

Internalizing Multicultural Education Values among University Students

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Abstract

This study explores the process of internalizing multicultural education values among university students in Indonesia, the conditions that facilitate or hinder this process, and its influence on students' attitudes, behaviors, and patterns of interaction within a culturally diverse university setting. Employing a qualitative approach, the study draws on data from in-depth interviews, document analysis, and classroom and campus observations. The findings indicate that multicultural education values are internalized through a continuous and experiential process embedded in compulsory value-oriented learning, interactive pedagogical practices, and sustained daily academic interactions. Institutional commitment to inclusivity and equality, combined with dialogical and collaborative learning strategies, creates conditions that support value internalization, while variations in the intensity of interaction highlight the need for consistent pedagogical and institutional support. The internalization of multicultural values is reflected in students' increased tolerance, openness, and acceptance of diversity, as well as in respectful communication, cooperative behavior, and inclusive patterns of interaction. This study concludes that multicultural education in higher education is most effective when designed as a holistic process that integrates curriculum, pedagogy, and campus culture, thereby contributing to the development of socially responsible and culturally responsive graduates in diverse societies.

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Introduction

Indonesia is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world, characterized by pluralism in ethnicity, religion, language, and socio-cultural traditions. Such diversity constitutes a fundamental social reality that offers both opportunities for social cohesion and challenges in managing differences (Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025; Kalogerogianni, 2025). In a multicultural society, diversity may function as social capital when accompanied by mutual respect and tolerance; however, when poorly managed, it can lead to social tensions and identity-based conflicts (Triyanto, 2026). These dynamics make multicultural education increasingly relevant in fostering harmonious coexistence within diverse communities.

In recent decades, Indonesia has experienced various forms of social conflict rooted in ethnic, religious, and regional identities (Yaumi & Husain, 2015). These tensions are not limited to broader society but have also emerged within educational environments, including universities (Hadi et al., 2025). Higher education institutions, which bring together students from diverse backgrounds, have occasionally become arenas for intolerance, group-based disputes, bullying, and the spread of radical or exclusive ideologies, both in physical spaces and through digital platforms (Astuti et al., 2011; Eka et al., 2021). Such phenomena indicate that exposure to diversity alone is insufficient without deliberate efforts to cultivate inclusive values.

Universities play a strategic role in shaping students' character and social attitudes, as they are responsible not only for academic development but also for moral and civic education. University students particularly those in teacher education programs are future educators and societal leaders who will influence the next generation (Fernández-espinosa & Redondo-corcobado, 2025; Sanjani, 2024). Therefore, higher education must function as a space for the internalization of multicultural education values, such as tolerance, equality, social justice, mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation. The internalization of these values is reflected not merely in students' knowledge, but in their attitudes, behaviors, and interactions within diverse social contexts (Athanasoulis & Han, 2026; Zheng, 2025; Burhaein et al., 2025).

Despite the growing discourse on multicultural education in Indonesia, empirical studies that specifically examine how multicultural education values are internalized among university students remain limited. Much of the existing literature focuses on policy frameworks or curricular design, while fewer studies explore students' lived experiences and the processes through which multicultural values are formed in higher education settings. This gap underscores the need for research that investigates how multicultural education values are internalized among university students in Indonesia.

Research Questions

Based on the background of the study, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How are multicultural education values internalized by university students in Indonesia through their learning experiences and daily academic interactions?
2. Why do certain educational practices, institutional environments, and social interactions facilitate or

hinder the internalization of multicultural education values among university students?

3. How does the internalization of multicultural education values influence students' attitudes, behaviors, and patterns of interaction within a culturally diverse university setting?

Literature Review

Internalization of Educational Values

Internalization refers to a process through which values, beliefs, and norms are deeply absorbed and become an integral part of an individual's personality, guiding attitudes and behaviors in daily life (Rosyad, 2024). In educational contexts, internalization involves more than cognitive understanding; it encompasses affective engagement and behavioral manifestation (Wu et al., 2025) (Yaumi, 2016). Scholars conceptualize internalization as a gradual process that integrates knowledge (*knowing*), practice (*doing*), and habitual disposition (*being*), resulting in consistent value-oriented behavior (Lickona, 2013; Kurniawan & Fitriyani, 2023). This process requires systematic guidance, reflection, and meaningful learning experiences that allow learners to transform abstract values into lived realities. Value internalization is closely related to moral development. The process generally progresses through stages that include moral awareness and understanding, emotional attachment to values, and moral action (Arthur, 2003). These stages highlight that value education is effective only when learners not only understand moral concepts but also feel committed to them and practice them in real-life situations. In higher education, this process is particularly significant, as university students are in a critical phase of identity formation and value consolidation (Kristjánsson, 2015).

Multicultural Education: Concepts and Dimensions

Multicultural education emerged as a response to social inequality, discrimination, and cultural domination, particularly in societies marked by ethnic, racial, and religious diversity. Conceptually, multicultural education emphasizes equality, inclusivity, and recognition of diversity within educational systems (Watts et al., 2021). It seeks to provide equal learning opportunities for students from diverse cultural backgrounds while fostering democratic, humanistic, and pluralistic values.

Scholars define multicultural education as both an educational approach and a reform movement aimed at transforming educational institutions to accommodate diversity (Dolby, 2012). Key dimensions of multicultural education include content integration, knowledge construction, equitable pedagogy, and prejudice reduction. These dimensions underscore the importance of integrating diverse perspectives into curricula, adopting inclusive teaching strategies, and addressing bias and stereotypes within educational environments (Herak, 2025; Rokhman et al., 2014). In this sense, multicultural education is not limited to curriculum content but extends to pedagogical practices, institutional culture, and social interactions.

Core Values of Multicultural Education

The literature consistently identifies several core values underpinning multicultural education, including tolerance, democracy, humanism, equality, justice, and pluralism. Tolerance involves respect for differences in

beliefs, identities, and ways of life, while democracy emphasizes participation, dialogue, and respect for diverse opinions (Kristjánsson et al., 2025; Arthur, 2003). Humanism focuses on upholding human dignity, empathy, and solidarity, whereas pluralism affirms diversity as a positive and constructive element of social life (Espinosa & Domingo, 2025).

These values function as guiding principles for social interaction in multicultural settings. In educational contexts, they are manifested through attitudes such as openness, mutual respect, cooperation, peaceful conflict resolution, and rejection of discrimination. Multicultural education thus aims to cultivate learners who are capable of living together harmoniously in diverse societies by transforming diversity from a potential source of conflict into a foundation for social cohesion (De Lara & Leesen, 2025).

Multicultural Education in Higher Education and the Indonesian Context

Higher education institutions play a strategic role in internalizing multicultural values, as they bring together students from diverse cultural, ethnic, religious, and regional backgrounds. Universities are not only centers of knowledge production but also spaces for socialization and character formation (Ardiansyah, 2026). In multicultural societies such as Indonesia, higher education is expected to foster students' capacity to navigate diversity constructively and ethically (Yaumi, 2016).

In the Indonesian context, multicultural education is closely aligned with national values of unity in diversity and democratic citizenship. Educational policies emphasize non-discrimination, human rights, and cultural pluralism as fundamental principles of national education (Alwanda et al., 2026). However, studies indicate that the presence of diversity alone does not automatically lead to tolerance or inclusivity. Without intentional educational efforts, diversity may give rise to prejudice, exclusivism, and social conflict (Purba et al., 2025; Witasari et al., 2025). Therefore, examining how multicultural education values are internalized among university students is essential for understanding the effectiveness of higher education in promoting inclusive and harmonious social relations.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design with a phenomenological approach. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings constructed by university students regarding the internalization of multicultural education values (Lahman, 2024). Rather than measuring variables statistically, this study sought to capture rich, in-depth descriptions of how and why multicultural values are internalized within a natural educational setting.

Phenomenology was used to examine students' subjective experiences and interpretations of multicultural learning processes within higher education (McNeill & Fitch, 2023; Percy et al., 2015). This approach enabled the researcher to uncover the essence of participants' experiences by focusing on both what was experienced (textural description) and how it was experienced within specific social and institutional contexts (structural description).

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at a private university in Indonesia that represents a culturally diverse higher education environment. The institution was selected due to its heterogeneous student population, comprising individuals from various ethnic, regional, linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. One faculty within the university was chosen as the primary research site because of its high level of diversity and its role in preparing future educators.

Participants were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research focus. They included:

1. University students from diverse backgrounds,
2. Lecturers involved in value-based and religious education courses, and
3. Faculty administrators with responsibility for academic and student affairs.

This selection allowed the study to capture multiple perspectives on the process of multicultural value internalization within the university context.

Data Sources and Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained directly from participants through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, while secondary data were derived from institutional documents, curricula, policy guidelines, and relevant academic literature.

Data collection techniques included:

- *Participant and non-participant observation*, conducted to examine interactions, learning activities, and campus social dynamics related to multicultural values.
- *Semi-structured and in-depth interviews*, which enabled participants to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and reflections on multicultural education and daily interactions.
- *Document analysis*, involving institutional records, course materials, and supporting documents to contextualize and triangulate the findings.

These techniques were applied flexibly and iteratively to ensure data richness and depth.

Research Instruments

In line with qualitative research principles, the researcher served as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. To support systematic data gathering, additional instruments included interview guides, observation protocols, and documentation checklists. Audio recording devices, field notes, and reflective journals were used to enhance data accuracy and completeness.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative analysis model, conducted concurrently with data collection. The process involved three main stages as suggested by (Miles et al., 2018):

1. *Data condensation*, by selecting, focusing, and organizing data relevant to the research questions.
2. *Data display*, through narrative descriptions that allowed patterns and relationships to emerge.

3. *Conclusion drawing and verification*, where interpretations were continuously refined and validated through comparison across data sources.

This iterative process continued until data saturation was achieved and no new significant information emerged.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed triangulation of data sources, methods, and time. Information obtained from interviews was cross-checked with observations and documents, and data were collected at different times to confirm consistency (McNeill & Fitch, 2023). This approach enhanced the validity and reliability of the research findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation, and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. The researcher avoided data manipulation, respected participants' privacy, and maintained professional independence. All data were used solely for academic purposes, ensuring integrity, transparency, and responsibility in reporting the findings.

Findings

RQ 1. How are multicultural education values internalized by university students in Indonesia through their learning experiences and daily academic interactions?

The findings show that multicultural education values are internalized by university students through a structured, repetitive, and experiential learning process embedded in formal learning activities and daily academic interactions. This internalization process begins through formal learning experiences that are designed as compulsory and continuous. A faculty leader emphasized the strategic role of these courses:

Institutional documents indicate that value-oriented learning is systematically implemented across multiple semesters and positioned as a core element of university education. These documents emphasize moral development, ethical conduct, social responsibility, tolerance, moderation, empathy, and respect for diversity as expected learning outcomes.

This statement is supported by faculty leaders' accounts, who emphasized that value education is not incidental but intentionally designed as a long-term process. One faculty leader stated that value-based learning is compulsory for all students and functions as the main instrument for character development.

Internalization is further strengthened through learning strategies that require active student participation, such as discussion, group assignments, demonstrations, and collaborative tasks. Lecturers explained that these strategies allow students to directly experience diversity during the learning process. This is supported by participants' accounts indicating that classroom discussions and group work train students to express opinions while respecting differing perspectives.

Daily academic interaction plays a critical role in transforming values into habitual behavior. Observational evidence shows that students interact routinely with peers from diverse ethnic, regional, linguistic, and religious backgrounds in classrooms and group activities. Through repeated interaction, students gradually move from initial unfamiliarity toward acceptance and mutual respect. This suggests that internalization occurs not only through instruction, but through continuous social practice in daily academic life.

Experiential learning activities further reinforce this process. Documentary evidence describes structured community engagement programs that require students to work collaboratively and interact with diverse social groups. Students reported that such activities strengthen empathy, cooperation, and social responsibility, indicating that values are internalized through direct experience rather than abstract learning alone. Multicultural education values are internalized through compulsory learning, interactive pedagogy, repeated daily interaction, and experiential activities that allow students to practice values continuously.

RQ 2. Why do certain educational practices, institutional environments, and social interactions facilitate or hinder the internalization of multicultural education values among university students?

The findings indicate that the internalization of multicultural education values is facilitated when educational practices, institutional environments, and social interactions consistently support inclusivity and ethical conduct, and is hindered when interaction is limited or socially segmented. Educational practices facilitate internalization when they are interactive and student-centered. This is supported by instructional documents emphasizing participatory learning approaches and ethical development as key objectives. Lecturers explained that active learning strategies enable students to experience diversity directly, making values more meaningful and internalized.

Institutional environments also play a facilitating role. Institutional documents emphasize equality, non-discrimination, and equal academic treatment for all students regardless of background. This is reinforced by faculty leaders' statements that no students are marginalized in academic services. Such an environment fosters a sense of security and belonging, which encourages openness toward diversity.

Social interaction further facilitates internalization when it involves cross-cultural engagement. Observational evidence shows that students often collaborate in mixed groups, form friendships across backgrounds, and engage in collective activities. These interactions reduce stereotypes and foster mutual understanding.

However, the findings also reveal inhibiting factors. Observational evidence indicates that in some informal situations, students tend to associate primarily with peers from similar regional or cultural backgrounds. While not resulting in open conflict, this social clustering limits opportunities for intercultural interaction.

Institutional documents also acknowledge the need for continuous guidance to prevent exclusivist tendencies among student groups. Educational practices and institutional environments facilitate internalization by promoting inclusivity and interaction. But limited cross-group interaction and social clustering hinder the internalization process.

RQ 3. How does the internalization of multicultural education values influence students' attitudes, behaviors, and patterns of interaction within a culturally diverse university setting?

The findings demonstrate that the internalization of multicultural education values has a significant influence on students' attitudes, behaviors, and patterns of interaction within a culturally diverse university setting. This influence becomes evident as values introduced through learning experiences and reinforced through daily academic interaction are gradually transformed into students' personal dispositions and social practices.

At the attitudinal level, students show increased tolerance, openness, and acceptance of differences. Students' accounts indicate that continuous engagement in value-oriented learning and interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds has helped them reinterpret diversity as a natural and meaningful aspect of academic life. One student explained that through learning activities and daily interaction, they began to "understand differences as something natural and valuable," rather than something that creates distance or tension in social relationships. This statement reflects a shift from initial awareness toward internal acceptance, where diversity is no longer perceived as an external challenge but as an integral part of students' worldview. Another student emphasized that regular interaction during discussions and group work enabled them to "become more reflective and open-minded toward other people's opinions and backgrounds," suggesting that tolerance developed through repeated social engagement rather than through instruction alone.

These attitudinal changes are consistently reflected in students' observable behaviors during academic activities. Observational evidence shows that students communicate respectfully, listen to differing viewpoints, and cooperate effectively in mixed-group assignments. In situations where disagreements arise, students tend to resolve them through discussion and negotiation rather than confrontation, indicating that values such as respect, empathy, and peaceful coexistence have been translated into habitual conduct. This pattern was repeatedly observed during classroom discussions and collaborative tasks, where students demonstrated "a willingness to help one another and to share responsibilities fairly," suggesting that internalized values guide behavior even in demanding academic situations. Such behavioral consistency indicates that multicultural values are not merely situational responses but have become part of students' everyday academic conduct.

Patterns of interaction within the university also show noticeable transformation as a result of value internalization. Observations indicate that students increasingly engage in cross-cultural collaboration, both in formal learning contexts and in academic-related activities beyond the classroom. Students were frequently observed forming mixed-background groups, participating collectively in discussions, and maintaining cooperative relationships across differences. One student noted that collaboration with peers from different backgrounds had become "normal and necessary" in academic life, as learning activities required cooperation and mutual understanding. This suggests that internalized values actively shape how students structure their social relationships and choose their interaction partners.

Documentary evidence further reinforces these findings by outlining graduate profiles that emphasize social competence, ethical responsibility, cooperation, and the ability to live harmoniously in diverse social environments. The alignment between these institutional expectations and students' observed attitudes and

behaviors indicates that internalization has tangible outcomes that correspond with the educational goals of the institution. Rather than remaining abstract ideals, multicultural values are manifested in students' inclusive interaction patterns and collaborative practices, contributing to a more harmonious academic environment.

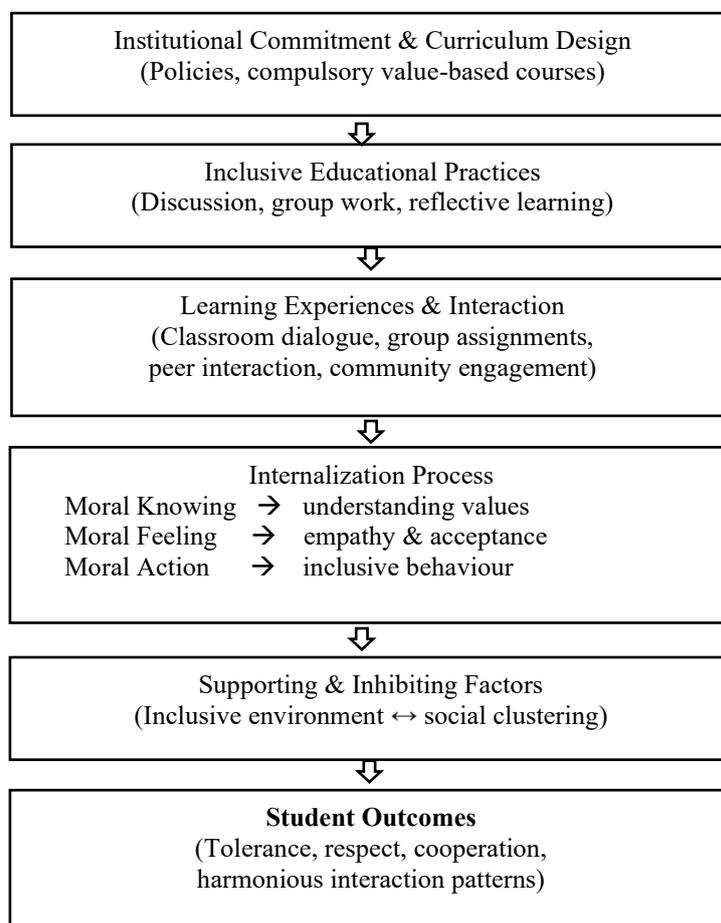


Figure 1. Process of Multicultural Education Value Internalization among University Students

Discussion

This study examined how multicultural education values are internalized by university students in Indonesia, why certain educational and institutional conditions facilitate or hinder this process, and how internalization influences students' attitudes, behaviors, and patterns of interaction. The findings contribute to the discourse on multicultural education in higher education by demonstrating that value internalization is a processual, experiential, and context-dependent phenomenon, rather than a purely cognitive outcome of instruction. This conclusion aligns with perspectives in value and character education that conceptualize internalization as a gradual process in which values become embedded in individuals' dispositions through sustained experience and practice (Rosyad, 2024; Wu et al., 2025; Yaumi, 2016).

Internalization of Multicultural Education Values as a Processual Experience

The findings indicate that multicultural education values are internalized through a structured and continuous

learning process, reinforced by interactive pedagogy and daily academic interaction. This supports theoretical perspectives that conceptualize internalization as an integration of cognitive understanding, affective engagement, and behavioral manifestation. Scholars have emphasized that internalization involves not only knowing values, but also practicing and embodying them in everyday life, resulting in consistent value-oriented behavior (Lickona, 2013; Kurniawan & Fitriyani, 2023).

The present findings align with this framework by showing that formal learning introduces and frames multicultural values cognitively, while repeated academic interaction enables students to experience and enact these values in real situations. This supports the view that value education is effective when learners are provided with meaningful experiences that allow abstract values to be transformed into lived realities (Arthur, 2003; Kristjánsson, 2015). Consistent with Wu et al. (2025), the findings suggest that internalization occurs progressively through repeated engagement, reflection, and social practice rather than through one-time instructional exposure.

Educational Practices, Institutional Environments, and the Conditions for Internalization

In response to the second research question, the findings demonstrate that educational practices and institutional environments facilitate internalization when they consistently promote inclusivity, dialogue, and interaction. This finding resonates with multicultural education theories that emphasize equality, inclusivity, and the recognition of diversity as foundational principles of educational practice (Watts et al., 2021; Dolby, 2012). Multicultural education is understood not only as curricular content, but also as an institutional approach that shapes pedagogy, campus culture, and social interaction (Rokhman et al., 2014; Herak, 2025).

The findings support this perspective by showing that interactive learning strategies enable students to encounter diversity directly and practice values such as tolerance and empathy. This aligns with research suggesting that equitable pedagogy and participatory learning approaches create opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning and develop respect for differences (Rokhman et al., 2014; Herak, 2025). Institutional commitment to equality and non-discrimination, as reflected in the study, further supports previous findings that inclusive environments foster a sense of security and belonging, which is essential for openness toward diversity (Yaumi, 2016; Alwanda et al., 2026).

At the same time, the findings indicate that internalization may be constrained when opportunities for meaningful interaction are limited or socially segmented. This observation is consistent with studies in the Indonesian context that caution that diversity alone does not automatically lead to tolerance or inclusivity without intentional educational guidance (Purba et al., 2025; Witasari et al., 2025). The study therefore reinforces the argument that multicultural education requires consistent alignment between institutional values, pedagogical practices, and everyday social interaction to prevent exclusivist tendencies.

Impact of Value Internalization on Attitudes, Behaviors, and Interaction Patterns

The findings related to the third research question demonstrate that internalized multicultural education values

significantly influence students' attitudes, behaviors, and patterns of interaction. Students' increased tolerance, openness, and acceptance of diversity reflect the core values of multicultural education, including humanism, pluralism, and democracy, as emphasized in the literature (Arthur, 2003; Kristjánsson et al., 2025; Espinosa & Domingo, 2025). These attitudinal changes indicate a shift toward viewing diversity as a constructive element of social life rather than a source of division.

Behaviorally, the findings show that students translate internalized values into respectful communication, cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution. This supports arguments in character and moral education that internalization is evidenced through consistent action and social conduct, rather than through cognitive understanding alone (Lickona, 2013; Yaumi, 2016). The observed behaviors demonstrate that multicultural values have become embedded in students' everyday academic practices.

Changes in interaction patterns further illustrate the depth of internalization. Increased cross-cultural collaboration and inclusive engagement are consistent with studies highlighting the role of higher education in fostering social competence and ethical responsibility in diverse societies (Ardiansyah, 2026; Fernández-Espinosa & Redondo-Corcobado, 2025). The alignment between students' behaviors and institutional expectations for graduate outcomes supports the view that multicultural education contributes to the development of socially responsible and culturally responsive graduates (Athanasoulis & Han, 2026; Burhaein et al., 2025).

Contribution to Multicultural Education in Higher Education

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence that multicultural education value internalization in higher education is a dynamic and ongoing process shaped by learning experiences, institutional contexts, and sustained social interaction. The findings support and extend existing research by demonstrating how multicultural values are internalized through everyday academic practices within a culturally diverse university setting. By emphasizing the integration of curriculum, pedagogy, and campus culture, this study reinforces the argument that multicultural education must be implemented holistically to promote tolerance, social cohesion, and ethical engagement in multicultural societies.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study imply that multicultural education in higher education should be designed as a continuous, interactive, and experience-based process that is embedded not only in the curriculum but also in daily academic and social life on campus. Universities need to move beyond viewing multicultural education as a purely cognitive endeavor and instead emphasize pedagogical practices, institutional policies, and campus environments that consistently promote dialogue, inclusivity, and meaningful intercultural interaction. Lecturers play a central role as facilitators and role models in translating institutional values into lived experiences, while institutional commitment to equality and non-discrimination is essential in creating a sense of belonging that supports value internalization. By intentionally aligning curriculum design, teaching practices, and campus culture, higher education institutions can foster the development of tolerant attitudes, cooperative behaviors, and inclusive interaction patterns among students, preparing graduates to engage constructively within culturally diverse

societies.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the internalization of multicultural education values among university students in Indonesia is a continuous and experiential process shaped by the integration of structured learning, inclusive pedagogical practices, and sustained daily academic interaction. Multicultural values are internalized not merely through cognitive exposure, but through repeated engagement in compulsory value-oriented learning, interactive classroom practices, and experiential activities that allow students to practice values in real social contexts. The effectiveness of this process depends on the alignment between educational practices, institutional environments, and opportunities for meaningful interaction, which together foster openness, tolerance, and social responsibility. As these values become internalized, they are manifested in students' attitudes, behaviors, and patterns of interaction, reflected in respectful communication, cooperative behavior, and inclusive engagement within a culturally diverse university setting. Overall, the study affirms the critical role of higher education institutions in cultivating socially responsible and culturally responsive graduates through holistic and sustained multicultural education practices.

Recommendations

Research on the internalization of multicultural values in Indonesian higher education still leaves gaps, including the lack of structured models, valid measurement instruments, and studies in the digital context. Future recommendations include developing learning models, creating psychometric instruments, and exploring critical digital literacy strategies using mixed methods approaches. Further research is expected not merely to identify strategies but also to measure effectiveness and respond to the challenges of the digital era.

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