



Strengthening Academic Awareness and Character Education among Students: A Study of IAIN Pontianak's International Academic Program in Malaysia

Ahmad Fadhail Ramadhan^{*1}, Sahri², Luqman Abdul Jabbar³, Nur Hamzah⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Institut Agama Islam Negeri Pontianak, Indonesia

Email: ahmadfadhailramadhan@gmail.com

Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article History Received: 2026-03-07 Revised: 2026-04-13 Published: 2026-05-02</p> <p>Keywords: <i>Educational Internationalization; Academic Awareness; Character Building; Cross-Border Learning.</i></p>	<p>This study aims to analyze the role of international academic programs in enhancing academic awareness and character education for postgraduate students at the State Islamic Institute (<i>Institut Agama Islam Negeri Pontianak/IAIN</i>) Pontianak. This study uses descriptive qualitative research in which the author is directly involved as a participant in the international academic program conducted in Malaysia. The research subjects include IAIN Pontianak students and lecturers involved in the program, with the activity location at SMK Pesantren Abdul Taib Mahmud, Sarawak, Malaysia. Data collection techniques were carried out through participant observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis used the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The research results indicate that international academic programs significantly contribute to strengthening students' academic awareness through direct involvement in teaching activities, academic presentations, and cross-cultural interactions. Furthermore, these programs play a role in the internalization of character education relevant to Islamic educational values. However, the implementation of international academic programs also faces various challenges, requiring institutions to be prepared to design structured and sustainable programs for their success. Strengthening pre-departure orientation, providing language and cultural training, and faculty mentoring are important strategies to minimize challenges and maximize the benefits of the program. This study confirms that international academic programs serve as a strategic means in shaping Islamic Studies Master's graduates who are globally minded, possess Islamic character, and are capable of contributing to the global community.</p>
<p>Artikel Info</p> <p>Sejarah Artikel Diterima: 2026-03-07 Direvisi: 2026-04-13 Dipublikasi: 2026-05-02</p> <p>Kata kunci: <i>Internasionalisasi Pendidikan; Kesadaran Akademik; Membangun Karakter; Pembelajaran Lintas Negara.</i></p>	<p>Abstrak</p> <p>Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran program akademik internasional dalam penguatan kesadaran akademik dan pendidikan karakter mahasiswa Pascasarjana Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Pontianak. Studi ini menggunakan penelitian kualitatif deskriptif yang mana penulis terlibat langsung sebagai peserta dalam program akademik internasional yang dilaksanakan di Malaysia. Subjek penelitian meliputi mahasiswa dan dosen IAIN Pontianak yang terlibat dalam program tersebut, dengan lokasi kegiatan di SMK Pesantren Abdul Taib Mahmud, Sarawak, Malaysia. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Analisis data menggunakan model Miles dan Huberman yang meliputi reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa program akademik internasional berkontribusi signifikan terhadap penguatan kesadaran akademik mahasiswa melalui keterlibatan langsung dalam kegiatan mengajar, presentasi akademik, dan interaksi lintas budaya. Selain itu, program ini berperan dalam internalisasi pendidikan karakter yang relevan dengan nilai-nilai pendidikan Islam. Namun demikian, pelaksanaan program akademik internasional juga menghadapi berbagai tantangan sehingga keberhasilan program diperlukan kesiapan institusi dalam merancang program yang terstruktur dan berkelanjutan. Penguatan orientasi pra-keberangkatan, pembekalan bahasa dan budaya, serta pendampingan dosen menjadi strategi penting untuk meminimalkan tantangan dan mengoptimalkan manfaat program. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa program akademik internasional merupakan sarana strategis dalam membentuk lulusan Magister Studi Islam yang berwawasan global, berkarakter Islami, dan mampu berkontribusi dalam masyarakat global.</p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's commitment to bringing the higher education system into the global arena

has been initiated since the early 2000s. This is reflected in the 2003-2010 Long-Term Strategic Plan for Higher Education, which positions the

internationalization of higher education as one of the main strategies to enhance national competitiveness. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, as the agency overseeing Islamic Higher Education, has also adopted the vision of internationalization in its strategic planning. The 2020-2024 Strategic Plan of the Directorate General of Islamic Religious Education explicitly affirms improving the quality and competitiveness of Islamic higher education institutions towards an international reputation as one of the main objectives of Islamic higher education development (Dairabi Kamil et al., 2025). In realizing this vision, the Directorate General of Islamic Religious Education has implemented various internationalization strategies, including providing scholarships for lecturers to pursue academic studies and development abroad, conducting student exchange programs, and strengthening research collaboration with foreign universities. Through this internationalization policy, each Islamic Religious Higher Education Institution (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam/PTKI) is expected to be able to expand its academic reach more quickly and strategically, while also introducing the ideas, concepts, and scholarly values developed by the institution to the global academic community (Rohman & Zainuddin, 2025).

Internationalization in higher education is very beneficial, especially for students pursuing education at Islamic Higher Education institutions in Indonesia. This can provide additional insights, particularly in academics abroad. In this context, programs such as student mobility or Community Service (Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat/PKM) abroad allow students to understand the dynamics of education in other countries and develop a global perspective relevant to the challenges of contemporary education. According to Suyato et al. (2025), students who participate in short-term international academic programs at foreign universities develop cross-cultural understanding, enhance their ability to address global issues, and increase international collaboration. Meanwhile, Khusnul Khatimah (2023), emphasizes the importance of character education and cross-cultural communication in international academic program learning. These programs contribute to cross-cultural understanding and the internalization of character values, thereby strengthening students'

academic development.

A study conducted by Rohendi et al. (2024), shows the low level of experience and knowledge among Malaysian students regarding participation in mobility programs and further studies in Indonesia. Therefore, it is necessary for higher education institutions in Indonesia to increase their visibility and global appeal, especially in the context of attracting international students. In addition, international academic programs support the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) policy in higher education institutions. First, the ability to adapt well to a new environment allows students to gain learning experiences outside the campus by adjusting to and respecting cultural differences in the destination country. Second, mastery of international languages gained through cross-border academic interactions encourages students to develop high-quality research while also enhancing their ability to communicate effectively and creatively. Third, students' interest in academic challenges and learning experiences at foreign campuses contributes to increased self-confidence, especially in presenting ideas and research findings in international forums. Fourth, the formation of a global perspective motivates students to pursue further studies abroad and to participate continuously in various international academic programs in the future (Isnaini et al., 2024).

One of the Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia that implements an international academic program is the State Islamic Institute (Insitut Agama Islam Negeri/IAIN) Pontianak. The international academic program is part of the institution's strategic efforts to improve the quality of higher education with global competitiveness while being based on Islamic values. As an Islamic higher education institution located in the border area between Indonesia and Malaysia, IAIN Pontianak holds a strategic geographical and cultural position to promote the implementation of cross-country academic programs, particularly with universities in Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam (Khalil et al., 2025; Ramadhan et al., 2025; Sapendi & Suratman, 2024; Yusriadi et al., 2023).

The implementation of international academic programs involving IAIN Pontianak students provides a contextual learning space that brings together academic, character, and cross-cultural values. Through direct involvement in academic

activities abroad, students not only develop academic and international language competencies but also strengthen academic awareness, scientific ethics, and responsibility as part of the global academic community. Moreover, the international academic programs organized by IAIN Pontianak contribute to the formation of students' character, making them adaptive, tolerant, and with integrity. This will lead students to have an attitude of tolerance and appreciation for cultural and religious differences (Sahri, 2016). Cross-cultural interactions encourage students to internalize values of discipline, cooperation, and appreciation for diversity, which are relevant to the principles of Islamic education (Sahri & Hali, 2023; Sahri & Widiatmaka, 2025). Thus, international academic programs not only serve as a means of institutional internationalization but also as a strategic tool in strengthening students' academic awareness and character education at IAIN Pontianak.

Based on this explanation, this article aims to analyze the role of international academic programs in strengthening academic awareness and character education among students at IAIN Pontianak. The focus of the study is directed at how cross-national academic experiences, particularly through student involvement in international academic programs in Malaysia, contribute to the formation of academic awareness and the internalization of character values in the context of Islamic higher education.

This study is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of higher education internationalization policies within Islamic Higher Education Institutions, while also serving as a reference in designing international academic programs that are not only oriented towards strengthening academic competencies but also towards shaping students' character in the global era.

II. METHOD

This research uses qualitative research with a descriptive approach. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes and meanings of students' experiences in international academic programs, as well as their implications for strengthening academic awareness and character education. The author was directly involved as a participant in the international academic program held in Malaysia, so this study also utilizes a reflective participatory perspective. The research subjects

were students of the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) Pontianak who participated in an international academic program in Malaysia. The research location included academic activities held at SMK Pesantren Abdul Taib Mahmud, in Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia.

The data collection technique used participatory observation, in which the author directly observed academic activities, student interactions, and cross-cultural learning dynamics during the international academic program. In addition, the author also conducted interviews, particularly with lecturers from IAIN Pontianak involved in the international academic program as well as IAIN Pontianak students. The documentation used by the author included program documents, activity certificates, academic agendas, as well as photos and reports relevant to the implementation of the international academic program. The data obtained were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's method, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Fitriyani et al., 2024; Sahri, 2024; Suratman, 2021).

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. International Academic Programs and the Transformation of Students' Academic Awareness

The Postgraduate Program at IAIN Pontianak is collaborating on an international community service program with SMK Pesantren Abdul Taib Mahmud, located in Sadong Jaya, Sarawak, Malaysia. This collaboration is directly led by a team of lecturers from the Graduate Program, including Dr. Moh Yusuf Hidayat and Dr. Luqman Abdul Jabbar. The collaboration will involve master's degree students from the Islamic Studies Program at IAIN Pontianak, who will participate directly in the community service activities, particularly in improving the quality of education in the community through scholarly study and analysis in the field of Islamic Studies. This program serves as a strategic step in strengthening international academic networks as well as expanding the contribution of the IAIN Pontianak postgraduate in community development through scientific and da'wa approaches (Based on interviews with lecturers of the IAIN Pontianak postgraduate, September 2025).

The networking and exploration of international cooperation carried out by the Graduate Program of IAIN Pontianak at SMK Pesantren Abdul Taib Mahmud, Sarawak, reflects the institution's commitment to expanding academic networks while strengthening the contribution of Islamic higher education at the international level. This activity is not only oriented towards strengthening institutional relationships but also opens up opportunities for student participation in academic and social activities across countries that have educational value. The involvement of postgraduate students from IAIN Pontianak in these activities provides contextual learning experiences that contribute to strengthening academic awareness. Students of the Master's Program in Islamic Studies are given the opportunity to teach and present to students at SMK Pesantren Abdul Taib Mahmud, in Sarawak, Malaysia. Through this experience, students not only act as participants but also as academic actors in professionally transferring values and knowledge to students in Malaysia. Teaching and presenting experiences in overseas educational settings encourage students to enhance their academic awareness and confidence in conveying ideas to international audiences. Additionally, direct interaction with students and the academic community at SMK Pesantren Abdul Taib Mahmud strengthens students' awareness of the importance of adapting teaching methods, cultural sensitivity, and intercultural communication. These aspects are an essential part of fostering students' academic awareness as future academics and educators.



Figure 1. IAIN Pontianak International Academic Program in Malaysia

Source: Author Documentation

Through direct interaction with educational environments abroad, students are encouraged to reflect on their roles and responsibilities as academics, both in the context of knowledge development and socially based service rooted in Islamic values. This experience strengthens students' understanding of Islamic educational practices in different cultural contexts, while also fostering professionalism, discipline, and ethical behavior in academic activities. Networking activities and international cooperation programs conducted by the Postgraduate Program at IAIN Pontianak not only serve as an initial step in strengthening institutional partnerships but also as a strategic learning tool to support the enhancement of students' academic awareness. This international academic experience emphasizes the role of Islamic higher education institutions in producing graduates, particularly Master of Islamic Studies, who are globally minded, possess Islamic character, and are capable of contributing at the international level.

This is relevant to the study conducted by Stebleton et al. (2013), which revealed that international academic programs facilitated by universities are able to promote the development of students' global and intercultural competencies more effectively. Unlike informal travel experiences abroad, international academic programs allow students to build deep collaborative relationships through academic interactions, community service activities, and direct engagement with the educational communities in the host country. In this context, international community service activities, experiential learning, and cross-national academic activities play an important role in developing students' cross-cultural interpersonal skills, communication competence, and social sensitivity. Students' involvement in teaching activities, academic presentations, and social interactions in foreign educational environments strengthens their awareness of the importance of intercultural dialogue, global collaboration, and social responsibility as part of the international academic community.

In addition, in preparing students of the Master's program in Islamic Studies, the postgraduate program at IAIN Pontianak has equipped students with knowledge of Malaysian culture, including foreign languages. As a result, students participating in international academic programs have proficiency in foreign languages, both Arabic and English. This effort is an important part of ensuring that students are able to adapt to foreign education environments and actively participate in cross-cultural academic activities. This practice is relevant to the research findings of Luzviminda P. Relon (2020), who emphasized that before participants are placed in internship programs or international academic activities, sufficient time should be allocated to study the language and culture of the destination country. Relon also highlighted the importance of conducting a needs assessment as the basis for designing a structured and formalized program. In this regard, social and cultural orientation is considered a top priority, which should be initiated by the hosting university to ensure that students are academically, psychologically, and socially prepared (Relon, 2020).

Especially the findings of Pitri Haryanti et al. (Haryanti et al., 2024), which indicate that Indonesian students who participate in internship programs or international academic activities generally experience culture shock at a moderate level. The difficulties they face are not only related to limitations in foreign language skills but also include differences in work culture, academic and professional performance demands, attitudes of some local communities, as well as student personality factors such as low adaptability and lack of self-confidence. The study reveals that although all students, at various levels of culture shock, face similar challenges in carrying out tasks due to cultural differences and language limitations, personal factors and social environmental responses are the main determinants of the intensity of culture shock in students. These findings indicate that students' readiness to participate in international academic programs depends not only on cognitive and technical aspects, but also on affective readiness and personal character.

In addition, the study by deLusé & Thomas (2022), suggests that internationally-led

academic programs run by faculty have great potential to provide transformative learning experiences. Through the direct involvement of students in a global context, these programs enable students to gain a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues that cross disciplinary and geographic boundaries. The integration of internship or international academic experiences into study abroad programs is considered effective for expanding the scope of interdisciplinary learning and promoting the development of students' integrative thinking skills (deLusé & Thomas, 2022).

Thus, the language training and cultural understanding provided by the IAIN Pontianak Graduate Program become highly relevant and strategic. Strengthening foreign language competence, accompanied by character development such as self-confidence, adaptability, openness, and mental resilience, is an important prerequisite for students' success in facing academic and social dynamics in an international environment. In addition, the international academic programs carried out by IAIN Pontianak broaden the scope of interdisciplinary learning, particularly in the Master's Program in Islamic Studies at IAIN Pontianak.

B. Internalization of Character Education in Cross-Cultural Learning

In the era of internationalization of higher education institutions, international student mobility is seen as an important educational tool to enhance students' cross-cultural competence. Students participating in these programs expand their knowledge through various trainings and workshops during each study visit abroad. Students not only acquire new knowledge and specific skills (e.g., conflict management, negotiation skills) and behaviors (e.g., tolerance, openness, trust), but they also improve previously acquired competencies, such as professional and linguistic competencies (English language proficiency) (Sylwia et al., 2024). The involvement of graduate students from the Islamic Studies Master's Program at IAIN Pontianak in this international academic activity also contributes to character education development. The process of cross-country interaction requires students to internalize values of responsibility,

cooperation, tolerance, and empathy, in line with the principles of Islamic education. Teaching activities and academic presentations at SMK Pesantren Abdul Taib Mahmud in Malaysia not only enhance students' academic experience but also strengthen their character and scholarly identity in a global context.

In addition, international academic activities that are integrated with community service also contribute to cross-cultural learning. Cross-cultural and social interactions require students to develop attitudes of tolerance, empathy, cooperation, as well as intercultural communication skills. These values become an important part of shaping the character of IAIN Pontianak students, who are not only academically excellent but also possess social sensitivity and moral integrity in facing global dynamics. In Jennifer Fong's study conducted on undergraduate students from American universities who participated in overseas research programs through partnerships between the United States and Taiwan, it was shown that the students considered their experiences abroad to enhance their intercultural awareness and skills, such as openness to cultural differences, overcoming challenges abroad, and working effectively in diverse teams (Fong, 2020). The experience of IAIN Pontianak students participating in an international academic program in Malaysia, particularly in collaboration with SMK Pesantren Abdul Taib Mahmud Sarawak, in academic activities, discussions, presentations, as well as social interactions with the local academic community, provides cross-cultural learning opportunities for students. This encourages IAIN Pontianak students to develop openness to cultural differences, enhance their ability to work in multicultural teams, and strengthen intercultural communication skills.

This is relevant to several studies that emphasize that academic experiences abroad contribute to increased intercultural awareness and the ability to work in diverse environments (Aba, 2016; Fong, 2020; Messelink et al., 2015; Sobkowiak, 2019). The success of IAIN Pontianak students in actively participating during academic programs in Malaysia shows that cross-cultural learning integrated with community service and academic activities can strengthen students' character holistically. Such experiences not

only enhance students' academic capacity and international networks but also reinforce the values of integrity, responsibility, and social sensitivity, which form the foundation of character education in Islamic Higher Education institutions. The international academic programs participated in by IAIN Pontianak students play a strategic role in shaping graduates who have a global perspective, Islamic character, and contribute to the dynamics of education and international society. The sustainability and strengthening of international academic programs at IAIN Pontianak are part of the strategy for curriculum development and the internationalization of Higher Education. Structured planning and faculty guidance will optimize the contribution of international academic programs in producing Master of Islamic Studies graduates who are globally competitive, have Islamic character, and understand cross-cultural dynamics.

C. Challenges and Strategies in the Implementation of International Academic Programs

The key driving factors are the rapid development of knowledge worldwide, technological advancements, economic globalization, the growth of the international student population, and increased workforce mobility. Globally competent students must possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable them to understand, communicate, and work effectively outside their own environment with people from different cultural backgrounds (Popov et al., 2017).

A study conducted by Dian Sri Wahyuni (2019), on the experiences of Indonesian students during teaching practice and community service in Thailand showed that there are six types of culture shock experienced by Indonesian students. The culture shock experienced includes language and communication problems, lifestyle and cultural differences, social support and making friends, positive experiences, academic problems, and psychological issues. As for strategies to overcome cultural differences and problems, four strategies were found to be used by Indonesian students, namely, self-confidence and optimism, accepting a new culture, seeking social

support, and language training (Wahyuni, 2019).

The findings show that the challenges in the implementation of international academic programs are not only technical but also cultural, linguistic, academic, and psychological. Language differences and communication patterns are often an initial barrier that affects the effectiveness of students' academic and social interactions in the destination country. In the context of IAIN Pontianak students who visit Malaysia, even though in terms of language using Malay, especially West Kalimantan and Sarawak, there are dialects and many different vocabulary in Malay. These challenges must be evaluated in international academic programs carried out by IAIN Pontianak. The program implementation strategy is not only focused on administrative aspects and institutional partnerships, but on the readiness of students culturally, academically, and psychologically.

Strategic steps that can be taken by IAIN Pontianak include strengthening pre-departure orientation, foreign language skills, and the introduction of Malaysia's academic culture to avoid culture shock and boost students' confidence. In addition, lecturer mentoring during the implementation of international academic programs plays an important role in helping students face challenges in the program. The presence of accompanying lecturers is not only as academic facilitators but also as leaders in guiding students. In this program, IAIN Pontianak can strengthen and facilitate sustainable collaboration with the local community to build social relations, thereby enhancing intercultural community skills.

The success of the international academic program is determined by IAIN Pontianak's readiness in designing programs that are relevant to students' needs in a global context. Therefore, the program is not only oriented towards achieving institutional internationalization but also towards developing students with Islamic character, cross-cultural awareness, and the ability to contribute to the global community. If this is realized, it will produce graduates of the Master of Islamic Studies who are capable of working in multicultural environments, which is one of the main challenges faced by higher education institutions. These competencies

become essential skills to respond to the demands of cross-cultural interaction in the global society. One approach that is considered effective in equipping students to develop into competent and sustainably cross-culturally oriented graduates (Salih & Omar, 2021).

Nevertheless, the program conducted by IAIN Pontianak provides cross-country academic experiences. This program also opens up opportunities for students' personal and professional development in a global context. Thus, international academic programs are not only a form of academic mobility but also a strategic investment in shaping students' academic awareness with Islamic character and a global perspective (Cahyarani & Fauji, 2024). Therefore, before participating in international academic programs, IAIN Pontianak can strengthen students by introducing Malaysian culture, foreign languages, and enhancing their academic skills. If reinforced in the future, this will produce graduates of the Master of Islamic Studies program who possess a global perspective and Islamic character.

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

A. Conclusion

The international academic program conducted by the Postgraduate Program of IAIN Pontianak in Malaysia demonstrates a strategic role in strengthening academic awareness and the internalization of student character education, particularly for students of the Master of Islamic Studies Program. Through direct involvement in academic activities, community service, and cross-cultural interactions, students gain transformative and contextual learning experiences. These experiences not only enhance academic competence, communication skills, and international networks, but also encourage critical reflection on the role and responsibilities of students as academics in the global community. Research results indicate that intercultural learning integrated with community service contributes significantly to the development of academic awareness and character building.

B. Suggestion

The implementation of international academic programs also faces various challenges, making institutional preparedness essential in designing structured and

sustainable programs. Strengthening pre-departure orientation, language and cultural training, as well as faculty mentoring are important strategies to minimize challenges and optimize program benefits. With structured planning and integration into curriculum development, international academic programs at IAIN Pontianak have the potential to produce graduates of the Master of Islamic Studies who are globally minded, possess Islamic character, and are capable of contributing to a multicultural society.

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