

## The Life Experiences of Non-Muslim Students at Muhammadiyah University: A Phenomenological Study on Inclusive Islamic Education

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study aims to explore the experiences of non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah University of Palopo within the context of inclusive Islamic education and to develop a relevant and contextual conceptual model. A qualitative approach with a hermeneutic phenomenological design was employed to investigate students' subjective experiences through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. The main findings include the adaptation process of non-Muslim students, which begins with a "culture shock" and transforms into acceptance and integration; Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah courses serve as arenas for negotiating meaning and identity, with diverse perceptions; patterns of identity negotiation are categorized as assertive, adaptive, and compartmentalized identities; transformative experiences emerge in cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions; and institutional support varies among universities, with institutions in urban-pluralistic areas demonstrating more systematic inclusive policies. Based on these findings, an inclusive Islamic education model was developed that integrates Islamic values with principled inclusivity, encompassing structural, pedagogical, relational, and spiritual dimensions. This research makes an original contribution by expanding the concept of inclusivity in Islamic education and offering an operational framework for the transformation of moderate and inclusive Islamic education in Indonesia. The study's limitations regarding location and resource context form the basis for recommendations for further testing.*

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi pengalaman mahasiswa non-Muslim di Universitas Muhammadiyah Palopo dalam konteks pendidikan Islam inklusif serta mengembangkan model konseptual yang relevan dan kontekstual. Pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologi hermeneutik digunakan untuk menggali pengalaman subjektif mahasiswa melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan studi dokumentasi. Temuan utama meliputi proses adaptasi mahasiswa non-Muslim yang

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diawali dengan "kejutan budaya" dan bertransformasi menjadi penerimaan serta integrasi; mata kuliah Al-Islam dan Kemuhammadiyah menjadi arena negosiasi makna dan identitas dengan persepsi yang beragam; pola negosiasi identitas terbagi menjadi identitas tegas, adaptif, dan kompartemental; pengalaman transformatif muncul pada dimensi kognitif, afektif, dan perilaku; serta dukungan institusional yang bervariasi antar perguruan tinggi, dengan institusi di wilayah urban-pluralistik menunjukkan kebijakan inklusif yang lebih sistematis. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, dikembangkan model pendidikan Islam inklusif yang mengintegrasikan nilai keislaman dengan prinsip inklusivitas berbasis prinsip, mencakup dimensi struktural, pedagogis, relasional, dan spiritual. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi orisinal dalam memperluas konsep inklusivitas pendidikan Islam sekaligus menawarkan kerangka operasional bagi transformasi pendidikan Islam yang moderat dan inklusif di Indonesia. Keterbatasan penelitian terkait konteks lokasi dan sumber daya menjadi dasar rekomendasi pengujian lebih lanjut.

**Keywords:** *Life Experience, Inclusive Education, Phenomenological Study, Non-Muslim Students.*

*Received: May 28, 2025; Revised: June 27, 2025; Accepted: July 8, 2025*

## I. INTRODUCTION

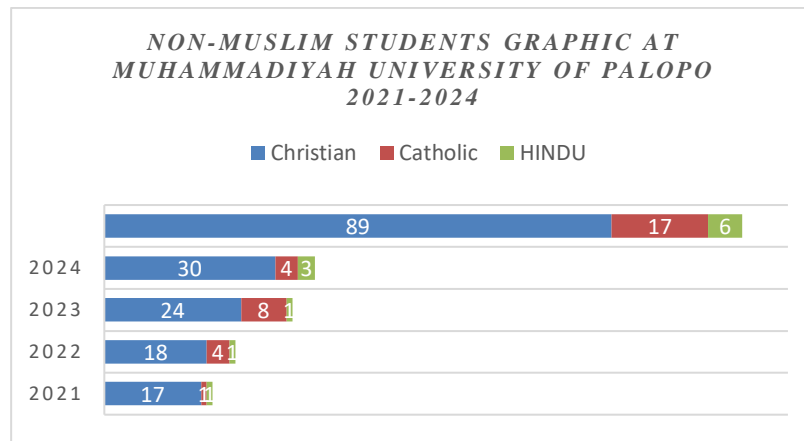
In recent decades, there has been a significant paradigm shift in global Islamic education from an approach that tends to be exclusive to a more inclusive orientation. This shift responds to the realities of modern, increasingly diverse, pluralistic societies (Basori et al., 2025). Islamic education is fundamentally rooted in universal values reflected in the concept of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy for all the worlds), which teaches respect for diversity as reflected in various verses of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

Muhammadiyah Higher Education consistently directs its focus towards inclusivity as an integral part of the education's vision and mission. This commitment is reflected in policies and practices that open educational access to students from various backgrounds, including non-Muslim students and other marginalized groups, without discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, or social status (Husnaini et al., 2021). Muhammadiyah's inclusive approach is not only based on the principle of universal humanity. Still, it is also deeply rooted in Islamic values emphasizing *rahmatan lil 'alamin*—compassion and justice for all humankind.

In this context, inclusive education is a concrete manifestation of Muhammadiyah's inclusive and progressive da'wah, prioritizing service and goodness for all parties. Thus, the focus on inclusivity is not merely a social response but also an epistemological and ethical reflection that enriches the tradition of Islamic education in Indonesia while simultaneously addressing the challenges of today's pluralistic and global society. This approach positions Muhammadiyah higher education institutions as adaptive, open, and relevant in the context of contemporary social dynamics and diversity (Nashir et al., 2019).

As one of the most prominent Islamic organizations in the world (Zarro et al., 2020), Muhammadiyah, in addition to engaging in the fields of *da'wah* (*amar ma'ruf* and *nahi mungkar*), is also active in the field of education. Muhammadiyah's educational

endeavors span elementary to higher education (Zaini, 2024). The public’s trust in Muhammadiyah Higher Education, especially Muhammadiyah University of Palopo, shows high enthusiasm, particularly among non-Muslim communities. According to data from the New Student Admission Unit of Muhammadiyah University of Palopo, there has been a continuous upward trend, as shown in the graph below:



**Figure 1.** Graph of Non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah University of Palopo

As a progressive Islamic educational institution, Muhammadiyah Higher Education has demonstrated its commitment to inclusivity by opening its doors to students from various religious backgrounds, including non-Muslim students. An interesting phenomenon is the increasing number of non-Muslim students pursuing their education at Muhammadiyah universities in the last decade. This trend raises questions about how Islamic educational institutions like Muhammadiyah can integrate Islamic values with the principles of inclusivity within the curriculum and campus culture, especially in the era of globalization and multicultural society. This integration poses a unique challenge that requires in-depth study to create a harmonious and accommodative educational model.

The main issue faced in this context is the potential tension between the Islamic da'wah mission, the ideological foundation of Muhammadiyah universities, and the educational inclusivity principles that must be applied. The experiences of non-Muslim students in navigating Islamic educational environments have not been comprehensively documented, leading to a gap in understanding how they adapt and interact within this educational system (Setiawan, 2025). Additionally, there is a lack of structured and empirically tested models of inclusive Islamic education in the specific context of Muhammadiyah universities.

This study aims to fill several gaps in the existing literature. *First*, most previous research on inclusive Islamic education focuses on primary and secondary education levels. In contrast, explorations in the context of higher education are still relatively limited. *Second*, studies on inclusivity in Islamic higher education generally use a quantitative approach, emphasizing institutional policies, but few have explored the phenomenological dimensions of non-Muslim students' experiences. *Third*, the inclusive education models developed so far come mainly from Western contexts, which may not be compatible with the unique characteristics of Islamic educational institutions based on community organizations such as Muhammadiyah in Indonesia. *Fourth*, research on integrating Islamic values with inclusivity principles in higher education

curricula is minimal, particularly studies examining it from the perspective of the direct recipients—non-Muslim students.

The originality of this research lies in the phenomenological approach used to uncover the authentic experiences of non-Muslim students in Islamic educational environments. This approach allows researchers to gain a deep and contextual understanding of the realities experienced by the research subjects. The significant contribution expected from this study is the development of an inclusive Islamic education model based on empirical data from students' direct experiences rather than solely on theoretical constructs (Mukhibat et al., 2024).

The theoretical objective of this study is to explore and interpret the phenomenological experiences of non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah universities, identify the factors influencing their adaptation and integration within Islamic educational environments, and formulate an integrated and sustainable inclusive Islamic education model based on empirical findings. Practically, this research aims to provide operational recommendations for developing inclusive policies, curriculum refinement, and implementing educational practices at Muhammadiyah universities. Its scientific contribution enriches the academic discourse on progressive Islamic education by integrating Islamic values with global inclusivity principles without compromising religious identity. It also builds a relevant conceptual framework for transforming Islamic education in Indonesia.

## II. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a hermeneutic phenomenological design (Al Zadjali et al., 2023). The phenomenological approach is chosen because it aligns with the research goal of deeply understanding the life experiences of non-Muslim students pursuing education at Muhammadiyah University of Palopo. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows the researcher to describe the experiences of the research subjects and interpret the meanings inherent in these experiences within a broader socio-cultural context (Fatah, 2024).

The hermeneutic phenomenological design is relevant to this study for several reasons. First, the research focuses on the life experiences of non-Muslim students within an Islamic educational environment. Second, this study aims to uncover the essence of these experiences through in-depth interpretation. Third, this approach enables the exploration of the complex interactions between religious values, educational practices, and students' academic and social adaptation in the specific context of Muhammadiyah higher education (Elida & Guillen, 2019).

The population in this study consists of all non-Muslim students currently enrolled at Muhammadiyah University of Palopo. According to the student data, 112 non-Muslim students attend Muhammadiyah University of Palopo. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling with maximum variation. The inclusion criteria for the sample are as follows: 1) active students who are non-Muslim (Christian, Catholic, and Hindu); 2) have been enrolled at Muhammadiyah University of Palopo for at least two semesters; 3) have taken the *Al-Islam* and *Kemuhammadiyah* (AIK) courses; and 4) are willing to participate in the study.

The selection of Muhammadiyah University of Palopo as the research location is based on several strong academic and contextual considerations. According to the student data

for 2024, the university has a non-Muslim student population of 112 (<https://pmb.umpalopo.ac.id/>), which is a significant number to examine the phenomenological experiences of non-Muslim students in the context of inclusive Islamic education at Muhammadiyah higher education institutions. Additionally, as an institution resulting from the merging of three Muhammadiyah universities in Palopo, Muhammadiyah University of Palopo shows progressive academic development dynamics with several accredited superior programs, providing a representative and conducive educational context for this study.

The university's commitment to inclusivity is reflected in its student admission policies without religious discrimination and support for diversity in academic and social campus practices. The Islamic values upheld, such as *ta'awun* (collaboration), *amanah* (trust), and *uswatun hasanah* (exemplary conduct), provide a strong philosophical foundation for examining and developing an authentic and contextual model of inclusive Islamic education. Therefore, Muhammadiyah University of Palopo is a strategic and relevant location for exploring the issue of inclusivity in Islamic education within Muhammadiyah higher education institutions.

Determining the number of participants is based on the principle of data saturation in phenomenological research (Nasir et al., 2023). This study's sample comprises 15 non-Muslim students from 5 different study programs at Muhammadiyah University of Palopo. The distribution of participants also considers the diversity of religious backgrounds, study programs, gender, and length of study to obtain a comprehensive perspective. The reason for selecting a sample of 15 non-Muslim students from 5 study programs at the Muhammadiyah University of Palopo is as follows: 1) In-depth phenomenological Approach. The phenomenological method emphasizes an in-depth understanding of subjective experiences rather than quantitative generalization. Therefore, a relatively small number of participants allows the researcher to explore in detail and comprehensively the meaning of each non-Muslim student's experience in the context of Islamic education; 2) Representation of Diverse Perspectives. By selecting participants from five different study programs and considering variations in religious background, gender, and length of study, this study ensures a sufficient diversity of perspectives to capture the complexity of adaptation and integration experiences in an Islamic campus environment (Septerio et al., 2025).

This is important for building a holistic and comprehensive understanding despite the limited sample size; 3) Data Quality Management and Analysis. The number of 15 participants allows the researcher to effectively manage data and conduct in-depth interviews, observations, and thematic analysis carefully, ensuring that the quality of the findings is maintained without losing the depth of phenomenological interpretation; (4) Anticipation of Representativeness Limitations and Researcher Subjectivity. The researcher acknowledges that the limited number of participants may affect the representativeness of the results (Hamidah, 2024). However, with a purposive sampling design and a focus on subjective narratives, this study anticipates these limitations by emphasizing internal validity and the richness of qualitative data rather than the number of participants alone.

The data collection phase begins with initial contact with potential participants to explain the purpose of the research, the procedures to be followed, and their rights as research subjects to build trust and transparency. Written consent for participation is requested through an informed consent form as a formal agreement before the data

collection process. In-depth interviews are then conducted to comprehensively explore the phenomenological experiences of non-Muslim students, complemented by participatory observation of academic and non-academic activities involving non-Muslim students to obtain contextual data (Nasir et al., 2023). Related documents such as Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah course syllabi, university policies on diversity, and student-written reflections are collected to enrich and validate the primary data.

The data analysis phase begins with verbatim transcription of all interview results to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the verbal data obtained. Observational data and documents are then systematically organized to facilitate the subsequent analysis. Data analysis is carried out according to the hermeneutic phenomenological method, which emphasizes deeply interpreting the meanings of participants' subjective experiences (Hamdani, 2024). Data triangulation and member checking are conducted as a verification effort to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings.

The model formulation phase begins with formulating theoretical propositions based on the research findings that have been analyzed to establish a solid conceptual foundation. The conceptual framework for the inclusive Islamic education model is then developed by integrating empirical findings and relevant theoretical frameworks. Model validation is carried out through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with experts in Islamic education and inclusive education practitioners to obtain feedback and refinement from academic and practical perspectives. The final stage is the formulation of the validated final model, along with implementation recommendations that can be applied in the context of inclusive Islamic education at Muhammadiyah University of Palopo.

This study uses three main data collection techniques to obtain a comprehensive picture of the experiences of non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah higher education institutions. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted with a duration of 30-60 minutes per participant, focusing on various aspects such as the background for choosing the university, experiences in taking Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah courses, academic and social adaptation processes, interactions with lecturers and fellow students, challenges faced and strategies to overcome them, perceptions of inclusion and exclusion, and the impact of Islamic education on personal values. All interviews are recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed verbatim for in-depth analysis. Second, participatory observation is carried out for 2-3 weeks at each research site to observe the learning process in AIK classes, social interactions in the campus environment, participation in extracurricular activities, and the use of religious facilities.

This observation is supported by structured guidelines and field notes documenting the setting, activities, and researcher reflections. Third, documentation studies are conducted to complement the data by collecting institutional documents such as curricula and syllabi for AIK courses, university policies related to non-Muslim students, academic and student guidelines, written reflections from students, and relevant university publications. Combining these three techniques allows for data triangulation, strengthening the validity and depth of understanding of the phenomenon of inclusive Islamic education within Muhammadiyah higher education institutions.

Data analysis in this study follows the hermeneutic phenomenological model developed by van Manen, which is carried out in three main stages. In the descriptive stage, the researcher performs a holistic reading of all interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents to gain an overall understanding of the experiences of non-Muslim students,

then identifies significant statements directly related to the phenomenon being studied and subsequently groups these statements into broader themes.

The interpretive stage is carried out through hermeneutic reflection to interpret the meanings inherent in the participants' experiences within the socio-cultural and historical context, linguistic analysis to examine the language use and narratives of participants to reveal implicit meanings, and contextual elaboration by relating individual experiences to a broader inclusive Islamic education framework (Husni, 2020). In the integrative stage, the researcher identifies patterns emerging from various participants' experiences, formulates the essence of the phenomenon of non-Muslim students' experiences at Muhammadiyah higher education institutions, and develops a theoretical construction that forms the basis for the inclusive Islamic education model.

To ensure data validity, this study applies the trustworthiness criteria according to Lincoln and Guba (Susanto & Jailani, 2023), which includes credibility through prolonged engagement in the field, data and method triangulation, analysis of negative cases, and member checking; transferability through in-depth descriptions of the context and participants; dependability through a detailed audit trail; and confirmability through researcher reflexivity and verification by external auditors. This research also considers ethical aspects by obtaining ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee, applying the principle of informed consent, maintaining the confidentiality of participant identities, and allowing participants to withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

### **III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Phenomenological Experience of Non-Muslim Students**

This study involves 15 non-Muslim students from five study programs at Muhammadiyah University of Palopo. In terms of religion, the participants include Protestants (8), Catholics (5), and Hindus (2). The gender distribution shows a balance between 8 female and 7 male students. Most of the participants (9) are in their second year of study, while the rest are distributed in the third year (4) and the fourth year (2).

The analysis of the socio-cultural background reveals that 60% of the participants come from areas with a strong tradition of pluralism, such as Seko and Rampi in North Luwu Regency. This strong pluralistic background among 60% of the participants from areas like Seko and Rampi is highly relevant to their experiences on an Islamic campus because this pluralistic tradition has shaped social and cultural patterns open to diversity. The indigenous communities in these regions are known for having customary systems that regulate communal life inclusively, with respect for differences and conflict resolution mechanisms that emphasize deliberation and tolerance. This condition influences the readiness of non-Muslim students from pluralistic backgrounds to adapt and integrate into the Muhammadiyah higher education environment, as they are already accustomed to living harmoniously with people of different faiths.

Thus, their adaptation experience on campus is not only a matter of "culture shock" but is also influenced by the social capital of the pluralistic tradition that supports inclusive attitudes and identity negotiation. This facilitates the integration process and the formation of an adaptive identity in the context of inclusive Islamic education, becoming an essential asset in navigating cross-religious interactions on campus. Therefore, this pluralistic socio-cultural background is a key factor influencing the

readiness and adaptation strategies of non-Muslim students in the Islamic education environment.

An interesting finding related to the motivation for choosing Muhammadiyah University shows four dominant factors: the academic reputation of specific study programs (40%), geographical proximity to their place of residence (27%), family or alumni recommendations (20%), and affordable tuition fees (13%). Only 2 out of the 15 participants specifically mentioned an interest in the Islamic-based educational model as a determining factor in choosing the campus.

A phenomenological analysis of non-Muslim students' experiences reveals a significant "culture shock" during the early stages of their studies (Rahmawati, 2024). As expressed by one participant:

"The first few weeks were very shocking for me. When I heard the prayer times being announced and saw almost all activities stop for prayers, I felt like I was in a completely different world. It took time to understand that this is an integral part of campus life." (P3, Catholic Student, UMPalopo)

Most participants (80%) experienced a gap between expectations and reality, especially concerning the intensity of Islamic nuances on campus. Nevertheless, 73% of participants reported that the initial adaptation phase was relatively short (1-2 months), supported by the accommodating attitude of Muslim peers and teaching staff. The most common adaptation strategies included active observation of campus norms (93%), building friendships with open-minded Muslim students (87%), and selective participation in non-religious campus activities (80%).

Non-religious activities refer to religiously neutral campus activities, meaning they are not directly related to a particular religion's practices, rituals, or teachings, nor are they organized by religiously affiliated organizations or units (Dag, 2022). In this study context, participation by non-Muslim students in "non-religious" activities includes involvement in various academic, social, cultural, or extracurricular programs that are general and open to all academic members, regardless of religious background. Examples include seminars, workshops, sports activities, arts, and student organizations focusing on skill development, leadership, or social service without religious content.

Thus, selective participation in non-religious activities allows non-Muslim students to integrate and socially interact on campus without having to be involved in religious activities, making this adaptation strategy an essential mechanism in fostering social connections and a sense of inclusion in Muhammadiyah higher education. This explanation is intended to clarify the use of the term "non-religious" in the research findings.

### ***Experience of Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah (AIK) Courses***

The Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah course is crucial to non-Muslim students' experiences (Meilinda, 2024). Analysis of students' perceptions reveals an interesting polarization. On the one hand, 60% of participants believe the content of the AIK course has universal relevance that can be applied to their lives:

"I found many universal values in the AIK course, especially regarding ethics, integrity, and social responsibility. Although presented from an Islamic perspective, these values are compatible with the teachings of Christianity I follow." (P7, Christian Student, UMPalopo)

On the other hand, 40% experienced difficulty relating AIK content to their belief system, especially on theological or ritual topics. This difficulty primarily emerged with materials discussing aspects of Islamic theology such as tauhid, *aqidah*, and religious rituals, integral to Islamic teachings and Muhammadiyah practices. These theological topics require an in-depth understanding of Islamic doctrine, which may differ significantly from the beliefs of non-Muslim students, thus posing challenges in the process of internalizing and integrating values. Additionally, ritual aspects involving worship and religious practices also became difficult for non-Muslim students to understand or relate to due to their different religious backgrounds and experiences. This finding shows that the main challenge in AIK learning is factual content and values' cultural and theological dimensions, which require a more inclusive and dialogical pedagogical approach to accommodate student diversity.

However, an important finding revealed that the pedagogical approach of AIK lecturers has a greater influence on student perceptions than the course content itself (Wahab et al., 2024). Lecturers who applied a dialogical and contextual approach received more positive responses from non-Muslim students than those who used a doctrinal approach (Pajarianto et al., 2022). Non-Muslim students' learning strategies in dealing with AIK included a comparative approach by comparing Islamic concepts with concepts from their religion (67%), focusing on universal values transferable across religions (73%), and an academic-objective approach treating AIK content as cultural knowledge without theological implications (53%).

### ***Social Interactions in the Academic Environment***

Analysis of social interaction patterns reveals a complex dynamic between non-Muslim students and the campus community. Most participants (87%) reported positive experiences interacting with Muslim students, although the intensity and depth of these interactions varied. Three identified interaction patterns were pragmatic interaction limited to academic needs (40%), inclusive friendships without religious boundaries (47%), and deep relationships with open discussions about religious differences (13%).

Participation in religious campus activities showed an interesting variation. Non-Muslim students generally felt comfortable attending academic or cultural Islamic activities (73%) but tended to avoid those that were ritualistic or worship-related (93%). An exception occurred for religious activities with a social or humanitarian dimension, such as mosque-based social service programs, where 67% of participants reported active involvement.

#### **1. Transformative experience**

The learning process at Muhammadiyah University has led to significant transformative experiences for non-Muslim students (Wahab et al., 2024). In-depth analysis reveals three dimensions of transformation: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Cognitive transformation is marked by a shift in perception of Islam from a monolithic understanding to a more nuanced one (93%), a deeper understanding of internal diversity within Islam (87%), and the deconstruction of stereotypes about Islamic education (80%).

In the affective dimension, 73% of participants reported increased cross-religious empathy, and 67% experienced a strengthening of their belief in universal human values that transcend religious boundaries. Meanwhile, in the behavioral dimension,

transformation is seen in increased involvement in interfaith dialogue (60%) and adoption of ethical practices from Islamic traditions compatible with their beliefs (53%).

In practice, this is manifested through mutual respect for rights and dignity, accepting halal food from non-Muslims, and maintaining social tolerance as long as no hostility or actions harm Muslims. This ethical approach also emphasizes the importance of preserving a strong Islamic identity while still opening space for dialogue and harmonious cooperation with non-Muslims, as reflected in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, who respected and interacted well with followers of other religions without compromising his own beliefs (Ismail et al., 2022). Thus, adopting ethical practices from Islamic traditions compatible with the beliefs of non-Muslim students includes principles of justice, respect, and tolerance that not only preserve social harmony but also strengthen inclusive values in Islamic education oriented towards *rahmatan lil 'alamin*.

Essential moments that became turning points in the diverse learning experiences among participants, however, the analysis identified three main categories: collaborative experiences with Muslim students in academic or social projects (40%), open discussions with lecturers showing respect for pluralism (33%), and solidarity experiences in moments of personal or communal crises (27%).

## 2. Emerging essential themes

Phenomenological analysis identified "openness and inclusivity" as one of the essential themes in the experiences of non-Muslim students (Songidan et al., 2021). Perceptions of institutional and academic community openness vary, ranging from "formal inclusivity" to "substantive inclusivity." Most participants (67%) felt formal inclusivity, where campus policies and regulations guarantee equal access and treatment, but the implementation at the level of everyday interactions varied.

The most appreciated inclusive practices include providing time and space for worship for non-Muslim students (80%), dispensations for important religious activities (73%), and the incorporation of diverse perspectives in class discussions (67%). However, the research identified several structural and cultural barriers to inclusivity, including the dominance of Islamic symbolism in public campus spaces (87%), the limited representation of non-Muslim students in student organizations (73%), and the lack of equal space for non-Islamic religious expression (60%).

## 3. Negotiation of identity

The theme of identity negotiation emerged as a fundamental aspect of the experiences of non-Muslim students. The process of maintaining religious identity in a predominantly Muslim environment involves complex and dynamic strategies. The analysis identified three main patterns: assertive identity shown by 33% of participants, adaptive identity practiced by 47%, and compartmentalized identity applied by 20%.

Students with assertive identities explicitly express their religious identity and actively discuss differences in beliefs (Kahar, 2025). Conversely, those with adaptive identities tend to emphasize aspects of their beliefs compatible with Islamic values while minimizing differences. Meanwhile, those with compartmentalized identities strictly separate academic life from religious expression (Kahar, 2025).

#### 4. Dialogical learning

"Dialogical learning" was identified as a crucial theme in the academic experiences of non-Muslim students. The interfaith dialogue experiences Pomalingo et al. (2024) in the educational context varied, with 53% of participants reporting well-facilitated dialogue opportunities, while 47% felt that dialogue occurred sporadically and informally. The analysis revealed that the success of interfaith dialogue highly depends on the pedagogical approach applied by the lecturers and the classroom culture developed.

The most effective pedagogical practices in facilitating diverse perspectives include the use of case methods and multidimensional ethical dilemmas (80%), the implementation of heterogeneous group discussions with role rotation (73%), and assignments that encourage comparative exploration across religious traditions (67%). The main challenges in creating an equal discussion space were identified as asymmetry of knowledge about Islam between Muslim and non-Muslim students (87%), reluctance among some non-Muslim students to express divergent views (60%), and the tendency of some lecturers to use theological references that were unfamiliar to non-Muslim students (53%).

#### 5. Institutional support

The theme of "institutional support" reflects the role of policies and the university structure in facilitating the experiences of non-Muslim students. The analysis identified significant variation in implementing inclusive policies among the Muhammadiyah universities studied (Pajarianto, 2023). Universities in urban areas with a strong tradition of pluralism tend to have more structured support policies and programs than those in regions with higher religious homogeneity.

The policies and programs considered most supportive include special orientation for non-Muslim students (73%), academic mentoring systems sensitive to the needs of non-Muslim students (67%), and the integration of diverse perspectives into the general curriculum (60%). Regarding access to worship facilities, 73% of participants reported the availability of prayer spaces for non-Muslims. However, there were variations in location, size, and facilities compared to Muslim worship spaces. The role of mentors and academic advisors was crucial in the experiences of non-Muslim students, with 80% of participants identifying at least one mentor who played a significant role in their adaptation process. Interestingly, 60% of the mentors mentioned were moderate Muslim lecturers who showed understanding and appreciation for diversity.

### **Interpretation of Results in the Context of Theory and Research**

The findings of this study provide a new perspective on the discourse of inclusive education within religious-based institutions. The phenomenological experiences of non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah University reflect a complexity not fully captured in conventional inclusive education models typically developed within secular contexts (Najib & Fata, 2020). The research results reveal the presence of a spiritual dimension that adds another layer to the dynamics of educational inclusivity, in line with the concept of "spiritual inclusivity" (Songidan et al., 2021).

Spiritual inclusivity within the context of the Muhammadiyah University of Palopo refers to a spiritual dimension that not only accommodates belief diversity but also places spiritual values as an additional layer that enriches the dynamics of educational inclusivity. Based on the findings, this spiritual inclusivity aligns with the concept of

"spiritual inclusivity" which emphasizes the integration of universal Islamic values and *rahmatan lil 'alamin* with respect for the differences in religion and beliefs of non-Muslim students. Specifically, the practice of spiritual inclusivity at the Muhammadiyah University of Palopo is manifested through education that not only focuses on the cognitive and ritualistic aspects of religion but also instills moral and ethical values that are cross-religious, such as honesty, justice, compassion, and social responsibility. Thus, spiritual inclusivity at Muhammadiyah University of Palopo is not just about tolerance but also the development of holistic spirituality that values diversity as a shared richness in shaping a perfect human being (*insan kamil*) with character and broad insight.

The adaptation patterns of non-Muslim students identified in this study align with Berry's acculturation theory, especially the integration strategy where individuals maintain their original cultural identity while adopting elements of the dominant culture. However, the study reveals an additional nuance that the acculturation process in religious-based education involves cultural dimensions and a more complex and sensitive negotiation of spiritual identity (Zee et al., 2022).

Based on the research findings that refer to John W. Berry's acculturation theory (Sumaryanto & Ibrahim, 2023), the adaptation patterns of non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah University can be explained through three main strategies. *First* is integration, where students can maintain their religious and cultural identity while actively participating in Islamic campus life. They can negotiate their identity by engaging in academic and social activities without compromising their personal beliefs, such as respecting Islamic values in daily interactions while practicing their non-Islamic religious practices openly. This strategy is considered the most balanced and supports psychological and social well-being (Krsmanovic, 2020).

*Second* is separation, where students choose to distance themselves from the Islamic campus environment by maintaining their cultural and religious identity without much interaction or assimilation. They focus more on the non-Muslim community and avoid involvement in activities that are Islamic, typically in response to discomfort in the majority environment. *Third*, marginalization is experienced by students who feel marginalized both from their original community and the campus environment. They neither fully maintain their original identity nor participate in the new environment, leading to identity uncertainty and social alienation. This condition is often exacerbated by implicit discrimination, lack of institutional support, and communication barriers. Thus, the variation in acculturation strategies reflects the diverse adaptation experiences of non-Muslim students in the Islamic education environment (Septerio et al., 2025).

This explanation is consistent with Berry's theory, which classifies acculturation strategies into four main types: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. In the context of this study, integration becomes the dominant pattern, followed by separation and marginalization as responses to the socio-cultural dynamics in the Islamic higher education environment. Explicit data from interviews and observations support this classification, such as narratives from students who assert active adaptation and respect for Islamic values while maintaining their non-Muslim identity (integration), those who choose to keep a social distance (separation), and those who express feelings of isolation (marginalization).

The "interstitial inclusivity" model in the context of higher education provides an analytical framework relevant to interpreting the study findings. The concept of

"interspaces," which accommodates differences without assimilation or segregation, is seen in the adaptation strategies of non-Muslim students creating a transitional zone between maintaining their unique identity and integrating into the majority Muslim community. This finding also aligns with research on "third space pedagogy" in the context of Islamic education in pluralistic societies.

The concept of "interspatial inclusivity" refers to "interspace" as a transitional zone where non-Muslim students can maintain their unique identity while integrating into the majority Muslim community without complete assimilation or segregation. Empirically, this study found that such an interspace is realized in various campus practices such as interfaith discussion spaces facilitated by the university, joint extracurricular activities involving students from multiple religious backgrounds, and dialogue forums that encourage the exchange of understanding and respect for differences. For example, in the *Al-Islam* and *Kemuhammadiyah* courses, lecturers use a dialogical approach that opens up space for mutual reflection so that non-Muslim students are not only objects of learning but also active subjects in the process of forming shared meaning.

Meanwhile, "third space pedagogy" in the context of Islamic education at the Muhammadiyah University of Palopo functions as a pedagogical space that transcends the dichotomy between majority and minority identities, allowing for the creation of critical and creative dialogue that produces new, inclusive understanding (Setiawan, 2020). Its practical application is seen in teaching methods that integrate Islamic perspectives with students' diverse experiences, as well as in campus policies that support social and spiritual inclusion without erasing individual identities. Thus, interspace and third space pedagogy are abstract concepts and real spaces and processes found in social interactions, learning practices, and institutional policies at the Muhammadiyah University of Palopo, building an inclusive, dialogical, and transformative educational environment. This approach aligns with previous research that emphasizes the importance of dialogue and collaboration spaces to build tolerance and social cohesion in the context of pluralistic Islamic education (Elias & Mansouri, 2023).

The transformative experiences of non-Muslim students show alignment with Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Nawawi & Muhammad, 2024), where exposure to alternative perspectives triggers a reframing of cognition and a shift in meaning frameworks. However, this study adds the dimension of affective and spiritual transformation, which has not always received adequate attention in the Mezirow model. This finding supports Tisdell's argument on the need to integrate the dimension of spirituality in transformative learning theory for religious-based education contexts (Bowling, 2023).

The tension between the *da'wah* mission and inclusivity principles identified in this study reflects dilemmas in other religious-based educational institutions. However, the context of the Muhammadiyah University of Palopo shows unique characteristics in managing this tension through what can be described as "progressive religious education" (Zarro et al., 2020), where religious values are transformed into universal principles that can be accepted in a pluralistic context.

### **Impact on Theory and Practice**

This research's findings significantly contribute to the development of inclusive Islamic education theory. The inclusive education model that emerged from the phenomenological experiences of non-Muslim students offers an expansion of the

conventional concept of inclusivity, which is often limited to accessibility and accommodation (Husna et al., 2024). This research shows that inclusive Islamic education needs to be understood as a multidimensional construct that includes structural, pedagogical, relational, and spiritual dimensions.

Based on the research findings, the developed inclusive Islamic education model emphasizes that inclusivity is not limited to accessibility and accommodation but is a multidimensional construct encompassing structural, pedagogical, relational, and spiritual dimensions. These four dimensions complement each other, forming a comprehensive framework for inclusive Islamic education. The structural dimension includes institutional policies and the provision of facilities that support diversity; the pedagogical dimension focuses on a dialogical curriculum and teaching methods that are responsive to pluralism; the relational dimension emphasizes the importance of harmonious and respectful social interaction among students of different religions; while the spiritual dimension places universal Islamic values and respect for the spirituality of all students as the foundation for character development. This model offers an expansion of the concept of inclusivity in Islamic education, as reflected in the following diagram:



**Figure 2.** *Inclusive Islamic education model*

The structural dimension pertains to policies, procedures, and infrastructure that facilitate the full participation of students from diverse religious backgrounds. The pedagogical dimension concerns learning approaches that accommodate a diversity of perspectives and spiritual experiences. The relational dimension encompasses the quality of interactions among religious communities within the campus environment. Meanwhile, the spiritual dimension relates to the space for authentic expression and the development of religious identity for all students. A significant practical implication of this study is the need to reconstruct the Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah curriculum to be more responsive to student diversity. The findings demonstrate the effectiveness of a pedagogical approach that distinguishes between the specifically theological-doctrinal dimensions for Muslim students and the universal ethical-humanistic dimensions. This approach enables non-Muslim students to adopt relevant values without compromising the integrity of their beliefs.

This study affirms that technical implementation is carried out through a pedagogical approach that explicitly differentiates between theological-doctrinal content specific to Muslim students and universal ethical-humanistic dimensions accessible to all students,

including non-Muslims. In practice, this is realized through the development of AIK learning modules that integrate two layers of content: first, theological content covering Islamic creed, worship, and ritual aspects, which are explicitly taught to Muslim students; second, ethical content emphasizing universal values such as honesty, justice, social responsibility, and humanity, which are taught collectively to all students regardless of religious background. Furthermore, the teaching methods employed are dialogical and contextual, with team teaching involving Muslim and non-Muslim lecturers to create an inclusive learning environment that values diversity.

This approach enables non-Muslim students to understand and internalize AIK's ethical values without adopting exclusive theological dimensions, thus maintaining the integrity of their beliefs. This learning model is also supported by official AIK guidelines at several Muhammadiyah universities, which emphasize the importance of facilitating a moderate and inclusive understanding of Islamic teachings while accommodating the diversity of learners (Pajarianto, 2023). Thus, the reconstruction of an AIK curriculum responsive to diversity is not merely idealistic but a practice that has been technically and methodologically implemented within the context of Muhammadiyah higher education.

This study also has implications for policies regarding the admission and support of non-Muslim students at Islamic-based universities. The findings regarding the importance of explicit institutional support highlight the need for developing specialized orientation programs, mentoring systems, and academic resources that are responsive to the needs of non-Muslim students. Policies that recognize and facilitate the spiritual needs of non-Muslim students—such as the provision of prayer spaces and accommodations for religious holidays—become an integral part of the inclusive Islamic education model.

In curriculum development, this study supports the importance of the "curriculum as encounter" approach (Putri, 2024), which facilitates authentic dialogue between religious traditions. Such a curriculum not only enriches the learning experience of non-Muslim students but also deepens Muslim students' understanding of pluralism and interfaith dialogue. The recommended pedagogical approaches include comparative learning, multidimensional case studies, and collaborative projects that involve diverse perspectives.

The inclusive Islamic education model developed from this study contributes to the discourse on Islamic higher education in the global era by offering an operational framework that bridges the tension between a commitment to Islamic values and the demands of inclusive education. This model proposes a paradigm of "principled inclusivity," wherein Islamic values such as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy to all creation), *ta'aruf* (mutual understanding), and *wasathiyah* (moderation) serve as the foundation for authentic inclusive practices.

### **Social and Ethical Implications**

The inclusive Islamic education model developed from this research has broad social implications in Indonesia's plural society (Putri, 2024). In the long term, the positive experiences of non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah universities have the potential to become a catalyst for strengthening interfaith dialogue and deconstructing negative stereotypes between religious communities. Non-Muslim alums who have undergone inclusive Islamic education can become effective cultural bridges between Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

From an ethical perspective, this study highlights the responsibility of religious-based educational institutions in facilitating diversity without compromising their religious identity. The research findings emphasize the principle that ethical treatment of minority students involves passive tolerance and active recognition of their unique identity and potential contributions to a diverse learning community. The inclusive Islamic education model also contributes to developing the discourse on religious moderation (*wasathiyah*) in Indonesia, emphasizing the balance between commitment to religious identity and respect for pluralism. In the global context marked by religious polarization and extremism, this model offers an alternative that supports harmonious coexistence in diversity.

The model's potential as an instrument of social transformation lies in its ability to cultivate future generations of leaders who possess cross-traditional religious literacy and engage in substantive dialogue beyond identity boundaries (Khumaini & Burhanuddin, 2023). Such competencies are becoming increasingly crucial in a globally connected and diverse society. An equally important ethical implication is the responsibility of the Muhammadiyah University of Palopo to articulate an authentic vision of inclusive Islamic education rooted in its Islamic tradition rather than merely adopting the concept of inclusivity from Western educational paradigms. This approach ensures the sustainability of the model within the context of Islamic institutions and enriches the global discourse on inclusive education with perspectives drawn from religious traditions.

In developing the vision for inclusive Islamic education at the Muhammadiyah University of Palopo, avoiding the uncritical adoption of Western paradigms and replacing them with an authentic epistemological foundation from the Muhammadiyah Islamic tradition is essential. The epistemology of Muhammadiyah Islamic education is rooted in the revelation of the Qur'an and Hadith as the primary sources of knowledge, combined with the use of reason (*'aql*), heart (*qalb*), and sensory experience as instruments of reasoning and knowledge development (Khumaini & Burhanuddin, 2023). This approach emphasizes the integration of Islamic values in the material, methods, and goals of education, with principles such as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, the exemplary conduct of the Prophet Muhammad (*uswatun hasanah*), and the development of human potential as khalifah on Earth. The teaching methods adopted are contextual, dialogical, and oriented towards the formation of individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also morally upright and capable of contributing to society. Therefore, inclusive Islamic education at Muhammadiyah University of Palopo does not merely adopt the concept of inclusivity from Western paradigms but instead builds a model that is deeply rooted in a holistic, progressive, and contextual Islamic tradition, capable of addressing the challenges of the times while enriching the global discourse on inclusive education from a unique religious perspective.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the four dimensions—structural, pedagogical, relational, and spiritual—play essential and complementary roles in developing the theory and practice of inclusive Islamic education at Muhammadiyah University of Palopo. The structural dimension provides policies and institutional support that are adaptive to the diversity of non-Muslim students. In contrast, the pedagogical dimension enriches the dialogical learning approach that accommodates differences in beliefs without compromising

Islamic values. The relational dimension strengthens social cohesion through interfaith interactions that reduce psychological distance, and the spiritual dimension introduces the concept of inclusive spirituality that balances the steadfastness of Islamic values with respect for diverse religious expressions. The findings show that non-Muslim students experience a complex adaptation process, with the Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah courses serving as a crucial arena for identity negotiation, where diverse identity patterns and cognitive, affective, and behavioral transformations occur. The varying institutional support across campuses also influences the inclusive experiences of students. The conceptual model of inclusive Islamic education offers a practical operational framework for developing inclusive policies, curricula, and educational practices that are both inclusive and have a strong identity while contributing significantly to the transformation of moderate and progressive Islamic education in Indonesia.

## V. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to express our deepest gratitude to the Muhammadiyah University of Palopo, the Research and Community Service Institute of the Muhammadiyah University of Palopo, and the Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah Institute of the Muhammadiyah University of Palopo for their support, which made this research possible. We also thank the many individuals and parties who provided the resources for this research. Our sincere appreciation goes to our colleagues and the research participants for their valuable insights and contributions. We hope that the results of this study can contribute to the development of knowledge, particularly in Muhammadiyah higher education institutions and religious-based universities.

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