

BRIDGING INDONESIAN CULTURES THROUGH ISLAM WASATIYYAH: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' INSIGHTS ON RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN AN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority country, has long promoted Wasatiyyah Islam as a fundamental principle for maintaining religious harmony. This study explores the perceptions and experiences of international students within Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions (IHEIs) regarding religious moderation. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five international students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. The findings indicate that many students were unfamiliar with Wasatiyyah prior to studying in Indonesia; however, their immersion in academic and social life at IHEIs broadened their understanding of Islamic moderation beyond personal religiosity to include interfaith tolerance and intercultural dialogue. The study highlights the role of Wasatiyyah as a framework that integrates Islamic principles with local traditions to promote inclusivity and religious tolerance. Nevertheless, challenges such as cultural adaptation, language barriers, and varying degrees of institutional commitment to moderation persist. This research contributes to the global discourse on Islamic education by advocating for the integration of religious moderation principles in IHEIs to enhance interfaith and intercultural harmony at both local and international levels.*

Keywords: Wasatiyyah Islam, religious moderation, Islamic higher education, international students, interfaith dialogue

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, embraces Wasatiyyah Islam as a guiding principle for religious moderation, tolerance, and social harmony. This concept, deeply rooted in Islamic teachings, promotes a balanced, just, and inclusive approach to faith, rejecting both religious extremism and secular indifference ¹. The Indonesian government, through policies and educational initiatives, has institutionalized Wasatiyyah as a response to ideological divisions and radicalism, positioning it as a crucial element of national identity ². By embedding

¹ Muhammad Nasir and Muhammad Khairul Rijal, "Keeping the Middle Path: Mainstreaming Religious Moderation through Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 11, no. 2 (2021): 213–41, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v11i2.213-241>.

² Rahmadi Rahmadi and Hamdan Hamdan, "Religious Moderation in the Context of Islamic Education: A Multidisciplinary Perspective and Its Application in Indonesian Institutions," *Khazanah: Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Humaniora* 21, no. 1 (2023): 59–82, <https://doi.org/10.18592/khazanah.v21i1.8487>.

Wasatiyyah values into various aspects of governance and society, Indonesia continues to present itself as a model of religious harmony amid global challenges of polarization and extremism.

Islamic higher education institutions (IHEIs) play a central role in promoting *Wasatiyyah* principles by incorporating religious moderation into academic curricula and student engagement programs. These institutions function as platforms for fostering interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and peaceful coexistence through structured learning and experiential interactions ³. By integrating Islamic values with local cultural traditions, Indonesian IHEIs offer a distinctive model of Islamic education that upholds inclusivity while countering radical ideologies ⁴. These institutions not only emphasize theoretical knowledge but also provide students with practical exposure to *Wasatiyyah* through discussions, collaborative projects, and interfaith initiatives, reinforcing Indonesia's commitment to religious pluralism and social harmony.

With the increasing number of international students choosing to study in Indonesian IHEIs, the global relevance of *Wasatiyyah* is becoming more apparent. These students bring diverse religious and cultural perspectives, offering a unique lens through which to examine how *Wasatiyyah* is perceived and practiced beyond Indonesia's borders ⁵. Their engagement in academic settings, campus activities, and daily social interactions provides critical insights into how *Wasatiyyah* is understood, internalized, and applied in multicultural environments. Despite the importance of their experiences, research on how international students perceive and engage with *Wasatiyyah* remains limited, necessitating further investigation into their adaptation, challenges, and contributions to religious moderation in Indonesia ⁶.

While Indonesia strongly advocates for religious moderation, international students may encounter difficulties in adjusting to *Wasatiyyah* principles due to differences in religious interpretations, cultural expectations, and institutional frameworks ⁷. Some students find Indonesia's approach to *Wasatiyyah* beneficial in

³ Azhari Andi et al., "Strengthening Wasatiyyah for the Youth through Islamic Education," *TAFAHUS: Jurnal Pengkajian Islam* 3, no. 1 (2023): 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.58573/tafahus.v3i1.44>; Azyumardi Azra, *Relevansi Islam Wasathiyah: dari melindungi kampus hingga mengaktualisasikan kesalehan*, ed. Idris Thaha (Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2020).

⁴ Agus Maimun et al., "Educating Islamic Values through Wiwitan Tradition," *JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAM* 14, no. 2 (2020): 359, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2020.14.2.359-386>.

⁵ St Aflahah et al., "The Role of Education in Strengthening Religious Moderation in Indonesia," *Jurnal SMART (Studi Masyarakat, Religi, Dan Tradisi)* 9, no. 2 (2023): 193-211, <https://doi.org/10.18784/smart.v9i2.2079>.

⁶ Umi Rosidah et al., "Interfaith Dialogue in Islamic Religious Education," *Jurnal Konseling Pendidikan Islam* 5, no. 1 (2024): 120-33, <https://doi.org/10.32806/jkpi.v5i1.129>.

⁷ Syamsul Arifin et al., "The Dimensions of Leadership and Ideology in Strengthening and Institutionalizing Religious Moderation in Muhammadiyah," *Legality : Jurnal Ilmiah Hukum* 33, no. 1 (2024): 69-92, <https://doi.org/10.22219/ljih.v33i1.37219>.

fostering interfaith harmony, while others struggle with cultural barriers, language differences, and variations in institutional support ⁸. These challenges can influence their ability to fully embrace religious moderation and highlight the need for more inclusive policies that facilitate their transition and engagement within Indonesian academic and social contexts.

This study investigates the perceptions and experiences of international students regarding *Wasatiyyah* in Indonesian IHEIs. It aims to examine how *Wasatiyyah* principles are institutionalized, the challenges students face in adapting to religious moderation, and the role of IHEIs in promoting interfaith harmony. The research addresses the following questions:

1. How do international students perceive *Wasatiyyah* Islam before and after studying in Indonesia?
2. How does their engagement in academic and social settings influence their understanding of religious moderation?
3. What obstacles do international students encounter in adapting to *Wasatiyyah* principles?
4. In what ways do international students contribute to interfaith dialogue and religious moderation in their university environment?

By exploring these questions, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Islamic higher education institutions shape religious moderation among international students and how these experiences contribute to the broader discourse on global Islamic education and interfaith engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wasatiyyah and Religious Moderation in Indonesia

The term *Wasatiyyah* in Arabic signifies moderation, balance, and justice, positioning it as the ideal alternative between two extremes ⁹. In Islamic thought, *Wasatiyyah* functions as a guiding principle that fosters equilibrium in religious practice, social interactions, and cultural engagement ¹⁰. By advocating for balance, *Wasatiyyah* plays a crucial role in shaping inclusive and peaceful communities,

⁸ Khaliq Ahmad, "International Conference on Renewal and Reform of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ICRITC24): A Review," *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)*, November 30, 2024, 337–44, <https://doi.org/10.31436/shajarah.vi.1943>.

⁹ Ahmad Farhan and Mukhamad Hadi Musolin Subagio, "Wasathiyah in the Tafsir of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia: A Study of Theory and Implementation," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 14, no. 1 (2024): Pages 899-911, <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i1/20122>.

¹⁰ Muhammad Ilyas Marwal and Muhammad Fadhlirobby Ilyas, "Analysis Of Wasatiyyah Thoughts Of Muhammad Mahfudh Tarmadzi's On Takfirism In His Is'af Al Mathali'," *Jurnal Ushuluddin* 32, no. 2 (2024): 152, <https://doi.org/10.24014/jush.v32i2.31889>; Khoirun Nidhom, "Pandangan Al-Qur'an Dan As-Sunnah Tentang Wasatiyyah (Moderasi) Serta Implementasinya Terhadap Hukum Islam," *AT-TAISIR: Journal of Indonesian Tafsir Studies* 2, no. 2 (2023): 67–86, <https://doi.org/10.51875/attaisir.v2i2.90>.

particularly in modern societies facing challenges such as extremism, intolerance, and the need for intercultural harmony ¹¹.

Indonesia, with its diverse ethnic and religious composition, has embraced *Wasatiyyah* as a national framework for maintaining unity (Marwal & Ilyas, 2024). Institutions such as the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) actively promote *Wasatiyyah* through education, community engagement, and da'wah initiatives ¹². Furthermore, Islamic educational institutions, including madrasahs and pesantrens, integrate *Wasatiyyah* principles—such as *tawazun* (balance), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *i'tidal* (justice)—into their curricula to equip students with a comprehensive and progressive understanding of Islamic teachings ¹³.

The Indonesian government actively supports religious moderation as a countermeasure against conservatism, radicalism, and exclusivism ¹⁴. Policies such as Presidential Regulation No. 58 (2023) emphasize religious practices that uphold human dignity, social welfare, and national unity. Additionally, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has introduced programs such as digital transformation, strengthening Islamic boarding schools, and the establishment of *Cyber Islamic Universities* to enhance inclusive educational opportunities ¹⁵. Beyond its domestic impact, Indonesia's religious moderation initiatives have gained international recognition, serving as a reference for other nations managing religious and cultural diversity ¹⁶.

¹¹ Iis Leniawati and Mochamad Ziaul Haq, "The Implementation of Islamic Moderation Principles in Addressing the Challenges of Political Identity Polarization," *Integritas Terbuka: Peace and Interfaith Studies* 3, no. 2 (2024): 151–64, <https://doi.org/10.59029/int.v3i2.42>; Norsaleha Mohd Salleh et al., "Wasatiyyah Discourse by the Perspective of Indonesian Muslim Scholars," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, ahead of print, September 1, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n5s1p480>.

¹² Muhammad Syarifuddin et al., "Da'wah Strategy of the Indonesian Ulema Council in Broadcasting Wasathiyah Islamic Values in Wonogiri," *Jurnal Ilmu Dakwah* 44, no. 1 (2024): 129–48, <https://doi.org/10.21580/jid.v44.1.20462>.

¹³ Tri Wibowo and Aziz Kurniawan, "Strengthening Wasathiyah Islamic Values in the Perspective of Education in Madrasah," *MUDARRISA: Jurnal Kajian Pendidikan Islam* 15, no. 1 (2023): 84–112, <https://doi.org/10.18326/mdr.v15i1.84-112>.

¹⁴ Hasudungan Sidabutar and Purim Marbun, "Menyemai Moderasi Beragama Dalam Konteks Indonesia Negara Pancasila Yang Plural," *Integritas: Jurnal Teologi* 5, no. 2 (2023): 179–93, <https://doi.org/10.47628/ijt.v5i2.216>.

¹⁵ M Mukhibat et al., "Pendidikan Moderasi Beragama Di Indonesia (Wacana Dan Kebijakan)," *Southeast Asian Journal of Islamic Education Management* 4, no. 1 (2023): 73–88, <https://doi.org/10.21154/sajiem.v4i1.133>.

¹⁶ Mohammad Deny Irawan, "Islam Wasatiyyah: Refleksi Antara Islam Modern Dan Upaya Moderasi Islam," *TAJDID: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin* 16, no. 2 (2018): 111–28, <https://doi.org/10.30631/tjd.v16i2.57>.

The Role of Islamic Higher Education in Promoting Religious Moderation

Islamic higher education institutions (IHEIs) in Indonesia play a key role in embedding *Wasatiyyah* values into academic and extracurricular programs ¹⁷. Universities such as Universitas Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang and Universitas Darussalam Gontor implement curricula that integrate local traditions with Islamic teachings, reinforcing values such as national dedication, tolerance, and non-violence ¹⁸. Additionally, IHEIs organize seminars, training sessions, and community outreach programs to enhance public understanding of *Wasatiyyah* (Nasution et al., 2024). The contextualization of traditional Islamic texts (*Kitab Kuning*) within pesantren-based education further supports the practical application of moderation in students' daily lives (Nasution et al., 2024).

The presence of international students in IHEIs presents both opportunities and challenges in fostering religious moderation. Exposure to Indonesia's *Wasatiyyah* framework allows international students to engage with diverse perspectives on Islamic teachings, encouraging dialogue and cross-cultural understanding ¹⁹. Studies indicate that over 90% of Muslim students with international exposure develop positive perceptions of Islamic moderation, demonstrating the significance of intercultural encounters in shaping religious attitudes (Adnan et al., 2024). Furthermore, international students contribute to academic discourse by participating in interfaith discussions, sharing diverse religious experiences, and fostering a globalized understanding of Islam ²⁰.

Despite these advantages, international students often encounter difficulties in adapting to *Wasatiyyah* principles due to differing interpretations of Islam, cultural complexities, and exposure to conservative or extremist viewpoints in their home countries ²¹. Additionally, language barriers and unfamiliarity with local customs may hinder their ability to fully engage with religious moderation initiatives ²². To address these challenges, Islamic universities must implement structured programs that

¹⁷ Nasir and Rijal, "Keeping the Middle Path."

¹⁸ M Muhsin et al., "Religious Moderation in Indonesian Islamic Universities: Policy Implementation and Identity Formation at IAIN Ponorogo," *Ascarya: Journal of Islamic Science, Culture, and Social Studies* 4, no. 2 (2024): 54–66, <https://doi.org/10.53754/iscs.v4i2.713>.

¹⁹ Muhammad Adnan et al., "Religious Moderation Perspectives and Practices in Muslim Youths With International Exposure," *JURNAL ILMU SOSIAL* 23, no. 1 (2024): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.14710/jis.23.1.2024.1-19>.

²⁰ Aprilia Dian Sukmawati, "The Diversity of Indonesian Religious Moderation as an Understanding Tool for Islamic Religious Education Students in a Foreign Land: Ponorogo," *Annual International COnference on Islamic Education for Students* 1, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.18326/aicoies.v1i1.297>.

²¹ Ahmad Jais and Sumin Sumin, "Portrait of Moderate Islam Within Muslim University Students in Indonesia," *Al-Albab* 11, no. 2 (2023): 301–22, <https://doi.org/10.24260/alalbab.v11i2.2459>.

²² Sukmawati, "The Diversity of Indonesian Religious Moderation as an Understanding Tool for Islamic Religious Education Students in a Foreign Land: Ponorogo."

facilitate cultural adaptation, such as intercultural competency training, mentorship initiatives, and language assistance programs ²³. By strengthening the role of IHEIs in fostering inclusive learning environments and addressing adaptation challenges faced by international students, Indonesia can further solidify its position as a global leader in Islamic education and religious harmony.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of international students in understanding and practicing *Wasatiyyah* Islam within an Islamic higher education context. A phenomenological approach was chosen to capture the depth of participants' perceptions and reflections, allowing for a detailed examination of how they experienced religious moderation in Indonesia ²⁴. This method is particularly relevant for studies focusing on subjective experiences, as it enables researchers to explore the meaning-making processes of individuals within their specific cultural and educational contexts ²⁵. By focusing on students' narratives, this study aimed to uncover how *Wasatiyyah* principles were internalized through both academic and social engagements in an Islamic university setting.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five international students from diverse backgrounds. The participants included students from the Philippines, Thailand, Tanzania, and Gambia, with two of them identifying as non-Muslims. Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure a diverse representation of students with different religious and cultural backgrounds ²⁶. The semi-structured interview format provided flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring consistency in addressing key themes related to *Wasatiyyah* and religious moderation ²⁷. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, descriptive responses, focusing on students' perceptions, challenges, and reflections on *Wasatiyyah* practices in Indonesia.

Given that data collection took place during the semester break, interviews were conducted online to accommodate students who were not residing on campus. This

²³ Maja Heidenreich, "Von Fremden zu Vertrauten," in *Praxishandbuch Mentoring in der Wissenschaft*, ed. Renate Petersen et al. (Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-14268-1_22.

²⁴ John W. Creswell, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*, 4th ed (Pearson, 2012).

²⁵ Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (SAGE Publications, Inc., 1994), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658>.

²⁶ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 3. ed., [Nachdr.] (Sage, 2010).

²⁷ Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Third edition (Sage, 2015).

method ensured accessibility while maintaining the depth of qualitative inquiry ²⁸. Online interviews have been recognized as an effective tool for qualitative research, particularly when participants are geographically dispersed, as they facilitate real-time engagement while minimizing logistical constraints ²⁹.

The study employed thematic analysis following the framework proposed by ³⁰, which involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. Thematic analysis was conducted manually, with recurring themes related to *Wasatiyyah*, religious inclusivity, and interfaith interactions emerging from the data. The six-phase framework by Braun and Clarke (2006) guided the analysis process: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. This approach allowed for a structured yet flexible analysis that remained faithful to participants lived experiences. By coding and categorizing responses, key themes were identified, providing a nuanced understanding of how *Wasatiyyah* values are perceived and practiced by international students in Indonesia. Furthermore, investigator triangulation was employed to enhance the credibility of the findings, with multiple researchers reviewing the coded data to ensure consistency and reliability ³¹. This methodological approach enabled a deep exploration of how international students engage with *Wasatiyyah* in an educational setting, shedding light on their challenges, insights, and transformative learning experiences. Future research could expand this approach by incorporating longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of religious moderation education on international students' perceptions and practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

International Students' Understanding of Wasatiyyah Islam

The understanding of Wasatiyyah Islam among international students before studying in Indonesia varied significantly, with some having a limited perception and others being entirely unfamiliar with the concept. Several students associated Wasatiyyah merely with maintaining balance in religious practices, avoiding extremes in faith and rituals. "*Before coming to Indonesia, I understood Wasatiyyah as simply*

²⁸ Raymond Opdenakker, "Advantages and Disadvantages of Four Interview Techniques in Qualitative Research," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* Vol 7 (September 2006): No 4 (2006): Qualitative Research in Ibero America, <https://doi.org/10.17169/FQS-7.4.175>.

²⁹ Roksana Janghorban et al., "Skype Interviewing: The New Generation of Online Synchronous Interview in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 9, no. 1 (2014): 24152, <https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v9.24152>.

³⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

³¹ M Q Patton, "Enhancing the Quality and Credibility of Qualitative Analysis," *Health Services Research* 34, no. 5 Pt 2 (1999): 1189-208.

meaning balance in practicing Islam – neither too extreme nor too lenient," said student from Thailand. However, many students admitted that they had no prior knowledge of the term until they took the Islam Wasathiyah course in Indonesia. "*Honestly, Islam Wasatiyyah was new to me, and before taking the course, I had no idea what it was about,*" stated another participant from the Philipine. This aligns with previous research suggesting that Wasatiyyah, despite being a fundamental Islamic principle, is often underrepresented in formal Islamic education outside Southeast Asia ³². Islamic educational institutions, particularly in Indonesia, have played a vital role in introducing and contextualizing Wasatiyyah as a philosophy beyond personal religious practice, encompassing social harmony, justice, and interfaith respect ³³.

After engaging with the Islam Wasathiyah course, international students demonstrated a notable shift in their perspectives. Many students expressed that their initial understanding of Wasatiyyah was limited to personal religious moderation, but they later realized its broader implications in social interactions, respect for diversity, and peaceful coexistence. Student from Thailand said that "*After studying here, I realized that Wasatiyyah is not just about personal practice but also about how we interact with others, build harmony, and respect differences.*" This transformation aligns with scholarly perspectives that emphasize Wasatiyyah as not just a theological construct but a social principle guiding interactions among Muslims and non-Muslims ³⁴. Several students highlighted that the course provided them with insights into how Wasatiyyah promotes interfaith tolerance, reinforcing findings that Islamic moderation can serve as a framework for religious coexistence ³⁵. "*My perspective on Islamic moderation evolved, and I gained a deeper understanding of what Wasatiyyah truly means,*" remarked from Filipino student. Furthermore, some students, particularly non-Muslims from Tanzania, perceived Wasatiyyah as an inclusive Islamic teaching that does not alter core religious doctrines but rather facilitates meaningful engagement across religious boundaries. "*After the class, I understood that Islamic*

³² Muhammad Irfan Helmy et al., "The Understanding of Islamic Moderation (Wasatiyyah al-Islam) and the Hadiths on Inter-Religious Relations in the Javanese Pesantrens," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 11, no. 2 (2021): 377–401, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v11i2.351-376>; Salleh et al., "Wasatiyyah Discourse by the Perspective of Indonesian Muslim Scholars."

³³ Muqowim Muqowim et al., "Developing Religious Moderation in Indonesian Islamic Schools Through the Implementation of the Values of Islām Wasatiyyah," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 19, no. 2 (2022): 207–22, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jpai.2022.192-03>; Ahamad Asmadi Sakat et al., "Al Wasatiyyah in the Eye of Prophetic Tradition," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, ahead of print, March 1, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n2s1p448>.

³⁴ Helmy et al., "The Understanding of Islamic Moderation (Wasatiyyah al-Islam) and the Hadiths on Inter-Religious Relations in the Javanese Pesantrens"; Sakat et al., "Al Wasatiyyah in the Eye of Prophetic Tradition."

³⁵ Bateer Chen et al., "International Muslim Students: Challenges and Practical Suggestions to Accommodate Their Needs on Campus," *Journal of International Students* 9, no. 4 (2019): 933–53, <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i3.753>; Salleh et al., "Wasatiyyah Discourse by the Perspective of Indonesian Muslim Scholars."

moderation is not about changing Islamic law but about how we live and socialize with people from different perspectives," noted one respondent. This is particularly relevant given that Wasatiyyah encourages a balanced approach to religious expression and civic responsibility, fostering peace and social justice ³⁶.

Despite the positive shift in understanding, international students faced several challenges in grasping Wasatiyyah within a new cultural and academic environment. The adaptation process was influenced by cultural differences, language barriers, and varying educational backgrounds in Islamic studies. Studies indicate that international Muslim students often struggle with religious adaptation when moving to new educational contexts, particularly when encountering unfamiliar theological terminologies and interpretations ³⁷. *"I did not have any understanding of Wasatiyyah before coming to Indonesia because I had never heard of the concept, even in my home country,"* admitted another non-Muslim student from Tanzania. Additionally, differences in the way Islam is practiced across regions contributed to initial misunderstandings. For instance, students from regions with strong textualist traditions found the Indonesian approach to Wasatiyyah more flexible and context-based, requiring them to adjust their perspectives. These challenges reinforce the argument that exposure to Wasatiyyah through structured education is crucial in broadening students' religious perspectives and fostering inclusive interpretations of Islam ³⁸.

Given these findings, universities should enhance their approach to teaching Wasatiyyah Islam by incorporating more culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy. Providing resources in multiple languages and facilitating peer discussions between local and international students can help bridge knowledge gaps and promote deeper engagement with Wasatiyyah principles. Moreover, academic institutions should collaborate with Islamic organizations to integrate Wasatiyyah into global Islamic education narratives, ensuring that international students from diverse backgrounds are introduced to its principles early in their studies ³⁹. Ultimately, strengthening the integration of Wasatiyyah into digital learning

³⁶ Donna Lynn Anderson, "Muslim International Students in the United States: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Experience of Identities," *Journal of International Students* 10, no. 2 (2020): 320-38, <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i2.965>.

³⁷ Chen et al., "International Muslim Students"; Popoola Kareem Hamed et al., "Intercultural Communication Interaction Among the Local and International ELS Postgraduate Students: A Case Study of International Universities in Malaysia," *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 52, no. 6 (2023): 629-45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2023.2283496>.

³⁸ Anderson, "Muslim International Students in the United States"; Muqowim et al., "Developing Religious Moderation in Indonesian Islamic Schools Through the Implementation of the Values of Islām Wasatiyyah."

³⁹ Anderson, "Muslim International Students in the United States"; Dri Santoso et al., "Preventing Religious Extremism in Islamic Religious Universities through Fiqh Wasatiyah," *Manchester Journal of Transnational Islamic Law & Practice* 19, no. 2 (2023): 176-92.

platforms and intercultural dialogues can further enhance students' understanding and application of Islamic moderation in a globalized world.

The Role of Wasatiyyah Islam in Bridging Indonesian Cultures and Religious Values

The concept of Wasatiyyah Islam plays a crucial role in integrating Indonesia's diverse cultural and religious values by promoting moderation, tolerance, and inclusiveness. Many international students acknowledged that their experience in Indonesia reshaped their understanding of religious and cultural diversity. "*Living here has really opened my eyes to how diverse Islam can be. Indonesia's different traditions and cultures blend into Islamic practices, but people still maintain strong religious values. This experience taught me that diversity doesn't mean losing identity; instead, it can actually strengthen faith,*" shared Thai student. This observation aligns with studies that highlight how Wasatiyyah promotes harmony by allowing religious practices to coexist with local cultures ⁴⁰. Indonesian Islamic institutions, particularly pesantrens and universities, have long incorporated Wasatiyyah values into their curriculum to ensure that students develop a balanced and inclusive religious outlook ⁴¹.

While most students adapted easily to Wasatiyyah values, some noted differences in religious practices between their home countries and Indonesia. "*In Thailand, some Islamic practices are stricter, while in Indonesia, things are more flexible. Learning to adapt without compromising my beliefs has been an interesting experience,*" remarked one student. Such cultural variations highlight the unique role of Wasatiyyah Islam in shaping an inclusive Islamic identity that accommodates local traditions while maintaining religious principles ⁴². Despite these differences, international students generally found the Indonesian model of Wasatiyyah to be an effective framework for religious moderation and social harmony.

International students also contribute to religious moderation in Indonesia through cultural exchange and dialogue. "*Because there are different perspectives among international students, we help create deeper discussions about Islam and moderation. By sharing our experiences, we help each other understand how Wasatiyyah works in different contexts,*" explained by Muslim Thai participant. One Tanzanian student emphasized,

⁴⁰ Muqowim et al., "Developing Religious Moderation in Indonesian Islamic Schools Through the Implementation of the Values of Islām Wasatiyyah"; Nasir and Rijal, "Keeping the Middle Path."

⁴¹ Hasse Jubba et al., "The Contestation between Conservative and Moderate Muslims in Promoting Islamic Moderatism in Indonesia," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2022): 2116162, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2116162>; Sahkholid Nasution et al., "Kitab Kuning and Religious Moderation: A Study on State Islamic Universities in Indonesia," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 19, no. 2 (2024): 73–88, <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol19no2.5>.

⁴² Noorhaidi Hasan, "Promoting Peace: The Role of Muslim Civil Society in Countering Islamist Extremism and Terrorism in Indonesia," in *Islam and Peacebuilding in the Asia-Pacific* (World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd, 2017); Asfa Widiyanto, "Islam, Multiculturalism, and Nation-Building in the Post-Truth Age: The Experience of Indonesia," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 14, no. 1 (2019): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol14no1.1>.

"Through interacting with new communities, I have learned to balance curiosity with appreciation. The experience has helped me evolve into a better human being, fostering an environment of tolerance and understanding." This aligns with the idea that exposure to diverse religious traditions fosters a broader understanding of Wasatiyyah and strengthens interfaith cooperation ⁴³. Other students highlighted their engagement in interfaith activities such as visiting churches and Buddhist temples, which allowed them to experience firsthand the principles of religious tolerance and respect. *"Participating in non-Muslim activities like visiting churches and Buddhist temples, which are rare in my home country, gave me a new perspective on religious coexistence,"* said another Tanzanian student. Additionally, some students suggested that universities should organize more forums and symposiums to address misconceptions about moderate Islam and encourage dialogue among religious communities. *"Organizing interfaith symposiums and open discussions on Wasatiyyah would help combat misunderstandings and promote religious harmony,"* one Gambian participant recommended.

The integration of Wasatiyyah into educational institutions, civil society, and cultural practices in Indonesia provides an effective model for promoting religious moderation. Moving forward, universities and policymakers should continue fostering an environment that encourages intercultural dialogue and religious tolerance, ensuring that international students can actively participate in the broader discourse on Wasatiyyah Islam and its role in building social harmony. Strengthening collaborations between religious organizations and academic institutions can further solidify the global impact of Wasatiyyah as a framework for religious moderation and cultural inclusivity.

The Impact of Islamic Higher Education on Religious Moderation

Islamic higher education institutions play a critical role in shaping students' understanding and practice of religious moderation. Through structured curricula, academic discussions, and campus activities, universities create an environment where students from diverse backgrounds can engage with Wasatiyyah principles in both theoretical and practical contexts. The *Islam Wasathiyah* course, in particular, has had a profound impact on international students, influencing their perspectives on religious moderation and interfaith dialogue. As Thai student noted, *"The Wasathiyah course made me reflect on how moderation is not just about avoiding extremism but also about actively promoting peace, harmony, and understanding."* This aligns with existing research

⁴³ Moh. Ashif Fuadi et al., "Religious Moderation in the Context of Integration between Religion and Local Culture in Indonesia," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 19, no. 1 (2024): 47–59, <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol19no1.4>; Mudjahirin Thohir, "Islam and Local Wisdom: The Study of 'Islam Nusantara' in the Cultural Perspective," *E3S Web of Conferences* 359 (2022): 04004, <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202235904004>.

highlighting that Islamic universities foster tolerance and counter radicalization through structured learning approaches ⁴⁴. Another statement coming from student from the Philippine emphasized, "*I gained a deeper understanding of Wasatiyyah and learned to respect our differences in beliefs and traditions,*" reinforcing the idea that higher education is a fundamental tool for promoting coexistence and religious pluralism.

Beyond the classroom, university environments contribute significantly to reinforcing *Wasatiyyah* values through extracurricular activities, student discussions, and institutional policies. Universities provide platforms for students to engage in open dialogue and intercultural interactions, which play a crucial role in shaping their understanding of moderation. "*University activities, student discussions, and how people interact here all reflect Wasatiyyah. The campus promotes dialogue among students of different backgrounds,*" explained by the student from Thailand. This observation is consistent with findings that Islamic universities facilitate interfaith and intercultural engagement, fostering a culture of respect and mutual understanding ⁴⁵. Additionally, campus policies that promote inclusivity ensure that both Muslim and non-Muslim students feel represented and valued. One Tanzanian Christian student remarked, "*Before going further, it's better to acknowledge that this is an Islamic university. But as a Christian, I still feel included and engaged in discussions, which shows the university's commitment to Wasatiyyah.*" This underscores the role of Islamic universities in promoting an educational setting where students from different faiths can coexist harmoniously.

While Islamic universities have made significant strides in integrating *Wasatiyyah* into their curricula and campus life, students also identified areas for improvement. Some international students suggested incorporating more interactive activities to enhance engagement with *Wasatiyyah* values. "*Maybe more interactive activities, such as workshops on cross-cultural understanding, study trips, or interfaith discussions, could help,*" recommended by Thai student. Others proposed integrating comparative religious studies into the curriculum to foster a deeper appreciation of interfaith relations. "*I recommend adding interfaith programs in the course and inviting religious leaders to engage in dialogue and seminars to spread love and harmony,*" suggested by non-Muslim participant. These recommendations align with scholarly perspectives advocating for

⁴⁴ Saepul Anwar et al., "Understanding Tolerance: Student Perceptions of Islamic Religious Education in Public Universities," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 10, no. 2 (2024): 294–307, <https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v10i2.38649>; Muhammad Anas Ma`arif et al., "Implementing Learning Strategies for Moderate Islamic Religious Education in Islamic Higher Education," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 8, no. 1 (2022): 75–86, <https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v8i1.19037>.

⁴⁵ Nunu Burhanuddin and Khairuddin Khairuddin, "The Radicalism Prevention through Academic Policies at State Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia," *Ullumuna* 26, no. 2 (2022): 363–91, <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v26i2.511>; Achmad Solechan et al., "The Influence of Islamic Religious Education Based on Religious Moderation and National Defence on The Nationalism of Students," *Journal of Ecohumanism* 3, no. 6 (2024): 628–36, <https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i6.4031>.

broader engagement strategies in Islamic education to strengthen inclusivity and interfaith dialogue ⁴⁶.

Moreover, international students emphasized the importance of fostering an environment where they can actively contribute to discussions on religious moderation. *"Because there are different perspectives among international students, we help create deeper discussions about Islam and moderation. By sharing our experiences, we help each other understand how Wasatiyyah works in different contexts,"* one Thai participant explained. Encouraging participation from students of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds can further enhance the effectiveness of Wasatiyyah-based education. Another Gambian student added, *"We should be exposed to different books and articles written about Wasatiyyah, so we can develop a more informed perspective on religious moderation."* These insights highlight the need for continuous curriculum development and resource expansion to ensure that students receive a well-rounded education on Wasatiyyah.

By continually adapting its curriculum and fostering inclusive discussions, Islamic higher education can further enhance its role in promoting Wasatiyyah and religious moderation among international students. Strengthening partnerships between universities, religious organizations, and policymakers will be essential in ensuring that Wasatiyyah education remains relevant and impactful in shaping future generations of moderate Muslim leaders. Through intercultural learning opportunities and a commitment to balanced religious discourse, universities can equip students with the tools to navigate religious and cultural diversity in an increasingly interconnected world.

International Muslim and Non-Muslim Students' Experiences of Religious Moderation in Indonesia

The experience of religious moderation in Indonesia varies for international Muslim and non-Muslim students, shaped by cultural, historical, and educational influences. For many Muslim students, Indonesia's approach to Islam is unique due to its integration with national values such as Pancasila, which emphasizes unity in diversity. One student from Thailand noted, *"Islam in Indonesia is more structured, especially in education and social life. There are national policies like Pancasila that promote tolerance and coexistence."* This reflects how Indonesia institutionalizes religious moderation within its legal and social framework, making it a model of Wasatiyyah Islam ⁴⁷. Additionally, students recognized Indonesia's emphasis on balancing

⁴⁶ Mardiah Astuti and Fajri Ismail, "The Religious Moderation and Decreasing Muslim Students' Identity," *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice* 23, no. 17 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v23i17.6549>; Nasir and Rijal, "Keeping the Middle Path."

⁴⁷ Zaenal Mustakim et al., "Empowering Students as Agents of Religious Moderation in Islamic Higher Education Institutions," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 1 (2021): 65-76,

religious principles with cultural traditions. Furthermore Thai respondent stated, "*Indonesian Islam reflects true moderation because it maintains religious principles while incorporating local traditions, making it a culturally rooted yet tolerant society.*" However, some students acknowledged that adjusting to Wasatiyyah principles required adapting to a new cultural and religious context, although the values largely aligned with their existing beliefs.

For non-Muslim students, interactions with the Indonesian Muslim community generally reinforced the perception of religious tolerance. One Tanzanian student mentioned, "*Indonesian Muslims are very respectful of different beliefs. I have been able to engage in religious and cultural discussions without any tension.*" Others highlighted the inclusive nature of religious celebrations in Indonesia, stating that religious holidays are recognized and respected across different faiths. However, some non-Muslim students faced challenges in fully engaging with Islamic discourse in academic settings. Another Tanzanian explained, "*Sometimes, courses are heavily focused on Islamic teachings, and as a non-Muslim, I struggle to contribute to discussions.*" This highlights the need for a more inclusive academic approach that allows interfaith dialogue while maintaining the integrity of Islamic education ⁴⁸.

Despite minor challenges, most international students, regardless of religious background, recognized Indonesia as a model for religious coexistence. The structured approach to Wasatiyyah in both education and society ensures that tolerance and pluralism are actively promoted. The policies embedded in Indonesia's higher education system, which emphasize respect for diversity, provide students with the opportunity to engage in meaningful interfaith interactions. A Muslim Thai student stated, "*Even though my country also practices Wasatiyyah, Indonesia implements it in a more structured way, integrating it into education and daily social interactions.*"

Furthermore, the role of Islamic higher education institutions in fostering religious moderation is crucial. Universities serve as platforms where students from different religious backgrounds interact, exchange perspectives, and develop mutual understanding. Student activities, academic discussions, and university policies all contribute to reinforcing Wasatiyyah values. "*University life here actively promotes dialogue between students of different faiths. We have student organizations and cultural programs that encourage interfaith discussions,*" shared one Filipino respondent. The presence of international students within Islamic universities adds another dimension

<https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v7i1.12333>; Imam Subchi et al., "Religious Moderation in Indonesian Muslims," *Religions* 13, no. 5 (2022): 451, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050451>.

⁴⁸ Rohmat Mulyana, "Religious Moderation in Islamic Religious Education Textbook and Implementation in Indonesia," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 79, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8592>; Ija Suntana and Betty Tresnawaty, "The Tough Slog of a Moderate Religious State: Highly Educated Muslims and the Problem of Intolerance in Indonesia," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7933>.

to the discourse on religious tolerance, offering insights into how Wasatiyyah is perceived and practiced beyond Indonesia's borders ⁴⁹.

Nevertheless, there is still room for improvement in ensuring that religious moderation is practiced inclusively. Some non-Muslim students suggested expanding interfaith engagement initiatives and enhancing academic inclusivity. "*It would be beneficial to have more comparative religious studies or interfaith dialogues included in the curriculum,*" suggested one Tanzanian student. These perspectives align with existing research advocating for broader engagement strategies in Islamic education to enhance inclusivity and intercultural understanding. Another respondent from Thailand proposed, "*Creating spaces where international students can openly share their experiences regarding religious coexistence could further strengthen understanding and collaboration between different religious groups.*"

Overall, international Muslim and non-Muslim students generally perceive Indonesia's model of Wasatiyyah as an effective approach to fostering religious coexistence. Strengthening interfaith engagement initiatives and creating more inclusive learning environments will further enhance Indonesia's role as a leader in religious moderation. By continuing to integrate Wasatiyyah values into both academic and social settings, Indonesia can maintain its reputation as a country that champions religious tolerance and multicultural harmony.

CONCLUSIONS

This study underscores the crucial role of Islamic higher education in fostering religious moderation among international Muslim and non-Muslim students in Indonesia. The structured approach to Wasatiyyah, embedded in both educational curricula and social interactions, has significantly contributed to promoting tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and mutual respect. Findings from this research indicate that while most students recognize Indonesia as a model for religious moderation, certain challenges persist, particularly regarding inclusivity in academic discussions and the engagement of non-Muslim students in religious discourse. Despite these challenges, the majority of students acknowledged Indonesia's efforts in creating an environment that supports religious coexistence, with educational institutions playing a central role in shaping perspectives on moderation.

One of the primary limitations of this study is its focus on a single Islamic university, which may not fully capture the diverse experiences of students across different institutions and regions in Indonesia. Future research should expand its scope by including multiple universities with varying academic and cultural settings to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Wasatiyyah in different educational

⁴⁹ Sulaiman Mappiasse and Hayadin Hayadin, "Students' Religious Tolerance: Comparing Muslim Students at Public Schools and Pesantren," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 16, no. 2 (2022): 326, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2022.16.2.326-351>; Nasir and Rijal, "Keeping the Middle Path."

environments. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining how religious moderation education influences students beyond their academic journey would be beneficial in assessing its long-term impact. Strengthening collaboration between universities, policymakers, and religious institutions will not only reinforce Indonesia's position as a leader in religious moderation but also contribute to global efforts in promoting peace, understanding, and tolerance.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

All the authors equally participated in all stages of the research, including the study's conceptualization, data gathering and analysis, and the drafting of the final report. All authors have read and approved the submitted version.

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