

CHAPTER II

THE STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PÉCS

Today, society has formed a generation that is increasingly globalized as the world becomes more interconnected by technology. This shift ignited a more inclusive type of communication, characterized by interactions among a diverse variety of people. This type of communication is known as intercultural communication. According to Baker (2022), intercultural communication involves recognizing the importance of linguistic and cultural differences during interactions. Successful intercultural communicators are those who are open and appreciative of the diversity and distinctions among various cultures in a given setting. By embracing these differences, people can communicate effectively without barriers.

One example of a globalized world fostering intercultural communication is the implementation of the Student Exchange Program. This program enables university students from different countries to spend a semester or two studying overseas (Atalar, 2020, p. 63). Through this experience, students can meet and interact with peers from various backgrounds, thereby developing their intercultural communication competence. Previous research has shown that participating in the Student Exchange Program is one of the most effective ways to enhance one's competence of intercultural communication. (Atalar, 2020, p. 63).

Eastern European countries, such as Hungary, are frequently perceived as less developed compared to Western Europe due to the Soviet Union's ideology (Gibb et al., 1993 p. 16). Nonetheless, despite economic and social challenges, several countries in this region have made notable strides in various fields, including higher education. Hungary, in particular, has emerged as a favored destination for international student exchange programs. Institutions like the University of Pécs have made considerable progress in improving the quality of higher education. Their efforts centered on internationalization by forging

partnerships with foreign universities, enhancing student and staff mobility, and providing English-language programs to attract international students.

The Student Exchange Program at the University of Pécs is discussed in this chapter, alongside with the intercultural communication competence.

2.1 The University of Pécs

According to their official website, international.pte.hu, the University of Pécs, founded in 1367, is the oldest university in Hungary. Established by King Louis I, it has evolved significantly over the centuries, becoming one of Central Europe's most respected higher education institutions. The university offers over 300 academic programs across various levels, from undergraduate to doctoral degrees. Its faculties include Humanities, Business and Economics, Medicine, Law, Engineering and Information Technology, Natural Sciences, Arts, Social, and Cultural Sciences, providing students with diverse options to match their interests and talents.

The University of Pécs has a strong international reputation for academic excellence. It participates in numerous international exchange programs and collaborations, including Erasmus and bilateral agreements, facilitating cross-cultural learning and research. With ten faculties, 20,000 students, and nearly 2,000 faculty and researchers, the University of Pécs plays a significant role in Hungarian education and extends its influence beyond the city. It has been offering full-degree programs in English for 35 years and in German for 10, attracting over 4,500 international students from more than 80 countries. The university maintains extensive partnerships with other institutions and is active in international and regional networks.

2.2 The Student Exchange Program

Student Exchange Program is an initiative for university students studying abroad at one of their educational institution's partner universities (Magdalena et al., 2019, p. 24). University of Pécs offers Indonesian students a chance to broaden their horizons through two student exchange programs: the Indonesian International

Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) and the Indonesian Study Abroad Program. Both programs allow students to spend a semester abroad, immersing themselves in a new academic and cultural environment at the University of Pécs.

The IISMA program caters to students seeking a scholarship-funded opportunity. Eligible students are selected through a two-stage process consisting of document review and interviews (iisma.kemdikbud.go.id). For students who employ a self-funded experience, the Indonesian Study Abroad Program offers just one application process. Students will submit required documents and, upon acceptance, receive an LoA. They are then responsible for covering tuition fees (international.pte.hu).

Regardless of the chosen program, participants reap a wealth of benefits. They gain exposure to diverse classes, expanding their knowledge and academic skills in their chosen field. The experience fosters cultural immersion, broadens students' worldview and develops their intercultural communication skills. Additionally, navigating them in a new environment cultivates independence, self-reliance, and adaptability—quite the valuable assets for personal growth, to name a few. Both programs grant participants access to the same facilities and opportunities as full-time University of Pécs students. This includes libraries, sports facilities, cultural events, and student organizations (isc.pte.hu), further enriching their time abroad.

The University of Pécs' student exchange programs offer Indonesian students a unique chance to expand their academic horizons, immerse themselves in a new culture, and embark on a journey of personal development. Whether pursuing the scholarship-funded IISMA or the self-funded Indonesian Study Abroad Program, participants can expect a transformative and enriching experience that will shape their future endeavors.

2.3 The Influence of Living Overseas Experiences

Living overseas allows Indonesian students to immerse themselves deeply in a foreign culture. In their day-to-day lives, they will encounter and have to interpret cultural differences firsthand. This process of interpretation is pivotal, as

it shapes the growth and development of their intercultural competence (Mayer et al., 2024). Over the course of their 4-5 month stay in Hungary, Indonesian students acquire this experience through active engagement with the local culture and community.

During their time abroad, Indonesian students engage in conversations, interact with locals, and navigate various cultural norms and practices. These experiences provide them with valuable insights into different ways of thinking, behaving, and communicating. Through continuous exposure to cultural diversity, they learn to appreciate and respect cultural differences while also developing the skills to adapt and communicate effectively across cultural boundaries.

Moreover, the experience of living abroad enriches their newfound competence, equipping them with the qualities and perspectives needed to thrive in a globalized world. As they return to Indonesia, these students bring back not only academic knowledge but also a heightened awareness and appreciation for cultural diversity. They become qualified learners who are well-prepared to navigate the complexities of an interconnected and multicultural world.

2.4 Participant in Student Exchange Program at the University of Pécs

A total of 53 Indonesian students, representing a diverse range of universities across Indonesia, including University of Indonesia, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Malang State Polytechnic, Nahdlatul Ulama University, Tonggak Equator Polytechnic, Airlangga University, Bengkalis State Polytechnic, Padjadjaran University, Brawijaya University, Muhammadiyah Purwokerto University, Gadjah Mada University, Diponegoro University, Bogor Agricultural Institute, and Sepuluh Nopember Institute of Technology, participated in the University of Pécs' student exchange programs. These students, divided into two groups based on their funding source, embarked on a journey of academic and cultural exchange.

IISMA scholarship recipients, focusing on diploma programs in Community Development and Health, Sport, and Technology, comprised 39 of the participants. The remaining 14 students, enrolled in undergraduate programs,

participated through the Indonesian Study Abroad Program. During their exchange semester, the Indonesian participants were spread across various faculties at the University of Pécs, including Humanities and Social Science, Business and Economics, Law, Engineering, and Psychology. This interdisciplinary exposure enriched their academic experience as they interacted with students from diverse backgrounds, including Erasmus students and other full-time international students. These international classrooms fostered a vibrant exchange of ideas and perspectives, broadening the Indonesian students' understanding of global issues and approaches to their fields of study. The above data pertaining to these two programs are substantiated by the author's interview with one of the Study Abroad Program Coordinators through personal communication in the years of 2023.

2.5 Student Organization at The University of Pécs

The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is a non-profit international student organization. Their mission is to represent international students, providing opportunities for cultural understanding and self-development under the principle of Students Helping Students (esn.org). Established in 1989 during a meeting in Belgium, the organization plays a significant role in the Student Exchange Program. Currently, ESN operates in 33 European countries, encompassing all levels of education and training. By 2025, ESN aims to become the global network of the Erasmus Generation, dedicated to enhancing international education and offering self-development opportunities to two million young individuals. This initiative aims to foster intercultural understanding and drive positive societal change.

The University of Pécs offers a vibrant social scene for international students through the Erasmus Student Network (ESN). This organization throws events nearly every day, especially during orientation week, to help students explore the university and its surroundings. These events also play a crucial role in fostering interaction among the international student community.

One such example is the "Country Presentation" event, where students from specific countries have the opportunity to showcase their cultures. This includes presentations on traditions, cuisine, dance, and more. Games are also incorporated

throughout the presentations, creating a fun and diverse atmosphere that encourages interaction. Furthermore, at the beginning of each semester, ESN organizes a series of other fun events such as campus tours, introductions to university facilities, and city exploration activities. This "welcome week" serves as a fantastic introduction to Pécs and the university, making international students feel welcomed from the very beginning.