


Students' Perception of the PMM 4 Program at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha Bali

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates students' perceptions of the Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka (PMM) 4 Program at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha (Undiksha) Bali. The research aims to explore how participants perceive the academic, cultural, and personal dimensions of their experience during the exchange, including the benefits, challenges, and transformative impacts encountered throughout the program. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with four PMM 4 alumni from various Indonesian universities. The findings reveal that students hold predominantly positive perceptions of the program. Academically, PMM 4 enriched their learning experiences through exposure to diverse teaching methods, interdisciplinary courses, and active classroom engagement, which enhanced critical thinking and communication skills. Culturally, the program fostered intercultural awareness and appreciation of Indonesia's pluralism, enabling participants to develop tolerance and empathy through direct immersion in Balinese traditions. Personally, students reported notable growth in confidence, adaptability, and independence while navigating new academic and social environments. However, several challenges were also identified, including differences in teaching styles, limited coordination between host and home institutions, and workload intensity. Despite these issues, PMM 4 was perceived as a holistic learning platform that integrates academic development with cultural and personal growth, effectively preparing students to engage in a globalized educational context. The study suggests that stronger institutional collaboration, improved mentoring systems, and balanced program design will further enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of PMM in the future.

Keywords: *Students' Perception, PMM 4, Academic Experience, Cultural Exchange, Personal Development*

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INTRODUCTION

The Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka (PMM) program is one of the flagship initiatives of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy introduced by Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. This domestic student-mobility scheme allows undergraduates to spend one semester studying at a host university in a different province, with the explicit aim of promoting intercultural understanding, strengthening national unity, and enriching both academic and personal competencies. By moving students outside their home regions, the government expects to cultivate graduates who are not only strong in disciplinary knowledge but also culturally literate and socially resilient – qualities essential in a country as diverse as Indonesia (Suleman et al., 2023)

My own participation in PMM 4 at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha (Undiksha) in Bali provided a firsthand illustration of this vision. Studying in a university far from my home institution exposed me to new academic approaches, diverse learning environments, and unique local customs. These experiences not only broadened my understanding of Indonesia's rich cultural and linguistic landscape but also helped me develop adaptability, communication skills, and the confidence to interact across cultures. Such outcomes are consistent with empirical findings showing that MBKM programs significantly enhance students' soft skills – critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration – which are increasingly valued in professional settings (Cahya Adrevi et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, students often face considerable challenges when relocating to unfamiliar provinces. Adjusting to differences in language, social norms, and academic expectations can lead to feelings of isolation or even culture shock. Research indicates that PMM participants frequently experience substantial stress when adapting to new social and cultural environments, highlighting the importance of coping strategies and personal resilience throughout the exchange period (Ardila, 2023). These findings underscore that, alongside academic benefits, personal and emotional adaptation is a critical factor in ensuring students' overall success.

In this context, the support provided by host institutions becomes a key factor shaping the quality of students' experiences. Well-structured orientation programs, peer-mentoring schemes, and easily accessible counseling services can help participants overcome homesickness and adjust more effectively to their new surroundings. Evidence shows that the presence of such organized support systems strongly influences students' ability to adapt and to maximize the benefits of their exchange (Wardani et al., 2025). Without such institutional support, even highly motivated students may struggle to achieve the intended academic and cultural goals.

For these reasons, documenting students' perceptions of PMM is essential for policymakers and universities seeking to refine the MBKM initiative. Understanding how students experience the program – what motivates them, what obstacles they face, and which forms of support are most effective – provides valuable insights for continuous improvement. Findings on intercultural competence and the management of homesickness among PMM participants further reinforce the need for ongoing evaluation and responsive strategies at the institutional level (Savira & Widiasih, 2024). Capturing these experiences will help shape a more inclusive, supportive, and impactful PMM program while strengthening national unity and the quality of higher education in Indonesia.

The Definition of Perception

Perception is defined as the process by which individuals organize, interpret, and give meaning to sensory information they receive from the environment. For example, according to (Yazici & Erenler, 2020), "perception refers to the way one thinks about something and one's idea of what it is like... an ability to understand the true nature of a subject especially as it affects our environment." It involves not only seeing or hearing but also the interpretation of stimuli based on past experiences, expectations, and individual differences. In other words, perception is not merely a passive reception of information but an active cognitive process that shapes how a person understands and responds to their surroundings.

Perception is also considered a subjective experience because different individuals may interpret the same situation in different ways. For instance, in the context of educational studies, research by (Shrestha et al., 2019) found that students' perceptions of the learning environment varied significantly across years of enrollment, indicating the role of personal background and experience in shaping interpretation. For example, when participating in a student-exchange program such as PMM, some students may perceive it as an exciting opportunity to learn and grow, while others may see it as a challenge or source of anxiety due to cultural and academic adjustments. This subjectivity makes perception an important concept in educational research, as it highlights the diversity of student experiences.

In the context of this study, perception refers specifically to how students view their experiences in the PMM 4 program at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha (Undiksha) Bali. This includes their opinions on the academic activities, cultural exchange, benefits, and challenges encountered during the program. By examining students' perceptions, the researcher can better understand how the program impacts learners from their own point of view, rather than relying solely on institutional or administrative evaluations.

Independent Student Exchange (PMM) Program Batch 4

PMM Program is one of the initiatives under the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy launched by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. The program provides opportunities for students from different universities and regions in Indonesia to experience academic and cultural exchange for one semester. PMM is

designed to strengthen students' national identity, broaden their academic experiences, and enhance cross-cultural understanding. Specifically, PMM 4 continues the vision of the earlier batches, with improvements in program management and student support systems to ensure more effective learning and exchange (Hidayat et al., 2025).

One of the unique features of the PMM program is that it not only focuses on academic learning but also emphasizes cultural diversity and social interaction. Students are encouraged to take part in the Nusantara Module, a component where they explore local traditions, culture, and values in the host university's region. For example, students coming to Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha (Undiksha) Bali in PMM 4 may join cultural activities such as traditional Balinese dance, temple ceremonies, or community service, while also attending regular lectures. This balance between academic and cultural learning allows students to develop both cognitive and socio-cultural competencies, which are essential in a diverse country like Indonesia (Saragih et al., 2023).

In addition, PMM 4 plays an important role in building students' confidence, adaptability, and communication skills. By studying in a new environment, students are required to adjust to different teaching styles, campus rules, and local cultures. These experiences often contribute to positive personal growth, such as increased independence, stronger teamwork skills, and greater tolerance toward differences. Previous research has shown that students who joined PMM 4 felt more open-minded and confident in expressing their ideas during class discussions and presentations (Muhammad Rafly & Ivan Achmad Nurcholis, 2024). Thus, PMM 4 not only contributes to academic achievement but also to character development and intercultural awareness.

Undiksha's Role in Supporting PMM 4

Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha serves as a key host university in supporting the implementation of the Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka (PMM) Program 4. To facilitate incoming students, Undiksha provides comprehensive academic facilities and infrastructure that ensure their studies continue smoothly without interrupting academic progress. A variety of courses across multiple faculties are offered so that credits can be transferred to students' home institutions, while academic advisors guide students in selecting appropriate courses and meeting credit transfer requirements. These measures reflect the university's dedication to maintaining the quality and integrity of the PMM program.

The Nusantara Module plays a significant role in enhancing both the cultural and academic experiences of PMM students. Through activities such as visits to places of worship, cultural discussions, and community service projects, students gain firsthand exposure to local traditions while also engaging in structured academic tasks. They are encouraged to write reflections, analyze field experiences, and present their findings, which helps integrate cultural learning with academic development. These experiences foster tolerance, a sense of community, awareness of cultural diversity, and strengthen academic skills such as critical thinking, cultural analysis, and effective communication (Wulan et al., 2023).

Beyond academics and cultural exposure, Undiksha offers strong support systems to help students adapt and maintain well-being throughout the PMM program. Local student organizations and peer buddies actively assist incoming students in navigating both academic requirements and cultural norms. Regular evaluations and feedback sessions are conducted to monitor students' experiences and address any challenges they encounter. By providing comprehensive guidance, Undiksha acts not only as an academic institution but also as a bridge connecting students across Indonesia, fostering educational collaboration and intercultural understanding. This holistic support enhances the impact and sustainability of the PMM 4 program.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, which is designed to explore and provide a detailed picture of phenomena, attitudes, perceptions, or behaviors in their

natural context. Rather than relying on statistical computations, this method emphasizes rich descriptions and thorough explanations of the subject matter. In this research, the focus is on capturing students' perceptions of the PMM 4 Program at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha (Undiksha) Bali, allowing the researcher to investigate the nuances of their academic and cultural experiences effectively (Sugiyono, 2020).

Furthermore, qualitative research seeks to understand participants' experiences in a holistic manner, highlighting their motivations, perceptions, and actions through detailed narrative accounts. This study pays close attention to the lived experiences of students engaged in the PMM 4 Program, exploring how they navigate academic demands, cultural immersion, and personal growth. By conducting in-depth interviews and analyzing students' reflections, the researcher can present a comprehensive portrayal of their experiences. This design ensures that the findings capture both the richness of individual experiences and the broader patterns in student perceptions of PMM 4 at Undiksha Bali.

Subjects

The subjects of this research were four alumni of the Merdeka Student Exchange (PMM) Program 4 who participated in the program at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha (Undiksha), Bali in 2024. They came from Universitas Garut, Universitas Islam Riau, Universitas Dharma Indonesia, and Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa. These participants were selected because they had direct experiences in academic, cultural, and personal aspects during their participation in the program, and the four participants were considered by the researcher to be capable of providing relevant and detailed information regarding the implementation of PMM 4. This enabled the researcher to gain diverse perspectives and insights into their experiences. The diversity of academic backgrounds enriched the data and made the research findings more representative of overall student perceptions of the PMM 4 program at Undiksha.

Procedures

The method used to collect the data was an essential component of the research process, given that the primary objective of the study was to obtain accurate and relevant information. The data for this research were obtained through interviews with four participants who were alumni of the Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka (PMM) Program 4 at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha (Undiksha), Bali, in 2024. The interviews were conducted online, depending on the location and availability of the participants. An interview guide was prepared to lead the discussion and ensure that the questions covered three main aspects, namely academic, cultural, and personal experiences. Each interview was recorded (with the participants' consent) and transcribed to facilitate data analysis.

Data Collection Instruments

The main instrument that was used in this research was an interview guide consisting of several open-ended questions. The interview questions were designed by the researcher to explore the participants' perceptions of the PMM Program 4 at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha (Undiksha), Bali. The questions were divided into three main aspects, namely academic, cultural, and personal experiences, to ensure that the participants were able to share their perspectives in a comprehensive way. By using open-ended questions, the researcher expected the participants to express their opinions freely and provide detailed information about their experiences. The interview guide functioned as a flexible tool, allowing the researcher to probe further whenever clarification or additional explanation was needed.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using the interactive model of (Miles, Huberman, 2014), which enabled the researcher to systematically condense, organize, and interpret large volumes of qualitative information. Through data reduction, the researcher selected, simplified, and categorized the raw interview data based on academic, cultural, and personal aspects of the PMM 4 Program. The reduced data were then displayed using descriptive narratives, thematic matrices, or summary tables to reveal patterns, relationships, and emerging themes. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified by re-examining the data,

cross-checking with relevant literature, and ensuring consistency across participants' responses to maintain credibility and accurately reflect their perceptions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study presents and analyzes the data obtained from interview sessions with the research participants, providing a comprehensive explanation of the findings and connecting them with relevant theoretical perspectives to describe students' perceptions of the implementation of the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* (PMM) 4 Program at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha (Undiksha) in 2024. The primary data were collected through 18 interview questions exploring academic, cultural, and personal aspects of the participants' experiences, involving PMM 4 alumni from Universitas Garut, Universitas Islam Riau, Universitas Dharma Indonesia, and Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa. All interviews were conducted online from October 17 to 20, 2025, recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy of transcription and interpretation, and analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns that reflect their overall perceptions of the PMM 4 program.

Findings

The findings from the interviews were obtained from four selected participants chosen from the initial twenty-three based on their communication skills, with each online session consisting of eighteen recorded questions to ensure accurate transcription. The results describe students' perceptions and experiences in the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* (PMM) 4 Program at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha, beginning with introductory questions about their identity, home universities, and study programs. The interviews explored academic experiences, including learning processes at Undiksha, differences from their home institutions, academic benefits, challenges, and impacts on motivation and study habits. Cultural experiences were also examined, focusing on adaptation to Balinese culture, memorable cultural values, culture shock and coping strategies, as well as interactions with local students and the community that shaped their understanding of diversity and tolerance. Additionally, the interviews highlighted personal development, such as increased confidence, independence, adaptability, communication skills, new habits or perspectives, and the program's contribution to future academic or career goals. The closing question allowed participants to share further reflections or additional insights regarding their overall PMM 4 experience at Undiksha.

Discussion

This study aims to explore students' perceptions of the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* (PMM) 4 Program at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha (Undiksha), Bali. The findings revealed that students experienced significant growth across academic, social, and cultural dimensions during their participation. They viewed the program as an opportunity to expand intellectual horizons and gain insights beyond the confines of their home institutions. The freedom to learn in a new academic atmosphere encouraged them to challenge themselves and adapt to innovative teaching methods. Most participants expressed that studying in Undiksha fostered not only knowledge but also personal maturity. The PMM 4 experience thus emerged as a catalyst for holistic learning and transformation.

From an academic perspective, all four participants AL01, AL02, AL03, and AL04 reported noticeable improvements in their confidence and learning motivation. They appreciated Undiksha's flexible teaching methods that combined conceptual and experiential learning across different disciplines. AL02 and AL04 particularly valued the opportunity to take courses outside their majors, which broadened their understanding of diverse academic fields. Meanwhile, AL03 felt that frequent class presentations helped strengthen public speaking and analytical skills. AL01 also acknowledged that the relaxed yet structured atmosphere improved her focus and enthusiasm in learning. These experiences demonstrate that PMM 4 encouraged active participation and nurtured students' intellectual curiosity. This is in line with (Wright, 2011), who noted that student-centered and interdisciplinary learning environments stimulate higher motivation and reflective engagement in academic tasks.

The social experience also had a profound impact on the participants' personal development. AL02 mentioned that collaborating with peers from various backgrounds enhanced adaptability and cooperation skills. AL03 described teamwork as both challenging and rewarding, especially when working with individuals who had different perspectives. AL01 found that engaging in group discussions helped her overcome hesitation and communicate more openly. Similarly, AL04 emphasized that sharing daily routines with others built patience and mutual respect. These collective experiences illustrate how PMM 4 strengthened interpersonal connections and social awareness among students.

Cultural immersion became one of the most memorable aspects of the PMM 4 experience for all participants. AL02 highlighted the Modul Nusantara activities, such as learning traditional Balinese dances, as meaningful opportunities to understand local customs. AL04 shared that studying the Tri Hita Karana philosophy taught valuable lessons about harmony between people, nature, and spirituality. AL03 recalled an incident involving cultural misunderstanding that later improved her awareness and sensitivity toward differences. Meanwhile, AL01 expressed admiration for Balinese rituals and community gatherings that encouraged respect for local traditions. These experiences deepened their appreciation for Indonesia's diversity and fostered intercultural competence, aligning with findings by (Internasional et al., n.d.) that Modul Nusantara effectively promotes cultural awareness and national identity through experiential cultural learning.

Despite overall satisfaction, several challenges were also encountered during the program. AL03 initially struggled to adapt to faster class pacing and a heavier workload than she was used to. AL01 found it challenging to manage multiple assignments at once, particularly in courses outside her comfort zone. AL02 shared that time management became difficult due to numerous academic and cultural activities scheduled simultaneously. In contrast, AL04 noted that although the transition was demanding, it motivated her to become more disciplined and organized. These narratives show that students developed resilience and perseverance through real academic challenges.

Another difficulty mentioned by participants involved coordination and communication between home and host universities. Inconsistencies in class schedules and unclear information occasionally caused confusion in planning and completing group projects. However, students demonstrated initiative by seeking clarification directly from academic supervisors and peers. This proactive approach not only resolved misunderstandings but also enhanced their leadership and problem-solving skills. They learned to handle administrative challenges with maturity and adaptability. Consequently, these experiences contributed to stronger independence and professional readiness.

Students also perceived Undiksha's teaching style as more engaging and practice-oriented compared to their home universities. The use of student-centered approaches, such as discussions and project-based learning, encouraged deeper reflection and understanding. Many participants enjoyed the combination of academic theory and real-life applications that made lessons more relevant. The lecturers' openness and encouragement to ask questions cultivated a supportive environment for active learning. Some subjects taught in English further increased students' confidence in academic communication. This inclusive approach contributed significantly to the formation of globally minded learners.

The living arrangements during the program provided students with valuable lessons beyond the classroom. Sharing dormitories and facilities with peers from other provinces encouraged mutual understanding and collaboration. They learned to manage differences in habits, lifestyles, and cultural values respectfully. The experience fostered tolerance, cooperation, and emotional awareness in their daily interactions. It also helped participants balance personal independence with collective responsibility. As a result, social learning became a vital complement to their academic experience.

Cultural activities within Modul Nusantara further enhanced experiential learning by connecting academic study with community engagement. Participants joined field trips, traditional ceremonies, and cultural workshops that deepened their appreciation of Indonesian heritage. They recognized how local wisdom and art can serve as powerful forms

of education. Observing Balinese community life inspired reflection on unity, respect, and gratitude. Through these encounters, students developed a stronger sense of national identity and belonging. Such activities demonstrated that cultural learning is integral to holistic education. Adapting to an unfamiliar environment initially caused uncertainty among participants. They recalled moments of surprise or confusion when confronted with different customs, dialects, or religious expressions. However, these early challenges gradually turned into opportunities to practice empathy and open-mindedness. Students learned that respecting differences was essential for peaceful coexistence. What once felt foreign became an enriching part of their cultural understanding. This transformation shows how intercultural growth occurs through experience and reflection.

The PMM 4 program also contributed greatly to participants' personal growth and independence. AL01 shared that living away from home taught her discipline in managing time and finances. AL02 emphasized that learning to adapt to a new environment increased her confidence and self-awareness. AL03 explained that facing daily challenges strengthened her decision-making and critical-thinking abilities. Meanwhile, AL04 stated that being responsible for her own schedule helped her mature emotionally and academically. These reflections resonate with the findings of (Vega-ram et al., 2024), who highlighted that student mobility programs enhance emotional maturity and self-regulated learning among university students.

Interpersonal communication emerged as another major benefit gained during the program. Students interacted with lecturers, local peers, and community members, which helped improve both verbal and nonverbal communication skills. They became more empathetic listeners and learned to articulate their ideas effectively in multicultural discussions. Exposure to diverse communication styles also enhanced their adaptability in academic and professional contexts. Group collaboration strengthened their ability to manage conflict and build consensus respectfully. This is consistent with (Aceh, 2023), who highlight that student exchange programs provide an effective environment for developing intercultural communication competence and empathy through sustained social interaction. Thus, the PMM 4 program functioned as practical training for cross-cultural communication and collaborative engagement.

Participation in PMM 4 also sparked intellectual curiosity and inspired future academic pursuits. Students expressed a newfound enthusiasm for postgraduate study and research collaboration. The opportunity to learn through interdisciplinary courses encouraged creativity and innovation in thinking. Several participants considered applying their new knowledge to community projects or educational initiatives. The program motivated them to view learning as a lifelong process that extends beyond university boundaries. Such aspirations reflect PMM 4's lasting influence on academic and career development.

While the experience was overwhelmingly positive, students shared thoughtful suggestions to improve the program's effectiveness. They recommended stronger mentoring systems and structured reflection sessions to help future participants process their experiences. Improving coordination between universities was also seen as crucial to prevent administrative confusion. Additionally, students suggested offering more orientation sessions to better prepare for cultural adaptation. These recommendations demonstrate their awareness of program sustainability and desire for continuous improvement. Their reflections serve as valuable input for policymakers in higher education.

In conclusion, the PMM 4 Program at Undiksha was perceived as a transformative educational journey that integrated academic enrichment, social interaction, and cultural exploration. It provided students with knowledge, empathy, and confidence to navigate diverse learning environments. The program strengthened their independence, adaptability, and appreciation of Indonesia's cultural diversity. It also fostered unity and collaboration among students from various backgrounds through shared experiences. By combining formal learning with real-world engagement, PMM 4 successfully nurtured balanced and open-minded individuals. Therefore, it stands as a meaningful model for preparing future generations to become globally competent yet locally grounded citizens.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the interview results and the analysis conducted, it can be concluded that the PMM 4 Program at Undiksha provides meaningful contributions to students' academic and personal advancement. The program encourages the development of cultural awareness, adaptability, and social interaction skills through exposure to diverse learning settings. In addition, students become more confident and open-minded as they experience new perspectives and collaborative activities with peers from different regions. In general, the PMM 4 initiative brings positive transformations in both intellectual growth and character formation, preparing students to participate actively in a globalized academic and social environment.

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