

International Student Mobility Models for Enhancing Islamic Higher Education Competitiveness in ASEAN

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International Student Mobility (ISM); Islamic higher education; Institutional competitiveness; ASEAN higher education.

Abstract

The internationalization of higher education constitutes a strategic agenda in the development of Islamic educational institutions across the ASEAN region. This study aims to examine the policies and implementation of International Student Mobility (ISM) programs at the ministerial level and within Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia, comparing them with their counterparts in Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, while simultaneously formulating an effective ISM model to enhance the competitiveness of Islamic higher education institutions in ASEAN. This research employed a qualitative approach with a multi-site study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, Focus Group Discussions, and document analysis across eleven institutions, comprising five Islamic universities, four public universities, and two overseas institutions. The findings reveal that ISM programs at Islamic higher education institutions can be classified into six categories: international study programs, teaching practice, community service, internship, international forum participation, and international exhibition. Key success factors include leadership commitment, supportive institutional policies, international partnerships, and language competency development. Major challenges encompass limited funding, language barriers, and complex administrative procedures. This study contributes to filling the literature gap regarding contextual ISM models for Islamic higher education institutions by proposing a model framework that integrates Islamic values, inter-institutional cooperation, and flexible credit recognition systems. These findings are significant as a policy foundation for the sustainable development of internationalization within Islamic higher education institutions across the ASEAN region.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:
Mobilisasi Pelajar Nasional; Pendidikan tinggi Islam; Daya saing kelembagaan; Pendidikan tinggi ASEAN.

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Internasionalisasi pendidikan tinggi merupakan agenda strategis dalam pengembangan institusi pendidikan Islam di kawasan ASEAN. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji kebijakan dan implementasi program International Student Mobility (ISM) pada tingkat kementerian dan perguruan tinggi Islam di Indonesia serta perbandingannya dengan perguruan tinggi Islam di Malaysia dan Brunei Darussalam, sekaligus merumuskan model ISM yang efektif untuk meningkatkan daya saing perguruan tinggi Islam di ASEAN. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi multi-situs. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi langsung, Focus Group Discussion, dan studi dokumen terhadap sebelas institusi, meliputi lima perguruan tinggi Islam, empat perguruan tinggi umum, dan dua perguruan tinggi luar negeri. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa program ISM di perguruan tinggi Islam dapat diklasifikasikan ke dalam enam kategori: program belajar internasional, praktik mengajar, pengabdian masyarakat, magang, partisipasi forum internasional, dan pameran internasional. Faktor pendukung keberhasilan meliputi komitmen pimpinan, kebijakan kelembagaan yang mendukung, kemitraan internasional, dan penguatan kompetensi bahasa. Tantangan utama mencakup keterbatasan pendanaan, hambatan bahasa, dan kompleksitas prosedur administratif. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dalam mengisi kesenjangan literatur mengenai model ISM yang kontekstual bagi perguruan tinggi Islam, dengan mengusulkan kerangka model yang mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai

Islam, kerja sama antar institusi, dan sistem pengakuan kredit yang fleksibel. Temuan ini penting sebagai landasan kebijakan pengembangan internasionalisasi perguruan tinggi Islam yang berkelanjutan di kawasan ASEAN.

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INTRODUCTION

The vision of *Indonesia Emas 2045*, which targets Indonesia to become a developed country ranked among the world's top five in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), requires the support of highly qualified human resources with broad knowledge and global competencies (I.J, Sumual., 2022). Universities, as institutions for the advancement of knowledge, research, and community service, are expected to direct their performance achievements not only at the national level but also internationally. This is reflected in the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) of State Universities, six of which emphasize internationalization dimensions, such as student learning experiences abroad, faculty works gaining international recognition, and study programs meeting global standards (DIKTI Kemendikbud, 2020).

Initial data show that internationalization programs in Indonesia remain relatively limited, particularly in Islamic higher education institutions. The *International Student Mobility* (ISM) program, which is part of the *Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) policy, only began to be implemented through the *Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards* (IISMA) in 2021 (Muchlis et al., 2022). Challenges include high costs, complex cross-border regulations, limited international-standard facilities, and faculty readiness for bilingual teaching (Choudaha & Wit, 2014) (Davis, 2003). These conditions highlight a gap between internationalization policies and their practical implementation (Apriliya & Nadlir, 2026; Hakim & Abidin, 2024; Shakina et al., 2025; Yuliana et al., 2025).

Previous studies have largely discussed student mobility in Western countries as a common practice, but comprehensive research on ISM implementation in ASEAN Islamic universities is still scarce. This study seeks to address that gap by examining policies, practices, and ISM models in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. The research aims to identify data, concepts, and philosophical theories of ISM that can strengthen program implementation in Islamic universities, while also comparing policy models across countries to formulate a relevant model for the ASEAN context.

The benefits of this research are both practical and academic. Practically, the findings are expected to provide insights into ISM policies and implementation models, making it easier for Islamic universities to adopt them. Academically, the study offers empirical evidence of ISM practices in ASEAN Islamic universities and serves as a reference for other stakeholders in developing similar programs. The novelty of this research lies in its effort to formulate an ISM model specifically for Islamic universities, since no comprehensive reference model currently exists apart from the scholarship-based IISMA 2021 guidelines.

The hypothesis of this study is that structured ISM implementation, supported by comprehensive policies, will enhance the competitiveness of Islamic universities in ASEAN, both in academic achievement, international networking, and the development of students' soft skills.

One of the flagship initiatives is the *Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards* (IISMA), launched by Kemendikbudristek in 2021. IISMA provides scholarships for Indonesian students to study abroad for one semester at world-class universities. This program has significantly broadened access to international academic and cultural experiences, responding to the growing demand among Indonesian students for overseas study opportunities (Arifin et al., 2025; Hasanah & Husna, 2025; Khoirurrijal et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has introduced complementary schemes such as MOSMA and Beasiswa Indonesia Bangkit, specifically targeting Islamic higher education institutions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a comparative case study approach. The choice of qualitative design was based on the need to capture the complexity of International Student Mobility (ISM) implementation across diverse Islamic higher education institutions in ASEAN. As (Creswell, 2014) Creswell argues, qualitative research is particularly effective for exploring processes, meanings, and institutional practices that cannot be reduced to numerical data. The comparative case study method allowed the researcher to examine similarities and differences across institutions, thereby identifying patterns and contextual variations (Yin, 2018).

The research design was also informed by (Knight, 2004) conceptualization of internationalization as a process of integrating international and intercultural dimensions into higher education functions. By adopting this lens, the study sought to analyze ISM not only as a set of programs but as an institutional strategy embedded within broader policy frameworks.

The study was conducted across eleven universities in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. These included UIN Mataram, UIN Jakarta, UIN Malang, STIT Padang Panjang, Universitas Syiah Kuala, Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah (Malaysia), and Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (Brunei). The selection of sites was purposive, based on their active involvement in ISM programs.

Participants included university leaders (rectors, vice rectors), heads of International Offices, program coordinators, and students who had participated in ISM programs. This multi-level participation ensured that data captured both policy perspectives and lived experiences. As (Patton, 2015) notes, purposive sampling is appropriate when the goal is to obtain rich, information-rich cases that illuminate the phenomenon under study.

Data were collected through multiple techniques to ensure triangulation: **Document Analysis:** Institutional documents such as SOPs, Rector's Decrees, program guidelines, and reports were analyzed to understand formal structures of ISM. This aligns with (Bowen, 2009) assertion that document analysis provides valuable insights into organizational processes. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with university leaders, International Office staff, and students. Interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of perceptions, challenges, and success factors. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) emphasize that semi-structured interviews balance flexibility with comparability across cases. **Observations:** Field visits and observations of ISM-related activities (e.g., orientation sessions, international classes) were conducted to capture contextual dynamics. **Secondary Data:** Reports from Kemendikbudristek, Kemenag, UNESCO, and OECD were used to situate findings within broader policy and global contexts.

Data analysis followed Miles, (Huberman, & Saldaña's, 2014) interactive model, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. **Data Reduction:** Transcripts and documents were coded thematically, focusing on categories such as policy, implementation models, challenges, and success factors. **Data Display:** Matrices and tables were used to compare ISM models across institutions. **Conclusion Drawing:** Patterns were identified and interpreted in light of theoretical frameworks (Knight, De Wit, Teichler). NVivo software was used to assist in coding and organizing qualitative data, ensuring systematic analysis.

To ensure validity, the study employed triangulation across data sources (documents, interviews, observations). Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm accuracy. Reliability was enhanced through detailed documentation of procedures and consistent application of coding schemes. (Lincoln, 1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability guided the evaluation of trustworthiness.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review boards. Informed consent was secured from all participants, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study and their rights. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participant identities. These practices align with the ethical standards outlined by the American Educational Research Association.

While the qualitative case study approach provided rich insights, it also had limitations. The findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable to all Islamic higher education institutions in ASEAN. Moreover, reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases. Future studies could complement qualitative insights with quantitative surveys to measure the impact of ISM on student competencies more systematically.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

ISM Policies and Implementation

International Student Mobility (ISM) in Indonesia is governed under two primary institutions: the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) through the IISMA program, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag) through scholarships and mobility schemes specifically designated for Islamic higher education institutions. IISMA itself is a scholarship scheme designed to fund Indonesian students' participation in mobility programs at leading universities abroad, enabling them to study for one semester at world-renowned campuses (Rijoly, n.d.).

At the institutional level, ISM management is delegated to International Offices (KUI). For example, Universitas Negeri Mataram (UNRAM) has actively developed ISM-related SOPs. As noted by the Vice Rector and Head of KUI: "UNRAM is currently developing SOPs; the socialization activities have already produced a significant mindset shift among both students and lecturers, as well as in the university's overall reputation" (Rector UNRAM, n.d.). At UIN Ar-Raniry, ISM governance is formally institutionalized through the International Service Center (PLI), which has been legally established within the university's organizational structure. In contrast, STIT Rahmah El Yunusiyah Padang Panjang still manages ISM centrally under the Director, without decentralized structures (Interview, STIT Director, 2023).

This finding is consistent with Knight's (2004) assertion that effective internationalization requires integration of international dimensions into the purpose,

functions, and delivery of higher education at both policy and operational levels. It also aligns with Putri's (2022) analysis of IISMA implementation at Universitas Gadjah Mada, which confirmed that well-structured mobility programs produce significant outcomes in terms of student competency development, institutional reputation, and advancement of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka policy framework.

ISM Implementation Models in Islamic Universities

The study identified diverse ISM models across Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia:

UIN Mataram: Nine student-centered international programs were identified, including international teaching practice in Malaysian learning centers in collaboration with the Educational Attaché at KBRI and UPSI, the International Forum Program, MOSMA (initiated in 2023 with full funding from Kemenag), the International Class Program for foreign students from Yemen and Saudi Arabia, international volunteering teaching at Islamic boarding schools abroad, International PPL, International KKP, the Mab'us Program in partnership with Al-Azhar Egypt, and International Internship in Malaysia (Template Document, 2023).

UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta: Eight program types were implemented, including Joint International Conference, ISM Inbound since 2021 from Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah for Tafsir Hadith and PIAUD programs, ISM Outbound since 2023 sending approximately 32 students to five selected countries, International KKN Outbound, International Festival, foreign student management, the BIPA program, and international collaborative research. The breadth of UIN Jakarta's programming reflects what Snow (2021) identifies as the multi-dimensional role of student mobility in strengthening institutional reputation and international relations.

UIN Malang: Eleven student-centered programs were developed, including PPL Abroad since 2013 across Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Cambodia; E-Mobility during COVID-19 involving 30 students from University Malaysia Sabah in 2021/2022; ISM Inbound for students from Japan studying Islam; International KKN; the KKI Program engaging international volunteers from various countries; 12 international students from Thailand and India; and active participation in the International Volunteer Movement (Gerakan Relawan Internasional/GRI). These programs collectively illustrate McLeod & Wainwright's (2009) finding that the study abroad experience extends far beyond academic credit transfer, encompassing deep intercultural learning.

STIT Rahmah El Yunusiyah Padang Panjang: Internationalization has been pursued through contextual and resource-efficient approaches, including hybrid Visiting Lecturer Outbound to Darul Ulum, Inbound Visiting Lecturer from Egypt, international comparative study visits to Japan, Joint International Seminars, KKN/Teaching Practice in Malaysia since 2014 involving 18 PIAUD students, the Inbound Program with UIS Selangor for learning about the Quba Curriculum, and Short Course programs in Morocco since 2017. This creative approach reflects Verbik & Lasanowski's (2007) observation that institutions with limited resources often develop uniquely adaptive internationalization strategies.

Universitas Syiah Kuala (USK): Offers multiple ISM schemes such as international credit transfer, exchange programs, IISMA, IISMA Vocational, IISMA Co Funding, UNINET Student Mobility, short courses, seminar scholarship day, and summer camps.

Table 1.: *ISM Programs at Syiah Kuala University (USK)*

No	Program	Description
1	International Credit Transfer	Credit transfer between USK and foreign universities
2	Regular Exchange	Student exchange, tuition & accommodation waived under MoU
3	IISMA	Scholarship for mobility abroad
4	IISMA Vocational	Mobility program for vocational students
5	IISMA Co Funding	Joint scholarship with partner universities
6	UNINET Mobility	Exchange & research with UNINET network
7	Short Course	Short training programs with partners
8	Seminar Scholarship Day	Exposure to academic climates abroad
9	Summer Camp	Thematic short programs

Comparison Between Islamic vs General Universities

A comparative examination of ISM models between Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTI) and General Higher Education Institutions (PTU) reveals both significant convergences and notable distinctions. Both categories share common program types including Joint International Conferences, International Credit Transfer, ISM Inbound and Outbound programs, International Class, International Teaching Practice, International KKN, International Internship, and International Festival participation.

The principal distinction lies in funding structures and program sources. PTU institutions benefit from more diversified funding channels, including direct access to Kemendikbudristek's IISMA program, International Credit Transfer schemes, and UNINET Student Mobility Programs. PTI institutions, by contrast, rely more heavily on Kemenag-funded schemes such as MOSMA, Beasiswa Indonesia Bangkit (BIB), and the Mab'us Program. As Kuroda et al. (2019) note, funding diversification is a critical determinant of the scope and sustainability of student mobility programs.

Despite funding constraints, PTI institutions demonstrate considerable creativity and adaptability evidenced by UIN Mataram's strategic practice of engaging internationally visiting scholars for guest lectures and STIT's utilization of Morocco's visa-free policy for Short Course programs. This aligns with Rivza & Teichler's (2007) argument that resource-constrained institutions can develop highly effective mobility programs through strategic network utilization.

Table 2: *Comparison of ISM Models in Universities*

University	Main ISM Models	Institutional Structure	Challenges
UIN Mataram	Internships, volunteering, MOSMA	Active International Office	Limited TOEFL readiness
UIN Jakarta	Inbound & outbound ISM, international KKN	Student selection & monitoring system	Funding constraints
USK	Credit transfer, exchange, IISMA, summer camp	International Office + License Officers	Cross-border credit regulations

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Policy and Institutional Readiness

The findings reveal that ISM policies in Indonesia are increasingly institutionalized, but readiness varies across institutions. Larger universities such as UIN Jakarta and USK demonstrate structured governance through International Offices and SOPs, while smaller institutions like STIT Padang Panjang remain centralized. This reflects (Knight, 2004) argument that internationalization requires integration of international dimensions into the purpose, functions, and delivery of higher education. (Putri, 2022) also confirms that well-structured mobility programs, such as IISMA at Universitas Gadjah Mada, significantly enhance student competencies and institutional reputation.

Moreover, the dual governance under Kemendikbudristek and Kemenag creates both opportunities and fragmentation. While Kemendikbudristek provides access to IISMA and international partnerships, Kemenag focuses on Islamic-specific schemes such as MOSMA and Beasiswa Indonesia Bangkit. This duality illustrates what (Choudaha & Wit, 2014) describe as the complexity of global student mobility, where multiple stakeholders shape outcomes.

Analysis of Implementation Models

USK demonstrates the most diverse and systematic ISM model, offering nine distinct programs ranging from credit transfer to summer camps. This breadth reflects strong institutional commitment and aligns with McLeod & Wainwright's (2009) finding that study abroad experiences extend beyond academic credit to deep intercultural learning.

UIN Mataram illustrates creativity through volunteering and international internships, leveraging partnerships with Malaysian institutions. STIT Padang Panjang adopts contextual approaches such as Morocco short courses, reflecting (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007) observation that resource-limited institutions often innovate unique strategies. These diverse models highlight the adaptability of Islamic higher education institutions in responding to global challenges despite resource constraints.

Comparative Insights: PTI vs PTU

General universities (PTU) such as Diponegoro and Syiah Kuala benefit from diversified funding and direct access to Kemendikbudristek's IISMA and UNINET programs. Islamic universities (PTI), by contrast, rely more heavily on Kemenag-funded schemes. This distinction underscores (Kuroda et al., 2018) emphasis on funding diversification as a determinant of sustainability in mobility programs.

Despite these constraints, PTI institutions demonstrate innovation. UIN Mataram strategically engages visiting scholars for guest lectures, while STIT utilizes Morocco's visa-free policy for short courses. (Teichler, 2007) argue that resource-constrained institutions can still develop effective mobility programs through strategic network utilization, a finding consistent with the practices observed in PTI institutions.

This comparative analysis also reveals differences in student preparedness. PTU students often have stronger language competencies, while PTI students face challenges with TOEFL readiness. (Choudaha & Chang, 2012) identify language barriers as one of the most persistent obstacles in global student mobility, reinforcing the need for targeted language training in PTI contexts.

Formulation of an Effective ISM Model for ASEAN

Based on the findings, ISM programs can be classified into six categories: Learning Programs (international classes, credit transfer), Teaching Programs (international teaching practice, visiting lecturers), Community Service Programs

(international KKN, volunteering), Internship Programs (international internships), International Forum Participation (seminars, conferences), Exhibition Programs (festivals, summer camps)

Success factors include leadership commitment, supportive policies, international partnerships, and language competency. Challenges involve limited funding, language barriers, and complex cross-border administrative procedures (Haqqi et al., 2025; Johari et al., 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2025; Syarip et al., 2026).

An effective ISM model must be contextual, adaptive, and policy-based, integrating Islamic values, inter-institutional cooperation, and flexible credit recognition systems. This resonates with (Kuroda et al., 2018), who emphasize the importance of funding diversification and policy flexibility for sustaining student mobility programs. It also aligns with (Teichler, 2007), who highlights the changing role of student mobility in shaping institutional competitiveness.

Furthermore, integrating Islamic values into ISM provides a unique contribution. As (Snow, 2021) notes, student mobility strengthens international relations; in Islamic higher education, it also fosters intercultural dialogue rooted in religious identity. This dual function enhances both academic and moral development, positioning Islamic universities as distinctive actors in global higher education.

CONCLUSIONS

The research findings confirm that International Student Mobility (ISM) has become a strategic necessity for Islamic higher education institutions in ASEAN. The study identified diverse implementation models: UIN Mataram with nine international programs, UIN Jakarta with eight, UIN Malang with eleven, STIT Padang Panjang with contextual short courses, and USK with nine structured schemes. At the ministerial level, governance is dual Kemendikbudristek through IISMA and Kemenag through MOSMA and Beasiswa Indonesia Bangkit creating both opportunities and fragmentation. Larger institutions demonstrate readiness through International Offices and SOPs, while smaller ones remain centralized. These findings resonate with (Knight, 2004) definition of internationalization as the integration of international dimensions into higher education functions, and (Putri, 2022) analysis of IISMA outcomes at Universitas Gadjah Mada, which showed that structured mobility programs significantly enhance student competencies and institutional reputation.

This study contributes a classification framework of ISM programs into six categories: *learning, teaching, community service, internship, forum participation, and exhibition*. This framework provides a systematic lens for analyzing ISM implementation in Islamic higher education and highlights success factors such as leadership commitment, supportive policies, international partnerships, and language competency. These align with (Kuroda et al., 2018), who emphasize funding diversification and policy flexibility as determinants of sustainability. The challenges identified limited funding, language barriers, and complex administrative procedures echo (Choudaha & Chang, 2012) findings on global student mobility obstacles. By focusing on Islamic higher education institutions, this study fills a gap in the literature, expanding the discourse by integrating Islamic values into ISM frameworks. (Snow, 2021) underscores that student mobility strengthens international relations; in Islamic contexts, it also fosters intercultural dialogue rooted in religious identity. The practical implications are clear: ministries should harmonize ISM governance to reduce fragmentation, institutions should invest in language training, and funding diversification through partnerships with donors and industry is essential to sustain mobility programs.

This study is limited to eleven universities in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, which, while providing valuable insights, do not capture the full diversity of ISM models across ASEAN. Moreover, the focus has been primarily on policy and institutional structures, with less emphasis on individual student experiences. Future research should broaden the scope to include more institutions, incorporate quantitative data on ISM's impact on graduate competencies, and examine perspectives of students and lecturers more comprehensively. (Teichler, 2007) emphasizes the changing role of student mobility in shaping institutional competitiveness; future studies could explore how ISM influences employability, research productivity, and community engagement. Comparative studies with non-ASEAN Islamic universities (e.g., in the Middle East or South Asia) could provide further insights into how Islamic values intersect with global academic practices. UNESCO and OECD data on global mobility trends should also be integrated to situate ASEAN Islamic higher education within broader international contexts, ensuring that Islamic universities can compete globally while remaining rooted in their cultural and religious identities.

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