

Original Article

Cultural and Academic Adaptation Experiences of Timor-Leste Nursing Students in Indonesian Universities: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study



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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Submit : May 27, 2025

Accepted : November 8, 2025

Published : November 15, 2025

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Citation:

Mulyadi, E. ., Permatasari, D. ., Soares, D. ., Syarifudin, M. ., & Sarmiento, J. . (2025). Cultural and Academic Adaptation Experiences of Timor-Leste Nursing Students in Indonesian Universities: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study. *Journal of Applied Nursing and Health*, 7(3), 656–669. <https://doi.org/10.55018/janh.v7i3.335>

ABSTRACT

Background: International education is rapidly expanding, with more students seeking study opportunities abroad. Timor-Leste students in Indonesia often face challenges involving language, academic expectations, and cultural adjustment. However, limited studies have explored their lived experiences. This study aims to explore the cultural and academic adaptation of Timor-Leste students in Indonesian universities.

Methods: This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design using Colaizzi's approach. The population comprised Timor-Leste students currently studying at Indonesian universities. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria focusing on students who had studied for at least one academic year, while those with less than six months of experience were excluded. A total of ten participants were included. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and direct observations. Instruments included an interview guide validated through expert review. Ethical approval number 3470/UN25.8/KEPK/DL/2025. Given that the study was interview-based, its design, conduct, and reporting adhered strictly to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) to ensure transparency, reflexivity, and rigor in qualitative interview research. Data were analyzed following Colaizzi's seven-step method.

Results: Thematic analysis revealed three core themes: (1) Cultural and academic shock — students experienced challenges adapting to local customs, social norms, and complex academic language; (2) Differences in learning systems — participants struggled with the shift from teacher-centered to independent learning approaches; and (3) Coping and adaptation strategies — students demonstrated resilience through peer networks, social engagement, and self-adjustment. These themes collectively highlight the dynamic process of cross-cultural adaptation among Timor-Leste students in Indonesian universities.

Conclusion: Timor-Leste students in Indonesia encounter significant cultural and academic adaptation challenges. Universities should strengthen inclusive support through structured orientation, language assistance, intercultural mentorship, and psychosocial programs to enhance their academic success and well-being.

Keywords: Cultural adaptation; Academic adjustment; International nursing students; Cross-cultural interaction; Sociocultural adaptation.

Implications for Practice:

- Strengthening culturally responsive academic and psychosocial support can enhance the adaptation and well-being of international students in clinical and educational settings.
- Policymakers should develop inclusive higher education frameworks that integrate intercultural mentorship and language assistance to promote equitable learning environments.
- For low- and middle-income countries, adopting cost-effective and community-based strategies can sustain cross-cultural adaptation programs despite limited institutional resources.

Introduction

International education has rapidly expanded, with more students than ever seeking academic and cultural enrichment abroad. However, adapting to a new educational environment is often challenging ([Ward et al., 2001](#)), particularly for students from distinct cultural backgrounds. Timor-Leste students studying in countries such as Indonesia, Brazil, and Mozambique often experience significant disruptions to their academic performance and psychological well-being due to "Cultural Shock" and "Academic Shock." These experiences are not isolated; international students frequently report global difficulties with integration, communication, and academic expectations. ([Antara News, 2025](#); [UNESCO, 2024](#))

According to Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Brian Yulianto, approximately 10,165 Timor-Leste students are currently enrolled in Indonesian universities across various programs, highlighting strong bilateral collaboration in higher education between the two countries. This partnership aims to enhance human capital quality through initiatives such as scholarship exchanges and the *Indonesia-Timor-Leste Higher Education Partnership Framework* ([Antara News, 2025](#))

In the broader Southeast Asian context, Indonesia hosts an increasing number of inbound and outbound international students, with 62,828 Indonesian students studying overseas as of 2022, a 29% increase from 2017 ([GSL, 2025](#)) Indonesia's dual role as both a provider and sender of students in the LMIC (Low-and Middle-Income Countries) region

underscores the need for policies that promote cultural inclusivity, institutional adaptability, and academic support mechanisms reflective of regional educational equity goals.

The prevalence of adaptation-related challenges among international students is widely documented. UNESCO data indicate a steady increase in the global mobility of students, yet support mechanisms have not constantly evolved to meet their complex needs. ([UNESCO, 2024](#)). Specifically, Timor-Leste students in Indonesia represent a unique and under-researched population within this context ([Da Costa et al., 2017](#); [Hastowohadi, 2025](#)). Existing studies often overlook their experiences, leaving a gap in understanding the nuanced barriers they face while adapting to Indonesian academic and cultural life ([Da Costa et al., 2017](#))

This study addresses a significant research gap by offering practical insights into the adaptation experiences of these students. By understanding their challenges and coping strategies, institutions can develop culturally responsive support systems. ([Tang & Zhang, 2023](#)) Furthermore, this research contributes meaningfully to global discussions on equity and inclusiveness in international education.

Contradictory findings regarding the extent and nature of cultural and academic shock also exist in the literature. Some research suggests that students eventually adapt with minimal intervention, while others indicate long-lasting psychological stress and educational disengagement ([Presbitero, 2016](#); [Smith & Khawaja, 2011](#)). This contradiction

highlights the need for context-specific research such as this study.

Berry's (1997) acculturation model offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for this research. Berry's theory divides adaptation into psychological and sociocultural dimensions, highlighting how individuals balance maintaining their cultural identity with integrating into a new cultural context. In this model, "Cultural Shock" represents emotional and social stress due to unfamiliar customs, whereas "Academic Shock" pertains to struggles with new academic systems and expectations.

These concepts are closely linked to the study's variables, which include emotional responses, social integration, academic performance, and institutional support. Previous research and theoretical models support the interconnection among these factors, suggesting that emotional distress from cultural shock can negatively impact academic adjustment, and vice versa. (Berry, 1997a). Peer support and institutional responsiveness are theorized to moderate these effects.

Coping mechanisms—such as peer support, institutional responsiveness, and active engagement in cultural and academic activities—function as moderating factors that help mitigate the negative impacts of cultural and academic shock. By employing these coping strategies, students can better navigate the acculturation process, leading to improved psychological well-being and academic success. This clear linkage positions the study's key variables within Berry's model, forming a conceptual bridge that guides the thematic analysis of Timor-Leste students' lived experiences.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the cultural and academic adaptation experiences of Timor-Leste students studying at Indonesian universities." using a qualitative phenomenological approach to develop a thematic framework grounded in their lived experiences.

Methods

Study Design

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach based on Colaizzi's method (Colaizzi, 1978), chosen to deeply explore the lived experiences of Timor-Leste students adapting to a new cultural and academic setting. The study was conducted in Universitas Wiraraja environments where Timor-Leste students were enrolled. Universitas Wiraraja was selected because it hosts a Timor-Leste student community, offering direct access to participants and a relevant setting for examining cross-cultural adaptation. The unique academic and social environment of the university shaped both the students' experiences and the interpretation of study findings, ensuring data were closely linked to context. A context that influenced findings due to immersion in an educational system with cultural expectations distinct from their home country. The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist was applied to ensure rigor and transparency in study design, data collection, and analysis (Tong et al., 2007).

Researcher characteristics and relationships

The research team consisted of lecturers with backgrounds in qualitative research and cross-cultural nursing education from Universitas Wiraraja Indonesia, Instituto Superior Cristal Timor-Leste, and DAJI's Research and Development Networking. Researchers maintained a professional distance with participants, having no prior personal relationships, to minimize bias. To further enhance reflexivity, researchers kept reflexivity journals, engaged in regular peer debriefings, and collaboratively reviewed and cross-checked data interpretations. These steps aimed to ensure transparency and trustworthiness in reflecting on how

researchers' backgrounds and interactions might influence data collection and analysis.

Contextual description and setting

This study was conducted exclusively at Universitas Wiraraja, located in Sumenep, East Java, Indonesia. The university is a private institution known for a diverse student body, including international students from Timor-Leste. Conducting the study in this specific academic environment, with its unique cultural and institutional characteristics, shaped the experiences of the participants. The contextual factors of this setting, including the university's resources, social dynamics, and academic expectations, were carefully documented to provide transparency and richness in understanding the participants' lived experiences.

Data saturation explanation

Data saturation was achieved when additional interviews no longer produced new themes or insights about the adaptation experiences of Timor-Leste students at Universitas Wiraraja. After conducting ten in-depth interviews, researchers identified a repetition in participant responses, indicating sufficient data to comprehensively address the research questions. This approach ensured that the collected data robustly represented the lived experiences within the specific university context, consistent with best practices in qualitative research methodology.

Quotation identification by participant

In this study, each participant was assigned a unique identifier code (P1, P2) to maintain confidentiality while allowing clear attribution of quotations. These codes were consistently used throughout the manuscript to link quotations to individual participants, enhancing the transparency and traceability of data presentation. The

selection of quotations aimed to represent a wide range of participant experiences and perspectives, ensuring authenticity and integrity in reflecting their lived realities at Universitas Wiraraja.

Research Team and Reflexivity

The research team comprised lecturers from Universitas Wiraraja Indonesia, Instituto Superior Cristal Timor-Leste, and DAJI's Research and Development Networking, all with backgrounds in qualitative research and cross-cultural nursing education. Before data collection, no personal relationships existed between researchers and participants. Researchers maintained reflexivity journals to minimize bias, engaged in peer debriefings, and cross-verified data interpretations among team members.

Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling through university networks and student communities. The first author, who had no prior personal relationships with the students, approached potential participants through in-person announcements and direct invitations. Inclusion criteria required Timor-Leste students who had studied at an Indonesian university for at least one academic year; exclusion criteria were less than six months of study in Indonesia. Out of 12 students contacted, 10 agreed to participate, and two declined due to personal constraints. All participants were briefed about the study objectives, provided informed consent, and were not offered financial or material incentives. This approach ensured transparency and minimized recruitment bias.

Data Collection

Data were collected between March and May 2025 through in-depth semi-

structured interviews and participant observations at university campuses. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The interview guide included questions such as "Can you describe a time when you felt culturally confused in Indonesia?" and "How did academic expectations differ from your home institution?" All interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim with Otter.ai software. Transcripts were returned to participants for verification (member checking), and data collection was concluded once saturation was achieved after the tenth interview.

Interviews were conducted in private university meeting rooms and dormitory lounges to ensure comfort and confidentiality. The campus and dorm environments influenced participant responses by promoting candid reflection on academic and social adaptation. Interviews were conducted primarily in Bahasa Indonesia, with occasional English as needed. Saturation was defined as the point at which no new codes or themes emerged in subsequent interviews and was confirmed after the tenth participant.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method, which involved extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and developing an exhaustive description. Two researchers independently coded the data, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Thematic findings were reviewed and refined collaboratively to ensure consistency (Tong et al., 2007)

Data were analyzed manually following standard qualitative coding procedures. Interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times, and relevant excerpts were highlighted and assigned codes through comments and color-coding in Microsoft

Word. Codes were then clustered into categories and themes through ongoing comparison and memo writing. To ensure reliability, coding and theme development were discussed among team members, and all key translations of quotations were verified by bilingual researchers and back-translated for accuracy.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of interviews and observations, member checking, audit trails, and peer review. Credibility was supported by transcript validation with participants, while thick description enabled transferability. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened by keeping an audit trail, using reflective memos, and applying a code-recode strategy, whereby initial codes were compared with those generated in a second independent session. Team discussions and peer review of coding further ensured that the analysis was consistent, transparent, and closely grounded in the data.

Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted with a strong emphasis on ethical integrity. Before data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any point without any consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study by using pseudonyms and securely storing all data. The research adhered to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee (Komite Etik Penelitian Kesehatan/KEPK), Faculty of Dentistry, Universitas Jember, under

approval number 3470/UN25.8/KEPK/DL/2025. All procedures followed standard ethical principles, such as informed consent and the right to withdraw, consistent with exempt research guidelines for minimal-risk student interviews.

Results

Participant Characteristics The study involved 10 Timor-Leste nursing students studying in Indonesian universities. Participants included male and female students aged between 19 and 23 years, with academic experiences ranging from one to four years in Indonesia (**Table 1**). All had sufficient Indonesian language proficiency to participate in interviews and were recruited from multiple institutions. They had diverse educational backgrounds and varying cultural exposure, influencing their adaptation experiences.

Table 1: Demographic Table of participants

Participant	Gender	Age (years)	Student's Education Level	Length Of Academic Experience (years)
R1	Female	21	Bachelor's degree	4
R2	Female	23	Bachelor's degree	4
R3	Female	24	Bachelor's degree	4
R4	Male	19	Bachelor's degree	2
R5	Male	20	Bachelor's degree	2
R6	Female	21	Bachelor's degree	1
R7	Female	21	Bachelor's degree	1
R8	Female	23	Bachelor's degree	1
R9	male	20	Bachelor's degree	1
R10	male	20	Bachelor's degree	1

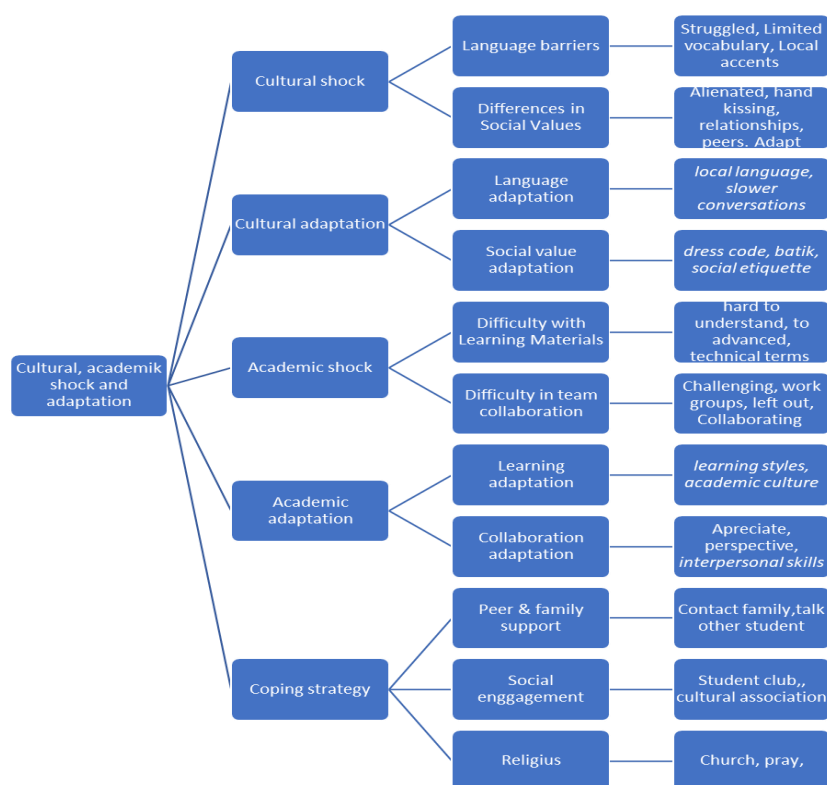


Figure 1. Coding tree / thematic map of Cultural and Academic Adaptation Experiences

Thematic Relationships: The themes are interconnected. Language barrier influenced academic and culture adaptation, while cultural shock affected emotional well-being and learning adaptation. The variation in academic systems heightened feelings of inadequacy, especially when compounded by language and cultural unfamiliarity. However, the students' coping strategy and use of support systems helped bridge these gaps, illustrating a dynamic process of cultural and academic adjustment (**Figure 1**).

Themes Identified

Theme 1: cultural and academic shock. Language barriers were a consistent challenge across all participants' experiences. Students struggled with understanding academic language,

especially medical terminology and formal Indonesian expressions. Participant 2, female 23 year old reported that, "*When the lecturer uses difficult words, I cannot follow. I need to ask my friend later to explain.*" In social settings, limited fluency led to feelings of isolation and exclusion. For instance, Participant 1, female 21 year old reported that the cultural expectation of hand-kissing in Madura, Indonesia, caused discomfort: "*It felt strange because in my country, we don't do that. I was not sure how to respond.*" These cultural differences magnified feelings of dislocation and unfamiliarity.

Theme 2: cultural and academic adaptation. International students encountered new learning styles and academic cultures different from their home countries. Participant 5, male 20 year old

reported that “Interactions with classmates from different backgrounds helped me improve my communication skills and see things from multiple perspectives.” Together, these adaptations show the combined academic and social growth necessary for success.

Theme 3: Coping Strategies, Despite the challenges, students developed coping mechanisms, including forming peer-support networks, participating in

orientation and cultural programs, and engaging in language exchange activities. One participant shared, Participant 1, female 21 year 21-year-old, “I joined a student group from Timor-Leste. We help each other, especially when someone doesn’t understand what to do in class.” Others found that cultural programs and mentoring by senior students eased their adjustment to academic and social life in Indonesia.

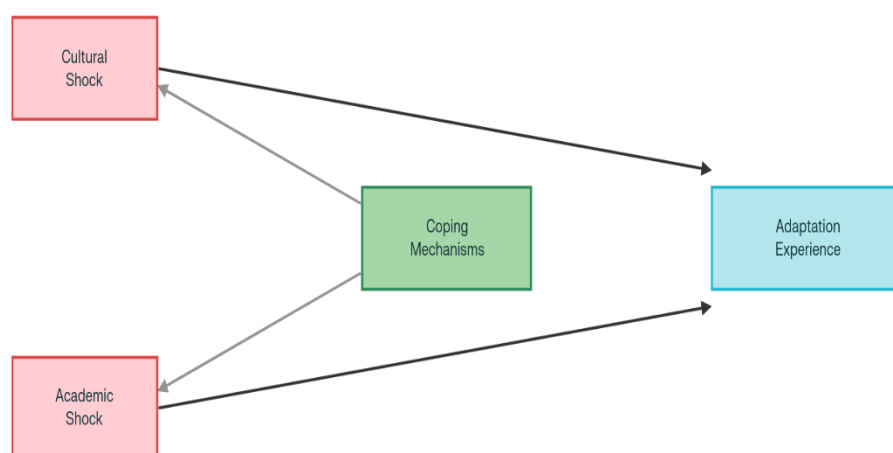


Figure 2. Conceptual Frame Work Of Cultural and Academic Adaptation Experiences

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationships among the main themes, Cultural.

Shock and Academic Shock act as primary challenges faced by international students in a new environment. Both forms of shock directly influence the use of Coping Mechanisms—strategies that students employ to manage and mitigate the impacts of these challenges. Coping mechanisms, such as seeking peer or family support, joining social groups, or engaging in religious practices, serve as mediators that help students navigate and lessen the negative effects of both academic and cultural shock. Ultimately, the effectiveness

of these coping mechanisms shapes the students’ overall Adaptation Experience, determining how successfully they adjust and thrive in their new academic and cultural setting. The framework emphasizes that successful adaptation is not only a function of the intensity of shock faced but also largely depends on how students cope with those challenges (**Figure 2** and **Table 2**).

Table 2. Theme And Category Of Cultural And Academic Adaptation Experiences

Theme	Category	Quote
Cultural shock	Language barriers	"When the lecturer uses difficult words, I cannot follow. I need to ask my friend later to explain." (R2, Female, 23 years)
	Differences in social values	"It felt strange because in my country, we don't do that. I was not sure how to respond." (R5, Male, 20 years)
Cultural adaptation	Language adaptation	"I try to use local language and join slower conversations to adapt." (R4, Male, 20 years)
	Social value adaptation	"Learning the dress code and local etiquette, such as batik and handshaking, helped me blend in." (R1, female, 21 years)
Academic shock	Difficulty with learning material	"The technical terms are hard to understand, especially in advanced subjects." (R5, Male, 20 years)
	Difficulty in team collaboration	"Sometimes, group work is challenging since I feel left out and need to work harder to keep up." (R1, female, 21 years)
Academic adaptation	Learning adaptation	"I had to adjust to more student-centered learning, where independent study is expected." (R2, Female, 23 years)
	Collaboration adaptation	"Working on group projects means accepting different opinions and learning interpersonal skills." (R2, Female, 23 years)
Coping strategy	Peer & family support	"Staying in touch with my family and talking with other international students makes the process easier." (R2, Female, 23 years)
	Social engagement	"Joining cultural associations and student clubs helped me overcome my difficulties." (R2, Female, 23 years)
	Religious	"I find peace and strength through prayer and church when times are tough." (R2, Female, 23 years)

Multiple Data Sources Findings were triangulated using semi-structured interviews and direct observations. Observations during campus visits confirmed the students' reported experiences of hesitation during class participation and limited interaction with Indonesian peers. These observational insights supported the credibility and depth of the interview data.

Discussion

Nursing students from Timor-Leste face significant challenges in cultural adaptation, primarily due to language barriers and differences in social values. These barriers impede academic success and social integration, often resulting in feelings of marginalization and isolation within the academic environment. Language proficiency plays a critical role in facilitating communication and cultural negotiation, as demonstrated by recent studies

emphasizing its importance in enhancing adaptation and emotional adjustment. This aligns with Berry's acculturation framework, which categorizes adaptation strategies into assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization based on the degree of cultural maintenance and adoption (Berry, 1997). Acculturation strategies and sociocultural adjustment significantly influence international students' perceived proficiency. Specifically, assimilation and integration strategies were found to enhance language proficiency, while interpersonal stress associated with cultural shock critically impacted proficiency (Tekel et al., 2025). Furthermore, Oberg's stages of cultural shock—honeymoon, frustration, adjustment, and acceptance (Oberg, 1960) effectively encapsulate the emotional and psychological phases experienced by these students when encountering unfamiliar cultural practices, such as specific social

customs. It is evident from these findings and theoretical frameworks that educational institutions must implement targeted support programs focusing on improving language competencies and fostering understanding of local social values. Such initiatives would likely enhance students' academic achievement and psychological well-being by facilitating smoother cross-cultural transitions and creating a more inclusive learning environment. This evidence-based approach underscores the necessity of institutional responsiveness in addressing the multifaceted nature of cultural adaptation among international students.

The discomfort with specific customs like hand-kissing underscores the influence of hyper-local cultural nuances on the adaptation process, extending existing research that often generalizes cultural shock across broader contexts. Consistent with Anjalin's research (2017), language barriers, emerged as a key factor limiting academic success and social integration. (Anjalin et al., 2017; L. Liu et al., 2016; Wuthrich et al., 2021) This finding is consistent with previous studies that emphasize the critical role of language proficiency in the adaptation process (Brown & Holloway, 2008)

This often left them feeling marginalized in the classroom, further isolating them. While the link between language proficiency and academic success is well-documented (Zhou et al., 2008) This study supports Furnham and Bochner's (1986) concept of academic shock, particularly in students' descriptions of struggling with independent learning. While earlier studies emphasize eventual adaptation, this research highlights the need for preemptive academic interventions tailored to students' backgrounds. (Furnham, 2010)

Universities should provide tailored orientation programs that address local

cultural norms and academic expectations, supported by language assistance, peer mentoring, and culturally responsive faculty training. Higher levels of peer social support have been shown to enhance academic resilience. (Gunawan & Huwae, 2022) While face-to-face contact significantly promotes host culture adoption, which in turn improves social connectedness, perceived social support, and reduces prejudice, effects not mirrored by online contact, which only directly influences these outcomes without fostering cultural adoption (Cao et al., 2018). Regular feedback mechanisms and cultural events can also strengthen institutional responsiveness, creating a more inclusive and adaptive environment for international students.

Universities should implement virtual orientation programs before students arrive (Ahmed & Shahzeb, 2024). covering cultural, academic, and practical aspects to ease the initial cultural shock (Mihayo, 2019). Tailored academic support, such as workshops on independent study and collaborative skills, can align with the educational styles of students' home countries. At the same time, faculty training can enhance support for diverse learning backgrounds. Continuous language assistance, including academic language classes and peer language exchanges, paired with structured mentorship programs with local or senior students, can facilitate smoother adaptation (Qun et al., 2018). varying intergroup and intragroup activities led to distinct acculturation outcomes, with regular and informal intergroup contact fostering integration. In contrast, formal and informal intragroup interactions supported cultural maintenance and dual adaptation within the host community. (Ranabahu & De Silva, 2024)

Additionally, universities should host regular cultural events and establish

responsive feedback systems to continuously improve support services, creating a globally inclusive campus environment. (Pacheco, 2020).

Implications and limitations

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of cross-cultural adaptation by highlighting how region-specific cultural practices and informal peer networks shape the lived experiences of Timor-Leste students in Indonesian universities. The findings extend existing models of student adaptation by revealing the interplay between sociocultural norms and self-initiated coping strategies, offering a nuanced conceptual lens for future cross-border education research. However, the study is limited by its small, homogenous sample and reliance on self-reported narratives, which may reduce transferability and introduce recall or linguistic bias. Future studies should adopt longitudinal and multi-contextual designs to validate and expand the conceptual insights generated from this work.

Relevance to Practice

The findings suggest that nursing and health education institutions can strengthen cultural competence by embedding culturally responsive teaching and mentorship into curricula and clinical training. Faculty should integrate local and cross-cultural case studies, encourage intercultural dialogue, and promote reflective learning to bridge classroom concepts with real-world care practices. Health facilities and policymakers can adapt these insights to develop low-cost, community-based orientation and language support programs that facilitate smoother adaptation for international students and healthcare workers. In resource-limited settings such as low- and middle-income countries, these context-sensitive strategies can enhance workforce inclusivity,

communication effectiveness, and the overall quality of patient-centered care.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to explore the adaptation experiences of Timor-Leste students in Indonesia. The major themes are cultural and academic shock, adaptation, and coping strategy. Created complex experiences of disorientation. However, the students' resilience and use of peer support enabled gradual adaptation. The institution needs to provide tailored academic and cultural support systems. Must act on these insights to ensure inclusive, equitable international education environments that prepare culturally competent healthcare professionals. While the study is limited in scope, the implications for clinical education, practice, and policy are substantial.

Funding

This research was funded by the Cristal Foundation, Timor-Leste, and the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) of Universitas Wiraraja.

CrediT Authorship Contributions Statement

Eko Mulyadi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing - Original Draft

Dian Permatasari: Validation, Formal Analysis, Writing - Review & Editing

Domingos Soares: Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Project Administration

Muhammad Syarifudin: Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization, Funding Acquisition

Julio Sarmiento: Visualization, Funding

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or

personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

Cristal Foundation Timor-Leste and the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) of Universitas Wiraraja.

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