

Relationship Between Cultural Readiness and Social Adaptation of Manado State Polytechnic Students Abroad

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Abstract

As international student mobility continues to expand globally, with over 6 million students crossing borders annually, cultural readiness has emerged as a critical determinant of successful social adaptation. However, polytechnic students who predominantly engage in workplace-based international experiences rather than academic exchanges remain underrepresented in adaptation research. This study aims to measure and analyze the relationship between cultural readiness and social adaptation of Manado State Polytechnic Students Abroad, focusing on cultural knowledge, open-mindedness, and language proficiency, and their link to the level of social adaptation of Manado State Polytechnic students studying or interning abroad. The research employed a correlational quantitative approach, using a Likert scale-based questionnaire distributed to 30 respondents through purposive sampling. Data analysis included normality tests, Pearson's correlation, and simple linear regression. The results show a significant positive correlation between cultural readiness and social adaptation ($p < 0.05$). Cultural knowledge and language proficiency have been proven to contribute significantly to students' ability to adapt socially. The cultural readiness training module that was developed and tested resulted in an average increase of 20% in both cultural readiness and social adaptation scores. In addition, this study provides policy recommendations for Polimdo's international program development unit to strengthen the pre-departure orientation for students.

Keywords: cultural readiness, social adaptation, international students, global mobility

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has driven massive cross-border student mobility in recent decades. UNESCO reports that by 2022, approximately 6.9 million students were enrolled abroad, nearly tripling since 2000 (UIS/UNESCO, 2022). This academic mobility is associated not only with the pursuit of better educational quality but is also seen as a strategic means to enhance global competencies, expand professional networks, and enrich intercultural experiences (Altbach & de Wit, 2021). In the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the ability to adapt in multicultural environments has become one of the most essential soft skills demanded in the global labor market (Poláková et al., 2023). Therefore, student mobility today is regarded not merely as an academic necessity but also as a competitive requirement for individuals wishing to thrive globally (Sekiyama, 2020). Recent empirical work further shows that graduates with cross-border study experience tend to score higher on cultural intelligence, adaptability, and international employability outcomes (Laguna et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of international student mobility also presents significant challenges, particularly in terms of social adaptation in host countries (Gutema et al., 2024). International students frequently face culture shock, language barriers, and difficulties in building social interactions with local communities. According to Chen & Starosta (2020), one of the key factors influencing students' successful adjustment is cultural readiness, which includes understanding local norms, values, traditions, and habits. Without adequate cultural readiness, students risk experiencing social isolation, psychological stress, and even a decline in academic performance. Empirical studies confirm that language barriers—especially in oral communication—are a major obstacle to sociocultural adaptation and social integration (Sheng et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2024). Investigations in cross-cultural student adaptation show that

Relationship Between Cultural Readiness and Social Adaptation of Manado State Polytechnic Students Abroad

culture shock and acculturation strategies strongly affect students' psychological wellbeing and social adjustment in host countries (Impact of culture shock et al., 2025). A study in Turkey found that international students reporting higher levels of cultural and language challenges also reported greater difficulties in social integration and satisfaction (Le, LaCost, & Wismer, 2024). Further, comprehensive literature reviews emphasize that culture shock, social isolation, and stress are recurrent themes in international student adaptation research, affecting mental health and academic outcomes (Wilczewski & Alon, 2022).

In Indonesia, international student mobility programs have expanded alongside the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy and various partnerships between universities and overseas institutions. One of the higher education institutions actively encouraging students to participate in international programs is Manado State Polytechnic (Polimdo). Through exchange programs, internships, and academic collaborations with overseas partners, Polimdo students gain opportunities for global learning experiences. However, according to Polimdo's internal report (2023), some students still encounter obstacles in adapting socially while abroad. These obstacles include limited knowledge of local cultures, inadequate foreign language proficiency, and weak interpersonal skills in cross-cultural settings. Studies have shown that international students often face challenges in adjusting to new cultural environments, including differences in communication styles, social norms, and academic expectations (Valls-Figuera et al., 2023; Su et al., 2025). Additionally, language barriers and limited cultural awareness can hinder effective interaction and integration in host countries (Makeeva et al., 2021; Prasetyaningrum et al., 2022).

Preliminary interviews with Polimdo students who participated in international internships revealed that language barriers were the most common issue, particularly when interacting with supervisors or colleagues abroad. In addition, several students expressed difficulties in adjusting to social norms, such as communication styles, lifestyle differences, and workplace habits. This highlights the importance of cultural readiness, not only from an academic standpoint but also as a crucial element of students' successful social adaptation abroad.

Several previous studies have emphasized the importance of the link between cultural readiness and international students' social adaptation. Ward & Szabó (2019) underscored that intercultural communication skills and openness to diversity are significant predictors of successful adaptation, particularly among international students in New Zealand who demonstrated higher psychological well-being when equipped with cultural competence. Liu (2019), in his study of Chinese students in Europe, found that language proficiency and an understanding of local social norms contributed positively to students' social integration, with linguistically prepared students reporting 35% fewer adaptation difficulties in their first semester. Similarly, Park & Lin (2020) demonstrated that students who received pre-departure cultural training had significantly higher levels of social adaptation compared to those who did not undergo such preparation, with trained students showing 40% faster integration into host communities. More recently, Choi & Lee (2018) examined the relationship between cultural preparation and academic adjustment among international students in South Korea, revealing that structured pre-departure orientation programs significantly reduced culture shock and improved both academic performance and social well-being during the initial adaptation period.

Despite these findings, research on the relationship between cultural readiness and social adaptation among Indonesian students abroad remains limited, particularly within the context of vocational and polytechnic education. Most existing studies focus on students from research-intensive universities pursuing academic degrees, while students from polytechnics—who constitute a significant portion of Indonesia's internationally mobile student population—have

Relationship Between Cultural Readiness and Social Adaptation of Manado State Polytechnic Students Abroad

rarely been explored. This gap is particularly significant because polytechnic students often participate in internship or work placement programs abroad rather than purely academic exchanges, requiring them to adapt not only within academic settings but also in professional work environments that involve dynamic cross-cultural interactions with supervisors, colleagues, and clients. Furthermore, no prior research has specifically examined Indonesian polytechnic students' adaptation patterns, despite the fact that vocational education institutions like Polimdo increasingly send students abroad through industry partnerships and cooperative education programs. The absence of research on this population represents a critical knowledge gap, as polytechnic students' adaptation challenges may differ substantially from those of university students due to the applied, practice-oriented nature of their international experiences and their extended immersion in workplace cultures rather than campus environments.

The urgency of this research is further strengthened by evidence showing that many Polimdo students encounter a cultural gap during their initial placement abroad. Cases of academic stress, social isolation, and even intentions to return to Indonesia prematurely have been reported. Such conditions are detrimental to both the students and the institution, as the main goal of international mobility programs is to enhance global competencies and strengthen the academic reputation of the institution. Thus, exploring the relationship between cultural readiness and social adaptation of Polimdo students abroad is not only academically important but also practically necessary.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on polytechnic students, a group that has received less attention in international student adaptation literature. Moreover, this study does not only measure the correlation between cultural readiness and social adaptation but also develops and tests a cultural readiness training module, providing direct, evidence-based interventions for students. Therefore, this research contributes new insights into designing more structured pre-departure strategies that can effectively enhance student competencies.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between cultural readiness, which encompasses cultural knowledge, open-mindedness, and language proficiency, and the level of social adaptation of Polimdo students abroad. Additionally, this study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the cultural readiness training module in improving students' social adaptation skills.

The significance of this research can be viewed from theoretical and practical perspectives. Theoretically, it enriches the body of knowledge on international student adaptation by incorporating insights from Indonesian polytechnic students. Practically, the findings can serve as a foundation for Polimdo in designing more effective pre-departure training programs for students engaging in international mobility.

The implications of this study are critical for both institutions and students. For Polimdo, the findings can inform policy development in the internationalization of higher education, particularly in providing comprehensive support for students before departure. For students, this research can strengthen their mental, emotional, and social readiness in facing challenges in a new environment. More broadly, the study also supports Indonesia's national agenda of developing World Class Polytechnics, emphasizing the importance of enhancing human resource quality through global learning experiences.

This research seeks to provide empirical evidence on how cultural readiness plays a vital role in the successful social adaptation of Polimdo students abroad. It is expected that the outcomes of this study will not only enrich academic discourse but also deliver practical solutions for improving the global competitiveness of Indonesian polytechnic students.

RESEARCH METHOD

Relationship Between Cultural Readiness and Social Adaptation of Manado State Polytechnic Students Abroad

This study used a quantitative method with a correlational design to measure the relationship between cultural readiness and social adaptation. The population consisted of Manado State Polytechnic (Polimdo) students who participated in study programs or internships abroad. Thirty respondents were selected using purposive sampling, with the criteria of having completed at least three months of an overseas program and expressed willingness to participate.

The instrument used was a Likert scale questionnaire that covered three aspects of cultural readiness: cultural knowledge, open-mindedness, and language proficiency. Data analysis included a normality test to determine the appropriate correlation analysis, Pearson correlation to examine relationships between variables, and simple linear regression to assess the contribution of cultural knowledge and language proficiency to social adaptation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis Results

- The normality test showed that the data was normally distributed, so Pearson's analysis was used.
- Pearson's correlation shows a significant positive relationship between cultural readiness and social adaptation ($p < 0.05$).
- Linear regression analysis indicates that cultural knowledge ($r = 0.45$; $p = 0.002$) and language proficiency ($r = 0.55$; $p = 0.001$) are important predictors of successful social adaptation.

Main Findings from Interviews with Program Coordinators

In-depth interviews were conducted with three program coordinators and two faculty members responsible for international partnerships. Several key themes emerged:

- a. Language barrier as the most common challenge – Program coordinators reported that students with limited English or host country language skills struggled more in workplace integration.
- b. Pre-departure training was not standardized – Orientation programs varied across study programs, with some students receiving intensive preparation while others did not.
- c. Cultural misunderstandings affected performance – In several cases, supervisors abroad reported that Indonesian students were diligent but hesitant to voice opinions, which was interpreted as a lack of confidence.
- d. Need for structured cultural readiness modules – Coordinators emphasized that systematic training prior to departure could significantly improve student adaptation and reduce psychological stress.

Tabel 1. Average Scores of Respondents (N=30)

Dimension	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Category
Cultural Knowledge	3.82	0.61	Moderate-High
Open-mindedness	4.11	0.57	High
Language Proficiency	3.45	0.74	Moderate
Social Adaptation Level	3.95	0.63	High

Source: Primary data analysis from questionnaire survey (2023)

Respondents scored highest on open-mindedness, showing that they were generally receptive to new cultural experiences. Language proficiency had the lowest mean, indicating a potential area of weakness. The correlation analysis showed that both cultural knowledge ($r =$

Relationship Between Cultural Readiness and Social Adaptation of Manado State Polytechnic Students Abroad

0.45; $p = 0.002$) and language proficiency ($r = 0.55$; $p = 0.001$) were significant predictors of social adaptation.

Field notes from supervisors abroad indicated the following behavioral patterns:

- a. Students with higher language proficiency engaged more actively in discussions, asked questions, and built friendships outside the Indonesian student group.
- b. Students with limited proficiency tended to remain within Indonesian circles, limiting their exposure to host communities.
- c. Several students initially experienced culture shock (food, lifestyle, punctuality norms) but gradually adapted within the first three months, particularly those who showed strong open-mindedness.
- d. Group cohesion among Indonesian students acted as a double-edged sword: supportive for emotional resilience but sometimes hindering wider integration.

Table 2. Comparison of Pre- and Post-Training Module Scores

Variable	Pre-Training Mean	Post-Training Mean	Improvement (%)
Cultural Knowledge	3.60	4.30	+19%
Open-mindedness	4.05	4.40	+9%
Language Proficiency	3.40	4.20	+23%
Social Adaptation	3.80	4.60	+21%

Source: Paired samples t-test analysis from cultural readiness training module pilot study conducted with 15 students (August-September 2023)

After the cultural readiness training module was applied, all dimensions showed significant improvement, with language proficiency and social adaptation increasing the most.

Cultural Readiness Training Module

Based on the research findings, a cultural readiness training module was developed and tested on a group of international students. The results of the trial showed a 20% increase in cultural readiness and social adaptation scores compared to before the training.

Policy Recommendations

This study produced recommendations for Polimdo's international program development unit to strengthen the effectiveness of pre-departure orientation, so that students are better prepared to face global challenges.

Discussion

The findings of this study support the results of research by Ward & Kennedy (1999) and Berry (2005), which emphasize the importance of cultural readiness and language skills in strengthening the social adaptation of international students. In practical terms, interventions in the form of training modules () can be an evidence-based strategy to improve student readiness before going abroad.

The interviews with program coordinators confirmed that language barriers were the central issue limiting adaptation. This finding is consistent with the regression results showing language proficiency as the strongest predictor of social adaptation ($r = 0.55$). Coordinators also noted that students who had participated in informal cultural training sessions tended to adapt better, aligning with Park & Lin's (2020) conclusion that pre-departure training improves adaptation.

The high score in open-mindedness reflects the cultural trait of Indonesian students who are generally tolerant and cooperative. However, tolerance alone is insufficient without

Relationship Between Cultural Readiness and Social Adaptation of Manado State Polytechnic Students Abroad

adequate cultural knowledge and language skills. This suggests that attitudinal readiness must be balanced with practical competencies to ensure smooth adaptation.

Observations highlighted that students' tendency to cluster with fellow Indonesians reduced opportunities for intercultural exposure. While this provides comfort during culture shock, it limits the depth of social integration. This aligns with Berry's (2005) acculturation theory, which warns against separation strategies that hinder full adaptation.

CONCLUSION

This study found a significant positive correlation between cultural readiness and social adaptation among Polimdo students abroad, with cultural knowledge and language skills identified as key factors supporting adaptation. The cultural readiness training module improved students' adaptation skills by up to 20%. Based on these results, it is recommended that Polimdo implement mandatory, standardized pre-departure orientation with a focus on language and cultural knowledge, starting six months before departure, alongside continuous monitoring and support during international placements. Future research should include larger sample sizes, longitudinal designs to track adaptation over time, exploration of moderating factors like personality and prior international experience, and comparisons across destination countries and program types. Although limited by a small sample and focus on a single institution, the findings offer a valuable foundation for enhancing polytechnic students' global competitiveness through systematic cultural preparation, contributing to Indonesia's goal of developing world-class vocational education.

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Relationship Between Cultural Readiness and Social Adaptation of Manado State Polytechnic Students Abroad

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