



Religious Moderation Education in Practice: A Study on International Students in a Middle Eastern University Dormitory

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Abstract

The international dormitory environment in the Middle East not only serves as a place of residence, but also as a complex socio-cultural and religious space for foreign students. As a residential area, dormitories offer various activities to foster social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence among students. This study aims to explore how various activities in dormitories can be a medium for the practice of religious moderation education. This study uses a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach. Data sources were obtained through in-depth individual and group interviews with twenty-five foreign students from five countries, namely Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Nigeria, and Bangladesh. All informants were foreign students living in university international dormitories. To strengthen the interview data, the researchers also conducted direct observations of the activities carried out, and even participated for one year in various activities of foreign students at the research site. All data were analyzed thematically using the qualitative software NVivo 12. The research findings reveal that religious moderation values such as tolerance, empathy, and respect for differences are not taught through formal programs but grow organically and are constructed through interactions in seven dormitory activities, namely i) cultural festivals, ii) clubs or communities, iii) volunteer activities, iv) mentorship programs, v) worship or religious rituals, vi) spiritually-based community service activities, vii) spiritual discussion groups. This finding provides a perspective for universities to function dormitories not only as a place to live, but as an inclusive environment that naturally fosters religious moderation.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world of higher education, the number of foreign students continuing their studies abroad continues to increase (Dirgantari, 2012; Mali, 2020; Syamsunardi, 2022). International students bring diverse cultures, values, and perspectives that enrich the academic and social environment in higher education institutions (Agung, 2017; Darussalam et al., 2025; Eqzaputri et al., 2025; Khotijah & Hidayah, 2025). However, they also face various challenges such as adapting to a new culture, language differences, and limited social networks. These

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challenges can affect emotional well-being, social interaction, and their spiritual development (Handayani, 2015; Ihsan, 2015).

International dormitories at universities often serve as the primary residence for foreign students. These dormitories not only function as a place to live but also as a social environment where students can interact, collaborate, and learn from one another (Hariyati, 2020; Utomo & Tjondro, 2022). The activities carried out by students in dormitories, both academic and non-academic, have great potential to influence the development of social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence.

Social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence are important components in character building and individual well-being. Social intelligence involves the ability to interact effectively with others and build positive relationships. Emotional intelligence includes the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions towards others. Meanwhile, spiritual intelligence relates to the search for meaning in life, values, and higher purposes (Ariantini et al., 2017; Azzahra & Nurjanah, 2022; Ratnasari et al., 2020).

International students often face challenges such as language, cultural, and educational system differences. This adaptation can cause stress, social isolation, and emotional uncertainty (Mugirotn & Mulawarman, 2023; Widiasih et al., 2020). Comprehensive support includes assistance in overcoming social, emotional, and spiritual challenges. Programs designed to meet these needs can enhance the student experience and help them develop positively during their studies (Aulia et al., 2021; Rahmah & Amaludin, 2021; Santoso et al., 2023; Solihat, 2018).

This study aims to explore the form of religious moderation education programs for foreign students on social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence in international dormitories at universities. By understanding the relationship between student activities and the development of this intelligence, it is hoped that effective strategies can be found to support the well-being and holistic development of foreign students (Hutabarat & Nurchayati, 2021; Wayong, 2017).

Previous studies have shown that social environments and extracurricular activities play an important role in the development of social and emotional intelligence. However, there are still limited studies that specifically examine religious moderation education programs for foreign students in international dormitories. That is why this research is important to find out how religious moderation education is internalized through daily social practices in dormitories, which can indirectly train students' social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence.

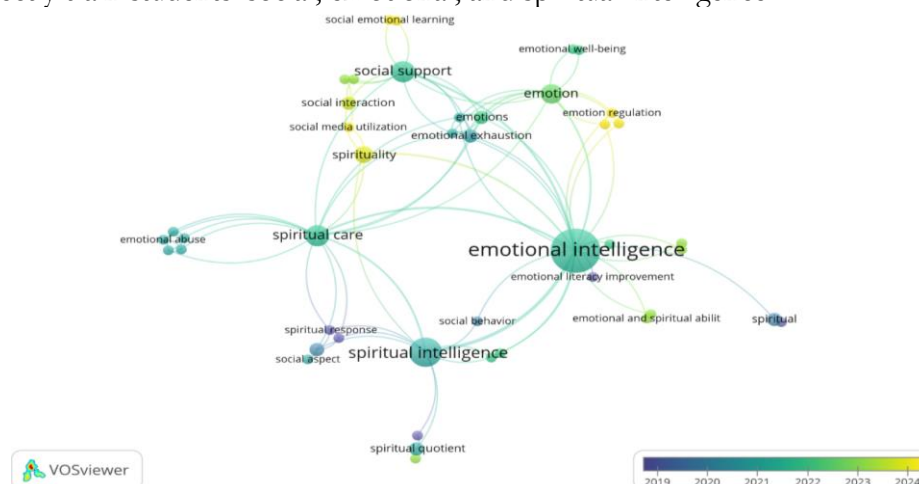


Fig 1. Visualization analysis using Vosviewer based on the keywords social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence by researchers (Scopus database)

The author found that research using the keywords social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence is still very limited. Based on a Scopus data analysis conducted on September 15, 2024, it was found that there were 59 research documents related to social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence from various countries around the world. However, no documents were found that specifically discussed the form of religious moderation education when internalized through daily social practices in international dormitories. Therefore, more in-depth research on this topic is needed.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach. The ethnographic approach is a research approach that focuses on a deep understanding of the culture, practices, and worldview of a particular group or community through direct observation and intensive interaction (Asril et al., 2023; Engkizar et al., 2024, 2025; Halik et al., 2018; Haryono, 2023; Kaputra et al., 2021; Maideja et al., 2023; Sabiruddin et al., 2024). This method and approach were chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of foreign students' experiences and perceptions of religious moderation education when internalized through daily social practices in dormitories and its impact on the development of social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence.

The population in this study consisted of twenty-five foreign students living in dormitories at several universities. The research sample was selected using purposive sampling, namely foreign students who had lived in the dormitory for at least one year (Purnamasari et al., 2017a; Tambun, 2022). This criterion was chosen to ensure that participants had sufficient experience in participating in dormitory activities.

Data was collected through several techniques, namely in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. The collected data was analyzed using Nvivo12 qualitative software (Abidin et al., 2023; Tambun et al., 2023). This research method was designed to provide a comprehensive picture of the form of religious moderation education when internalized through daily social practices in dormitories, using qualitative methods with an in-depth ethnographic approach and systematic thematic analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study has successfully revealed that religious moderation values such as tolerance, empathy, and respect for differences are not taught through formal programs, but grow organically and are constructed through interactions in seven dormitory activities, namely i) cultural festivals, ii) clubs or communities, iii) volunteer activities, iv) mentorship programs, v) worship or religious rituals, vi) spiritually-based community service activities, vii) spiritual discussion groups. These findings are summarized in several themes as shown in the following figure.

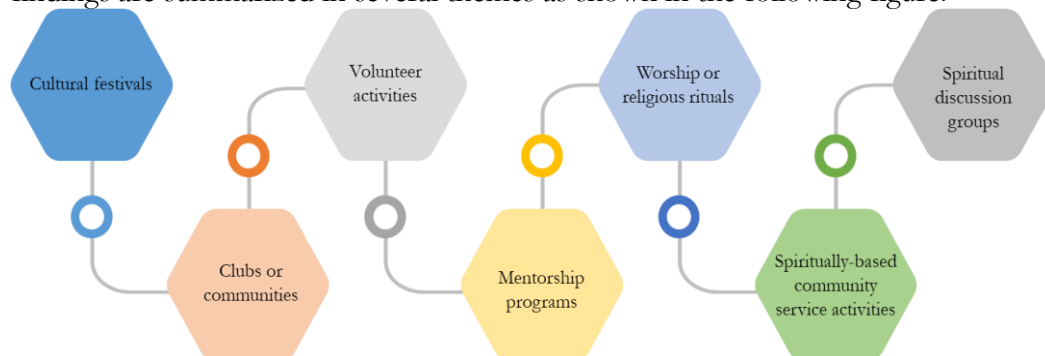


Fig 2. Religious moderation education activities for international students

The first is the cultural festival program. Cultural festivals held at the dormitory are an effective medium for instilling the values of religious moderation in a subtle and enjoyable way. When foreign students from Malaysia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, and other countries gather to present their traditional clothing, dances, and cuisine, informal discussions arise about how religious values influence their cultures. Through this direct experience, students not only “know” about differences, but learn to “appreciate” them and see them as a shared treasure. The cultural festival program was described by several informants in the following interviews.

“...cultural festival program, I learned that even though worship practices differ, the values of goodness in each tradition are the same (informant 1); preparing for the festival taught us real cooperation. We learned to unite our differences to create something beautiful (informant 2); Through this festival, I realized that differences in traditions and beliefs are not barriers, but rather enrich spirituality. I learned to appreciate other ways of worshiping God, which sharpened my spiritual intelligence to be more tolerant (informant 3)”

A cultural festival is an event held by foreign students living in international dormitories to celebrate and introduce the cultural diversity of various countries. This event usually features various cultural aspects such as food, dance, music, traditional clothing, art, and handicrafts (Cahya & Ramadhana, 2023; Misnawati, 2023). The main purpose of cultural festivals is to promote understanding, tolerance, and appreciation between cultures, as well as to provide opportunities for students to share their cultural heritage with the wider campus community. Cultural festivals such as this are not only a form of entertainment and education, but also play an important role in building a more inclusive and diverse campus community (Anggoro et al., 2023; Sulianita & Qorib, 2023).

Second are clubs and communities. Clubs and communities in international university dormitories were formed as a tangible manifestation of a holistic religious moderation education program for foreign students. Through interactions in interest-based groups such as art, sports, or volunteer clubs, students from various religious and cultural backgrounds learn to collaborate, manage conflicts, and build empathy, which directly hones their social intelligence. The existence of these clubs and communities was conveyed by several informants in the following interviews.

“Joining the Cultural Arts Club taught me that religious moderation grows naturally when we collaborate. Through art, social intelligence is honed as we learn to communicate across cultures (informant 4); in the Cultural Arts Club, I learned religious moderation in the most natural way through collaboration... (informant 5)”

Clubs and communities organized by international students residing in university dormitories are groups or organizations formed based on specific interests, hobbies, and objectives (Hendra, 2018; Rochman Hadi Mustofa & Agnes Defiana, 2024). These clubs provide opportunities for students to engage in various activities that enrich their experiences, help them build social networks, and support their adaptation to new environments. These clubs and communities include language clubs, sports clubs, art clubs, academic clubs, religious clubs, and social clubs. By joining these clubs and communities, international students can enjoy a richer and more diverse educational experience, as well as build strong and meaningful relationships during their studies abroad.

Third is the volunteer program. The volunteer program at the international dormitory is a tangible manifestation of transformative religious moderation education for foreign students. Through social activities such as community service, students from various religious backgrounds learn to work together directly for universal humanitarian goals. This statement was conveyed by several informants in

the following interviews.

“The volunteering program taught me that serving others knows no religion. When we worked together to build houses for disaster victims, what we saw were not Muslims or Christians, but people who needed help. This strengthened my spirituality and empathy (informant 20); ... by becoming a volunteer, I learned to listen and understand the needs of others without prejudice. My social and emotional intelligence was honed through direct interaction with people of different cultures and beliefs (informant 21); Volunteering is the most tangible form of religious moderation. We work together based on universal human values (informant 22)”

Volunteering activities carried out by foreign students living in international dormitories at universities are activities carried out voluntarily to provide assistance or services to other people, communities, and organizations. These activities aim to make a positive contribution to society while providing valuable experiences for students in personal development and social skills (Fahmi & Yulita, 2023; Hamzah et al., 2022; Yusuf et al., 2020). These volunteer activities include environmental and conservation efforts, health services, and humanitarian activities. By participating in volunteer activities, international students not only make a positive contribution to the local community but also gain experience in personal, social, and professional development.

Fourth is the mentorship program. The mentorship program at the international dormitory plays a strategic role in instilling the value of religious moderation through a personal approach. Mentors not only guide foreign students in academic and cultural adaptation, but also facilitate the development of social intelligence through modeling interfaith interactions, honing emotional intelligence in managing cultural conflicts, and deepening spiritual intelligence by becoming a sounding board for reflecting on universal values in diversity, thereby creating organic and sustainable internalization of religious moderation. This statement was conveyed by several informants in the following interviews.

“... my mentor helped me understand the local culture without having to abandon my religious identity. I learned to balance tradition and beliefs with my new environment (informant 23); Discussions with my mentor taught me how to deal with differences of opinion in a mature way. My emotional intelligence developed in responding to diversity (informant 24); Through the mentorship program, I discovered ways to practice spiritual values in a multicultural life (informant 25)”

The mentorship program implemented by foreign students living in international dormitories at universities is an initiative in which senior students or academic staff assist and guide newly arrived foreign students to adapt to the academic, social, and cultural environment at the university. This program is designed to facilitate a smoother transition for international students, help them overcome challenges they may face, and support their academic success and well-being (Purnamasari et al., 2017b; Rahmalina et al., 2023; Tjilen et al., 2023; Zakiyah et al., 2023).

Some forms of mentorship programs include academic mentoring, cultural orientation, socialization and social support, career development, and emotional support. The main objective of these mentorship programs is to ensure that international students are supported and connected, and able to overcome any obstacles they may encounter while studying abroad. These programs also encourage cross-cultural interaction and enrich students' experiences in a diverse environment.

The fifth is worship and religious rituals. The worship and religious ritual facilities program at the international dormitory is an important foundation for

religious moderation education by providing a safe space for each student to practice their respective religions. This statement was conveyed by several informants in the following interviews.

“With separate but adjacent places of worship, I learned that we can practice our respective beliefs while maintaining peace together (informant 11); the experience of worshipping in this multicultural environment strengthened my spirituality (informant 12)”

Religious worship and rituals carried out by foreign students living in international university dormitories refer to religious activities held to support the spiritual and religious needs of students from various religious backgrounds. These activities are important for maintaining spiritual balance, providing comfort, and ensuring that students can practice their religion even though they are far from home (Kusumastuti, 2021).

Some forms of worship and religious rituals that may be available include regular congregational prayers, places of worship on campus, religious holiday celebrations, religious classes and discussions, joint religious activities, and spiritual support. The main purpose of worship and religious rituals is to ensure that international students have access to the facilities and support they need to maintain and practice their religious beliefs (Martin & Hafer, 2009; Pandya, 2017). This also helps to create an environment that respects diversity and supports inclusion for all students, regardless of their religious background.

The sixth is spiritual-based community service activities. Spiritual-based community service programs provide a concrete space for practicing religious moderation. Through activities such as interfaith social service, foreign students hone their social intelligence by learning to collaborate in diversity. This statement was conveyed by several informants in the following interviews.

“Through interfaith social service, I learned that serving others is the universal language of all religions. This strengthened my spirituality (informant 13); working with other religious communities taught me to respect differences. My social intelligence developed as I came to understand new perspectives (informant 14); community service opened my eyes to the fact that values of goodness exist in all beliefs. This experience has matured the way I relate to differences (informant 15)”

Spiritual-based community service activities carried out by foreign students living in international dormitories at universities are initiatives that combine spiritual or religious values with concrete actions to make a positive contribution to the surrounding community. These activities are usually driven by principles of humanity, compassion, and solidarity that stem from the religious beliefs or spiritual values embraced by the students (Adawiyah, 2016; Yuliyanti & Wasisto, 2021).

Some forms of spiritual-based community service activities include religious-based social activities, educational and outreach programs, social service at places of worship, spirituality-based environmental activities, health services and humanitarian aid, community empowerment programs, and interfaith activities. The main objective of these activities is to have a positive impact on society through an approach rooted in spiritual values. In addition, these activities also help students deepen their understanding and experience of their religious teachings or beliefs, while building greater empathy and social responsibility.

The seventh is the spiritual discussion group. The spiritual discussion group serves as a strategic forum for foreign students to develop religious moderation. Through open dialogue about the universal values of various beliefs, participants practice social intelligence by learning to listen to different perspectives, hone their emotional intelligence by respecting each other's feelings, and deepen their spiritual

intelligence by reflecting on the commonalities between religions. This statement was conveyed by several informants in the following interviews.

“Spiritual discussions broadened my horizons. It turns out that there are many similar human values in all religions (informant 16); I learned to listen to and respect opinions about different beliefs. My social intelligence has been honed (informant 17); discussion groups helped me understand spirituality more deeply. Differences are no longer seen as a threat, but as a source of richness (informant 18)”

Spiritual discussion groups organized by foreign students living in international university dormitories are forums or meetings where students gather to discuss topics related to spirituality, religion, and inner life. This activity provides an opportunity for students from various religious and belief backgrounds to share their views, deepen their spiritual understanding, and learn from one another in an open and inclusive atmosphere (Khilmiyah & Wiyono, 2021; Mumthi'ah Alkautzar et al., 2018; Rosadi, 2023).

Some aspects of spiritual discussion include the exchange of spiritual views, learning about other religions, increasing understanding and tolerance, reflection and meditation, understanding ethical and moral issues, spiritual support, and interfaith collaboration. The main purpose of this spiritual discussion group is to create a space where students can explore and deepen their spiritual lives in a supportive and inclusive atmosphere. It also helps them build a close-knit community based on shared values, increase spiritual awareness, and develop a broader understanding of the spiritual world.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that values of religious moderation such as tolerance, empathy, and appreciation for differences are not formed through formal programs, but develop organically through interactions within seven dormitory activities. These seven activities - cultural festivals, clubs or communities, volunteer activities, mentorship programs, religious practices, spiritually-based community service, and spiritual discussion groups - have created an ecosystem that allows international students to naturally construct an understanding of religious moderation. Through this process, the values of religious moderation are not only understood cognitively but are also internalized and practiced in daily life within the international dormitory environment.

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DECLARATIONS

Author Contribution

Nuha Sufina Binti Saidi: Writing-Preparation of original manuscript, **Nur Akashah Binti Zulkefli:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Visualization, Investigation, Improve Content, **Dasrizal:** Data accuracy, Improve Language.

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The authors declare that this research was conducted without any conflict of interest in the research.

Ethical Clearance

The place or location studied has agreed to conduct research and is willing if the results of this study are published.

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