional guidance to help the students adapt to the local situations during their stay. One of the predominant factors influencing the students' adaptation process to the host culture is the initial knowledge of the family value brought from their home countries. Even though the used adaptation process may also be affected by internal and external factors, those two other prominent factors that affected the students' adaptation process also play an important role in influencing the students' adaptation process. These factors affect the Darmasiswa students' flexibility when interacting with the teachers, local friends and people. The individual personal communication systems are the internal factors influencing the self-adaptation process. These successful interpretation symbols occur in the interaction, particular background knowledge, and distinctive ways of thinking. Meanwhile, the external indicators that influence the self-adaptation process are the local people's participation in contributing motivation, guidance, and understanding of the social life applied in the community. Hence, the result of the adaptation process can be acquired maximally when the Darmasiswa student and the local community can respect and accept each other's culture.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has answered all the questions addressed at the beginning of this article. It has been proved that the Darmasiswa program encourages foreign students to come to Indonesia to learn about Indonesian language and culture. The rich diversity of Indonesian society and culture were the appealing elements of the program. The complexity of Indonesian culture was one of the biggest challenge for the Darmasiswa students in this study, although they also showed that it took them some time to get used to the culture that they eventually embraced as a part of their identity. This kind of study is necessary to conduct so that relevant governmental bodies can monitor the development of the program and make a scientific report to The Ministry of Education and Culture, the universities that hold the Darmasiswa program, and other related parties as a knowledge contribution. There might be some aspects of this study that have not been explored in greater and deeper detail. The approach and methodology of this study can be adapted

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to different contexts of Darmasiswa or other types of international students. New studies could focus on different aspects of cultural adaptation, such as the identity formation, the embodiment of local culture into their daily activities or other aspects of research pertaining Darmasiswa students. However, it is best to allow other researchers to delve deeper into this uncharted field of study.

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