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## International Graduate Students' Cross - Cultural Academic Engagement: Stories of Indonesian Doctoral Students on an American Campus

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## International Graduate Students' Cross - Cultural Academic Engagement: Stories of Indonesian Doctoral Students on an American Campus

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of academic engagement of twelve Indonesian doctoral students attending an American graduate school during their first term and over time through demographic background surveys and semi - structured in - depth interviews. The research design was qualitative in the phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990). We analyzed our interviews data by using within - case and cross - case displays and analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994) while we analyzed the demographic data descriptively. We identified five major themes related to Indonesian doctoral students' academic engagement experiences , including (a) academic workload, (b) unfamiliarity with classroom dynamics, (c) unfamiliarity with the nature of relationships between faculty and student, (d) personal conflicts with and unfair treatment from professors, and (e) linguistic barriers. Implications of findings and future research are discussed.

### Keywords

Academic Engagement, Indonesian Doctoral Students, Phenomenology, Asian International Students, Student Engagement

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## **International Graduate Students' Cross-Cultural Academic Engagement: Stories of Indonesian Doctoral Students on an American Campus**

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### **Introduction**

American higher education has continued to become increasingly diverse and the number of overseas students, who come to the U.S. voluntarily with a specific period of time in order to pursue their educational careers, tends to increase from year to year. For example, the number of international students in American higher education in the 2009-2010 academic year was 690,923 students (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2011) and in the 2010-2011 academic year was 723,277 students (IIE, 2011). While the number of international students is increasing, the enrollment of Indonesian students in the U.S. dropped from 13,282 in the 1997-1998 academic year (Marklein, 2011) to 6,942 in the 2010-2011 academic year (IIE, 2011). One possible explanation for the declining trend in enrollment of Indonesian students may be related to entrance obstacles such as immigration regulations or visas after the horrific tragedy of September 11, 2001. As Akramand Johnson (2002) stated, "Almost immediately after the tragedy, Arabs and Muslims, as well as those appearing to be Arab or Muslim, were subject to crude forms of racial profiling" (p. 295). While the immigration regulations or visas issues sound like a plausible explanation, previous research has suggested that due to lack of extensive exposure to the U.S. academic and social culture, as well as significant differences in language, culture values, communication styles, and academic and social life between most Asian countries and the U.S., Asian international students appear to experience more academic and nonacademic challenges than do students from other regions (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Li & Gasser, 2005; Nilsson, Butler, Shouse, & Joshi, 2008; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004; Sato & Hodge,

2009; Trice, 2004). While a substantial number of previous studies have addressed academic and nonacademic challenges experienced by many international students, most of them have focused on the international students in general and tend to place Indonesian students in one group with other Asian students (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Liu, 2001; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008; Trice, 2004; Zhai, 2002). For example, Fritz, Chin, and DeMarinis (2008) found that Asian students had difficulties to deal with the new language and to make new friends. Meanwhile, Liu (2001) reported that interrelated identified as linguistic, sociocultural, cognitive, pedagogical, and affective factors influenced Asian international graduate students' classroom engagement.

Although these studies might provide readers with useful information on what Asian students experienced during their transition processes in American higher education, much less work, to date, has examined how Indonesian students negotiate their cultural values in their cultural encounters in American graduate schools and what uniquely and individually academic engagement experiences of Indonesian graduate students might look like at the classroom level. Tinto and Pusser (2006) and Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007) wrote that involvement or engagement is one of the most important factors influencing student success in college. Additionally, as indicated in a number of previous studies, there are substantial distinctions in types and meanings of student engagement which impact on students' experiences in schools (McMahon & Portelli, 2004; McMahon & Zyngier, 2009; Vibert & Shields, 2003).

The lack of literature and information on Indonesian graduate students' academic engagement experiences in American higher education might keep the declining trend continuing since policymakers and those working with international students are not provided with current data to shape institutional actions and to provide multicultural education programs. Additionally, it might obscure our understanding of the unique and individual nature of Indonesian graduate students' academic engagement. This study was our attempt to fill a gap in the international student engagement literature and to contribute to existing knowledge about Indonesian graduate students' academic experiences. Our purpose with this phenomenological study was to report the findings from a study on the lived experience of Indonesian doctoral students attending an American graduate school during the first term and over time at their institutions. Our focus in the study was on better understanding the academic engagement experiences of Indonesian doctoral students at the classroom level and how the students negotiate their cultural values in their cultural encounters in an American graduate school.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Previous research contends that there are significant differences in types and meanings of student engagement which impact on students' experiences in schools. For the purposes of this study, these can be broadly categorized as functionalist, relational, and transformative (McMahon & Portelli, 2004; McMahon & Zyngier, 2007; Vibert & Shields, 2003). A functionalist, technical, or performative conception links student engagement to behavioral indicators such as time on task and test results and equates engagement with motivation, an internal characteristic of individual students whose responsibility it is to be engaged. Engagement in this sense is seen as measurable and is demonstrated by student commitment to behaviors associated with schooling (O'Brien, 2000; Steinberg, 1996).

A second meaning of student engagement envisions it as existing in relationships between and among educators and students. These relationships are described in the literature as student-centered and related to specific teaching/learning strategies (Brooks & Miles, 2006; Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Singh, Chang, &

Dika, 2010) Student engagement as a relational phenomenon focuses on “the inclusion of a psychological component such as a sense of connectedness or belonging which is deemed to be realized in schools through the use of group-work and membership in teams and clubs” (McMahon & Portelli, 2012, p. 4). While still stressing the importance of behavioral aspects of student engagement, by emphasizing individual interests, this conception adds independent study projects to established core curriculum.

Transformative student engagement differs qualitatively from the other two conceptions and. Instead of emphasizing identifiable student and teacher behaviors, or teaching techniques and strategies, critical inquiry based on robust notions of equity and social justice is central to education for democratic transformation. In this sense: “engagement is present in the iterations that emerge as a result of the dialectical processes between teachers and students and the differing patterns that evolve out of transformational actions and interactions.(McMahon & Portelli, 2004, p. 70). The third meaning of student engagement has been configured as both procedurally and substantively distinct from the first two (McMahon & Portelli, 2004, 2012). However, since each type serves a different purpose, it is possible for them to co-exist. To further our understanding of student engagement in general as well as Indonesian students’ academic success in U.S. universities, it is important to comprehend their understandings of, and experiences with, student engagement.

### **The Context of the Study**

Qualitative research is an interpretative and inductive study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the research, a qualitative researcher will be involved in diverse and multifaceted interactions with research participants, implying that the knowledge built is basically interpretive. “The researcher makes meaning (interprets) what he learns as he goes along. Data are filtered through the researcher’s own unique ways of seeing the world – his [sic] lens or worldview” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 26). This implies that qualitative researchers have to “explicitly identify their biases, values, and personal interest about their research topic and process” and access to the research participants (Creswell, 2007, p. 184). Patton (2002) suggested that the qualitative report should incorporate information on the researcher, describing his or her experience and training, personal connections to the participants and topic being studied, and the perspectives that he brings to the subject. These elements are essential in a phenomenological study in order to establish standards of quality and credibility and to define the researcher’s role in this study. This study was part of the first author’s dissertation. However, the second author also played an important part in creating this article, in setting thoughts and reflections, and in helping the first author analyze the data.

The first author for this study is a male Indonesian international graduate student who was pursuing a doctoral degree in Foundation of Education with a specialization in Sociocultural and International Development Education Studies and sponsored by Fulbright. He earned his master’s degree in educational sciences from one of the universities in the Netherlands. The first author also had experience and training in qualitative research by taking various courses at a graduate level, including qualitative research methods, qualitative data analysis, and research methods in education. In addition, he was a graduate research assistant for qualitative data analysis. The second author is an international faculty member at a U.S. university with a research focus is on student engagement.

The first author’s interest in Indonesian graduate students in the U.S. was sparked when he took graduate courses focusing on student success in university and multicultural education in the U.S. In addition, when he took the courses on qualitative research methods, he mostly wrote research paper on programs for international students in the U.S. He found

that the number of Indonesian students in the U.S. continuously declined from 13,282 in the 1997-1998 academic year (Marklein, 2011) to 6,942 in the 2010-2011 academic year (IIE, 2011). The first author also found that while a substantial number of previous studies (Li & Gasser, 2005; Nilsson, Butler, Shouse, & Joshi, 2008; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004; Trice, 2004; Wilton & Constantine, 2003) have addressed the acculturative problems experienced by many international students, unfortunately most of them have focused on the international students in general or have grouped all Asian international students from different nationalities into one category. In addition, despite the fact that there have been several recent studies examining the acculturative issues of Asian international students in the United States from several Asian countries, such as China (Wei, Mallen, Heppner, Yao Ku, Hsin Liao, & Feng Wu, 2007; Zhang & Rentz, 1996), Taiwan (Ying, 2005), South Korea (Lee, 2009; Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004), and Japan (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002), it is somewhat surprising and regrettable that little research effort has been devoted to the acculturative experiences of the Indonesian students in the U.S. An earlier study on Indonesian students conducted by Alwasilah (1991) found that Indonesian students in the U.S. experienced academic and social challenges such as writing research papers, making oral presentations, working with American students, consulting with American advisors, using English, thinking in terms of Indonesian culture and applying it to American situations, and understanding American culture and values. While Alwasilah's (1991) study might be useful for understanding what Indonesian students have experienced during their acculturative process in the U.S., the world has changed considerably since 1991, which further justifies the need for such research.

The first author decided to examine the experiences of Indonesian graduate students in the U.S. in order to find out more about this particular segment of the student population, particularly Indonesian graduate students' academic engagement experiences in American higher education since the lack of literature and information this student population might obscure our understanding of the unique and individual nature of Indonesian graduate students' academic engagement, whose population has tended to decrease over time.

## **Methods**

In order to deepen our knowledge of the lived experience of Indonesian doctoral students' academic engagement in an American graduate school, we adopted a phenomenological approach. The key elements of a phenomenological study are to seek to understand how one or more individuals experience a phenomenon and to explore in depth accounts of experiences and their meanings from participants' personal words, descriptions, reflections, and perspectives on the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990).

### ***Research Sites and Participants***

We conducted our current research at a public research university in the southern part of the United States that has more than 1,250 international students, about 78 percent of whom are graduate students from over 100 different countries and regions. The first author selected this site because he had access to the participants, whose linguistic, cultural, and educational system backgrounds are similar with the first author. In addition, the first author identified the Indonesian international graduate students to participate in this study by contacting the international center at the university where the participants and the first author were studying. Due to the university policy, the first author was not allowed to contact Indonesian international graduate students directly. So, the researcher gave the invitation

letter and the purpose of study to the director of the international center who contacted the participants through email and explained the purpose of the study and requested their agreement to participate in the study. The students who were interested in participating in the study contacted the first author and sent their agreement. Twelve Indonesian doctoral students voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Ten participants were male and two were female and eight were married and four were single. Three participants: Zulkifli, Mursalin, and Adriani (pseudonyms) majored in an applied science (e.g., education) and nine participants: Leo, Hamdani, Rojuk, Sabarno, Suhantono, Antoni, Jauhari, Kamarudin, and Lala majored in a hard science (e.g., physics, engineering). The participants in this study shared similar cultural and educational backgrounds. They were born and raised in Indonesia; they had studied English as a foreign language from a primary to middle school. All of them passed the minimum scores required to study in U.S. graduate programs in TOEFL and GRE. Prior to coming to the United States, seven participants had visited or lived in another country (e.g., pursued master's degree, attended conferences, or participated in short courses).

### *IRB Approval Process*

Participation was voluntary and submission to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was made in order to protect the rights of human participants. The names of people, places, and research site were masked through the use of pseudonyms for the participants, places, and sites.

### *Data collection*

A demographic background survey and a semi-structured in-depth interview, were the techniques used for data collection. The survey was administered before the individual interviews were conducted. A semi-structured interview was conducted individually with each student at a location of the student's choice. We developed the interview questions based on the previous research (Alwasilah, 1991) and theoretical framework. During the interviews, each Indonesian doctoral student was asked to discuss his/her classroom experiences during their transition to the university and during their university years. Each interview lasted between 90- and 120-minutes and the authors digitally recorded each participant's accounts and responses via a digital voice recorder. Before the interviews were started, each participant was given an option to respond to interview questions in either Indonesian or English. All elected to use English. As a result, any grammatical errors will appear in the quotations. The interview protocol contained questions related to academics in an American graduate school, including general and specific differences between American and Indonesian higher education, academic workload, grading policy, faculty expectations, relationships with professors and advisers, and classroom dynamics (e.g., making presentations, active class participation culture) in American higher education.

### *Data analysis*

According to Miles and Huberman (1994) data collection and analysis are interwoven and reciprocally influence each other. Guided by Miles and Huberman's (1994) within-case and cross-case displays and analyses, we started analyzing the interview data, while the data collection was still going on. We transcribed the recordings, read the transcripts line-by-line, marked potentially interesting and relevant parts of our study in different colors, and spread interviews data so as to find and list every significant statement relevant to the topic and to see the patterns and themes and to deepen understanding and explanation of our data among

the cases (participants). All the transcripts across the 12 participants were analyzed and compared in this manner to find similarities and differences and to organize, group, or cluster the significant statements among the cases (participants) into themes or meaning units, and to reduce the repetitive data. After we analyzed the transcripts to look for categories or themes, we classified and reduced them into a small manageable set of themes consisting of a brief or few statements, which are important for our final report. To ensure our interpretations, we checked not only with the participants, but also provided rich and thick descriptions (Merriam, 1998) and narratives of Indonesian doctoral students' classroom engagement experiences. This included verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews. Another important thing to ensure the credibility of our study is the fact that one of us shared the same language and cultural background with the participants, which helped us to interpret our data in a more nuanced way.

## **Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to report the findings from a study on the lived experience of Indonesian doctoral students attending an American graduate school during the first term and over time at their institutions, particularly, academic engagement experiences of Indonesian doctoral students at the classroom level and how they negotiate their cultural values in their cultural encounters in an American graduate school. Going through within-case and cross-case displays and analyses, we identified interrelated themes and sub-themes, including: (a) academic workload (an unanticipated amount of homework and assignments; an inability to understand the volumes of reading required within a limited timeframe; and responsibilities involved in teaching/research assistantships); (b) unfamiliarity with classroom dynamics (a lack of confidence to present academic assignments; keeping silent, shy, and passive in classroom; and struggling to meet high expectations and pressures to perform well); (c) unfamiliarity with the nature of relationships between faculty and students; (d) personal conflicts with and unfair treatment from professors; and (e) linguistic barriers (struggles with foreign language skills).

### **Academic workload**

As a result of their continuous contacts with the new academic culture and of the unanticipated academic differences, Indonesian doctoral students reported that they encountered some barriers and difficulties related to academic workload that prohibit them from engaging actively in classroom activities during their first semester. Three sub-themes emerged from the interview data, including: (a) an unanticipated amount of homework and assignments; (b) an inability to understand the volumes of reading required within a limited timeframe; and (c) responsibilities involved in teaching/research assistantships.

#### ***An unanticipated amount of homework and assignments***

All Indonesian doctoral students regardless of their demographic backgrounds reported that the overwhelming amount of homework and assignment and their level of difficulties shocked them and led them to be stressed during their first semester, which influenced participants' full academic engagement. For example, Lala, a female doctoral student majoring in a hard science, reported, "I couldn't do any homework; it was a lot of homework. I took three courses and each of them had homework every week... I was actually in an academic probation." Andriani, a female doctoral student majoring in an applied science, shared similar feelings, "The first semester was the most shocking one. It is not easy

for me to [take] care of them...I took three courses... I had no idea at all about the course. It was very difficult.” For participants, homework was too much and time was not sufficient to do it. Although participants seemed to be engaged in functionalist or behavioral ways, in terms of taking classes or attending lectures, their full engagement was hindered by academic challenges and obstacles (e.g., understanding the topics of the lectures or submitting required work) arising from their unfamiliarity with the American graduate classroom.

### ***An inability to understand the volumes of reading required within a limited timeframe***

Two participants majoring in a hard science and three participants majoring in an applied science reported that they had difficulties to understand the written materials, including books, or articles from courses that they were taking during the first semester because they contained too much material and time was limited. Consequently, they could not actively engage in classroom discussion. For example, Mursalin, a male doctoral student majoring in an applied science, reported, “There were many books, articles, journals that [we] had to read and it was ... impossible to read and finish them in one week. I sometimes just read the abstract of a journal because I had no time to finish it.” Likewise, Suhantono, a male doctoral student majoring in a hard science, said, “I had four courses in the first semester. I had to read materials of the courses that I was taking and it was difficult, especially reading research papers. That’s really, really difficult to understand the content of courses.” The interviews data indicated that participants failed to fully engage in class discussions due to their difficulties in understanding the content of the lectures in limited time at a graduate level.

### ***Responsibilities involved in teaching/research assistantships***

The other academic challenge that participants particularly majoring in a hard science commonly faced was working as a full time graduate student and as a teaching/research assistant, preventing them from concentrating on engaging in their courses during their first semester. Jauhari, a male doctoral student majoring in a hard science, reported, “I took 9 credits hours every semester ... and I was also a TA [teaching assistant]. The amount of work as a TA like teaching and grading made me stressed. ...While I also needed to do my coursework.” Similarly, Leo, a male doctoral student majoring in a hard science, said, “I was pretty much shocked.... I was a TA [teaching assistant] and taking nine credit hours. As a TA, I had to grade students’ work, as a student I had to do my homework, which was overwhelming.”

However, starting from their second semester through the remainder of their university years, participants commonly reported that they felt more engaged in classroom activities and less stressed with homework and assignments, reading research literature, and teaching/research assistantships, although these were still challenging. For example, Antoni, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, reported, “I felt better in the second semester...I still had difficulties with homework and assignments, but in general the grades that I got were better. I started enjoying [working] as a TA [teaching assistant].” Likewise, Leo, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, explained, “it took about five months to get used to all the workload...although I was still taking classes and [working as] a TA in the second semester, it was easier to handle and to adjust with the routine.” Participants seemed to be more able to manage their demanding academic routine, compared to their first semester. This also indicated that they started participating in their demanding academic activities in American academic culture.

## **Unfamiliarity with classroom dynamics**

The transcripts of the interviews demonstrated that participants' unfamiliarity with American classroom dynamics appeared to be a barrier for their active academic engagement in class activities during the first semester. The sources of their difficulties were: (a) a lack of confidence to present academic assignments; (b) keeping silent, shy, and passive in classroom; and (c) struggling to meet high expectations and pressures to perform well.

### ***Lack of confidence to present academic assignments***

Participants regardless of their majors, reported that making oral presentations was another area of difficulty for them due to lack of confidence and experience during their first semester. In the words of Adriani, a female doctoral student majoring in an applied science, "in the first semester it was hard for me to make presentations in class because of several reasons like my English and the topics...I did my presentation and you know nobody knew what I was talking about." Similarly, Hamdani, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, reported, "My big problem is I was not fluent in using English. So, the problems that I faced were [...] about using English, about how to communicate or deliver my presentation to my students, my peers or professors." Participants in this study appeared to be unconfident in speaking English in front of other students from other cultures. The feelings of lack of confidence and experience made them difficult to actively engage in delivering their academic assignments due to their cultural influences and limited English ability. They seemed to be afraid of making mistakes when they spoke in English in front of native speakers.

### ***Keeping silent, shy, and passive in classroom***

Unlike at their home university where students are typically passive, at their host university, participants reported that active class participation culture was one of the major sources of their difficulty that impacted on their activeness in learning with other students in the American classroom. Adriani, a female doctoral student majoring in an applied science, said, "I tried to be active ..., but you know I am not used to actively participating in class like discussions on specific topics... The difference is that in Indonesia, students are not really active in the classroom." Additionally, Rojuk, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, reported, "I felt I should raise my hand... Actually Asian students like me they know the answer to the question, but maybe we are used to the culture that we are more humble or silent." Zulkifli, a doctoral student majoring in an applied science, shared similar experience, "It was difficult to adjust to the American academic culture. So, I just kept silent in the first semester and learned my new environment." Participants perceived that their passiveness in class discussions was due to their cultural influences, level of English ability, and unfamiliarity with active class participation culture. Although they understood the topic being discussed and prepared for the discussions by reading materials in advance, they were not used to contributing their ideas in class discussions. This situation was exacerbated by their lack of English speaking practices. As a result, they remained silent in whole class discussions. This situation might have also been influenced by Indonesian academic culture which believes that teachers or faculty are considered more knowledgeable and responsible for explaining all details of the subject while students just listen to their teachers and take notes.

### ***Struggling to meet high expectation and pressure to perform well***

Professors' high expectations and pressures to perform well seemed to be related to participants' active academic engagement. All of the participants, except Hamdani, reported that they had a stressful and demanding experience related to their professors' high expectations and pressures to perform well. They had to do a lot of work while the time was not sufficient for actively engaging in fast-paced learning activities during their first semester. As reported by Kamarudin, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, "[The] pressure to perform well was there during the first semester. It was a little bit difficult to deal with high expectation or standard from faculty members... For example, to get an A, I should get above 94 of 100." Similarly, Jauhari, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, said, "To get good grades is not easy for me in the first semester as a new student from a different country. I was worried about that because our GPA depends on our performance in all courses." In the words, of Suhantono, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, "Pressure to perform well is immense. I have to struggle. It is demanding. I basically spent ninety percent of my time ...In a graduate school every 'A' you earn is very difficult."

After their first semester, participants reported that their level of stress was lower. They started building their confidence in order to actively engage in fast-paced classroom activities although they continuously experienced pressure as graduate students. For example, Rojuk, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, reported, "[In] the second semester ... I was much more relaxed because I passed the first semester quite well and I think it was going to be okay." Likewise, Kamarudin, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, said, "I know to get an A is hard... I think my transition was very good although it was stressful as well. I knew how to handle academic problems using what I experienced in the first semester." Hamdani, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, starting from his second semester, was more actively engaged in classroom activities, "I started participating more actively in the classroom during my second semester and other semesters. I gained courage to participate in the class discussions actively after seeing many students participating in the discussions as well." Indonesian doctoral students in this study experienced a wide range of cultural adjustment due to their unfamiliarity with American classroom dynamics, but starting in the second semester, they appeared to gain courage to participate actively in class activities.

### **Unfamiliarity with the nature of relationships between faculty and student**

International students are expected to engage not only in the classroom, but also outside classroom (e.g., discussing academic issues with faculty members or discussing intellectual or course-related matters during their office hours). Differences in educational systems between Indonesia and the United States regarding the nature of professor and student relationships play an important part in Indonesian students' academic engagement in fast-paced classroom activities. Based on the within-case and cross-case analyses, participants reported that the difficulties they experienced in getting advice, suggestions, or help arose from their unfamiliarity with the informality of professor and student relationships. There is less of an overt power distance between professors and students in the United States compared to Indonesia. Participants were not used to visiting their professors' offices to talk or discuss their problems related to their graduate work. In the words of Leo, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, "I am not sure if it is cultural or if it is just me. I felt reluctant to get advice... I am not used to communication with professors." Adriani, a female doctoral student majoring in an applied science also encountered similar challenges, "I was still afraid of asking professors [questions] or visiting their office, whether it would be fine or

not to email them. The first semester was difficult to discuss like assignment or papers with other professors [...].” Additionally, due to cultural influences, Lala, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, did not use the office hour’s appointment with faculty member. She thought that the relationship between professor and student at her host university was similar to that at her home country, which is so formal and hierarchical. “I didn’t know about the informality between professor and student because you know in my country a professor is someone whom we need to be afraid of...I didn’t know that when you have problems, you could go to them.”

Participants’ cultural influences made them feel reluctant to meet professors to discuss the problems related to their academic challenges and obstacles although almost every faculty member has office hours. Participants might have thought that the classroom was the only place on campus where they could meet and talk to the faculty. Feelings of reluctance led Indonesian students to keep their own academic problems in fast-paced learning activities at an American graduate school. However, after spending one semester, participants reported that they felt comfortable with the informal relationship between professor and student. They felt that professors treated them equally although they were from different cultures. For example, Lala, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, said, “I could go to see my professors by sending an email first. I even meet professors outside their office hours to get their advice or input. My adviser invited me to his house.” Similarly, Jauhari, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science reported, “I had difficulties to discuss assignment, papers, exam, or readings with faculty members inside and outside the classroom.” This suggested that the participants were able to interact with people from different cultures and at the same time they were able to integrate with the host culture, which facilitated them to more engage in every academic activity at their host university.

### **Personal conflicts with and unfair treatment from professors**

Although not all participants had conflicts with faculty members, four interviewees (Antoni, Suhantono, Sabarno, and Rojuk) reported that they were confronted by difficulties and feelings of discomfort with their adviser or faculty members. Although they experienced stressful events, they tended to keep problems and challenges, which may have been related to the cultural stigma and shame associated with emotional expression. This kind of crisis influenced the four participants’ academic engagement at their host university, and finally impacted on their academic success as international students. For example, Antoni got into a serious conflict with his major professor. “My current professor is very good. He is from Europe. My previous professor was from one of Asian countries. He is probably one of the worse professors. ...I lost three years because of that.” Likewise, three other participants reported that they experienced unfair treatments from professors who seemed to maintain their home culture in American academic culture. For example, Suhantono, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, reported, “I got unfair treatment from some professors...If you ask an easy question, they will ignore you. ... When I asked a question, most of them did not take it seriously.” Experiencing personal conflicts with and unfair treatment from professors seemed to influence these participants from participating in classroom activities actively. If they wanted to ask questions, they had to have a high-level question. Otherwise, the professors were unhappy. This kind of experience made participants feel ignored in lessons or excluded by the professors.

## **Linguistic barriers: Struggling with four language skills**

Due to lack of English proficiency, classroom engagement (e.g., comprehension of long lectures, class participation, discussion groups, and presentations) seemed to be challenging for Indonesian students although some of them have learned English as a foreign language in their home countries, some of them pursued their undergraduate or master's degrees in an English speaking country, and some of them have attended several training or conferences held in English before coming to the United States. The participants' linguistic barrier issues were related to listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

**Listening.** This language skill was reported by nine participants including Antoni, Rajuk, Jauhari, Hamdani, Adriani, Leo, Zulkifli, Kamarudin, and Mursalin as one of the difficult skills during their first semester. For them, it was difficult to understand the topics being discussed because American professors and students spoke too quickly. For example, Leo, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, reported, "I was not really good at listening to others. Especially when a professor was explaining or talking about something in front of the class.... People here speak very fast." Likewise, Zulkifli, a doctoral student majoring in an applied science and who earned his master's degree in the UK, said, "Listening was a problem for me. I had problems with understanding the lectures because here Americans speak very fast and [it's] hard for me to understand."

**Speaking.** Participants recognized that speaking up was important at a graduate level in the US. But, they reported that they had problems speaking English during their first semester due to their lack of practice and/or their personality. They perceived that their lack of English proficiency prevented them from engaging in fast-paced classroom discussions and from communicating with others inside or outside classrooms. For instance, Mursalin, a doctoral student majoring in an applied science who earned his master's degree in Canada, explained, "Speaking was the most difficult for me... I was very quiet in most of the courses that I took. I doubted to speak in the classroom." Hamdani, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, added, "Speaking in English was the most difficult skill for me during the first semester. You know I am not really a talkative person, even when in Indonesia. I am a shy person." Likewise, Kamarudin, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, reported, "I got a problem with speaking in English from the beginning because you know I do not much like expressions or to start a conversation, or to express a thing."

**Reading.** The analysis of the interview data indicated that participants experienced difficulties in reading course materials, including books or research articles during the first semester, but they improved their reading skills after the first semester, as described by Zulkifli, a doctoral student majoring in an applied science, "I did not understand the course materials although I read them two or three times....From the second semester [on] I have made a lot of improvement. I read faster and understand the course materials better." Hamdani, a doctoral student majoring in a hard science, added that his reading skills improved overtime, "In reading, sometimes I missed readings some words and it changed the entire meaning. But, you know as time goes on, I have some improvements and it is not a big problem anymore."

**Writing.** Participants reported that writing was one of the major sources of difficulties that they faced during the first semester and during their university years. For applied science students, due to their lack of practice and unfamiliarity with their host university rules such as plagiarism, from the first semester, they found writing the most challenging language skill. For example, Zulkifli stated, "Writing was the most difficult thing in the first semester. I sometimes, chose the wrong words and as a result the meanings were different and it influenced the grades on my papers." Adriani also added, "I have lack of skill at writing, even in my own language. That's the problem. So, in English, then, like how to choose words, how

to formulate sentences, the flow of writing and everything.” Hard science students reported that they were not required to write a lot of papers during their first or even second years because their reports were more mathematical and did not deal with a lot of theories. However, after they started writing their research, journals, or dissertation proposal, they had difficulties writing in English. Sabarno stated, “To write homework is not a problem...To write a research paper, it is a big problem because I don’t know exactly how to write an introduction, how to choose the appropriate words.” Likewise, Suhantono stated, “Especially writing, it is so difficult until now... Writing is not only about grammar but also about how to organize ideas, coherence, styles, and a good flow.”

The language skills were influential factors for participants to be able to engage actively in fast-paced classroom activities during their first semester. The data indicated that some participants had language difficulties related to listening and speaking skills and some reported that they had problems with reading. However, except for writing skill (e.g., research articles or dissertation proposal), participants reported that the linguistic barriers gradually improved overtime and they started acquiring the courage and confidence necessary to engage in classroom discussions.

## **Discussion**

International students including Indonesian graduate students have come to the US for a specific period of time for the purpose of obtaining a degree, suggesting that academic achievement is a very important determinant in their intercultural contact in U.S. higher education. Previous studies have documented that the characteristics and degree of Asian international students’ educational and sociocultural experiences vary due to factors, including race/ethnicity (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Trice, 2004; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005), length of stay and major of study (Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008), social support and social contacts (Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008; Trice, 2004; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005), and English language proficiency (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Liu, 2001; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008; Trice, 2004;). Although, these studies provide readers with useful information on what Asian students experienced during their transition processes in American higher education, fewer previous research (e.g., Awasilah, 1991) has specifically examined the lived experience of Indonesian doctoral students’ academic engagement in an American graduate school. The intent of our study was to better understand the academic engagement experiences of Indonesian doctoral students at the classroom level and how they negotiate cultural encounters in an American graduate school during the first term and over time at their institutions.

The academic engagement/involvement experiences of twelve Indonesian doctoral students at an American public research university were presented and interpreted from their viewpoints. As indicated in a number of previous studies, there are substantial distinctions in types and meanings of student engagement which influence on students’ experiences in schools or colleges. These distinctions can be generally categorized as functionalist (e.g., behavioral indicators such as time on task and test results and equates engagement with motivation) relational (e.g., relationships between and among educators and students), and transformative (e.g., critical inquiry based on robust notions of equity and social justice; McMahan & Portelli, 2004; McMahan & Zyngier, 2009; Vibert & Shields, 2003). Additionally, Tinto and Pusser (2006) and Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007) wrote that involvement or engagement is one of the most important factors influencing student success in college. The findings of this study indicate that starting from their first semester; Indonesian doctoral students generally wanted to engage actively in classroom learning, and that their reports of engagement were primarily in functionalist and behavioral

terms, and secondarily in relational terms. Perhaps because of the following reasons, these international students were consumed with their efforts to achieve the academic grades required by the conditions of their scholarships and their expectations for their own academic achievements. However, their ability and willingness to engage to fast-paced classroom activities are largely dependent on several challenging and interrelated factors, including (a) academic workload (b) unfamiliarity with classroom dynamics (c) unfamiliarity with the nature of relationships between faculty and student, and (d) personal conflicts with and unfair treatment from professors, and (e) linguistic barriers.

More important, participants in this study reported that during their first semester, academic workload, including (a) an unanticipated amount of homework and assignments; (b) an inability to understand the volumes of reading required within a limited timeframe; and (c) responsibilities involved in teaching/research assistantships prohibited them from engaging actively in classroom activities. The overwhelming amount of homework, assignment, and reading literature and their level of difficulties shocked them and led them to be stressed. According to functionalist perspectives, student engagement refers to behavioral indicators such as time on task and test results and equates engagement with motivation, an internal characteristic of individual students whose responsibility it is to be engaged. Engagement in this sense is seen as measurable and is demonstrated by student commitment to behaviors associated with schooling (O'Brien, 2000; Steinberg, 1996). This is the meaning of engagement that the interviewees seemed to articulate as the most important. However, participants were likely to fail to fully function as graduate students in an American graduate school due to the unanticipated academic differences although they did spend time on task and passed the courses that they took during the first semester. Additionally, the results of this study support Ying's (2005) finding in that academics (e.g., study) was one of the challenges for Taiwanese international graduate students and the findings are consistent with what Sato and Hodge (2009) found in their study with Asian students, including students from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan who struggled to manage time to carry out multiple tasks such as teaching, coursework, and research.

We also found that due to their double roles in a new academic culture as full time graduate students and as teaching/research assistants, participants majoring in a hard science reported that they could not fully engage in fast-paced classroom activities. However, the findings of this study indicated that starting from their second semester through the remainder of their university years, participants felt more engaged in classroom activities and less stressed with homework and assignment, reading literature, and teaching/research assistantship although they were still challenging. This suggested that they were able to interact with people from different cultures and at the same time they were able to integrate with the host culture, which facilitated them to more engage in every academic activity at their host university. This demonstrates relational meanings of student engagement.

Previous studies on Asian students in US higher education (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Kim, 2006; Liu, 2001; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Zhai, 2002) indicate that Asian international students in the United States experienced academic and sociocultural challenges (e.g., comprehension of long lectures, class participation, discussion groups, presentations, and academic advisors' academic related expectations) due to their unfamiliarity with American academic culture. For example, Liu (2001) found that five interrelated issues that influenced Asian international graduate students' classroom engagement were linguistic, sociocultural, cognitive, pedagogical, and affective factors. This study supported findings by Liu (2001) in finding that factors such as unfamiliarity with classroom dynamics (e.g., keeping silent, shy, and passive in classroom or struggling to meet high expectation) and unfamiliarity with the nature of relationships between faculty and student, contributed to Indonesian doctoral students' classroom engagement during their first semester.

Transformative academic engagement that McMahon and Portelli (2004) identified as, “present in the iterations that emerge as a result of the dialectical processes between teachers and students and the differing patterns that evolve out of transformational actions and interactions” (p. 70), were not reported. Participants in this study were not used to student-centered learning. However, the finding from this study indicated that from their second semester, participants appeared to gain courage to engage with the course materials and participate actively in class activities, leading to greater quality of effort to enhance their learning. Additionally, they felt comfortable with the informal relationship between professor and student, suggesting that they started integrating to the academic culture at their host university.

While participants reported that from their second semester on they felt more adjusted to engage in the American higher education classroom dynamics, several interviewees experienced personal conflicts with and unfair treatment from professors. This made participants feel ignored in lessons or excluded by the professors that prohibited them from actively engaging in classroom activities. However, they tended to keep problems and challenges, which may be related to cultural stigma and shame associated with emotional expression to themselves.

In this study, we also found that although all of Indonesian doctoral students passed the minimum scores required to study in U.S. graduate programs in TOEFL and GRE, many of Indonesian doctoral students reported that the linguistic barriers seemed to lead them to have uncomfortable feelings and anxiety about actively engaging in fast-paced classroom activities. More specifically, they perceived their limited language skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing which are influential factors for engaging in long lectures, discussion groups, or presentations during their first semester. A number of previous studies have well documented that language problems contribute to international students’ academic adjustment on in U.S. higher education (Alwasilah, 1991; Baker, & Al-Timimi 2004; Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis 2008; Kim, 2006; Lee, 2009; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008; Wilton & Constantine, 2003;). Specifically, Fritz, Chin, and DeMarinis (2008) found that Asian international students found it harder to deal with the new language. Additionally, Sumer, Poyrazli, and Grahame (2008) reported that international students with lower levels of English proficiency experienced higher levels of depression and anxiety. Lee (2009) found that Korean graduate students felt their lack of English proficiency was the most critical factor influencing their oral participation in graduate class discussions and Kim’s (2006) study reported that East Asian international graduate students were most concerned about leading class discussions and participating in whole-class discussions because of their limited English ability. Nevertheless, previous research often fail to specifically define what language skills become obstacles for international students to actively engage in an American graduate classroom and how long they experience such problems. In our study, we found that Indonesian doctoral students indicated that they had language difficulties related listening, speaking, reading, and writing during their first semester. However, unlike the findings of previous studies, except for writing skill (e.g., writing research articles, journals, or dissertation proposal), participants reported that the linguistic barriers gradually improved overtime and they started acquiring courage and confidence to engage in classroom discussions. This suggests that despite the language challenges and obstacles, they used their first semester experience to actively engage in learning to accomplish their graduate work starting from their second semester and over time at their institutions.

### **Limitations**

Our findings should be considered in the view of some limitations. Firstly, participants may not be representative of all Indonesian students in the US. There may be differences between the academic engagement experiences faced by Indonesian students who are enrolled in different programs, non-degree program, and post-doctoral programs. Generalizability of the findings to other Indonesian students in the U.S. is cautioned. Future research may include a larger sample of Indonesian graduate students from different universities in the U.S., which may provide different perspectives of Indonesian graduate students' academic engagement experiences. Secondly, this study was limited to 12 Indonesian doctoral students at an American graduate school only, faculty members were excluded from this study, so in future research we could investigate the faculty's perspectives on Indonesian graduate students and their awareness of the issues of Indonesian students' academic engagement. Also, our participants were limited to Indonesian doctoral students who received various scholarship programs, including scholarships from the Indonesian government, the U.S. government, and graduate assistantships from the host university. Other investigators may replicate and extend our study to self-funding students from Indonesia.

### **Policy and Programs Implications**

International students, including Indonesian students in the U.S., may face a number of academic and nonacademic challenges that make them work hard to be successful in college including the fact that they come from different ethnic and racial minority backgrounds. For them, coming to a new and foreign academic culture may be an exciting experience, but unfamiliarity, uncertainty, and disorientation may constrain their experience in their cultural encounters. However, international students may become important sources of diversity on American university campuses and American students may take advantage of this situation in order to get used to working and studying with people from different countries and backgrounds (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). The findings of the study provide additional evidence to fill a gap in the international graduate student engagement literature and to add to the existing information on Indonesian graduate students' academic engagement experiences in American higher education. The findings from this study indicate that 12 Indonesian doctoral students at an American graduate school encountered similar interrelated problems and challenges related to their academic engagement in American learning activities. Many factors challenged their classroom engagement due to the differences between Indonesian academic culture and American academic culture, including: academic workload, faculty expectations, the nature of relationships with professors and advisers, classroom dynamics, and linguistic barriers during their first semester. Their academic engagement was worsened by the fact that several participants encountered personal conflicts and unfair treatment from professors. However, starting from their second semester, although their academic engagement was still challenging, they appeared to gain courage and confidence to participate actively in class activities, which facilitated them to more engage in every academic activity at their host university. This suggests that as they began understanding rules, norms, traditions, and values that rule interaction and communication in American higher education, their engagement in their classes increased.

In light of the importance of international graduate students' existence in a college and in order to help them survive and succeed academically and socially, universities, colleges, departments, and student affairs professionals working with international graduate students should provide them with adequate and clear information on American academic and social culture. The focus should be on assisting international graduate students in

understanding social rules, norms, traditions, and values that rule interaction and communication in American higher education. This information should be provided through ongoing mentoring before and while they are on campus. We argue that more attention should be paid to the challenges that are related to academic workload, faculty expectations, the nature of relationships with professors and advisers, and classroom dynamics, such as active participation in discussions.

Previous research (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Kim, 2006; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004; Trice, 2004) contends that international and Asian students are more silent in class due to their lack of English proficiency. Our findings indicate that the linguistic barriers were one of the challenging factors, preventing Indonesian doctoral students from engaging actively in fast-paced classroom activities such as comprehension of long lectures, class participation, discussion groups, and presentations during their first semester, but gradually improved overtime. Individual faculty members can do much to assist Indonesian and other Asian international graduate students in engaging actively in class discussions. Their attitude is very essential to encourage international students to talk in classroom. These students likely will wait for a professor to initiate communication. Some recommendations for faculty members include facilitating systematic meetings with international students to share perspectives and voice concerns related to American classroom dynamic or pairing international students with host students in group work.

The findings from this study indicated that participants reported that they had problems with academic writing (e.g., writing research articles, journals, or dissertation proposal). Universities should provide regular language training and workshop for graduate students since they are trained to be the ones who are experts in their field, including publishing their work. Also, universities should help international graduate students improve their English by providing programs that develop their spoken English. For example, programs that provide conversation partners with American students. Data also found that several participants experienced personal conflicts with and unfair treatment from faculty members. They were confronted with the difficulties and feelings of discomfort with their adviser or faculty members. We suggest that rules and instructions regarding working with international graduate students from diverse backgrounds should be articulated so that faculty members are attentive to their responsibility in providing a safe and welcoming atmosphere for international graduate students.

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