

International Academic Collaboration in Strengthening Higher Education: Synergy between Mulawarman University and UNISSA Brunei Darussalam

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the forms and impacts of international academic collaboration between Mulawarman University and Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA), Brunei Darussalam, in strengthening higher education. This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation involving lecturers, institutional leaders, and related parties. The results show that the collaboration is implemented through visiting professor programs, research collaborations, and academic exchanges, with visiting professors as the most dominant activity. This cooperation contributes to improving lecturer competence, students' global perspectives, learning innovation, scientific publications, and academic networks. However, challenges such as limited funding, policy integration, and program sustainability remain significant issues. The study concludes that international academic collaboration plays an important role in supporting higher education internationalization and improving institutional quality.

INTRODUCTION

The development of globalization has triggered a fundamental transformation in the higher education system in various countries, including Indonesia. Universities are no longer functioning solely as local institutions, but rather as part of a competitive and ever-growing global academic ecosystem. In this context, the internationalization of higher education has emerged as a key strategy to improve academic quality, the competitiveness of graduates, and the reputation of institutions at the international level (Mali, 2020). This condition encourages universities to expand their cross-border partnership network, covering the fields of education, research, and community service.

In line with increasing global demands, international academic collaboration has become a necessity. Various data and study results show that the internationalization of higher education in Indonesia has increased significantly, which is marked by an increase in student mobility programs, lecturer exchanges, and scientific publications together with foreign partners (Prakoso & Syakira, 2025). In fact, most of Indonesia's related scientific publications currently involve international cooperation, which confirms the importance of collaboration in improving the quality of research and expanding academic visibility at the global level.

The urgency of international collaboration is getting stronger in line with the demands to improve the quality of higher education in the face of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and Society 5.0 era. Universities are required to be able to produce innovations, integrate digital technology in learning, and develop students' global competencies. In this case, international cooperation acts as a strategic means for knowledge transfer, exchange of best practices, and strengthening the capacity of human resources (Astuti, 2016). In addition, this collaboration also contributes to accelerating the achievement of international standards in the implementation of higher education.

However, the implementation of international cooperation in Indonesia is still faced with various obstacles. These challenges include limited resources, differences in education systems between countries, and the lack of optimal governance of cooperation between institutions (Mutiarin et al., 2019). In addition, some of the cooperation that has been established is still administrative and has not had a significant impact on substantive academic quality improvement. This shows that there is a gap between the great potential of international cooperation and effective implementation on the ground.

On the other hand, a number of studies show that optimally managed international collaboration is able to make a real contribution to improving the quality of higher education. The collaboration not only improves the quality of scientific research and publications, but also expands academic networks, improves lecturer competence, and encourages innovation in the learning process (Purwaningsih et al., 2026). Therefore, it is necessary to develop a more integrated, sustainable, and institution-oriented cooperation model.

In this context, the collaboration between Mulawarman University and Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA) Brunei Darussalam can be used as a concrete example of the implementation of international academic

collaboration. Through various programs such as visiting professors, academic exchanges, and research collaborations, the two institutions seek to build synergy in strengthening the implementation of the tridharma of higher education. This cooperation not only reflects internationalization efforts, but also becomes a strategic space in the development of educational innovations and improving the quality of human resources.

Based on this presentation, this article aims to analyze the form, benefits, and implications of international academic cooperation between Mulawarman University and UNISSA Brunei Darussalam in strengthening higher education. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the literature on the internationalization of higher education and cross-border academic collaboration. Practically, the results of this discussion are expected to be a reference for universities in designing international cooperation strategies that are effective, sustainable, and have a real impact on improving the quality of higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization of higher education is a concept that refers to the integration of the global dimension into the main functions of higher education, including education, research, and community service. Mali (2020) explained that internationalization is not only limited to the mobility of students and lecturers, but also includes strengthening a globally oriented curriculum, research collaboration, and improving the quality of the institution as a whole. In this framework, internationalization is a crucial strategy for universities in increasing competitiveness at the international level.

In line with this view, Astuti (2016) emphasized that the internationalization of higher education in Indonesia is a strategic process that requires sustainable institutional capacity development. These efforts include improving human resource competence, strengthening the governance system, and expanding international cooperation networks. Without adequate internal readiness, the implementation of internationalization has the potential to not make a significant contribution to improving academic quality.

One of the main manifestations of internationalization is cross-border academic collaboration. This form of collaboration includes various activities such as joint research, collaborative scientific publications, academic exchanges, and visiting professor programs. Ghani and Diana (2023) stated that international collaboration is able to improve the quality of higher education through the exchange of knowledge, experience, and best practices between institutions. In addition, this collaboration also plays a role in strengthening the academic reputation of universities at the global level.

Furthermore, research by Bariyah et al. (2025) shows that international academic collaboration has a positive impact on improving the quality of human resources, especially in the development of lecturer and student competencies. Through cross-border cooperation, academics gain access to global resources, innovative learning approaches, and wider research

opportunities. This is an important factor in improving the quality of graduates as well as the competitiveness of the workforce.

However, the implementation of international collaboration is inseparable from various challenges. Mutiarin et al. (2019) revealed that obstacles in governance, differences in education systems, and limited resources are still the main obstacles to the effectiveness of international cooperation. In addition, Ansori and Sulhan (2025) added that cultural, language, and institutional readiness factors in managing collaboration programs in a sustainable manner are also challenges that need to be overcome.

On the other hand, advances in digital technology have driven transformation in the implementation of international academic collaboration. Purwaningsih et al. (2026) stated that the use of technology in higher education allows collaboration without geographical boundaries, such as through online learning, digital-based collaborative research, and international scientific publications. This digitalization opens up great opportunities to expand the reach of cooperation while increasing the efficiency of its implementation.

Although various studies have examined internationalization and academic collaboration, there are still gaps in research that focuses on the real implementation of cooperation between universities in the regional region, especially between Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam. Therefore, the study of the collaboration between Mulawarman University and UNISSA is relevant to fill this gap. This research is expected to be able to provide an empirical overview of the practice of international academic collaboration and its contribution to strengthening higher education, both conceptually and applicatively.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive type that aims to understand in depth the phenomenon of international academic collaboration between Mulawarman University and Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University (UNISSA) Brunei Darussalam. The qualitative approach was chosen because it was able to reveal the meaning, process, and dynamics of cooperation in a contextual and comprehensive manner (Moleong, 2017). The focus of this research includes the analysis of forms of cooperation, program implementation, and its impact on strengthening higher education, so that the case study approach is considered appropriate as a research strategy.

The data sources in this study include primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with lecturers, institutional leaders, and parties directly involved in the implementation of international cooperation. In addition, observations of various academic activities such as visiting professor programs and research collaborations are also carried out to strengthen empirical findings. The secondary data was obtained from official documents, cooperation reports, and relevant scientific publications. The data collection techniques used include interviews, observations, and documentation, which are common techniques in qualitative research to produce valid and comprehensive data (Sugiyono, 2019). The

determination of informants is carried out through purposive sampling, which is based on certain criteria such as direct involvement in international cooperation and relevant academic experience.

The data analysis process in this study refers to the interactive analysis model developed by Miles and Huberman, which includes three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). The data reduction stage is carried out by selecting and focusing data that is relevant to the research objectives. Furthermore, the data is presented in the form of a descriptive narrative to facilitate the interpretation process. The final stage in the form of drawing conclusions is carried out continuously throughout the research process. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, this study applies triangulation techniques both in terms of sources and methods, so that the results of the research can be scientifically accounted for and provide an accurate picture of the practice of international academic collaboration.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on qualitative analysis, international academic collaboration between Mulawarman University and Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University (UNISSA) includes three main forms, namely visiting professors, research collaborations, and academic exchanges such as public lectures and international seminars. The visiting professor program is the most dominant because it is easy to implement and has a direct impact on learning. Meanwhile, research collaboration is beginning to develop through joint publications, although it still depends on individual lecturers' initiatives.

The implementation of cooperation takes place through the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages. Planning is characterized by the preparation of MoUs and MoA as a formal basis, implementation through collaborative academic activities, and evaluation through program monitoring. In general, implementation is quite effective, but it is still constrained by limited funding, technical coordination, and not optimal integration in institutional policies.

In terms of impact, this collaboration contributes to improving the quality of higher education, as seen from the increase in students' global insights, learning innovations, and lecturer competence. In addition, there has been an increase in scientific publications and the expansion of academic networks. This shows that international cooperation not only has an academic impact, but also strengthens the position of the institution globally.

These findings are in line with Purwaningsih et al. (2026) which affirm the contribution of collaboration to the quality of learning and research. However, in contrast to Mutiarin et al. (2019) who assessed that cooperation is still administrative, this study shows that collaboration has been implementive, even though it has not been strategically integrated. This indicates progress, but it still requires strengthening governance.

Theoretically, these results reinforce Mali's (2020) concept of internationalization that global integration includes curriculum and research,

and is in line with Astuti (2016) regarding the importance of strengthening institutional capacity. The implementation of the program shows that institutional capacity is beginning to develop, but it is not systemically optimal.

The implication is that international collaboration plays a strategic role in improving the quality of higher education. Theoretically, it enriches the study of practice-based internationalization, and practically becomes a reference for the development of more integrated and results-based cooperation.

The success of collaboration is influenced by supporting factors such as institutional commitment and shared vision, as well as inhibiting factors such as budget constraints, system differences, and cultural barriers. This finding is consistent with Ansori and Sulhan (2025) related to structural and cultural constraints.

In addition, digital technology is a key factor in the sustainability of collaboration, enabling efficient cross-border interaction. This is in line with Purwaningsih et al. (2026) which emphasizes the role of digitalization in expanding academic cooperation.

However, this study has limitations in the scope of a single case study, the dominance of lecturers' perspectives, and the absence of quantitative measurements. Therefore, further research is recommended to use a mixed methods approach, expand the object of study, and measure the impact through performance indicators such as international publications and academic mobility.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research confirms that the international academic collaboration between Mulawarman University and Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA) is a tangible manifestation of the implementation of the internationalization of higher education which plays a role in strengthening the tridharma of higher education. The main results show that the form of cooperation developed includes visiting professor programs, research collaborations, and academic exchanges, with the visiting professor program as the most dominant activity and having a direct impact on the learning process. Although the implementation of cooperation has gone quite well through the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages, there are still obstacles in the aspects of policy integration and program sustainability.

The findings of this study provide an understanding that the success of international collaboration does not only depend on the existence of the program, but is also determined by the quality of governance, institutional capacity, and the level of strategic integration in university policies. These results reinforce the view that the internationalization of higher education is a comprehensive and sustainable process, as expressed in previous studies, while confirming that an activity-only approach is inadequate without the support of a robust institutional system.

Implicitly, this research makes a significant contribution in academic and institutional contexts. From the academic side, international collaboration has been proven to be able to improve the quality of learning, strengthen lecturer competence, and encourage the productivity of scientific publications.

Meanwhile, in the social and cultural context, cross-border cooperation plays a role in building global insights, strengthening cultural tolerance, and improving adaptability in a multicultural environment. Thus, international collaboration not only functions as a strategy to improve the quality of education, but also as a means of developing human resource capacity in accordance with global demands.

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Based on the results of the research, it is suggested that practitioners in higher education optimize the integration of international cooperation policies into sustainable institutional strategies, through the provision of special budgets, strengthening collaborative governance systems, and the use of digital technology to increase the effectiveness of programs such as visiting professors, academic exchanges, and joint research; for academics, there is a need to increase active involvement in cross-border collaboration through joint publication and the development of a globally oriented curriculum; Meanwhile, for stakeholders, regulatory and policy support is needed that is able to encourage synergy between institutions. For further research, it is recommended to expand the object of study to various institutions and regional contexts, apply more comprehensive data triangulation, and combine qualitative and quantitative approaches (mixed methods) to produce a more comprehensive understanding. In addition, an in-depth study of performance indicators such as academic mobility, the quality of international publications, and the long-term impact of collaboration needs to be carried out to enrich the understanding of the effectiveness of international cooperation in strengthening higher education in the future.

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