

Empowering Cultural Diplomacy: Indonesian International Mobility Awards (IISMA) Students on the World Stage

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ABSTRACT

The Indonesian International Student Mobility Award (IISMA) is a flagship program under the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* initiative, which enables Indonesian students as awardees to study at universities abroad for one semester. Designed to enhance Indonesia's education system and human resources, the program also functions as a cultural diplomacy initiative by introducing Indonesian culture to international students. This study explores the role of IISMA participants as non-state actors in cultural and exchange diplomacy, contributing to the promotion of Indonesian culture globally. Using qualitative research methods, primary data were collected through interviews with Udayana University students who had participated in the IISMA program. The study is grounded in the concepts of new public diplomacy, cultural and exchange diplomacy. Findings indicate that IISMA participants act as diplomacy agents by disseminating various elements of Indonesian culture throughout the program. This highlights the importance of the role of students and educational institutions in strengthening collaborative relations between the two countries.

Keywords: *Cultural Diplomacy, IISMA, MBKM, Non-State Actors, Public Diplomacy, Indonesian Culture, International Education*

INTRODUCTION

To advance national interests in education, the Indonesia Government, through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, introduced the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* policy, which is regulated under Ministerial Regulation (Permendikbud) Number 3 of 2020 concerning the National Standards for Higher Education. This policy encompasses various programs, including the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA), launched in 2021. IISMA provides Indonesian undergraduate and vocational students the opportunity to study at partner universities abroad for one semester. These partner universities are located across regions such as America, Asia, Australia, and Europe. This program is centrally managed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in collaboration with the Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) (IISMA, 2024a).

The IISMA program allows Indonesian students to study at universities abroad while acting as actors in cultural diplomacy. In addition to gaining new knowledge, IISMA students can play a role as cultural ambassadors who introduce Indonesian culture to the international community. Its implementation can be in the form of participation in activities to introduce Indonesian culture or social activities held at the university where they study. In addition, these programs provide authentic experiences for students to interact with others from different cultures (Goff, 2013; Saaida, 2023), which helps increase global and cultural awareness. The experience abroad helps students develop communication, adaptation, and leadership skills important in carrying out the diplomatic agenda. IISMA and other exchange programs also help foster mutual understanding and appreciation between Indonesia and other countries. Study-abroad students possess soft skills and promote cultural diplomacy. They can establish, develop, and sustain relationships with others internationally through culture and education, which enables them to claim a cultural diplomacy role proactively (Akli, 2012).

Globalization has opened opportunities for non-state actors, including students, to get involved in international politics (Mubah, 2019). Globalization has opened up space and borders between countries to make international travel and communication more accessible. This allows more students to participate in exchange programs such as IISMA and have direct experience of cultures and political systems between countries. Students play crucial roles as agents by fostering international understanding and building bridges between cultures. The contribution of "citizen diplomats" and the "people-to-people" public/cultural diplomacy can be effectively carried out through work like exchange student programs and IISMA. As representatives of the country, students can influence the international community's opinion to understand the diversity of Indonesian culture while raising awareness among young people

about the contributions they need to make in realizing nationalism for their homeland that is more nuanced and positive.

The novelty of this study is to have enriched the theory of new public diplomacy by adding new actors such as students (IISMA awardee) and their role in implementing public diplomacy through culture. Cultural diplomacy also encompasses interactions between these actors and the populations of countries targeted by government-led public diplomacy initiatives.

METHODS

The study employed a qualitative research design, incorporating data obtained through semi-structured interviews. Seven awardees of the IISMA scholarship program participated in this research. The IISMA program, a scholarship scheme by the Government of the Republic of Indonesia to fund Indonesian college students for mobility programs at top universities and reputable industries overseas for a period of one semester (approximately 16 weeks) (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024).

To collect interview data, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with eight former exchange participants from various years, who were students from Udayana University. Specifically, two participants were alumni from 2021, two were alumni from 2022, two from 2023, and two were active participants in 2024. These interviews, designed to capture detailed insights into students' exchange experiences related to the role of students as agents of diplomacy and cultural exchange, as well as the activities they engaged in to introduce Indonesian culture abroad during the IISMA program. Featured open-ended questions were conducted by direct interview and via email or telephone due to the geographic dispersion of the participants.

The responses obtained from the semi-structured interviews were subsequently categorized and analysed based on the research questions. The data were analysed concurrently with the data collection process. Once all the data had been gathered, the researcher conducted data reduction by selecting key aspects relevant to the research focus. Subsequently, the researcher drew conclusions by establishing connections between the reduced data and the theoretical framework employed. The analysis employed the theoretical frameworks of new public diplomacy and exchange diplomacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since its launch in 2021, the IISMA program has produced several awardees, including 955 awardees in 2021, 1,557 in 2022, 1,980 in 2023, and 2,748 in 2024 (IISMA, 2024b). The number of students from Udayana University selected as IISMA awardees has also increased over the years, with 14 awardees in 2021, 16 in 2022, 17 in 2023, and 31 in 2024 (International Office Udayana University, 2024). Since 2022, the regular IISMA program has

also included vocational students. In 2023, a new co-funding scheme was introduced, providing partial funding shared between students and the government. In 2024, the IISMA Entrepreneur scheme was introduced as an extension of the regular IISMA program. Through this scheme, undergraduate (S1) and applied undergraduate (D4) students can participate in a 6-7 week program at leading international universities to develop entrepreneurial skills, engage in practical activities, and learn about foreign cultures (Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024).

Table 1. IISMA Awardee

<i>Awardee</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2023</i>	<i>2024</i>
<i>Total Awardee</i>	955	1557	1980	2748
Undergraduate path	955	1150	1415	1963
Vocational path	0	407	565	785
Total Awardee (Udayana University)	14	16	17	31
Undergraduate path (Udayana University)	14	16	12	23
Vocational path (Udayana University)	0	0	2	1
Co-Funding (Udayana University)	0	0	3	3
Entrepreneur (Udayana University)	0	0	0	4

IISMA, as an internationalization program for Indonesian education, also serves as a platform for cultural exchange among students. In addition to enhancing students' competencies beyond their core academic disciplines, this initiative aims to develop soft skills, foster an understanding of foreign cultures and the latest technologies, and assist students in building more global networks. This opportunity is leveraged by participating students not only to gain knowledge abroad but also as a means of promoting Indonesia and its rich cultural heritage (Rifanzha, 2022). IISMA seeks to disseminate values and celebrate the spirit of culture and diversity collectively (IISMA, 2023).

In the evolution of international relations, diplomacy is no longer limited to interactions between governments or institutions but now extends to engaging all levels of society. Nye's (2008) perspective highlights the shift from traditional intergovernmental diplomacy to a "government-to-citizen" approach, introducing new perspectives, components, and tools in the practice of public diplomacy. It differs public diplomacy from traditional diplomacy in both its participants and approaches. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is carried out solely by officially appointed state representatives, public diplomacy allows citizens to serve as informal ambassadors of their home country. Methodologically, public diplomacy leverages mass media, including international broadcasting and publishing, to engage broad audiences abroad.

Several scholars describe new public diplomacy as a two-way process, defining it as "a mechanism utilized by states, their affiliates, and non-state actors to comprehend the attitudes and behaviors of diverse cultures, establish

and maintain relationships, shape opinions, and encourage actions to further their interests" (Ayhan, 2019. p.22). Public diplomacy seeks to influence the hearts and minds of foreign audiences (Fitzpatrick, 2010. p.105).

Exchange diplomacy in public diplomacy may be defined as an actor's attempt to manage the international environment by sending its citizens overseas and reciprocally accepting citizens from overseas for a period of study and/or acculturation (Cull, 2013.p.20). Cultural diplomacy is the "exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and peoples in order to foster mutual understanding (Cumings, 2003.p.1). Cultural diplomacy frequently overlaps with exchanges, which is why the two are often grouped together.

Educational and cultural exchanges are a highly celebrated form of public diplomacy, designed to enable students, scholars and cultural visitors to communicate with overseas audiences, transcending cultural barriers. The vision of an international learning experience in which both parties benefit and are transformed. This approach is strategically utilized to advance exchange diplomacy through IISMA, as involving broader societal layers increases the potential to introduce Indonesian culture and capture the attention of a global audience. Through IISMA, students play a significant role in contributing to social engagement and the dissemination of cultural values.

Participants of the IISMA program are not only responsible for their one-semester education in the host country but are also tasked, directly or indirectly, with introducing Indonesia's ideology, values, and culture. From the preparatory phase, IISMA awardees are informed of the critical role they play in promoting Indonesian culture through people-to-people diplomacy (Interview with Esa Satria, IISMA awardee 2024, December 3, 2024). The introduction of Indonesia is carried out through various activities freely chosen and implemented by the students, yet still aligned with the mandatory program framework established by IISMA. Each year, this program adopts a different name but consistently shares the same goal: to disseminate Indonesia's values and celebrate the spirit of its culture and diversity.

In 2021, the program *Indonesian Youth Spirit Around the World*, as part of IISMA, required IISMA awardees across all regions to organize activities aligned with a specific theme. Collaboratively, the IISMA awardees at each university were granted the freedom to determine the activities they would host. At Waterloo University, Canada, the IISMA awardees organized an event titled "*SANUBARI: The Heart of Archipelago.*" This event coincided with the commemoration of Indonesia's Youth Pledge Day in 2021. During the event, the awardees showcased various cultural performances, traditional Indonesian foods, and a recitation of the Youth Pledge. One of the cultural performances presented was the Gaba-Gaba dance from Maluku. This dance involves four bamboo sticks struck to create rhythmic music, starting from a slow tempo and gradually increasing in speed. Traditionally, this dance served as a social activity for young people to build friendships. In line with the philosophy of

this dance, the Gaba-Gaba performance by the IISMA awardees at Waterloo University was also aimed at fostering friendship. The performance received an enthusiastic response from the foreign audience, many of whom participated by attempting the dance movements and jumping over the bamboo sticks.

In 2022 and 2023, this program was designed as the IISMA Challenges under the name *HEROES (Humanity, Diversity, Culture, Beyond Boundaries) Challenge*. This initiative also served as a platform to embrace cross-national differences through cultural and humanitarian values (Tim Media dan Promosi IISMA, 2022). Within the HEROES Challenge, IISMA scholarship awardees organized activities collectively at each host university, showcasing the students' potential and creativity. The HEROES Challenge provided a unique experience and learning opportunity for the students. Additionally, it became a source of pride for them to take part in introducing Indonesian values and culture. The HEROES Challenge served as a platform for creativity and contribution for IISMA awardees, as well as a constructive space for discussions to bridge differences in national identities. This celebration of diverse cultural expressions fostered connections among people worldwide.

At the Universidad de Granada, Spain, the 2022 IISMA awardees conducted an event titled "*Good Day From Indonesia*" by distributing popular souvenirs from their respective regions. For instance, an awardee from Bali shared souvenirs such as Barong-themed shirts, *udeng* (traditional Balinese headwear), and various keychains. The distribution of these souvenirs was accompanied by explanations of the history and legends of the Barong, as well as an introduction to Bali as Indonesia's largest tourism destination (Interview with Alexandra Catherine, IISMA awardee 2022, November 29, 2024). One of the most engaging cultural exchanges, according to Alexandra, was the *Gemu Fa Mi Re* dance exercise, during which the HEROES Challenge drew the largest audience, filling the university hall. The audience actively participated in the dance, which was performed to the *Gemu Fa Mi Re* song originating from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT).

In 2023, 49 IISMA awardees at Michigan State University, United States, organized an event titled *BHINNEKA (Bawa Indonesia ke Amerika)*. Collaborating with PERMIAS MSU (the Indonesian Student Association in the United States), they set up several booths:

- Indonesian Coffee Shop Booth: Serving Indonesian food and beverages to the attending audience.
- Batik Booth: Educating guests about batik and offering the opportunity to create batik on paper fans, accompanied by merchandise.
- Travel Booth: Promoting hidden gem tourist destinations in Indonesia while providing authentic Indonesian souvenirs.

Additionally, they presented a variety of performances, including the Indonesian national anthem "*Indonesia Raya*," a recitation of the Youth Pledge, a musical poetry performance accompanied by violin and piano, the *Wonderful Indonesia* creative dance, the *Jaipong* (Bajidor Kahot) dance, traditional

Indonesian games, and dance together with the *Gemu Fa Mi Re* (Maumere) dance exercise. This event aimed to showcase, educate, and leave a warm and cheerful impression while bringing the "experience" of Indonesia to America (Interview with Arimbi Koyuki, IISMA awardee 2023, November 28, 2024).

Still within the American continent, IISMA awardees at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, organized the *Penn Indonesian Cultural Fair* (PICF) under the theme "*Take a Peek at Indonesia's Hidden Treasures.*" The *Penn Indonesian Cultural Fair* has been held by IISMA awardees since 2021. During the event, the IISMA awardees wore batik or traditional Indonesian attire and served Indonesian cuisine to students at the University of Pennsylvania.

In 2024, IISMA students are also required to implement the CULTURISE (Culture United for Reconnection, Inspiration, Sharing, and Empowerment) program, which aims to develop multicultural understanding, create an inclusive, globally aware, and culturally rich environment, and empower the young generation of Indonesia. In CULTURISE, IISMA awardees must hold social and cultural activities in the environment of Overseas Universities or host universities to enliven one of the three important moments for the Indonesian people. IISMA students are encouraged to organize or participate in cultural events at their universities, such as exhibitions, batik workshops, drama performances, traditional dances, and inviting other international students to play traditional games. In addition to increasing understanding and appreciation of Indonesian culture, CULTURISE has the potential to facilitate collaboration with students from other countries for joint cultural projects.

Moreover, the immersion experience can help students better understand and accept cultural differences (Terehoff, 2000). Another interesting finding is that in addition to cultural exchange events, awardees feel a more holistic impact when living in everyday life, for example, by living together in a flat with students from other countries (Rena Budhiarta, Awardee IISMA 2021, 30 November 2024). Sharing a living space means interacting in everyday activities, such as cooking, eating, and relaxing, facilitating deeper conversations and understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study attempts to analyze the role of IISMA students as agents of cultural diplomacy who can provide positive perceptions of the culture of their homeland while developing their abilities, competencies, and knowledge in other countries. This study found that IISMA awardees are important agents of cultural diplomacy to promote Indonesian culture and build a greater understanding and acceptance of different cultures. From several interviews conducted with former awardees, the researcher found that the awardees gained immersive experience and insight into how to strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations. Indonesian Youth Spirit Around the World, HEROES

Challenges, and CULTURISE as mandatory programs for awardees are able to develop multicultural understanding, create an inclusive environment, be globally aware, and appreciate the richness of culture and empower the young generation of Indonesia. Furthermore, this study needs to be improved with a discussion of the socio-cultural impacts that influence students' social and cultural views, as well as an evaluation of the program's effectiveness in building international networks and long-term relationships.

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