

## Exploring the internationalisation strategy of higher education: A case of Muhammadiyah Higher Institution

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### ABSTRACT

This article aimed to identify the inhibiting factors and the internationalisation strategy of higher education in Indonesia. The study deployed a qualitative based on the case study at Muhammadiyah Higher Education Institutions. Data collected through in-depth interviews with key respondents include the leader of Higher Education, Research and Development Council of Muhammadiyah, university chancellors, and International Affairs Office head. Findings illustrate the factors hindering the internationalisation which are generally not much different from those described by previous research but here found one factor which has not been explained before, the geographical location of the university, which mostly located in small urban areas that depicted a condition in which cooperation with external parties, foreign institutions, is challenging. The finding also suggests that the internationalisation strategies formed in a very structured manner, involving internal and external university parties. Therefore, this is significant as it explores inhibiting factors and internationalisation strategy of higher education in Indonesia, where it still prioritises religious and cultural values in their educational systems. Practically, this result expected to be a useful reference for university leaders in formulating internationalisation strategies so that the quality of graduates produced can be further improved.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are currently considered as a part of international businesses operating and competing globally [1]. Higher institutions or universities are not only acted as providers of educational services, but their existence also determines global economic growth [2]. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [3] points out that the increment of one per cent of the educated workforce in a country is estimated to contribute to the six percent growth in Gross Domestic Product. This condition makes educational institutions especially higher education often used as the spearhead of the state in developing the quality of its human resources (HR) [1-4].

The strategic role possessed by higher institutions attracts many attention to quality improvement [5]. One of the many approaches taken to actualise this expectation is to internationalise. The previous study has found that internationalisation has a positive relationship with quality [6, 7] and university competitiveness [8]. The local, regional and national perspectives that are still widely applied by universities, especially in developing countries, are certainly no longer relevant. It is important to change from local paradigm to

internationalism to become leaders in their countries and the global environment.

A significant increase in attention to higher education institutions' internationalisation indicates that it is crucial to conduct further research in this study. The availability of adequate studies will be expected to have an impact on better understanding and practice. In Indonesia, research discussing internationalisation of educational institutions generally focuses on examining inhibiting factors [9, 10] to comprehend how the process carried out is challenging to be understood. Therefore, this study explores the obstacles and strategies of internationalisation of HEI based on educational institutions' perspective in Indonesia. The sample in this study is Muhammadiyah Higher Education (PTM). PTM was selected as a matter of the fact that this institution is distinct from others in several aspects. Historically, the establishment of PTM was initially driven by the Republic of Indonesia's political upheaval at the beginning of independence, which triggered many conflicts in various regions. The presence of PTM was expected to provide a solution to the problem. Besides, PTM is a charitable and religious organisation, Muhammadiyah, in which the main purpose is to spread universal human values based on Islamic viewpoints and teachings. These characteristics makes governance, including internationalisation policies, within PTM performed differently compared to other institutions in responding to the globalisation of education that makes this significant for understanding internationalisation of Indonesian HEI which still prioritises religious and cultural values in their systems and policies [11]. In practice, this study's result is expected to be an additional useful reference for university leaders in formulating internationalisation strategies so that the quality of education and graduates produced can be further improved.

Previous research has grouped several barriers to HEI's internationalisation into individual, institutional and external barriers [12]. The first obstacle relates to staff and students' behaviour who find it challenging to adapt to the environment or the global atmosphere. The lack of communication skills, mastery of language, and support for global interaction is the trigger [13] followed by low ability to conduct research [12]. The private institution is considered to be another obstacle hindering the process of internationalisation in HEI. To improve the quality of education, internationalisation should be poured into the organisational strategy so that all parties can know their respective roles. The fact is that university leaders tend to ignore faculty participation in internationalisation [12], making these activities a partial focus at the corporate level, even though the internationalisation process requires all parties' involvement, including faculties. The lack of costs obtained by faculties in building global academic interactions, such as seminars, conferences and staff exchanges make internationalisation activities difficult. The final obstacle to the internationalisation process described by the study arises from the external environment. This includes the dynamics or changes in global politics, which often impact the difficulties in administering administration (visas) for university members who want to make an academic visit abroad.

Furthermore, Jiang and Carpenter [14], in their study of the internationalisation of British universities incorporated within the Russel Group, found that the obstacles to internationalisation mainly arose from internal organisations. Integrating the system on the main campus with outside branches is a typical example. Another study by Maringe [15], in the same country found that structural factors and policies of university leaders emphasised the exchange of human resources compared with integrating cultural values as a barrier to campus entry into the global, international environment. It is argued that university leaders should integrate cultural values and design organisational structures to support these activities. Given that, students and staff will be more confident in building global interactions.

In reviewing HEI's internationalisation in China, Guerreiro and Barros [16], underlined the difficulty of interacting between students and supervisors. Supervisors, professors, and the country are generally preoccupied with research activities to neglect student academic guidance. This then makes students prefer to build interaction with supervisors from other countries. They also explained the separation of local students from international students as a barrier to the internationalisation of education in the country, followed by the lack of internship opportunities for international students.

To improve the quality of education, internationalisation is now almost evenly distributed in every country, including developing countries like Indonesia. One study examined the internationalisation of HEI in Indonesia was conducted by Soejatminah [9]. The study underlines that the barriers to Indonesian higher education's internationalisation include the limitations of teaching staff or lecturers in conducting research, lack of understanding or mastery of foreign languages, and weak technological support. Another study conducted by Abduh, *et al.* [10] added cultural factors as obstacles to Indonesia's internationalisation of education. The academic world experiences the lack of academic activities that support cross-cultural understanding among students, lecturers, and staff. The ambiguity of government policies towards internationalisation and poor university management are other factors which make it difficult for Indonesian tertiary institutions to enter the global environment [17].

There is no one form of strategy that is most appropriate to be applied in all conditions. However, previous researchers have explained several procedures to internationalise universities. Binangkit and Siregar

[18], explained that internationalisation initially began by including the vision and mission statement, and the report acted as a reminder that must be realised immediately. Another study conducted by Maringe [15] at a UK tertiary institution found that young universities tend to recruit international students, develop distance education, and adopt an international curriculum as an internationalisation strategy. Improving infrastructure to support learning is also an approach often adopted by new campuses to attract students from other countries [19], while established universities generally focus on strengthening human resources mobility, maximising research and developing systems as an internationalisation strategy [15].

However, discussions the internationalisation of education have been dominated by Western countries [20] so that understanding the concept only refers to their practice. The internationalisation approach is certainly not always the same on every campus seeing differences in cultural characteristics, demographics, systems and educational policies that are almost always different in each country. For example, universities in Norway carrying out the internationalisation approach condemn the development of collaborative research and teaching [21]. The two aspects' intensity becomes the most critical bridge that universities must have to enter the global environment [22]. With this change of paradigm from local to international will be easier to do.

As explained above, educational institutions' internationalisation strategy in western countries is not necessarily successful if implemented on campuses in Asia. Chan [23] in his study of the internationalisation of universities in several Asian countries (Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore) found that educational institutions in Japan and Taiwan place more emphasis on strengthening local quality rather than adopting systems from other countries. The government and university managers in the country try to provide the best service for every student, including international students, to feel comfortable participating in every university activity. This approach is different from higher education institutions in Malaysia and Singapore. The two countries chose to increase cooperation and adopt an overseas education system through student exchanges, double-degree implementation, and an international curriculum's adoption as an internationalisation strategy.

The review above made it clear that the internationalisation strategy in each university has its characteristics. This is in line with what was conveyed by Samuel and Guyo [24] that the choice of approach depends on each organisation's characteristics. In most cases, university leaders understand the consequences of each choice of strategy they apply, but resources are often considered for choosing one approach over another. Improvements to the aspects of research at young universities, for example, will be difficult due to cost considerations so that the recruitment of international students is an ideal choice and prioritised. In other words, the activities that eventually receive the most income for the universities are often the primary choice in internationalisation [20].

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study aimed to identify the inhibiting factors and strategies of internationalisation of HEI in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was deployed in achieving the goals, based on case study [25, 26]. In this study, higher education internationalization if seen from the organization management point of view requires comprehensive understanding, making the case study approach precise to use since internationalization is a complicated thing affected by various factors that frequently generate different interpretation [27].

Furthermore, since this research adopted a qualitative case study, the sample selection was made based on a theoretical sampling approach, to obtain an in-depth understanding of the observed phenomenon [28]. Therefore, the sample used was Muhammadiyah Higher Education (PTM) with several considerations. First, as an educational service provider at the university level, PTM is the property of religious organisations referring to Islamic principles and teachings. Furthermore, every student and employee in PTM is equipped with Darul Arqam Dasar activities, Islamic leadership training, as the way to have a deeper understanding of universal human values based on Islamic teachings that must be applied in every aspect of life. Finally, in carrying out research, teaching, and social service activities (the university's principal activities), as implemented in other campuses, PTM has one distinguishing aspect in its curriculum, Amar ma'ruf nahi munkar inviting or advocating for the good and preventing all immoral actions. However, these characteristics make this study a significant contribution to understanding the concept of internationalisation based on different tertiary institutions' perspectives.

To obtain information related to barriers and the process of internationalisation, the researchers conducted qualitative data collection methods [29, 30]. Several stages were interviews, a document study, and an institutional visit to ensure data validity through source triangulation [31, 32], and to avoid bias on the real condition. Semi-structured interviews were carried out altogether with the university chancellor, International Affairs Office (KUI) manager, and the head of the Higher Education, Research and Development Council (Diktilitbang) of Muhammadiyah Central Leadership. Before conducting interviews,

the researchers first sought the respondent's approval to record, which aimed to assist the transcript and analysis process. The interview questions are open-ended to freely express their feelings and opinions related to the topic being observed. Researchers also used document studies as a method of collecting data. The documents about internationalisation activities obtained directly from the university or published on the website and press release. To triangulate the source, the researcher makes direct observations. The three researchers were lecturers at one of the PTMs, who served as a KUI manager to make direct observations efficiently and effectively.

Qualitative data analysis is organising, grouping and interpreting data [33] from various sources of information and explaining the relationship amongst the observed phenomena [25, 24]. The analysis of case study findings was conducted through content analysis by identifying the specific themes related to the obstacles and strategies of PTM internationalization. Those analysis stages include organizing the collected data, transcribing, identifying the framework, and interpreting [25, 34]. In conducting interview transcripts, researchers played back recordings and extracted some essential points relevant to the research topic. This was thus interpreted in narrative form to explain the reasons for the emergence of each theme. Frequent themes relate to inhibiting factors and internationalisation strategies. These themes are accompanied by several sub-themes which will be explained in the following section.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. PTM internationalization obstacles

Based on the data analysis, there found several factors inhibiting the internationalisation of PTM. Internationalisation is marked by staff, lecturers, and students' involvement in global meetings, both in academic activities such as seminars, conferences, guest lecturers, and non-academic events such as community service. However, this study found a lack of communication skills, mastery of English, possessed by staff and students, which finally became the first obstacle to internationalisation. In global interactions, communication skills, especially English proficiency, have become the campus community's obligation to be fulfilled because this is the most widely used interaction tool in global academic activities [35].

Furthermore, to gain global or international recognition, universities must ensure that every research output produced has a significant impact on the development of knowledge, technology, and social life. The interviews with respondents who were also the head of KUI in one PTM confirmed that this was still very low. This can be seen from the research output produced by most lecturers only in the form of articles published in local journals so that the global impact obtained is minimal. Respondents explained:

*"We recognise that research is a vital part of the internationalisation process. Global recognition is possible when this aspect is mastered well. Unfortunately, research and publications are generally still limited to the completeness of the administration work. Lecturers are demanded to get monthly compensation from the government through the lecturer certification scheme program."*

Another obstacle to the internationalisation process is limited organisational capacity. PTM totalling 116 and spreading in all over provinces in Indonesia are still mostly in high schools, academies and institutes which are small in size and located in regency or small city areas. As a result, reaching these locations requires quite a long time and access to the area is still limited to buses. For this reason, it is challenging to develop cooperation with other agencies, especially from abroad. This also has the effect of delaying or even cancelling the collaboration. The Head of the Diktilitbang explained:

*"Although PTM has Higher Education, Research and Development Council, which functions as a guide in university management, internationalisation, but not all campuses can be treated equally. Colleges which are already superior will be prioritised, while new and developing campuses will continue to be mentored."*

The general chairman of the KUI later confirmed the statement by conveying:

*"..... the location of the campus, which is mostly located in the region makes external cooperation, such as distributing prospective students from abroad difficult. At the end we chose to place them on easy-to-reach campuses, generally located in big cities like Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Malang and Medan."*

Internationalisation of HEI is generally characterised by students coming from various countries into educational institutions [1]. This condition also applies to PTM campuses. However, based on interviews

with respondents, it was found that bringing students from foreign countries is not an easy job. In addition to meeting campus requirements, they are also confronted with the system and government regulations of the destination campus country, which in some cases are often unfavourable. The chairman of PTM KUI explained:

*"As a college owned by a religious organisation, we try to recruit students from small and less developed countries. Many are interested in coming to our place, but they clash with quite complicated regulations. The states of origin of the prospective students have not been registered with immigration, and this is not easy to arrange, so many have cancelled the arrival of their study plans."*

As a campus that is transforming towards an international scale, PTM demands familiarising with the global academic atmosphere. Therefore, the campus community's participation, students and staff, in international events such as seminars, conferences, guest lecturers and other essential activities are enhanced. The action is expected to be able to encourage changes in the global mindset. However, for PTM staff and students, participation in these activities often gets delays and even cancellations due to the institution's limited funds. However, this makes the global interaction of students and staff limited and only relies on the arrival of institutions from abroad in institutional visits and guest lecturers.

### **3.2. PTM internationalisation strategy**

After describing the inhibiting factors of internationalisation, the next section will explain some of the internationalisation strategy approaches developed by PTM. This strategy is generally grouped into four main themes, each followed by sub-themes which can be seen in detail.

#### **3.2.1. Designing organisational structure**

The first internationalisation approach adopted by PTM was to form an organisational structure. The structure referred is a specialised division tasked with handling activities or interactions with foreign institutions related to academics and other collaborations. The Head of the Diktilitbang explained:

*"I always remind PTM leaders totalling from 166 institutions in every meeting that three divisions must be monitored by rectors, within 24 hours. First is the admission division, second is quality assurance, LP2KM and the last is KUI. This last division is the university's main door in entering the global environment, and all activities related to international interactions at the university, faculty, and study program level."*

The statement further clarifies the internationalisation of PTM centrally. The Diktilitbang, not only functions as a supervisor of PTM activities but also acts as a maker or designer of internationalisation strategies. In their implementation, they were assisted by the general chairperson of PTM KUI and three regional coordinator chairs spread across Sumatra, Java and Eastern Indonesia. Furthermore, the team was tasked with providing direction, guidance and ensuring that the internationalisation process was carried out according to a predetermined plan. When a PTM campus encountered obstacles, the regional coordinator and the KUI chairperson would help find solutions by coordinating with the entire PTM KUI network. Related to this, follows the statement of the KUI general chairman:

*"All KUI managers can exchange information, and continue to hold meetings in the form of workshops to discuss the program and progress that has been achieved. When there are campuses that find difficulties in building international cooperation, others will try to find solutions. This is the advantage of establishing KUI. In essence, we join hands and move forward together for the progress of PTM."*

#### **3.2.2. Recruiting high-young-talented employees**

As explained in the abovementioned section, one of the obstacles to the internationalisation of HEI institutions is limited to human resources. At PTM, HR is grouped into two categories, namely staff and teaching staff. The first group is the academic staff in charge of carrying out administrative functions. The second category is lecturers tasked with carrying out Catur Dharma Perguruan Tinggi; 4 principal activities of the university, consisting of teaching, research, social service, and Al-Islam Kemuhammadiyah.

As a component that has a strategic role for the organisation, HR screening in PTM is done very thoroughly. Planning, recruitment and development are carried out and possible to be the drivers of the actualisation of the internationalisation objectives. Therefore, employees recruited are also those of

productive age, on average under 30 years old, and are fresh graduates from the best campuses at home country and abroad. In connection with this, one of the chancellors explained:

*"We prefer to develop young personnel who have a passion for continuing education. Hiring them does require much investment. They must be trained and developed. Nevertheless, when viewed from the organisation's long-term goals, they are the most strategic and dependable people."*

### 3.2.3. Expand global promotion

This study found that cross country promotion activity is another international strategy approach. As an institution belonging to a large religious organisation and for more than a century, Muhammadiyah has an extensive network at home and abroad. The distribution of alumni who managed various strategic positions in government institutions, education, and the private sector made it easy for them to do promotions globally. Promotions are not only carried out by the campus, but they involve the entire network and its subsidiary organisations such as administrators of the Muhammadiyah Special Branch (PCIM) in Europe (Germany, Great Britain, France, Russia), Asia (Taiwan, Malaysia, Egypt, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Japan, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia), Australia, New Zealand, America to Africa. These elements lead PTM campuses to assist prospective students (overseas students) in carrying out the admission process, student visa arrangement, accommodation, and scholarships at the destination campus.

Besides, the universities allocate orientation weeks for respective students to familiarize campus environment before commencing their study. It is important to note that international class is open in any department that is eligible for teaching and learning English. Given that such students can participate and flourish their interest. The chairperson of Diktilitbang explained:

*"PTM must be known, either through educational institutions, health services, or their ideology. To be well-known in the international, all networks must inform the wider community who we are. Therefore, we continue to develop Muhammadiyah branch managers in various countries. We also translate pocketbooks or short articles about Muhammadiyah into English so that people can read quickly."*

The statement was later confirmed by another respondent who was also the head of the KUI in one of the PTMs in the area of the Java coordinator by explaining:

*"We must tell the global community who we are, what we offer, and how we can work together. For this reason, all organisational units, PTM, Muhammadiyah and branch managers must provide complete information and updates on their respective websites."*

### 3.2.4. Reaching out and gaining recognition

The next internationalisation approach adopted by PTM is to develop cross-country cooperation with various educational institutions, private sector and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Educational assistance is generally carried out with campuses in the Asia Pacific region, America and Europe, actualised through student, lecturer and staff exchanges, joint programs and joint research implementation. The collaboration with the private sector includes internships for students, lecturers and employees. Cooperation with NGOs is manifested in community service activities by providing medical assistance to disaster-affected countries and sending teachers to less developed countries. In certain circumstances, PTM and its organisation, Muhammadiyah, also participated in promoting religious harmony through dialogue between nations and became a mediator in handling conflict in various areas, such as in Thailand and the Philippines. In connection with this, the chairman of Muhammadiyah's Diklitbang explained:

*"PTM provide educational services at the university level. In providing services to the community (students), this organisation focuses not only on developing cognitive abilities. Social sensitivity is also an aspect that is developed. This has been outlined in the curriculum and is part of Catur Dharma, the university's principal activities, which distinguishes PTM from other campuses in Indonesia."*

In addition to developing cross-country cooperation, the next approach adopted is seeking international certification or accreditation. This approach aims to show that PTM campuses have the same quality as other campuses abroad. Global recognition or accreditation has been obtained from the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology at the study program level. At the university level,

PTM has received recognition from various international institutions such as the Asia Pacific Society for Public Affairs, ASEAN University Network-Quality Assurance, QS World Ranking, and Webometric Ranking of World Universities.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study provides at least two academic contributions related to the process of internationalisation of educational institutions. The barriers to internationalisation found are not much different from previous research, limitations of communication skills among students and staff, the low ability of research, and universities' limited funding. It is also found an obstacle that has not been explained previously, the geographical location of PTM, which is mostly located in small urban areas that makes external cooperation challenging to develop.

Furthermore, PTM has a structural strategy in conducting internationalisation, starting from forming the intermediate level's organisational structure, the Diktilitbang Council, to the university. The position in the structure is also occupied by professional HR and productive age. Besides, PTM also conducts promotions in various countries by utilising all networks of organisations and alumni. Obtaining accreditation from international institutions for study programs and universities is also a strategy developed by PTM to be the global campus.

In conclusion, this study is in line with the previous research that explained internationalisation should start from a structure supporting the activities, to gain confidence within community, staff and students to build global interaction. This study certainly has limitations, where the sample used only came from one educational organisation, Muhammadiyah Higher Education Institutions. However, this study has a depth of analysis in examining the barriers and strategies of internationalisation of higher education based on developing countries' viewpoints. Future research is expected to include samples from various higher institutions so that broader generalisations can be made.

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