

ENHANCING TOLERANCE THROUGH CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION IN A NON-METROPOLITAN ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Most research on cross-cultural education focuses on diverse, metropolitan universities. This study addresses the scarcity of evidence from non-metropolitan Islamic universities by investigating the impact of structured intercultural programs in a homogeneous setting in Ponorogo, Indonesia. Using reflexive thematic analysis on student interview data, findings reveal a critical divergence: program participants developed "embodied tolerance" characterized by active empathy, whereas non-participants viewed tolerance merely as abstract non-interference. Additionally, the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* emerged as a theological anchor reinforcing global citizenship. Theoretically, this research extends experiential learning theory, arguing that in homogeneous environments, tolerance does not develop organically but requires "manufactured" experiences integrated with religious ethics.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is universally recognized for its rich cultural and religious diversity. While this plurality is a national asset, recent social dynamics expose a troubling gap between the theological ideal of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*—Islam as a mercy to all worlds—and the reality of intolerance among the youth. Reports indicate that educational institutions are not immune to segregation and identity-based friction (Anam, 2016; Institute, 2023). Recent studies confirm that religious intolerance remains a pressing concern in higher education, particularly where students lack exposure to diverse perspectives (Afida et al., 2024; Nurul et al., 2023). In response, universities bear the responsibility not only to transfer knowledge but also to nurture characters that uphold plurality (Arifin & Huda, 2024; Hidayat, 2022; Leuwol & Gaspersz, 2022).

Cross-cultural education has emerged as a strategic imperative to foster empathy and social cohesion (Mukarom et al., 2024; Surianti et al., 2022). Global frameworks by (Kolb, 1984) and Deardorff (2020) emphasize experiential learning and reflection as keys to intercultural competence. However, these models largely reflect Western

perspectives. In the context of Islamic education, tolerance is often framed not just as a social skill but as a religious duty (Ali & Al-Owaidan, 2008). Programs such as international community service (KKN) and collaborative teaching have proven effective in enhancing social competencies in various (Farfan et al., 2023)

A critical gap in current scholarship is the focus on metropolitan universities. There is a scarcity of empirical research on how tolerance is cultivated in non-metropolitan Islamic universities, which are characterized by culturally homogeneous student populations (Ayu Rahmawati et al., 2023; Mahfudz Faqih et al., 2024). In such settings, students may understand tolerance merely as an abstract concept due to limited interaction with "the other" (Nursalim et al., 2021; Permana, 2023). Without intentional intervention, this homogeneity can hinder the development of genuine global citizenship.

Based on this background, this study aims to bridge the gap by investigating the effectiveness of cross-cultural education in a non-metropolitan Islamic university. By integrating Islamic values with experiential learning, this study argues that tolerance must be cultivated through "manufactured" encounters that explicitly connect global competencies with local theological commitments.

METHODS

This qualitative study involved eight undergraduate students from a non-metropolitan Islamic university in East Java, Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to prioritize information-rich cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enable comparative analysis, the sample was divided into two distinct groups:

Group 1 (Coded R1–R4): Students who have participated in cross-cultural programs, such as CCU courses, international KKN, or student exchanges. Group 2 (Coded N1–N4): Students who have not participated in any such program, representing those without formal cross-cultural learning experience. This distinction was critical to isolating the impact of educational interventions on tolerant attitudes within a culturally homogeneous student body.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, documentation, and non-participant observation. The primary instrument was an interview guide comprising five core questions that explored participants' understanding of tolerance, intercultural experiences, and the role of Islamic values. Interviews were conducted via digital platforms (WhatsApp and Instagram) to ensure participant comfort (Salmons, 2015), lasting between 25 and 45 minutes. To enhance data validity, interview findings were triangulated with program documentation and students' social media reflections. Ethical protocols, including informed consent and participant anonymity, were strictly observed throughout the study.

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Manual coding was employed to ensure analytical closeness to the data. The analysis followed a systematic six-step procedure: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was conducted to validate interpretations with participants, and peer debriefing was utilized to minimize researcher bias (Noble & Smith, 2015; Nowell et al., 2017).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the findings based on the thematic analysis of interviews with eight students. The discussion is structured around four emerging themes: the transformation of tolerant attitudes, perceptions of program effectiveness, the integration of Islamic values, and institutional strategies. To provide a visual overview of the analytical process and the summary of participant responses, the coding tree and the thematic categorization are presented below.

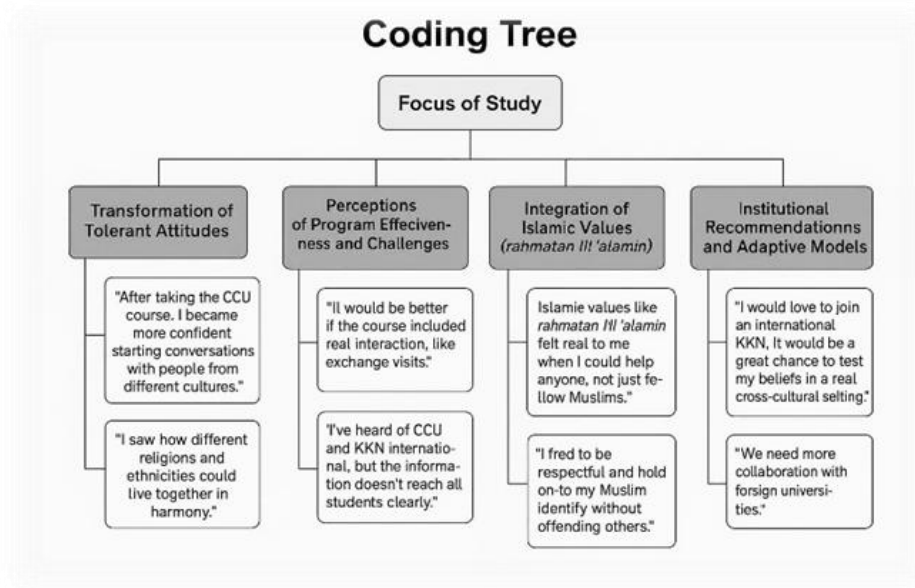


Figure 1. Coding Tree of Thematic Findings

The summary of participant responses and their categorization into these themes can be seen in the following table.

Table 1. Coding Themes of Cross-Cultural Education Findings

Theme	Related Research Objective	Participant Codes	Key Statements
1. Transformation of Tolerant Attitudes	Objective 1: Contribution of cross-cultural education to tolerance	R1, R2, R3, N1	"I became more confident starting conversations with people from different cultures." (R2) "I saw harmony between different religions." (R3)
2. Perceptions of Effectiveness and Challenges	Objective 2: Student perceptions on program effectiveness	R2, R4, N4	"It would be better if the course included real interaction." (R2) "The information doesn't reach all students clearly." (N4)
3. Integration of Islamic Values (rahmatan lil' alamin)	Objective 3: Role of Islamic values in cross-cultural education	R1, R4, N3	"Islamic values felt real to me when I helped everyone, not just Muslims." (R1) "I held onto my Muslim identity without offending others." (R4)
4. Institutional Recommendations and Contextual Model Building	Objective 4: Developing adaptive models for Islamic universities	R3, N3	"I would love to join an international KKN to test my beliefs in real cross-cultural settings." (N3) "We need more collaboration." (R3)

Table 1. summarizes how participant responses were categorized into four main themes: transformation of tolerant attitudes, perceptions of program effectiveness, integration of Islamic values, and institutional strategies.

Transformation of Student Tolerance: From Abstract to Embodied

The transformation of student tolerance reveals a sharp distinction in how tolerance is conceptualized between students who participated in cross-cultural programs (R1–R4) and those who did not (N1–N4). Participants of structured programs displayed a significant shift from abstract knowledge to embodied practice. For instance, R2 reflected on the impact of the Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) course:

“After taking the CCU course, I became more confident starting conversations with people from different cultures... difference is not something to be afraid of, but something to learn from.” (R2)

Similarly, R3 described his experience in the international KKN program:

“I saw how different religions and ethnicities could live together in harmony... tolerance isn’t just about accepting others, but actively working together despite our differences.” (R3)

These two participants show that international exposure could encourage them to be more aware of collaboration. This finding extends prior research by demonstrating that in a culturally homogeneous environment, tolerance does not develop organically but requires "manufactured" experiential interventions (Nolan & Hickman, 2024; Nursalim et al., 2021). Unlike studies conducted in metropolitan universities where students naturally encounter diversity in their daily lives (Thoyib et al., 2024), students in non-metropolitan settings rely heavily on institutional programs to bridge the gap between cognitive understanding and affective empathy.

In contrast, students without such exposure (N1–N4) tended to view tolerance passively. N2, for example, defined tolerance as mere non-interference: “I think tolerance means letting others do their own religious practices as long as it does not disturb me.” These results suggest that without the "concrete experience" phase of Kolb’s (1984) cycle, students’ understanding of tolerance remains at the level of "abstract conceptualization," lacking the resilience needed for real-world engagement (Mccarthy, 2016)

Perceptions of Effectiveness: The Gap Between Theory and Practice

The assessment of program effectiveness uncovers a critical dichotomy between the theoretical appreciation of cross-cultural education and the structural limitations hindering its full potential. While participants acknowledged the value of cross-cultural programs, they critically highlighted the gap between curriculum design and practical immersion. R2 argued that theoretical courses alone are insufficient: “It would be better if the course included real interaction, like exchange visits.” Furthermore, confidence issues emerged as a barrier, as noted by R4: *“I sometimes lacked confidence when discussing in English... more preparatory sessions could have helped us feel safer.”* This reflects challenges found in digital intercultural environments where language confidence is crucial (Nguyen et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2020).

A more pressing concern revealed by the data is the issue of accessibility. N4, a non-participant, remarked:

“The information doesn’t reach all students clearly... I thought it was only for top students, so I never tried to apply.” (N4)

R4 and N4 showed that English became a language barrier for knowledge transfer. These findings suggest that unintentional "elitism" in program dissemination hinders the democratization of tolerance education. Consistent with (Parker et al., 2022) and reports on inclusion (UNESCO, 2020) this study finds that inclusivity requires not just the existence of programs but equitable access and transparent communication. If left unaddressed, this perception of exclusivity risks reinforcing a campus hierarchy where global citizenship is seen as a privilege rather than a standard graduate attribute.

Integration of Islamic Values (Rahmatan lil ‘alamin)

The integration of religious values into cross-cultural education functions not as a barrier to openness, but as a theological anchor that validates and motivates intercultural engagement. A unique strength of the educational model in this context is the anchoring of tolerance in the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil ‘alamin* (mercy to all worlds). Participants consistently referenced their faith not as a barrier, but as a motivation for inclusivity. R1 stated: *“Islamic values felt real to me when I helped everyone, not just Muslims... kindness and service are universal values.”* This reinforces the potential of faith-based values in humanistic education (Nur Adha & Prawironegoro, 2024).

Crucially, the data shows that experiential learning helps students negotiate their religious identity in pluralistic settings. R4 shared:

"I held onto my Muslim identity without offending others. During KKN, I realized I could still keep my Muslim identity while helping non-Muslims. That made me stronger in my faith and more respectful to others." (R4)

This finding challenges the notion that strong religious identity necessarily leads to insularity. Unlike secular models of intercultural competence that often emphasize individual autonomy (Deardorff, 2020), the Islamic framework observed here emphasizes communal responsibility (*ummah*) and spiritual accountability. The integration of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* acts as a normative anchor, allowing students to engage with "the other" confidently without fear of compromising their theological beliefs (Ali & Al-Owaihian, 2008).

Institutional Recommendations: Toward a Contextual Model

Establishing a sustainable culture of tolerance requires a strategic shift from sporadic, exclusive initiatives toward a systemic and democratized model of global engagement. The final theme highlights students' aspirations for a more robust institutional commitment to cross-cultural education. Participants expressed a desire for the university to move beyond sporadic initiatives toward systemic collaboration. R3 emphasized, *"We need more collaboration,"* while N3 expressed a specific interest in immersive experiences: *"I would love to join an international KKN to test my beliefs in real cross-cultural settings."*

These narratives suggest that non-metropolitan Islamic universities possess a latent demand for global engagement, similar to findings in satisfaction studies (Arruzza & Chau, 2021). To address this, institutions must develop adaptive models that blend local wisdom with global exposure. This study proposes that effective cross-cultural education in this context must be: (1) Inclusive, dismantling the "elite" perception of international programs; (2) Experiential, moving beyond textbooks to real human encounters (Smith et al., 2013); and (3) Value-integrated, explicitly connecting global citizenship with Islamic ethics.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the role of cross-cultural education in enhancing student tolerance at Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo, a non-metropolitan Islamic university in Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that students who participated in structured intercultural programs—such as CCU courses, international KKN, and student exchanges—developed deeper intercultural empathy, reflective understanding, and an embodied practice of tolerance. In contrast, students without such experiences tended to view tolerance abstractly, confirming the importance of experiential and intentional exposure for cultivating intercultural competence.

The integration of Islamic values, particularly *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, provided a strong ethical foundation that reinforced tolerance as both a spiritual and social obligation. However, this potential was most evident when values were tested and applied in real intercultural contexts, demonstrating that ethical ideals require lived practice to become transformative. The study also identified institutional challenges, including limited access, unclear communication, and perceived elitism in program participation, which hinder the democratization of cross-cultural learning opportunities.

Theoretically, this study extends experiential learning theory by integrating Islamic ethical principles into intercultural education. Unlike secular models that emphasize individual autonomy, this study highlights how communal responsibility and spiritual accountability create a holistic understanding of tolerance relevant to faith-based institutions. Practically, the findings suggest that Islamic universities in non-metropolitan settings should design adaptive models of cross-cultural education that are inclusive, experiential, and value-integrated.

Policy implications suggest that universities should institutionalize intercultural programs as part of their official curriculum rather than treating them as extracurricular options. Embedding cross-cultural engagement into core courses will ensure equitable participation and prevent elitism. Furthermore, lecturers and program facilitators must be equipped with training in intercultural communication to effectively scaffold student reflection.

However, the findings are limited to a single institutional context and should be interpreted with caution. Consequently, future research directions should expand the scope to multi-campus studies, allowing comparisons between metropolitan and non-metropolitan Islamic universities. Longitudinal research would also provide insights into how tolerance develops over time, especially after students graduate. In conclusion, by embedding inclusive and

value-integrated intercultural learning, Islamic universities can play a pioneering role in shaping a generation that embodies tolerance as a lived virtue.

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