

## ADAPTATION AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATION AMONG NON-MUSLIM STUDENTS IN INDONESIAN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

State Islamic Higher Education (PTKIN) in Indonesia has transformed into inclusive higher education institutions that accommodate students from diverse religious backgrounds. However, the dominance of Islamic Studies within the curriculum presents unique academic and socio-cultural challenges for non-Muslim students, particularly in terms of comprehension, participation, and identity negotiation. This study aims to explore the adaptation strategies employed by non-Muslim students in engaging with Islamic Studies at PTKIN. A qualitative research design was adopted to capture in-depth experiences and perspectives. Data were collected through interviews and observations involving 18 participants, comprising 15 non-Muslim students and 3 university leaders. The data analysis followed a systematic process of categorization, interpretation, pattern identification, and naturalistic generalization. The findings reveal that non-Muslim students employ two main adaptation strategies: conformity and consistency. Conformity strategies include cognitive, affective, social, and learning adjustments that facilitate academic engagement. Meanwhile, consistency strategies enable students to maintain their personal religious beliefs while participating in Islamic learning environments. In conclusion, the study highlights the dynamic negotiation between adaptation and identity preservation among non-Muslim students. The findings imply that Islamic higher education institutions should foster inclusive pedagogical practices, supportive academic environments, and culturally responsive policies to enhance equity and participation in Islamic education.

**Keywords:** Islamic Higher Education, Islamic Studies, Learning Adaptation, Learning Strategies, Non-Muslim Students, Religious Pluralism

### INTRODUCTION

The increasing globalization of higher education has intensified the encounter between diverse religious identities within academic institutions, including faith-based universities. Across different contexts, the presence of minority students in religiously affiliated institutions has raised important questions about inclusion, identity, and learning processes. Studies have shown that students navigating religious differences often engage in complex processes of adaptation and identity negotiation, particularly when institutional cultures are shaped by dominant belief systems (Rockenbach et al., 2017; Stuart, 2014). In this regard, Indonesian State Islamic higher education institutions (PTKIN) represent a unique setting where religious values, pedagogy, and diversity intersect, making them important sites for examining inclusive education in multicultural societies (Parker, 2014; Mu'ti, 2023).

In Indonesia, PTKIN have undergone significant transformation, evolving into more open and inclusive institutions that admit both Muslim and non-Muslim students (Burhanuddin & Hendri, 2024; Saefurahman et al., 2022). This development is in line with national efforts to

promote religious moderation and pluralism within education (Ali et al., 2021; Mukhibat et al., 2024). At the same time, the inclusion of non-Muslim students has generated ongoing debates. On one hand, it is viewed as a strategic approach to strengthening interreligious understanding and tolerance (Helmawati et al., 2024; Nasution et al., 2023). On the other hand, concerns persist regarding the potential implications for institutional identity and the preservation of Islamic values (Sirry, 2020; Arifianto, 2019). These tensions highlight the complexity of positioning PTKIN as both Islamic and inclusive institutions.

A defining feature of PTKIN is the centrality of Islamic Studies within the curriculum, which serves not only as an academic discipline but also as a medium for transmitting religious values and institutional identity (Hidayati et al., 2025; Rahman, 2022). While this is pedagogically appropriate for Muslim students, it presents significant challenges for non-Muslim learners who may lack prior exposure to Islamic teachings, Arabic texts, and related epistemological frameworks (Manurung, 2023; Ritonga et al., 2020). Consequently, non-Muslim students must engage in various forms of adaptation to participate effectively in learning processes that are deeply embedded in a particular religious tradition. These experiences can be understood within intercultural learning perspectives, where students actively negotiate meaning, belonging, and identity in response to dominant academic cultures (Asari et al., 2025; Wakhidah & Adityarini, 2020).

Adaptation, in this context, is not merely a passive adjustment but an ongoing, multidimensional process involving cognitive, affective, and social dimensions (Figueiredo, 2018). It plays a crucial role in shaping students' academic success and well-being, particularly for those in minority positions (Franzoni et al., 2009). For non-Muslim students in PTKIN, adaptation extends beyond mastering course content to include interactions with lecturers, peers, and religious symbols that characterize the learning environment. This process is closely linked to identity negotiation, as students seek to balance academic participation with the preservation of their personal beliefs (Widyawati & Lon, 2023). Thus, adaptation becomes a dynamic interplay between engagement and resistance, conformity and consistency.

Despite increasing attention to diversity and inclusion, existing studies often approach adaptation in a fragmented manner, focusing separately on cultural adjustment (Wakhidah & Adityarini, 2020; Mukhtarom, 2023), interreligious relations (Leszczensky & Kretschmer, 2022; Rahman, 2022), or specific learning domains such as language acquisition (Aladdin, 2010; Arifin et al., 2020). While insightful, these perspectives tend to overlook adaptation as an integrated academic and socio-cultural process within PTKIN, particularly in relation to how non-Muslim students engage with Islamic Studies as a core element of institutional identity. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the adaptation strategies of non-Muslim students in PTKIN through a phenomenological approach that captures their lived experiences in interacting with learning content, lecturers, peers, and religious symbols.

## METHOD

This study adopts a theoretical framework that integrates adaptation and identity negotiation in cross-religious educational contexts. Drawing on Figueiredo (2018) and Payne (1986), adaptation is viewed as a dynamic process of cognitive, social, and cultural adjustment shaped by the interaction of individual agency and institutional structures. This is complemented by Gregory (2014) and Stuart (2014), who emphasize identity negotiation and meaning-making in religiously diverse settings, as well as Widyawati and Lon (2023), who highlight adaptation as a dialogical process. Together, these perspectives frame how non-Muslim students in Islamic higher education navigate adaptive strategies while maintaining their religious identities.

This research employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of non-Muslim students in engaging with Islamic Studies at PTKIN. The study was

conducted at three institutions, UIN North Sumatra Medan, UIN Jakarta, and UIN Yogyakarta, selected to represent major PTKIN institutions in Indonesia. Using purposive sampling, 15 non-Muslim students from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds were recruited based on their active enrollment and willingness to participate. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences. To enhance the credibility of the findings, triangulation and cross-checking were conducted across multiple informants and data sources.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

No.	Category	Sub-category	n
1.	Gender	Male	3
		Female	12
2.	Religion	Christianity	8
		Catholicism	5
		Hinduism	2
4.	Ethnicity	Nias	4
		Batak Toba	4
		Batak Karo	1
		Toraja - Makassar	1
		Bali Aga – Bali	1
		Rote – East Nusa Tenggara	1
		Java	2
5.	Age	20 – 40 years	15

Data analysis followed an inductive and iterative process adapted from Creswell (2015). The analysis began with the categorization of data relevant to students' adaptation experiences, followed by direct interpretation to derive meaning from each data set. Subsequently, patterns and relationships among categories were identified to understand the interconnected dimensions of adaptation, including interactions with learning content, lecturers, peers, and religious symbols. The process culminated in the development of naturalistic conclusions grounded in the data rather than imposed theoretical assumptions. Throughout the study, ethical considerations were strictly maintained, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, ensuring that participants' identities and personal beliefs were fully protected.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Overview of Adaptation in Islamic Studies

Non-Muslim students in PTKIN experience Islamic Studies as both an academic and socio-cultural challenge, primarily due to limited prior exposure to the Arabic language, Islamic texts, and related religious concepts. Interview data revealed recurring feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, particularly when engaging with Qur'anic verses and Arabic terminology. One participant stated, "*At first, I didn't understand anything because I couldn't read Arabic, but I tried to follow step by step*" (S1, UIN Jakarta; Interview, May 2024). Similar concerns were expressed by other participants, indicating that initial difficulties are a shared experience among non-Muslim students. These findings were supported by observational data, which showed moments of hesitation and reduced confidence during activities involving Arabic reading and textual interpretation.

Despite these challenges, students demonstrated active engagement in the learning process through various adaptation strategies. Interview data indicated that participants intentionally developed ways to cope with academic demands, while classroom observations confirmed consistent attendance, participation in discussions, and efforts to seek clarification from both peers and lecturers. In addition, focus group discussions (FGD1; FGD2, May 2024) revealed that peer collaboration played a crucial role in supporting comprehension, particularly through group study and informal discussions. The convergence of interview, observation, and FGD data suggests that adaptation is not a passive response but an active and sustained process.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that adaptation is shaped by the interaction between individual motivation and the learning environment. Participants emphasized persistence and willingness to learn despite difficulties (S3; S7, Interviews, May 2024), while observational data highlighted supportive classroom dynamics, including peer assistance and lecturer responsiveness. FGDs further confirmed that a conducive academic environment significantly facilitated students' adjustment. Overall, these results demonstrate that adaptation in Islamic Studies among non-Muslim students is a dynamic and continuous process, influenced by both internal commitment and external support systems.

### **Conformity Strategies in Learning Islamic Studies Cognitive and Behavioral Adaptation**

Non-Muslim students employed a range of cognitive strategies to navigate unfamiliar Islamic content, particularly in relation to Arabic texts and religious concepts. Interview data revealed that students actively engaged in translating Arabic materials, repeating lecture content, and simplifying complex ideas into more accessible forms. One participant explained, *"Even though it was difficult, I forced myself to attend every class so I wouldn't fall behind"* (S5, UIN Medan; Interview, May 2024). Similar responses from other participants (S2; S8, Interviews, May 2024) indicate that cognitive adaptation was closely tied to persistence and self-regulated learning efforts in the face of academic challenges.

Behavioral adaptation was reflected in students' consistent efforts to remain engaged in formal learning activities. Observational data confirmed that non-Muslim students regularly attended classes, took notes, and participated in discussions, even when they experienced difficulties in comprehension. In several observed sessions, students were seen asking clarification questions or consulting peers during and after lectures. These observations align with interview findings, suggesting that active participation was a deliberate strategy to cope with learning demands rather than a passive classroom presence.

Triangulation across interviews, observations, and focus group discussions (FGD1; FGD2, May 2024) further strengthens these findings. Participants collectively emphasized that maintaining discipline in attendance and participation was essential for keeping pace with the course (S4, S6, Interviews, May 2024), while FGDs highlighted shared practices such as reviewing materials together and explaining concepts in simpler terms. This convergence of data demonstrates that cognitive and behavioral adaptation function as interconnected strategies, enabling non-Muslim students to conform to academic expectations while gradually building understanding of Islamic Studies content.

### **Social and Technological Adaptation**

Social interaction emerged as a central strategy in supporting non-Muslim students' adaptation to Islamic Studies. Interview data revealed that students relied heavily on peer support, particularly from Muslim classmates, to clarify difficult concepts and navigate unfamiliar material. One participant noted, *"I usually ask my Muslim friends when I don't understand, and they help explain it in simpler ways"* (S9, UIN Yogyakarta; Interview, May 2024). Similar accounts

from other participants (S3; S11, Interviews, May 2024) indicate that collaborative learning and informal discussions were not only common but essential in bridging gaps in understanding. These findings suggest that social adaptation operates through interpersonal relationships that foster trust, accessibility, and shared learning.

Observational data further confirmed the significance of peer interaction in the learning process. During classroom and informal settings, non-Muslim students were frequently seen engaging in group discussions, consulting peers, and participating in collaborative study activities. In several instances, students continued discussions beyond class time, indicating that learning extended into informal academic spaces. Focus group discussions (FGD1; FGD2, May 2024) reinforced these observations, with participants collectively emphasizing the importance of peer explanation and mutual support in making Islamic content more comprehensible. This triangulation highlights that social adaptation is both structured (in class) and unstructured (outside class).

In addition to social strategies, students actively utilized digital technologies to support their learning. Interview data indicated frequent use of platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp to access explanations, tutorials, and supplementary materials (S6; S10, Interviews, May 2024). Documentation and observational evidence confirmed that these platforms were commonly used as informal learning tools, particularly for understanding Arabic pronunciation and religious concepts. FGDs further revealed that students often shared digital resources within peer groups, strengthening both social and technological dimensions of adaptation. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that adaptation extends beyond the classroom, encompassing interconnected social and digital environments that facilitate continuous and self-directed learning.

### **Consistency Strategies: Maintaining Religious Identity Negotiating Classroom Expectations**

While non-Muslim students actively adapted to the academic demands of Islamic Studies, they simultaneously maintained their religious identities through various consistency strategies. Interview data indicate that students established personal boundaries, selectively engaged with religious practices, and remained conscious of their beliefs throughout the learning process. This dual process reflects a balance between academic participation and identity preservation. As one participant explained, *"I wore the hijab only in certain classes because it was required, but I didn't feel it represented my belief"* (S4, UIN Medan; Interview, May 2024). Similar responses from other participants (S7; S12, Interviews, May 2024) suggest that students were able to distinguish between compliance with academic expectations and personal religious commitment.

The negotiation of classroom expectations, particularly regarding the use of the hijab, revealed diverse forms of adaptation. Some lecturers required or strongly encouraged non-Muslim students to wear the hijab, leading to situational compliance among students. Observational data confirmed that several non-Muslim students wore the hijab during specific lectures but did not consistently adopt it outside the classroom context. In some cases, students appeared hesitant or less confident, indicating a degree of psychological discomfort. However, compliance was generally viewed as part of fulfilling academic requirements rather than a reflection of internalized belief.

Triangulation across interviews, observations, and focus group discussions (FGD1; FGD2, May 2024) highlights that this practice constitutes a form of strategic or pragmatic adaptation. FGDs revealed that students were aware of the implicit expectations within certain classes and chose to comply to maintain academic harmony and avoid conflict. At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of preserving their religious identity by limiting

such practices to specific contexts. These findings demonstrate that non-Muslim students engage in negotiated adaptation, where behavioral conformity coexists with a conscious effort to maintain personal belief systems.

### **Responding to Conversion Invitations**

Instances of invitations to convert to Islam were reported by non-Muslim students as part of their classroom experiences, particularly during discussions comparing religious perspectives. Interview data indicate that students employed several strategies in response, including postponement, avoidance, and reaffirmation of their existing beliefs. One participant stated, *"I just said I came here to study, not to change my religion"* (S2, UIN Jakarta, Interview, May 2024). Similar responses from other participants (S6; S10, Interviews, May 2024) show that students consistently framed their presence in PTKIN as academic rather than religiously transformative, thereby reinforcing their personal boundaries.

Focus group discussions (FGD1; FGD2, Month Year) further revealed that these invitations were generally delivered in a persuasive or dialogical manner rather than through direct pressure. Participants described responding by either redirecting the conversation, providing neutral answers, or politely declining engagement. These strategies allowed students to maintain social harmony while avoiding potential conflict. The recurrence of such responses across participants suggests a shared understanding of how to navigate sensitive religious interactions within the academic environment.

Triangulation of interview and FGD data indicates that, although invitations to convert were present, they were not accompanied by coercion, and students retained full autonomy over their religious identities. Observational data also did not reveal any institutional enforcement or formal pressure related to conversion. Instead, these interactions appear to reflect broader interfaith dynamics within the classroom. Overall, the findings demonstrate that non-Muslim students actively negotiate such encounters by asserting agency, maintaining respect, and preserving their beliefs while continuing to participate in the academic setting.

### **Peer Interaction and Identity Negotiation**

Peer interaction emerged as a highly dynamic context in which students continuously negotiated their religious and social identities. Across interview and focus group data, participants consistently described interfaith relationships, particularly between Muslim and non-Muslim students, as generally positive, supportive, and conducive to everyday campus life. However, this openness also created informal spaces where religious boundaries were occasionally tested, most notably through subtle invitations to convert to Islam, locally referred to by students as "login." Triangulated evidence from interviews and FGDs suggests that while such invitations were not coercive, they were sufficiently recurrent to require students to actively develop interpersonal strategies for managing identity boundaries in peer settings.

In responding to these interactions, students demonstrated two dominant strategies: argumentation and avoidance. Some participants reported directly affirming their religious identity through clarification or respectful disagreement, thereby asserting clear boundaries in interfaith dialogue. Others preferred avoidance strategies, particularly in situations perceived as socially sensitive or potentially disruptive to friendship ties. As one interview participant noted, *"Sometimes I just change the topic to avoid conflict, because I want to stay friends"* (UIN Yogyakarta, Interview, May 2024). This pattern was corroborated in FGD discussions, where participants similarly emphasized the importance of maintaining harmony over engaging in potentially contentious theological debates, indicating a pragmatic balance between identity assertion and social cohesion.

Beyond verbal exchanges, peer interaction also extended into shared religious practices, including invitations to participate in Islamic rituals such as prayer and fasting. Responses to these invitations varied along a continuum of engagement, ranging from polite refusal to selective or partial participation. Notably, some students engaged in experiential participation without altering their core beliefs, as illustrated by one participant who stated, “*I tried fasting for one day just to understand my friends, and it was a meaningful experience*” (FGD, UIN Yogyakarta; May 2024). Triangulation across interviews and FGDs indicates that such participation was framed not as religious conversion, but as a form of social empathy and cultural understanding. Overall, these findings demonstrate that peer interaction functions as a negotiated space where students actively balance social integration with the preservation of religious identity.

### **Engagement with Islamic Cultural and Symbolic Environment**

Engagement with the Islamic cultural and symbolic environment emerged as a significant dimension of non-Muslim students’ everyday experiences on campus. Across interview and focus group data, participants reported routine exposure to Islamic symbols embedded in institutional life, including mosque spaces, dress norms, and religious expressions used in daily communication. Triangulated findings from interviews, FGDs, and observational data indicate that these symbols were not perceived as exclusionary; rather, they were generally experienced as part of the normalized cultural landscape of the university. Many students described entering mosques for the first time within the campus context and encountering an atmosphere of openness and acceptance, suggesting that institutional religious spaces functioned simultaneously as spiritual and social environments.

Adaptation to visible religious-cultural practices, particularly the hijab, reflected varying degrees of engagement among non-Muslim students. Data from interviews and FGDs show that adoption of the hijab in specific contexts was motivated by multiple factors, including institutional expectations in certain academic settings, curiosity, and pragmatic social adjustment rather than religious conversion. Similarly, students reported the gradual incorporation of Islamic expressions such as “*Bismillal*” and “*Alhamdulillah*” into everyday interactional speech. Triangulation across participant narratives suggests that these expressions were largely interpreted as culturally embedded communicative norms rather than indicators of theological alignment, highlighting a distinction made by participants between cultural participation and religious commitment.

Observational data further reinforced these self-reported experiences by demonstrating that such practices had become routine within peer interactions and classroom communication. The frequent and unmarked use of Islamic expressions, alongside the visible presence of shared mosque spaces and dress practices, indicated a process of cultural normalization within the campus environment. This convergence of interview, FGD, and observational findings suggests a broader pattern of cultural accommodation, whereby non-Muslim students actively navigate and selectively adopt elements of the Islamic symbolic environment while maintaining their own religious identities.

### **Adaptation as a Dynamic Negotiation Process**

Adaptation among non-Muslim students emerged as a dynamic and context-dependent process rather than a linear or uniform adjustment. Across interview, focus group, and observational data, participants consistently described their experiences as a continuous negotiation between conformity to institutional expectations and the preservation of personal religious identity. Rather than indicating passive assimilation, adaptation was framed as an active and situational process shaped by ongoing interactions with lecturers, peers, and the broader institutional environment, as well as by academic, social, and cultural demands.

Within this process, students employed dual strategies of adaptation. Conformity strategies were used to ensure academic participation and success, often reflected in compliance with classroom norms, institutional expectations, and, at times, religiously influenced practices such as dress codes. In contrast, consistency strategies were used to maintain internal belief systems and identity boundaries, with students deliberately separating outward participation from inward conviction. Triangulated findings further show that students may comply with visible norms, such as wearing the hijab in certain contexts, while privately maintaining their own religious commitments, or engage selectively in academic discussions while avoiding overt religious persuasion. These patterns highlight adaptation as an ongoing balancing act between participation and self-preservation within a structured yet socially flexible academic setting.

### **Factors Influencing Adaptation**

Factors influencing adaptation among non-Muslim students were found to arise from the interaction of internal dispositions and external contextual conditions. Across interview, focus group, and observational data, participants consistently reported that prior socialization experiences, personal motivations, and openness to interfaith engagement shaped their adaptive processes. Triangulated findings indicate that students with prior exposure to Muslim-majority environments, particularly those from regions where Muslims are more prevalent, generally experienced smoother adjustment to campus life than those from minority-Muslim contexts, suggesting that earlier intercultural contact enhances adaptive readiness.

Internal factors also included attitudes toward diversity and willingness to engage in unfamiliar cultural and social experiences. Students who expressed curiosity and openness tended to interpret campus interactions more positively and participated more actively in both academic and social settings, while those with limited prior interfaith exposure often required a longer adjustment period and showed initial hesitation in navigating religiously infused norms. In addition, external factors such as lecturer attitudes, peer support, and institutional climate played a decisive role in shaping adaptation. Supportive peer networks and inclusive classroom practices facilitated smoother adjustment, whereas certain lecturer expectations embedded in religious norms occasionally created challenges, requiring additional negotiation. Overall, triangulated evidence confirms that adaptation is shaped by the dynamic interplay between internal readiness and external structural conditions.

The findings of this study demonstrate that adaptation among non-Muslim students in Islamic higher education is a multidimensional and dynamic process that involves continuous cognitive, social, and cultural negotiation. In line with adaptation theory, adaptation is not understood as a passive process of adjustment but as an active form of meaning-making in which individuals continuously respond to environmental demands while maintaining a sense of self (Figueiredo, 2018; Payne, 1986). The present findings extend this conceptualization by showing that students operate within overlapping layers of institutional expectation, peer interaction, and personal belief systems. This reflects broader understandings of adaptation in higher education as a situated process shaped by both structure and agency, particularly in culturally diverse learning environments (Stuart, 2014; Wu & Volker, 2009).

A key contribution of the findings lies in demonstrating how adaptation is closely intertwined with identity negotiation. Students' experiences of responding to religiously embedded norms, such as wearing the hijab in specific contexts or responding to informal invitations to convert, illustrate a continual balancing process between conformity and consistency. This dual strategy resonates with earlier studies on minority students in religiously structured institutions, where individuals often negotiate belonging without abandoning core identity markers (Gregory, 2014; Widyawati & Lon, 2023). Similar negotiation patterns have been documented among non-Muslim learners in Islamic educational settings, where

participation in dominant cultural practices does not necessarily indicate theological alignment but rather social adaptation (Mukhtarom, 2023; Nasution et al., 2025). In this sense, identity is not fixed but performative and contextually managed.

The findings also highlight that interfaith relations within the institution are generally characterized by inclusivity and collaboration, which contrasts with literature emphasizing strong in-group boundaries and religious clustering in educational settings (Leszczensky & Kretschmer, 2022). Instead, the present study shows that Muslim and non-Muslim students often develop cooperative and supportive peer relationships, which facilitate smoother adaptation and reduce social distance. This aligns with broader scholarship on multicultural education in Indonesia, which emphasizes the role of shared learning environments in fostering tolerance and intergroup understanding (Eko & Putranto, 2019; Asari et al., 2025). The evidence suggests that Islamic higher education institutions (PTKIN) can function not only as academic spaces but also as social laboratories for interreligious engagement (Muliadi et al., 2025; Kaharuddin & Dirkareshza, 2025).

At the same time, the findings reveal that adaptation is not free of tension, particularly regarding informal religious persuasion practices such as classroom-based invitations to convert. While these interactions are often framed as non-coercive, they raise ethical questions regarding religious neutrality and academic inclusivity in higher education spaces (Haw, 2009). Similar concerns have been noted in discussions on religious campus environments where informal proselytization may blur the boundaries between education and religious advocacy (Arifianto, 2019). Therefore, although interfaith contact can promote understanding, it also requires careful institutional regulation to ensure that diversity is experienced as inclusive rather than pressuring (Iriawan et al., 2026).

The strategies employed by students, such as argumentation, avoidance, and selective participation, reflect broader patterns of minority negotiation in majority-dominated contexts. These strategies are consistent with findings from cross-cultural education research, which show that minority students often develop adaptive mechanisms to manage social belonging while preserving identity integrity (Koh, 2021; Koistinen, 2024). Argumentation allows students to assert boundaries, avoidance helps maintain social harmony, and selective participation enables contextual engagement without full assimilation. However, while these strategies are effective in short-term adaptation, they may also subtly reinforce social boundaries between groups if not complemented by structured intercultural dialogue.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that adaptation strategies are not solely individual responses but are deeply shaped by contextual and institutional environments. Supportive peer relations and inclusive pedagogical practices were found to facilitate smoother adaptation, while certain lecturer expectations occasionally created discomfort or ambiguity. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing the role of institutional climate in shaping interreligious interaction and student well-being (Ali et al., 2021; Helmawati et al., 2024). It also underscores the importance of lecturers' sensitivity in managing culturally and religiously diverse classrooms, particularly in institutions that integrate religious values into academic life (Syarif et al., 2024).

The findings further suggest that adaptation processes are significantly influenced by prior exposure to Muslim-majority environments and interfaith experiences. Students originating from more religiously diverse or Muslim-majority regions demonstrated greater ease in navigating campus life, indicating that previous intercultural contact enhances adaptive capacity. This aligns with broader studies on cultural competence and intercultural learning, which emphasize the importance of prior experience in shaping openness and adjustment in diverse environments (Al-Abdullatif & Alsubaie, 2022; Arifin et al., 2020). Conversely, students with limited prior exposure required more time and cognitive effort to interpret and adjust to institutional norms.

Beyond individual background, institutional culture plays a decisive role in shaping adaptation trajectories. Observations and participant accounts consistently show that Islamic higher education institutions provide a structured yet socially flexible environment in which students learn to navigate diversity. This supports literature suggesting that Islamic universities in Indonesia are increasingly positioning themselves as spaces for religious moderation and multicultural education (Mukhibat et al., 2024; Amri et al., 2024). However, the effectiveness of this role depends on the consistency of inclusive practices across classrooms and institutional actors.

Engagement with Islamic symbols and practices further illustrates the layered nature of adaptation. Students' participation in mosque visits, shared expressions such as “*Bismillab*” and “*Alhamdulillah*,” and exposure to Islamic dress practices reflect a process of cultural immersion rather than religious conversion. These findings align with research on experiential learning in multicultural educational environments, where symbolic participation fosters social integration and intercultural literacy (Mu'ti, 2023; Parker, 2014). Importantly, such engagement is interpreted by students as cultural accommodation rather than theological alignment, reinforcing the distinction between cultural familiarity and religious commitment.

Taken together, the findings support the view that adaptation in Islamic higher education is best understood as a continuous, multidimensional negotiation between structure and agency, identity and participation, as well as inclusion and difference. While existing literature has emphasized either integration or boundary maintenance, this study demonstrates that both processes occur simultaneously and are contextually managed. The institution thus functions as a space of ongoing negotiation rather than complete assimilation or separation.

## CONCLUSION

Non-Muslim students are generally well received within Indonesian state Islamic higher education (PTKIN), yet their experience involves continuous adaptation due to limited prior exposure to Islamic Studies and Arabic as part of the academic environment. Adaptation is supported through a combination of student agency and lecturer facilitation, including peer collaboration, use of digital learning resources, additional academic support, and psychological assistance. Beyond academics, students also navigate social and cultural pressures such as invitations to participate in Islamic practices, conversion discourse, and dress norms, responding through avoidance, selective engagement, or limited contextual adaptation while maintaining their personal religious identity. Although these strategies enable students to manage daily campus life, the findings also reveal the absence of formal institutional policies specifically addressing the needs of non-Muslim students, highlighting the need for clearer, more comprehensive guidelines to ensure consistent support, ethical interfaith engagement, and an inclusive academic environment within an increasingly diverse PTKIN context.

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