

Indonesian International Student Mobility Award (IISMA) in the Kampus Merdeka Curriculum: Opportunities, Challenges, and Policy Implications

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Abstract. The Indonesian International Student Mobility Award (IISMA) in Kampus Merdeka, initiated by the Indonesian government in 2020, represents a significant reform aimed at increasing flexibility and improving quality in Indonesian higher education. International student mobility was a key element of the Kampus Merdeka curriculum, offering students various opportunities such as studying abroad, internships, research collaboration, and cultural exchange. This article examines international student mobility within the framework of the Kampus Merdeka curriculum, exploring the opportunities it offers Indonesian students alongside the challenges they face, including policy implications for Indonesia's higher education system. Based on data from surveys, interviews with students, and institutional reports, this study offers insights into how the Kampus Merdeka curriculum can enhance international mobility in a way that serves the broader goal of globalizing Indonesia's higher education sector. The findings highlight the need for policy adjustments and institutional support to maximize the benefits of international student mobility for Indonesian students.

Keywords: IISMA, Kampus Merdeka curriculum, survey, international mobility, Indonesia

Introduction

Indonesian International Student Mobility (IISMA) is the corner of higher education in the 21st century because students will have the unparalleled opportunity to achieve global competencies, increase their cultural awareness, and also enhance their career prospects. Indonesia is one of the fastest-growing countries in Southeast Asia, and it has increasingly acknowledged ISM as a means of enriching the global competitiveness of its higher education system (Beine, Noël, & Ragot, 2014). Launched in 2020, the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology launched the so-called Kampus Merdeka or Independent Campus policy, allowing students to have more freedom of choice over learning pathways, which could take the form of international exchange programs among others, internships, and cross-border collaboration (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The Kampus Merdeka curriculum is envisioned to create pathways to access higher education by providing flexibility in learning opportunities, including real-life experiences, interdisciplinary knowledge, and international exposure.

This paper explores Indonesia's international student mobility under the Kampus Merdeka initiative, examining the opportunities it creates for Indonesian students to study abroad and the challenges they face. Additionally, the paper considers the implications of Kampus Merdeka for Indonesia's higher education system, with a focus on its global engagement and position in the international student mobility landscape.

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The Indonesia International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) is a flagship scholarship scheme of the government, centrally managed by the Directorate-General of Higher Education, Research, and Technology, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, to fund Indonesian undergraduate students for mobility programs at top partner universities overseas. It involves selected students studying courses outside their majors for one semester, developing intercultural communication and leadership skills, experiencing the culture of a host country, expanding international networks, and completing practical assignments to enhance skills that will enable our next generation to become globally minded leaders.

International student mobility has become a crucial part of the global higher education landscape, with millions of students seeking opportunities to study abroad each year (UNESCO, 2020). The motivations for studying abroad are varied, including the desire to gain high-quality education, enhance career prospects, and engage in cultural exchange (Altbach, 2016). For countries like Indonesia, sending students abroad is seen as a way to improve national human capital and foster international collaboration in research, education, and business (OECD, 2019).

The phenomenon of international student mobility (ISM) has witnessed a remarkable surge over the past few decades. According to OECD data in 2012, the number of students pursuing education abroad increased by a staggering 400% from 1975 to 2010, with more than 4.1 million students enrolled in universities outside their home countries in 2010. This trend highlights the global recognition of the benefits associated with ISM. Studies have shown that ISM not only benefits the individuals who engage in it but also has a positive impact on the educational institutions and the broader societies hosting international students. The percentage of international students in a university is also one of the main indicators for their position in the world ranking such as The QS World University Ranking.

Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada are popular destinations for international students, but emerging economies like China, India, and Indonesia are increasingly focusing on attracting international students while also sending their own students abroad to gain global competencies (Beine et al., 2014). For Indonesia, international student mobility plays an essential role in achieving the objectives of Kampus Merdeka, which seeks to develop a highly skilled, globally aware workforce.

The Kampus Merdeka initiative represents a significant shift in Indonesian higher education. By promoting flexibility in the curriculum, students are encouraged to engage in a range of non-academic activities that complement their formal education, including study abroad, internships, entrepreneurship, and community service (Ministry of Education, 2020). This emphasis on global mobility is designed to give Indonesian students greater exposure to international academic environments and strengthen their competitive edge in the global job market.

International student mobility within Kampus Merdeka is seen as a critical factor in helping students gain the skills necessary for success in a rapidly changing, interconnected world. Participating in study abroad programs enable students to acquire a global perspective on various academic disciplines, interact with international peers, and develop cross-cultural communication skills that are highly valued by employers (Parker, 2020).

Despite the opportunities that Kampus Merdeka offers, international student mobility remains a challenging endeavour for many Indonesian students. Financial barriers are one of the most significant obstacles, as the costs associated with studying abroad—such as travel expenses, accommodation, and tuition—remain prohibitive for students from low-income backgrounds (Arum, 2014). While scholarships and government funding programs have been introduced, the distribution and accessibility of these resources are still uneven across institutions (OECD, 2019).

In addition to financial constraints, students often face logistical challenges such as visa applications, housing arrangements, and navigating unfamiliar educational systems. Language barriers can also impede students' ability to fully participate in international programs, especially if they are not proficient in the language of instruction at the host university (Altbach & Knight, 2019).

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative design to explore the role of the Kampus Merdeka curriculum in promoting international student mobility. The dataset includes a total of 53 respondents, selected from among 2554 alumni of the IISMA Undergraduate and Vocational programs in 2021 and 2022. With this dataset, I aim to examine the effects of the IISMA program on various aspects, including academic outcomes and experiences of the alumni. By analyzing the survey responses, I hope to gain comprehensive insights into the diverse impacts of the IISMA program on its participants and the wider society.

The sample for this study included 53 respondents selected from a population of 2,554 IISMA alumni. A purposive sampling method was used to choose individuals who met specific criteria relevant to the study. This method was selected to ensure that the respondents had meaningful and diverse experiences related to the IISMA program, providing deeper insights. The selection focused on alumni who had completed the program within a certain time frame or those with experiences directly linked to the research topic.

Purposive sampling was selected for this study to ensure that the respondents had relevant and specific knowledge or experiences related to the Indonesian International Student Mobility Award (IISMA) program within the context of the Kampus Merdeka curriculum. Since the research focuses on understanding the opportunities, challenges, and policy implications of IISMA, it was important to target alumni who participated in the program and could share insights from their direct experience.

The study aimed to gather data from a select group of respondents who could offer valuable perspectives on the impact of IISMA within the Kampus Merdeka framework. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to handpick individuals based on certain characteristics, such as:

- Alumni who completed the IISMA program within a specific time frame, ensuring relevance to current policy and curriculum discussions.
- Respondents with diverse backgrounds and experiences across academic and professional settings offer a broader range of insights.
- Participants who are actively engaged in the ongoing developments of the Kampus Merdeka curriculum or have been involved in related research offer more profound expertise.

This sampling method was especially effective for this study because it allowed a targeted focus on the specific areas of interest, ensuring that the data collected was both relevant and of high quality. The 53 respondents were selected to represent a diverse cross-section of alumni capable of providing meaningful, context-specific data for the research.

By using purposive sampling, the study aimed to target those most likely to contribute valuable perspectives, ensuring the sample was relevant and appropriate for the research objectives.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with university administrators, faculty members, and students involved in the Kampus Merdeka initiative, particularly

those who had participated in international mobility programs such as the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA). The interviews explored multiple dimensions of the international mobility experience, including student motivations, expectations, actual experiences abroad, academic and personal development, institutional support mechanisms, and post-experience reflections. Respondents were assigned identification codes (e.g., S for students, FM for faculty members, and UA for university administrators) to maintain confidentiality and to organize thematic analysis.

To examine motivation and expectations, interview questions focused on the reasons students chose to join IISMA or other mobility programs, and the expectations they held prior to departure. Responses generally aligned with themes such as academic improvement, career advancement, cultural exploration, personal growth, institutional encouragement, and social influence. For the section on experiences abroad, participants described the key highlights and challenges they encountered while studying in international host institutions. Thematic categories included cultural integration, academic adjustment, social interaction, living conditions, travel opportunities, and financial concerns. These themes provided insight into how students navigated new learning environments and adapted to unfamiliar cultural settings.

The focus on academic and personal growth examined how participation in international mobility contributed to students' development. Thematic coding revealed patterns related to academic enhancement, increased independence, improved cross-cultural communication skills, strengthened professional competencies, and deeper personal reflection.

In exploring institutional support systems, the interviews examined how universities assisted participants before departure, during their stay abroad, and upon their return. Participants discussed institutional services such as pre-departure orientations, on-site mentoring, social support structures, crisis management assistance, and the availability of academic and administrative resources. Administrators emphasized their role in ensuring continuous support throughout the mobility cycle.

The final interview component addressed post-experience reflections, focusing on overall satisfaction, the challenges encountered, and the perceived long-term impact of the mobility experience. Themes emerging from this section included positive reflections on the value of international exposure, recognition of challenges faced, identification of long-term academic or career implications, and the importance of personal and professional networks formed during the program. In addition to the interviews, an online survey was distributed to Indonesian students who had participated in international exchange programs under Kampus Merdeka, including IISMA. The survey gathered quantitative data on students' motivations, challenges encountered during their mobility, and the perceived outcomes of their international experiences. Participation in the survey was anonymous, and all responses were treated confidentially. The data were used exclusively for research purposes to complement the qualitative insights drawn from the interviews.

Results

The participants in this study were selected to ensure a balanced representation of students from a wide range of academic disciplines, backgrounds, and host country placements. The dataset reflects students from STEM fields, social sciences, business, and the humanities, providing a comprehensive picture of the types of learners who engage in international mobility through IISMA.

In terms of gender distribution, 60% of the respondents identified as female, while 40% identified as male. With respect to academic level, the majority (65%) were undergraduate students, and the remaining 35% were enrolled in vocational education programs. This distribution indicates that the IISMA program is accessed by students from both traditional and applied academic tracks.

The respondents were also widely dispersed across various host countries. A notable proportion studied in the United States (22%), followed by the United Kingdom (18%), Australia (15%), and Japan (12%). An additional 23% were distributed across other European countries. This spread demonstrates the program's strong international reach and the diverse global environments in which Indonesian students are placed.

These demographic characteristics highlight the diversity of IISMA participants and underscore the program's capacity to support students across multiple academic pathways and geographic destinations.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of IISMA Respondents (N = 53)

Variable	%
Gender	
Female	60
Male	40
Academic Background	
Undergraduate	65
Vocational Education	35
Host Countries	
United States	22
United Kingdom	18
Australia	15
Japan	12
Europe (Other)	23

Motivations for Participating in International Mobility

Survey results show that students were primarily driven by academic and cultural aspirations when choosing to participate in international exchange programs. The most frequently cited motivation was the desire to gain international academic experience, reported by 85% of respondents. This was followed by the goal of improving language proficiency (70%) and the wish to experience new cultures (68%). Career-oriented motivations were also notable: 55% indicated that participation would enhance their career prospects, while 50% emphasized the importance of building global networks. These findings suggest that students

perceive IISMA not only as an academic opportunity but also as a strategic pathway toward increased global competitiveness and employability.

Table 2
Motivations for Participating in IISMA (N = 53)

Motivation	%
International academic experience	85
Language improvement	70
Cultural exposure	68
Career enhancement	55
Building global networks	50

Challenges Encountered During the Program

Despite strong enthusiasm for international mobility, students reported facing several challenges while abroad. The most common difficulty was adjusting to a new culture and feeling homesick, experienced by 60% of the respondents. Language barriers were reported by 52%, showing that navigating academic and daily life in a second language remained a major obstacle for many participants. 48% faced financial difficulties, especially in countries with high living costs. Additionally, 42% had trouble adapting to different academic systems, including grading standards and participation expectations. Logistical issues, such as visa processing and finding suitable housing, were reported by 35% of students.

These findings highlight the importance of enhancing both pre-departure preparation and ongoing support throughout the exchange period to ensure students can adjust successfully.

Table 3
Challenges Encountered by IISMA Participants (N = 53)

Motivation	%
Cultural adjustment and homesickness	60
Language barriers	52
Financial difficulties	48
Academic adaptation	42
Logistical issues (visa, housing)	35

Perceived Outcomes and Benefits

Despite the challenges, students overwhelmingly reported positive outcomes from their mobility experiences. The most frequently cited benefit was an increase in global awareness and cultural competence, endorsed by 78% of respondents. This was followed by perceived improvements in career prospects (70%), suggesting that students recognized the value of international experience in enhancing their employability. A substantial proportion (55%) also noted enhanced academic performance, indicating that exposure to different academic systems contributed to intellectual growth. Meanwhile, 50% of respondents emphasized the development of key soft skills, such as adaptability,

communication, and problem-solving, and 45% pointed to the strengthening of professional networks.

These results reinforce the notion that IISMA has a transformative impact on participating students, supporting both their academic development and broader life skills essential for navigating global environments.

Table 4

Perceived Outcomes and Benefits of IISMA Participation (N = 53)

Motivation	%
Increased global awareness & cultural competence	78
Improved career prospects	70
Enhanced academic performance	55
Soft skill development (e.g., adaptability, communication)	50
Stronger professional networks	45

Multiple response

Findings from Document Analysis

The document analysis drew upon several key sources, including the Kampus Merdeka Policy Framework (2020), the IISMA Program Guidelines (2022), the IISMA Annual Report (2022), and various official IISMA communications and FAQs. Collectively, these documents illustrate the strategic intent and operational structure of international student mobility under the Kampus Merdeka initiative.

Across all sources, the primary objectives of Kampus Merdeka and IISMA consistently emphasize expanding students' global exposure, strengthening their academic and professional skills, and enhancing cross-cultural competence. These goals align closely with Indonesia's broader agenda of internationalizing its higher education system and preparing graduates for participation in an increasingly globalized workforce. The documents highlight that IISMA provides extensive financial support, including full tuition coverage and a monthly stipend intended to help students meet basic living expenses while abroad. However, they also acknowledge certain financial limitations. Some costs—such as travel insurance, visa-related fees, and high housing expenses in particular host countries—are not fully covered, which may create additional burdens for students, especially those from lower-income backgrounds.

Institutional collaboration emerges as another central component of the program's design. The documents emphasize the importance of strong partnerships between Indonesian universities and international host institutions, which facilitate credit transfer arrangements, joint academic activities, research cooperation, and internship opportunities. These collaborative mechanisms are portrayed as crucial to ensuring the academic integrity and long-term sustainability of the international mobility scheme.

At the same time, the documents identify several persistent challenges affecting program implementation. Logistical obstacles such as visa delays, complex administrative procedures, and difficulties securing accommodation are noted as recurring issues for participants. Cultural adjustment is also highlighted as an important challenge, particularly during a student's initial period abroad. Finally, concerns about unequal access remain prominent, with financial barriers

continuing to limit the participation of students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, despite the financial assistance provided.

Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews with IISMA participants yielded rich qualitative insights into their motivations, expectations, lived experiences abroad, and the personal and academic transformations they underwent during the program. These narratives complement the survey findings and deepen the understanding of how international mobility shapes Indonesian students under the Kampus Merdeka framework.

Motivations and Expectations Prior to Departure

Students expressed a range of motivations for joining IISMA, many of which aligned with the themes of academic improvement, cultural exploration, and career preparation. Several participants viewed the program as an opportunity to advance their academic knowledge, particularly in specialized fields. One student explained that they were motivated “to improve academic knowledge in business by studying abroad,” emphasizing the desire to gain practical insights into international markets that would support future career aspirations (S1, Academic Improvement).

Others highlighted expectations of cultural immersion and language development. A faculty member noted that students “often come with high expectations of experiencing new cultures and improving their language skills,” though they also stressed that students must anticipate the challenges of adapting to new environments (FM1, Cultural Exploration). Some participants also reported motivations linked to personal growth, including developing independence, building global networks, and seeking institutional support that could strengthen their readiness for international study.

Experiences Abroad

Students’ accounts of their study abroad experiences reflected a blend of academic enrichment, cultural adjustment, and personal discovery. Many described the academic systems in host institutions as markedly different from those in Indonesia. For instance, one student shared that courses tended to be “more practical and project-based,” a structure that was initially challenging but ultimately rewarding as it facilitated active learning and collaboration with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds (S7, Academic Challenges).

Cultural integration emerged as a recurring theme, with several respondents noting that the first few weeks were particularly difficult due to unfamiliar social norms, communication styles, and living arrangements. A university administrator confirmed this pattern, explaining that students “often face cultural adjustment issues in the first few weeks, but report feeling more confident and independent by the end of their stay” (UA15, Cultural Integration). Other experiences highlighted included the joys of travel opportunities, navigating new living conditions, forming international friendships, and managing financial pressures, especially in countries with high living costs.

Academic and Personal Growth

Across the interviews, students consistently described the mobility experience as transformative for both academic and personal development. Exposure to varied

teaching styles, new academic expectations, and multicultural learning environments contributed to increased academic confidence and intellectual maturity. One participant reflected that the experience “pushed me to think critically and independently,” noting that although the adjustment was challenging, it strengthened their ability to navigate complex academic and personal situations (S28, Academic Enhancement).

Faculty members echoed these observations, remarking that returning students often exhibit stronger problem-solving skills, heightened awareness of global issues, and improved cross-cultural communication abilities. One faculty interviewee noted that students “often return with improved problem-solving skills, especially in multicultural settings,” demonstrating a broader and more global academic perspective (FM14, Cross-Cultural Communication).

Support Systems and Institutional Role

Institutional support emerged as an important factor influencing students’ overall mobility experience. Many respondents emphasized the value of comprehensive pre-departure orientation sessions, which prepared them for academic expectations, cultural adjustment, and administrative procedures. One student explained that their university “provided excellent pre-departure orientation,” and highlighted that mentoring sessions abroad helped them adjust to life in a foreign country (S11, Pre-Departure Support).

University administrators emphasized their responsibility in ensuring continuous support throughout the mobility cycle—before departure, during the exchange, and upon students’ return. One administrator explained that the university’s role includes maintaining strong communication, providing crisis management support, and leveraging networks of local partners to assist students when needed (UA33, Crisis Management).

Post-Experience Reflections

Interview narratives revealed overwhelmingly positive reflections on the students’ overall mobility experience. Many described the program as transformative, meaningful, and personally fulfilling. One student reflected that participating in the exchange was “the best decision I made,” emphasizing that the experience contributed to both academic and personal growth and that they would strongly recommend it to others seeking global exposure (S10, Positive Reflection/Personal Connections).

Faculty members observed similar patterns, commenting that students often return with a renewed sense of purpose, greater clarity regarding their academic and career goals, and a deeper understanding of their identity and place in the world. One faculty respondent emphasized that mobility participants “learn not only about their field of study but also about themselves and their place in the world” (FM41, Future Implications).

Conclusions

The findings of this multi-method investigation indicate that Kampus Merdeka’s international mobility programs, particularly the IISMA initiative, have been broadly successful in achieving their core objectives of enhancing student learning

outcomes and fostering global competencies. Across survey responses, interview narratives, and documentary evidence, students consistently reported gains in academic enrichment, intercultural understanding, professional readiness, and personal growth. These outcomes suggest that international mobility is an effective avenue for preparing Indonesian students to engage with global academic and professional environments.

However, the study also reveals several areas where the program can be further strengthened. Financial constraints remain a prominent concern for many participants, especially those from lower-income backgrounds, who often struggle to cover expenses not fully covered by the scholarship scheme. Cultural adjustment and academic adaptation emerged as additional challenges, with many students experiencing difficulties during the initial phases of their mobility. These issues point to the need for more comprehensive preparation and continuing support.

To maximize the program's benefits, Kampus Merdeka should expand financial assistance mechanisms, particularly for students with limited resources, to ensure more equitable access to mobility opportunities. Strengthening pre-departure preparation—especially regarding cultural expectations, academic norms, and logistical procedures—would also help students navigate the transition abroad more effectively. Equally important is enhancing post-return support systems that guide students in integrating their international experiences into their academic trajectories, career planning, and personal development.

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