BEYOND STEREOTYPES: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR INCLUSIVE ISLAMIC EDUCATION AMONG INDIGENOUS PAPUAN STUDENTS

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Abstract

Negative stereotypes and interconnected structural, social, psychological, and cultural barriers can limit the academic participation of Indigenous Papuan students in Islamic higher education. However, these barriers and the institutional responses needed to address them remain insufficiently explored. This study examines these challenges and proposes strategies for inclusive and culturally responsive Islamic religious education. Adopting a descriptive qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm, the study was conducted at an Islamic higher education institution in Southwest Papua. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, with source and method triangulation to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Four interrelated barriers emerged: economic hardship, transportation costs, and inadequate learning facilities; negative stereotypes, perceived unequal treatment, and social exclusion; low self-confidence and difficulties adapting to the academic environment; and limited representation of Papuan culture in the learning process. In response, the study proposes four strategies: developing a curriculum grounded in Papuan culture; integrating the Islamic principle of rahmatan lil 'alamin; fostering partnerships with traditional institutions and religious leaders; and providing sustained academic mentoring. The study's contribution lies in connecting these barriers to institutional responsibilities rather than treating academic challenges solely as problems of individual adaptation. It offers a conceptual framework for promoting more inclusive and culturally responsive Islamic higher education. Further empirical research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed strategies.

Keywords: *Inclusive Higher Education, Indigenous Papuan Students, Islamic Religious Education, Stereotypes*

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a strategic role in developing human capital, promoting social mobility, and supporting sustainable development in Papua. However, access alone does not guarantee sustained participation or academic success among Indigenous Papuan students, particularly when institutional environments fail to accommodate their sociocultural backgrounds. Anjaryani and Edwina (2020) highlight the limited integration of local cultural values into higher education, despite their potential to enhance students' learning motivation. This situation underscores the need for an inclusive educational approach that recognizes cultural diversity while ensuring equal academic opportunities.

At Sorong State Islamic Institute (Institut Agama Islam Negeri/IAIN Sorong), administrative data show an increase in the number of new Papuan students, from two in the 2022–2023 academic year to 38 in 2023–2024 and 52 in 2024–2025. Nevertheless, preliminary observations indicate that some students attend classes less regularly as the semester progresses, with some eventually ceasing to attend altogether. Data from the Faculty of Tarbiyah's Academic Information System (SIAT) for the 2023–2024 and 2024–2025 academic years also indicate that some Papuan students have a cumulative grade point average (CGPA) below 3.00, with some scoring below 2.00 (SIAT Study Program, Faculty of Tarbiyah, 2024). These figures raise concerns about sustained academic participation and performance but should not be interpreted as evidence of inherently limited academic ability. Rather, they highlight the need to investigate the educational, social, and institutional conditions that shape students' academic experiences.

Previous studies have identified challenges related to learning motivation, attendance, the learning environment, student engagement, discipline, and communication across language differences (Jua et al., 2024; Lestari et al., 2023; Putra et al., 2020). Jua et al. (2024) also identified communication difficulties arising from differences in instructors' accents. Other studies have documented negative stereotypes portraying Papuan students as academically weak, undisciplined, or incompetent (Jua et al., 2024; Lestari et al., 2023; Nababan, 2022; Yunita et al., 2024).

Wulandari and Jones (2022) found that stereotypes, academic difficulties, and communication barriers affect Papuan students' social and academic integration. Nababan (2022) documented discrimination against Papuan students seeking rental accommodation, while Wijanarko and Syafiq (2017) examined stereotypes concerning their discipline and academic abilities. More recent studies have highlighted experiences of being perceived as different or exotic, alongside psychological pressures such as culture shock and acculturative stress (Romadhoni et al., 2024). Hanifa et al. (2023) also identified cross-cultural communication barriers between Papuan students and non-Papuan faculty members. Taken together, these studies suggest that Indigenous Papuan students' educational experiences are shaped by multiple factors, including learning and communication challenges, stereotyping, social exclusion, and psychological adjustment.

In Islamic higher education, inclusion should be reflected in institutional practices grounded in justice and respect for diversity. Surah al-Hujurat (49:13) affirms human dignity regardless of ethnicity, providing a religious basis for educational equality (Muhibuddin & Mawaddah, 2025). Similarly, the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* emphasizes respect for cultural diversity, justice, and students' academic and social development (Hazaa et al., 2025; Putri,

2026). Islamic multicultural education likewise emphasizes justice and equal access rather than tolerance alone (Miftahussurur & Firdaus, 2024). Translating these principles into practice requires curricula that integrate local Papuan knowledge and Islamic values, equitable access to academic resources, social support, opportunities for cultural expression, collaboration with traditional and religious leaders, and sustained academic mentoring (Nur, 2022; Putri et al., 2025). Previous research has also addressed disparities in access, differences in religious understanding, and economic barriers (Zimmerman, 2000), as well as the importance of egalitarian and pluralistic religious education curricula (Abduloh et al., 2022; Hazaa et al., 2025; López Hernández, 2023). In addition, culturally responsive learning has been identified as a potential means of enhancing intercultural understanding and educational quality (Hazaa et al., 2025). These perspectives suggest that integrating Islamic values with local wisdom can provide a foundation for a more inclusive and equitable education system (Muhibuddin & Mawaddah, 2025).

Despite these contributions, previous research has largely examined Indigenous Papuan students' experiences from separate perspectives, including academic motivation, communication barriers, stereotyping, psychological adjustment, and multicultural education. The interplay of structural, social, psychological, and cultural barriers in shaping academic participation in Islamic higher education remains insufficiently explored in the literature reviewed for this study. To address this gap, the present study examines these barriers collectively and shifts the analytical focus from individual adaptation to the institutional conditions that shape students' academic experiences. Its contribution lies in examining how these interrelated barriers inform the development of more inclusive and culturally responsive Islamic religious education at Sorong State Islamic Institute. Potential institutional responses include recognizing and incorporating Papuan cultural knowledge, integrating Islamic values into the curriculum, collaborating with traditional and religious leaders, and providing sustained academic support. These strategies are proposed directions for institutional development rather than interventions whose effectiveness has already been established. They are informed by research on culturally responsive curricula (Abduloh et al., 2022; Hazaa et al., 2025), institutional support and mentoring, and educational inclusion through cultural recognition.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the structural, social, psychological, and cultural barriers faced by Papuan students in the Islamic Religious Education program at Sorong State Islamic Institute and to formulate institutional strategies for creating a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment. It addresses two research questions: (1) What structural, social, psychological, and cultural barriers do Indigenous Papuan students face in their academic participation and development? and (2) How can these findings inform the development of a more inclusive and culturally responsive Islamic Religious Education program that recognizes both local Papuan culture and Islamic values? By addressing these questions, the study provides a contextually grounded understanding of Indigenous Papuan students' academic experiences and offers insights to inform institutional development in Islamic higher education.

Literatur Review

Development of Higher Education Study Programs

Higher education plays a strategic role in driving social transformation, technological advancement, and economic development. Amid globalization and

rapid digital change, universities must prepare graduates to meet contemporary challenges while remaining responsive to local needs and sociocultural contexts. Balancing modernization with the preservation of local values is essential to producing graduates who are globally competitive without losing their cultural identities (Khomsinnudin et al., 2024).

In Papua, the development of Islamic higher education, particularly the Islamic Religious Education program, is important for empowering Indigenous Papuan students and supporting inclusive social, economic, and cultural transformation. However, barriers related to access, academic adaptation, negative stereotypes, and limited cultural inclusion continue to shape their educational experiences. Addressing these challenges requires a fair and culturally responsive learning environment that recognizes local knowledge, provides adequate academic support, and encourages student participation. Such an approach positions higher education as a long-term investment in human capital development in Papua and contributes to sustainable regional development.

Banks's (2010) theory of multicultural education provides an analytical framework for examining these challenges through five dimensions: content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and the empowerment of school culture and social structures. Applied to Islamic higher education, this framework helps examine how curricula, teaching practices, social interactions, and institutional structures can accommodate cultural diversity. It also provides a basis for exploring how Papuan local wisdom can be incorporated into teaching and learning to promote recognition, acceptance, and equal participation among Indigenous Papuan students. Thus, multicultural education offers a framework for developing more inclusive and culturally responsive Islamic Education programs that better address students' sociocultural backgrounds.

Stereotypes and Academic Achievement among Papuan Students

Stereotypes are widely held beliefs about particular groups that can oversimplify individual differences and reinforce prejudice (Bahry et al., 2024; Ramadani et al., 2024). Ethnocentrism can further complicate intercultural communication by encouraging people to judge others according to their own cultural norms (Laway & Rachma, 2024; Turcan & Abramihin, 2025). Allport's perspective on prejudice also highlights the risks of making generalized assumptions about social groups (Laway & Rachma, 2024; Nababan, 2022).

Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory provides a framework for understanding intercultural communication and adaptation (Gudykunst, 2005; Holliday, 2007). In higher education, negative stereotypes and cultural differences can contribute to culture shock, social discomfort, and difficulties in academic adjustment among students from Papua (Jua et al., 2024; Lestari et al., 2023; Wijanarko & Syafiq, 2017).

Academic achievement encompasses not only grades but also the development and application of knowledge, understanding, and analytical skills (Putri et al., 2024; Putra et al., 2020). It is commonly assessed using grade point average (GPA) (Hulu et al., 2024; Wahidah et al., 2023). Academic achievement is shaped by internal factors, such as motivation, preparedness, anxiety, and fatigue, as well as external factors, including family and campus environments, teaching quality, and instructional methods (Kusumastuti, 2020; Nababan, 2022; Wulandari & Jones, 2022). Economic constraints, academic pressure, and negative stereotypes can undermine students' motivation, whereas an inclusive learning environment and

support from faculty members, peers, and family can strengthen their self-confidence and participation. Accordingly, faculty support, spiritual values, a safe learning environment, and collaboration with traditional and religious leaders may contribute to student development (Firmansyah et al., 2024; Nur et al., 2024).

Vygotsky's social constructivist theory views learning as an active process shaped by social interaction and cultural context (Vygotsky, 1980). Knowledge is constructed through interactions with teachers and peers, while language serves as a tool for communication and thinking (Silva et al., 2024). The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) emphasizes the role of guidance from more knowledgeable others in helping learners develop skills beyond what they can achieve independently. Meaningful social interactions and collaborative learning environments are therefore important for cognitive development (Silva et al., 2024; Teguh & Ani, 2025). Research further highlights the importance of guided learning and social interaction in helping learners reach their potential (Damanik et al., 2025; Retnaningsih, 2024; Salsabila & Muqowim, 2024). Applied to Indigenous Papuan students, this perspective provides a basis for examining how communication difficulties, limited social support, cultural differences, and stereotypes may constrain learning opportunities (Jua et al., 2024; Lestari et al., 2023; Wijanarko & Syafiq, 2017). It also informs the analysis of culturally responsive curricula, inclusive teaching practices, and academic mentoring that recognizes students' cultural backgrounds.

Drawing on this perspective, the study examines structural, social, psychological, and cultural barriers as interrelated dimensions of Indigenous Papuan students' academic experiences. It focuses on how these barriers relate to institutional strategies that integrate local Papuan culture, Islamic values, and academic support. This approach aims to develop a more holistic and culturally responsive framework for inclusive Islamic higher education.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework integrates Banks' theory of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2010, 2016) and Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1980) to examine how structural, social, psychological, and cultural barriers shape Indigenous Papuan students' academic experiences in Islamic higher education. Banks' framework emphasizes culturally inclusive curricula, prejudice reduction, equitable pedagogy, and institutional recognition of cultural diversity. In the Papuan context, this framework positions local culture as a valuable resource for developing a more inclusive Islamic Religious Education program. Vygotsky's theory highlights the roles of social interaction, cultural context, and learning support in academic development. From this perspective, stereotypes, low self-confidence, and limited academic support may hinder knowledge construction and learning motivation, whereas interactions with faculty members, peers, and Indigenous communities can provide support within students' ZPD.

By integrating these theories, the study conceptualizes academic barriers as interrelated rather than isolated problems. Inequalities in educational facilities and access, social exclusion arising from negative stereotypes, and cultural differences in values and communication collectively shape students' learning experiences. This framework informs four proposed institutional strategies: (1) developing a curriculum grounded in Papuan culture; (2) integrating the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* to promote empathy, self-confidence, and respect for diversity; (3) fostering collaboration with traditional institutions and local religious leaders; and (4)

providing equitable and empathetic academic mentoring to strengthen social interaction and learning support.

Overall, the framework positions the development of an inclusive Islamic Religious Education program as an institutional process that connects cultural recognition, Islamic values, community partnerships, and academic support. These strategies provide a conceptual basis for addressing stereotypes and barriers to academic participation while promoting culturally responsive and equitable Islamic higher education. However, their effectiveness in sustaining students' academic participation and achievement requires empirical evaluation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm to examine the structural, social, cultural, and psychological barriers experienced by Indigenous Papuan students and to formulate strategies for developing an inclusive and culturally responsive Islamic Religious Education program. The research was conducted at Islamic higher education institutions in Southwest Papua, focusing on students' academic participation and achievement, as well as institutional responses to the barriers they encountered.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on the relevance of their experiences and knowledge to the research objectives. The study involved 44 participants: 35 Indigenous Papuan students (Orang Asli Papua/OAP), five lecturers, two program coordinators, and two traditional leaders. Participant selection considered students' academic experiences, lecturers' and coordinators' involvement in teaching and mentoring, and traditional leaders' knowledge of local culture. The student participants represented various ethnic groups, including Kokoda, Matlauw, Moi, Maybrat, and Biak, and came from areas including Fakfak, Kaimana, Tambrauw, Bintuni, Raja Ampat, and South Sorong. This diversity was intended to capture perspectives from students, institutional representatives, and Indigenous communities.

Lecturers and program coordinators were selected based on their roles in teaching, academic administration, or student support, while traditional leaders were included because of their knowledge of local cultural values and community practices. The sampling aimed to capture diverse experiences and institutional perspectives rather than achieve statistical representativeness. Participants' accounts were compared to identify similarities and differences across the groups.

Data were collected over six months in 2025 through semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), participant observation, and document analysis. The documents included curricula, academic reports, and records of student mentoring activities. Interview questions were tailored to participants' roles and explored students' academic experiences, teaching practices, institutional support, and local cultural values. FGDs examined shared experiences and differing perspectives on structural, social, cultural, and psychological barriers. Observations and document analysis provided additional context regarding academic activities, classroom interactions, curricula, and student mentoring. Field notes were used to document emerging issues and compare information across data sources.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (2014), comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data were organized by source and research question, then coded by identifying relevant statements, assigning initial codes, and grouping them into four categories of barriers: structural,

social, cultural, and psychological. Comparisons across participant groups and data sources were used to identify recurring patterns and differences, develop themes, and interpret the findings in relation to the theoretical framework.

The credibility of the findings was strengthened through source and method triangulation. Statements from students, lecturers, program coordinators, and traditional leaders were compared with observation notes and available institutional documents. Conclusions were verified by examining the consistency of the empirical evidence, analytical categories, and theoretical interpretations.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, the nature of their involvement, and how the data would be used. Verbal consent was obtained before data collection, whether conducted on campus or at participants' homes. Participation was voluntary, participants' identities were protected through the use of initials, and confidentiality was maintained. Particular care was taken when discussing sensitive experiences involving stereotypes, unequal treatment, and psychological pressure.

DISCUSSION

Factors Hindering the Academic Achievement of Papuan Students

Interviews and participant observations identified four interrelated factors that hinder Indigenous Papuan students' academic participation and achievement: structural, sociocultural, and psychological and emotional barriers. These factors are reflected in the students' experiences and are summarized in Tables 1–4. The following sections describe each category and its key indicators.

Structural Barriers

Students from Papua, particularly those living in the Klalin area, face challenges related to high transportation costs, financial constraints, and limited access to digital learning resources. These barriers affect class attendance, access to course materials, communication with peers, and assignment completion. One student (SB) explained that some students collect shells or sell goods at local markets to cover transportation costs, while others rely on rides from passing vehicles. Another student reported frequently arriving late for morning classes despite receiving a scholarship because they could not afford online transportation. As a result, they had to rely on financial assistance from lecturers and fellow students to reach campus.

These challenges are compounded by limited access to mobile phones, internet data, and academic support. Such limitations make it difficult for students to communicate with academic advisers, keep up with course materials, and submit assignments on time. The student BM team also identified inadequate learning facilities, limited access to academic literature, and difficulties balancing academic, organizational, and personal responsibilities. One lecturer reported frequent absences, low classroom participation, and literacy challenges among some Indigenous Papuan students, attributing these difficulties to their family economic circumstances and living environments.

The main indicators of structural barriers identified in the study are summarized in Table 1.

Table. 1: Indicators of Structural Barriers among Indigenous Papuan Students

No.	Indicator	Brief Description
1	Economic constraints	Limited financial resources for transportation, educational expenses, and daily necessities. Part-time work to meet these needs may result in class absences and reduced participation in extracurricular activities.
2	Limited Access to Learning Facili	Inadequate access to smartphones, laptops, internet connectivity, and mobile data plans needed to support learning activities.

	ties and Infrastructure	
3	Unequal Access to Scholarships	Limited access to affirmative action scholarships. Even students who receive scholarships may struggle to cover daily transportation costs and other living expenses.
4	Non-Inclusive Academic Policies	Curricula, assessment practices, and teaching methods that insufficiently accommodate students' cultural backgrounds and learning needs.
5	Limited Access to Academic Guidance and Counseling	Inadequate availability or accessibility of academic advising and psychosocial support services.

Source: Researcher's observations and interviews

Sociocultural Barriers

Negative stereotypes portraying Papuan students as lazy or academically underqualified contribute to feelings of insecurity, perceptions of discrimination, and withdrawal from social interactions. Consequently, some students tend to interact primarily with members of their own communities.

A student from Kaimana acknowledged receiving support from lecturers and fellow students but also noted differences in lecturers' approaches, particularly when students felt less confident or socially disconnected. Similarly, a student from Tambrauw reported being excluded from key roles in group assignments because peers considered him "incapable." Rather than withdrawing in response to this treatment, the student used the experience as motivation to demonstrate his abilities.

Other reported barriers included difficulties understanding formal academic language and the limited representation of Papuan cultural contexts in course materials. Some students also reportedly experienced difficulties attending morning classes because of social activities that continued late into the night. Taken together, these findings suggest that negative stereotypes, unequal social experiences, and limited cultural representation in the learning environment can undermine Indigenous Papuan students' self-confidence, academic participation, and sense of belonging.

The identified sociocultural barriers encompass both social and cultural dimensions. The social dimension includes negative stereotypes, discrimination in social interactions, limited academic networks, low participation in student organizations, and social isolation on campus, as summarized in Table 2.

Table. 2: Indicators of Social Barriers among Indigenous Papuan Students

No.	Indicator	Brief Description
1	Negative Stereotypes	Prejudices and generalizations that portray Papuan students as lazy or academically weak.
2	Discrimination in Social Interaction	Perceived or reported unfair treatment by lecturers or peers in academic and social interactions.
3	Limited Academic Social Networks	Difficulties building relationships with peers and establishing academic collaborations, potentially due to social and economic differences.
4	Low Participation in Student Organizations	Limited involvement in student organizations associated with low self-confidence or feelings of social exclusion.
5	Social Isolation and Alienation on Campus	Feelings of isolation and a lack of supportive peer relationships within the campus environment.

Source: Researcher's observations and interviews

The cultural dimension involves differences between cultural and academic expectations, difficulties understanding formal academic Indonesian, limited representation of Papuan culture in the curriculum, and challenges in expressing opinions in academic settings. These indicators are presented in Table 3.

Table. 3: Indicators of Cultural Barriers among Indigenous Papuan Students

No.	Indicator	Brief Description
1	Differences between Cultural and Academic Expectations	Tensions between family or cultural obligations and academic demands, particularly when institutional expectations do not adequately accommodate students' cultural contexts.

2	Difficulties with Formal Academic Indonesian	Difficulties understanding academic materials presented in formal Indonesian, which may affect comprehension and participation in learning activities.
3	Limited Representation of Papuan Culture in the Curriculum	Course materials and learning activities that insufficiently reflect local contexts, knowledge, and Papuan cultural values.
4	Challenges in Expressing Opinions	Reluctance or difficulties in expressing opinions, debating, or asking questions in class, potentially associated with cultural expectations concerning communication and respect for others.

Source: Researcher's observations and interviews

Taken together, Tables 2 and 3 show that sociocultural barriers involve both interpersonal relationships and the extent to which the academic environment accommodates students' cultural backgrounds. These dimensions may interact, shaping students' experiences of inclusion, participation, and belonging in higher education.

Psychological and Emotional Barriers

Several Indigenous Papuan students reported low self-confidence, feelings of alienation, and psychological stress in an academic environment dominated by non-Papuan students. These experiences affected their motivation to study and class attendance. HB (2025) reported experiencing differential treatment and stereotyping on campus, while ML (2025) described limited interaction with peers, loneliness, and reluctance to attend classes.

However, some students remained active in academic activities, drawing on their previous educational experiences in Java and support from families that valued education. This variation was observed among students from Kokoda in South Sorong who had recently moved to Sorong City, suggesting differences in their adaptation experiences and available support systems.

The main indicators of psychological and emotional barriers are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Indicators of Psychological and Emotional Barriers among Indigenous Papuan Students

No	Indicator	Brief Description
1	Feelings of Inferiority and Social Exclusion	Feelings of inadequacy, rejection, or isolation in an academic environment dominated by non-Papuan students, potentially undermining motivation and class attendance.
2	Pressure Arising from Social and Family Expectations	Pressure to uphold family or clan reputations, which may contribute to psychological stress and affect academic performance.
3	Stress Associated with Adapting to a New Environment	Difficulties adjusting to a campus environment, academic system, and social culture that differ from those of students' home communities.
4	Limited Access to Mental Health Support	Limited availability or accessibility of campus counseling services and professional psychological support.

Source: Researcher's observations and interviews

Institution- and Community-Based Strategies to Support Indigenous Papuan Students

The findings identify three areas of support for Indigenous Papuan students: religious programs and spiritual guidance, peer mentoring and community-based social support, and the integration of local cultural values into academic activities. These areas reflect both existing initiatives and recommendations from participants. However, their effectiveness has not yet been systematically evaluated.

Religious Programs and Spiritual Guidance

During the research, the researchers sought to provide intensive social and spiritual guidance to strengthen students' learning motivation. Although the outcomes of these efforts were not yet clearly evident, several faculty members had also developed communication approaches to address students' difficulties and encourage their participation in campus organizations and extracurricular

activities, including the Scout Movement, PMII, HMI, and HMPS. Religious study sessions, spiritual guidance, and Islamic discussion groups facilitated by faculty members and student organizations were also identified as potential means of providing encouragement and fostering social interaction.

Peer Mentoring and Community-Based Social Support

Several educators reported using persuasive communication and discussion to motivate students and help them address the challenges they faced. According to KPS, Indigenous Papuan students needed greater opportunities to participate in academic activities, transportation assistance to facilitate class attendance, and affirmative support through sustained mentoring. Both group and individual mentoring had been implemented, while study groups formed around regional origins or community affiliations offered potential opportunities for solidarity and information exchange.

The researchers had also initiated the formation of dedicated groups for Papuan students at the faculty level to facilitate communication and information sharing. During the academic year in which the study was conducted, the growing number of Papuan students from different regions had prompted discussions about establishing a Papuan student organization at Sorong State Islamic Institute. These initiatives represented initial efforts to strengthen peer support and student participation.

Integrating Local Cultural Values into Academic Activities

The findings highlight the need to incorporate Papuan cultural contexts into teaching materials and academic assignments, recognize students' cultural identities in classroom discussions, and involve traditional leaders in academic activities and character development. These approaches were proposed as ways to foster a more inclusive academic environment and provide meaningful opportunities for cultural expression.

A Papuan student, BM, emphasized the importance of equal opportunities and institutional recognition:

> *"I hope the university can pay more attention to indigenous Papuan students by providing equal opportunities for them to develop their potential whether through scholarships, academic mentoring, or spaces to express local culture. In this way, indigenous Papuan students can become more confident and achieve greater success."*

Similarly, SL, another student, recommended broader academic and non-academic support:

> *"My suggestion is for the university to establish a special academic support program for indigenous Papuan students, expand access to scholarships, organize soft skills training activities, and continue to provide opportunities for the preservation of local culture on campus. Through these measures, the quality of education for indigenous Papuan students can be further improved, and they can thrive both academically and non-academically."*

These perspectives highlight students' expectations regarding academic support, scholarships, soft skills development, and cultural preservation. Several educators also emphasized the importance of providing appropriate opportunities and platforms for Indigenous Papuan students to express themselves. Overall, the findings suggest that participants view academic support, equitable access to resources, and cultural recognition as interconnected institutional priorities. These initiatives and recommendations offer directions for future program development, although their effects on students' academic participation and achievement require further evaluation.

The Role of Academic Programs and Higher Education Institutions in Addressing Stereotypes and Promoting Inclusivity

The findings point to five institutional priorities: (1) academic

mentoring, scholarships, and other forms of support to strengthen students' self-confidence and address economic and academic barriers; (2) a culturally responsive curriculum that integrates local Papuan knowledge and Islamic values; (3) affirmative action policies that recognize students' cultural identities; (4) safe, discrimination-free spaces supported by cultural sensitivity training and multicultural dialogue; and (5) sustained academic mentoring and counseling.

One practical initiative is the provision of free on-campus accommodation for a small number of Papuan students, particularly those from the Kokoda community who face transportation and financial difficulties. Although students have welcomed this initiative, it has not fully addressed their needs. Some remain unable to leave their elderly parents, while others continue collecting and selling shellfish to cover transportation and daily living expenses. These findings highlight the need for sustained, individualized support to monitor academic progress, identify learning difficulties early, and strengthen academic literacy, research skills, and academic writing. Such support may enable Indigenous Papuan students to participate more fully in higher education and contribute to positive change in their communities.

Analysis of Barriers to Academic Achievement among Papuan Students

The findings indicate that Indigenous Papuan students' academic experiences are shaped by interrelated structural, social, psychological, and cultural barriers. This pattern is consistent with previous research identifying economic conditions, the learning environment, motivation, and social support as factors associated with academic achievement (Kusumastuti, 2020; Wulandari & Jones, 2022). Rather than reflecting individual shortcomings, these barriers highlight the importance of examining both students' access to educational resources and the inclusivity of institutional practices.

Structural barriers, including transportation costs, limited internet access, inadequate learning facilities, and insufficient financial support for daily needs, constrain students' attendance and academic participation. The experiences of students who must earn money before traveling to campus illustrate how economic hardship can intersect with academic engagement. This observation is consistent with Anjaryani and Edwina (2020), who emphasize the importance of a supportive educational environment for Indigenous Papuan students. From the perspective of Banks' (2010) multicultural education framework, these challenges raise questions of educational equity and institutional responsibility. Inclusive higher education therefore requires not only access but also sustained support that enables students to participate meaningfully in academic activities.

Social barriers, particularly negative stereotypes and perceived unequal treatment, further complicate students' academic experiences. Previous studies have shown that stereotypes can reinforce prejudice and hinder intercultural communication (Daryanto & Rahardjo, 2016; Juditha, 2015). Research on Papuan students has also identified social discomfort and cultural adaptation as continuing challenges (Jua et al., 2024; Lestari et al., 2023; Wijanarko & Syafiq, 2017). Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory provides a framework for understanding how uncertainty and anxiety can affect intercultural interactions (Gudykunst, 2005; Holliday, 2007) In this context, negative stereotypes, perceived unequal treatment, social exclusion, and limited interaction may hinder communication, academic participation, and the development of supportive relationships. These experiences may also be associated

with social isolation, low self-confidence, and reluctance to attend classes.

However, these findings do not establish direct causal relationships. Rather, the experiences should be understood in relation to the broader structural and cultural conditions affecting students, including limited access to learning resources and insufficient recognition of their cultural backgrounds.

Psychological barriers, including low self-confidence, isolation, and reluctance to attend classes, are closely linked to students' social experiences. Previous studies have identified motivation and anxiety as factors associated with academic achievement and highlighted the importance of support from faculty, peers, and family (Kusumastuti, 2020; Nababan, 2022; Wulandari & Jones, 2022) These findings suggest that student engagement cannot be understood independently of students' sense of belonging and the social environment in which learning takes place.

Vygotsky's (1980) sociocultural theory helps explain the importance of social interaction and guided learning in addressing these challenges. Learning develops through interactions mediated by language, culture, and shared experiences (Andriansyah, 2024; Muhibin & Hidayatullah, 2020; Subarjo et al., 2023). The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that guidance from instructors, peers, and mentors can help students develop abilities beyond what they can achieve independently. However, reported limitations in academic guidance indicate the need for more consistent mentoring, collaborative learning, and responsive academic support.

Cultural barriers also affect student engagement, highlighting the need to balance academic development with recognition of local knowledge and sociocultural contexts (Khomsinnudin et al., 2024). The limited representation of Papuan culture in learning materials and difficulties with academic language reveal a gap between students' experiences and institutional practices. These findings reflect Vygotsky's (1980) emphasis on the mediating roles of language and culture, as well as Banks and Banks (2010) focus on content integration and knowledge construction. Incorporating Papuan contexts into teaching materials, discussions, and assignments may promote meaningful learning and student participation while maintaining academic standards.

Overall, structural inequalities, stereotypes, psychological experiences, and limited cultural representation interact to shape Indigenous Papuan students' academic experiences. Banks and Banks (2010) multicultural education framework emphasizes institutional equity and inclusion, while Vygotsky's (1980) theory highlights culturally meaningful interactions and guided learning. Together, these perspectives underscore institutional responsibility beyond individual adaptation. An inclusive Islamic Religious Education program therefore requires equitable access to learning resources, efforts to reduce prejudice, a culturally responsive curriculum, and sustained academic support. The long-term effects of these approaches on academic achievement, however, require systematic evaluation.

Culture- and Religion-Based Education Development Strategy

Culture- and religion-based educational development offers a contextually relevant approach to promoting inclusive Islamic higher education in Papua. Previous research has emphasized the importance of responding to local sociocultural realities while preserving cultural identity (Khomsinnudin et al., 2024; Nur, 2022). The findings of this study suggest that incorporating Papuan cultural contexts into course materials, case studies, and academic activities may strengthen

students' self-confidence and participation. This approach aligns with Banks and Banks (2010, 2016) multicultural education framework, particularly its emphasis on content integration, knowledge construction, and equitable pedagogy.

Islamic values also provide an important foundation for students' character development and motivation. Firmansyah et al. (2024) and Nur et al. (2024) highlight the relevance of spiritual values, supportive learning environments, and collaboration with religious and traditional leaders in student development. In this study, religious mentoring, spiritual discussions, and faith-based student activities are proposed as ways to foster responsibility, cooperation, resilience, and a sense of belonging. These practices should complement rather than replace academic guidance and material assistance.

Vygotsky's (1980) sociocultural theory further emphasizes that learning develops through social interaction, language, and cultural context. This perspective is relevant to the findings concerning students' difficulties with formal academic language, limited access to academic guidance, and exclusion from group activities. Research applying Vygotsky's theory to Islamic education likewise highlights the importance of social interaction and guided learning (Muhibin & Hidayatullah, 2020). The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development suggests that guidance from lecturers, peer mentoring, and collaborative learning can support students' academic development. Incorporating Papuan cultural knowledge and locally relevant examples may also help bridge students' lived experiences and formal academic learning (Khomsinnudin et al., 2024; Nur, 2022).

However, culturally responsive education requires more than curriculum adaptation. The findings indicate that negative stereotypes, perceptions of unequal treatment, and social exclusion may hinder students' participation and sense of belonging. These concerns are consistent with Hanifa et al. (2023), who examined intercultural communication between Papuan students and non-Papuan lecturers, and Wulandari and Jones (2022), who discussed Papuan students' academic and social integration.

Banks and Banks' (2010) framework complements Vygotsky's theory by emphasizing prejudice reduction, equitable pedagogy, and institutional While Vygotsky's theory explains the role of social interaction and guided learning, Banks and Banks' framework highlights institutional responsibility for equitable participation. Higher education institutions should therefore promote respectful intercultural dialogue, ensure equal opportunities in classroom activities, and create supportive environments in which students can express their views without stigma. Collaboration with traditional institutions and religious leaders can further connect academic learning with local knowledge and community support, consistent with Nur's (2022) discussion of religious education grounded in local wisdom. Although these approaches provide a basis for developing inclusive Islamic Religious Education, their effects on student participation and academic achievement require further empirical evaluation.

Overall, four interrelated strategies are proposed: integrating Papuan culture and local wisdom into the curriculum, promoting the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* in campus life, building partnerships with traditional institutions and religious leaders, and providing sustained, culturally responsive academic support. Banks and Banks' (2010) emphasizes institutional responsibility for equity and inclusion, while Vygotsky's (1980) theory highlights cultural mediation and social support in learning. Together, these perspectives provide a foundation for developing an

inclusive Islamic Religious Education program that recognizes cultural identity and promotes academic participation. The effectiveness of these strategies in improving long-term academic achievement remains to be established through further empirical research.

The Role of Study Programs and Higher Education Institutions in Promoting Inclusivity and Addressing Stereotypes

These findings highlight the institutional responsibility of Islamic higher education institutions to address stereotypes and ensure equal participation for Indigenous Papuan students. Participants reported perceptions that they were considered less academically capable and described experiences of exclusion from important roles in group tasks. These experiences are consistent with Wulandari and Jones (2022), who examined stereotypes and academic and communication barriers affecting Papuan students' integration; Nababan (2022), who documented discrimination against Papuan students in accessing rental housing; Hanifa et al. (2023), who investigated intercultural communication between Papuan students and non-Papuan lecturers.

Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory (Gudykunst, 2005; Holliday, 2007) helps explain how stereotypes and perceived unequal treatment can generate uncertainty and anxiety in intercultural interactions, potentially limiting students' participation and social relationships. Although this study did not establish direct causal relationships, the findings underscore the importance of respectful and supportive communication. Banks and Banks (2010) multicultural education framework complements AUM theory by emphasizing equity and prejudice reduction, while Vygotsky's (1980) sociocultural theory highlights the importance of social interaction and guided learning. Together, these perspectives support inclusive Islamic higher education through culturally responsive curricula, equitable participation, sustained mentoring, and material assistance. Integrating Papuan cultural knowledge and involving traditional and religious leaders may further strengthen cultural recognition and intercultural understanding (Khomsinnudin et al., 2024; Nur, 2022).

Overall, the study identifies four institutional priorities: integrating Papuan cultural knowledge into the curriculum, promoting multicultural and equitable learning, providing sustained academic and material support, and fostering intercultural dialogue and partnerships with traditional and religious leaders. Banks and Banks' framework and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory position inclusion as an institutional responsibility rather than merely an individual adaptation requirement. However, the effectiveness of these strategies in reducing stereotypes and improving long-term academic achievement requires further empirical evaluation.

Integration of Findings and Practical Implications

The findings indicate that Indigenous Papuan students' academic experiences are shaped by interconnected structural, sociocultural, and psychological and emotional barriers. Viewed through the lenses of multicultural education and sociocultural theory, these findings highlight the need for institutional support, cultural recognition, and supportive social relationships. Seven priorities are proposed: (1) providing culturally responsive academic guidance; (2) integrating multicultural education and the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*; (3) ensuring sustainable financial and housing assistance; (4) providing cultural sensitivity training; (5) strengthening partnerships with government agencies, traditional institutions, religious leaders, and local communities; (6) establishing

dedicated student services and supporting platforms for Papuan student organizations; and (7) regularly evaluating inclusive policies. These priorities aim to promote cultural recognition, social empowerment, and equitable learning opportunities. Their effectiveness, however, requires systematic evaluation.

CLOSING

Indigenous Papuan students face interconnected structural, sociocultural, and psychological and emotional barriers that affect their academic participation and learning experiences. Addressing these challenges requires sustained institutional commitment to four priorities: a culturally responsive curriculum grounded in Papuan local knowledge, inclusive Islamic higher education guided by the principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, partnerships with traditional institutions and religious leaders, and sustained academic and material support. This study contributes a context-sensitive perspective by framing inclusion in Islamic higher education as a shared institutional responsibility rather than merely an individual adaptation requirement.

The findings may inform the development of culturally responsive curricula, equitable student support services, and institutional policies that recognize Indigenous knowledge and cultural identity. However, the study's focus on a single institution and its qualitative design limit the generalizability of the findings. Further research should examine how these strategies are implemented and evaluate their long-term effects on student participation, learning motivation, and academic achievement across multiple higher education institutions in Papua.

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