

Psychological safety and stress management among IISMA 2024 awardees at Yale University

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Keywords:

Academic Stress, International Students, Psychological Safety, Stress Management, Yale University

ABSTRACT

International student mobility exposes students to unfamiliar academic cultures, intensive workloads, language demands, and psychological pressures, making psychological safety and effective stress management essential for successful adaptation. This study aimed to identify the academic and psychological pressures experienced by Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) 2024 awardees at Yale University, examine how psychological safety was established, and explain its relationship with stress management. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, involving 15 Indonesian awardees from nine universities. Data were collected during a three-month Yale Summer Session through participant observation, informal open-ended interviews, personal reflective journals, and relevant secondary sources. Source triangulation and thematic analysis were conducted to organize the findings into themes of academic pressure, psychological safety, coping strategies, and relationships among constructs. The findings revealed that pressures emerged from intensive learning demands, English-language challenges, cultural differences, self-imposed expectations, and concurrent academic obligations at students' home universities. Empathetic lecturers, inclusive classroom norms, two-way communication, and opportunities for self-expression strengthened psychological safety and encouraged active participation. Students managed stress through cognitive reframing, time management, journaling, self-reflection, and peer support. In conclusion, psychological safety functioned as a stress buffer that enhanced resilience and engagement, while adaptive coping strategies reciprocally reinforced students' sense of security within a cross-cultural academic learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) is a scholarship program initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia in 2021 as part of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (Independent Learning–Independent Campus) policy. This program provides opportunities for Indonesian students to study for one semester at leading universities worldwide through undergraduate and vocational schemes, with the aim of broadening global perspectives through direct exposure to international education systems and academic cultures. By 2024, IISMA had dispatched more than 6,000 students to over 160 universities across various countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, and South Korea (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2024). One of the partner universities in the United States is Yale University, which implements intensive and participatory discussion-based learning.

The IISMA selection process is conducted nationally and competitively, involving requirements such as the Cumulative Achievement Index (GPA), proof of English language proficiency through IELTS, TOEFL, or Duolingo English Test, as well as document screening, essay evaluation, and interviews. These stages are designed to attract participants who demonstrate academic excellence, strong soft skills, and motivation to learn in an international environment. Yale University was founded in 1701 in New Haven, Connecticut, and is a member of the Ivy League, with a strong academic tradition that also emphasizes student support and engagement. The Yale Summer Session program attended by IISMA awardees combines intensive lectures, workshops, and seminars within a relatively short period, requiring participants to adapt rapidly to a new academic environment.

The learning system at Yale positions students as equal intellectual partners, encouraging them to express opinions, ask questions, and critically evaluate the arguments of lecturers and peers. This model reflects a liberal education approach that places open discussion, critical inquiry, and cross-perspective interaction at the center of the learning process (AAC&U, 2007; Freeman et al., 2014; Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, 2024). This educational culture contrasts with many higher education practices in Indonesia, which still commonly emphasize lecturer-centered learning. For Indonesian students who are less familiar with expectations of active participation, transitioning into such an environment can become a challenge, both intellectually and psychologically.

Classes at Yale are attended by students from more than 120 countries. Data from the Office of International Students & Scholars recorded 3,533 active international students in the 2023 academic year, with the largest representations from China, India, Canada, South Korea, and the United Kingdom (Yale OISS, 2023). This diversity contributes to expressive communication patterns and openness toward academic debate. Previous observations indicate that Chinese students with limited English proficiency may still actively participate in classroom discussions, partly due to competitive academic cultures that encourage resilience and strong diaspora community support (Wenhua & Zhe, 2013). Conversely, students from collectivist cultures such as Indonesia tend to be more cautious because of social norms emphasizing respect for authority and avoidance of direct conflict (Hofstede, 2001).

These differences do not reflect variations in intellectual ability but rather differences in communication and learning cultures. Students who are accustomed to environments that emphasize critical thinking and confidence may tolerate linguistic imperfections during communication and perceive active participation as an indicator of successful adaptation. Conversely, students from cultures that emphasize harmony and caution may experience internal conflicts between the desire to participate and the fear of making mistakes. Therefore, they require an adequate sense of psychological safety before fully engaging in academic interactions (Edmondson, 1999).

Psychological safety refers to a psychological condition in which individuals feel safe speaking up, asking questions, taking interpersonal risks, or expressing ideas without fear of humiliation, criticism, or negative judgment. The foundation of this concept can be traced to Kahn's (1990) framework of three psychological conditions for personal engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Edmondson (1999) further developed the concept as a shared belief that an environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, making it an important prerequisite for learning, innovation, and reflection (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In discussion-

based classrooms, students who experience psychological safety tend to participate more actively, acknowledge knowledge limitations, and demonstrate greater learning initiative (Carmeli et al., 2009). Clark, (2020) expanded this concept into four stages: inclusion safety, learner safety, contributor safety, and challenger safety. The development of psychological safety is influenced by lecturers' teaching approaches (Pekrun, 2006), egalitarian classroom norms, and inclusivity toward cultural diversity (Hofstede, 2001), and has been empirically associated with higher academic engagement, motivation, and resilience (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017).

Clark's four stages describe the psychological journey of students in the classroom. In inclusion safety, students feel that their presence is recognized and accepted by the group. In learner safety, they begin to feel confident asking questions, admitting mistakes, and trying new approaches without fear of ridicule. In contributor safety, their ideas are valued, allowing them to develop greater confidence. In challenger safety, they feel safe questioning established norms and even critically evaluating lecturers' opinions. For students from collectivist cultures, the final stage is often the most challenging because it may conflict with cultural values emphasizing respect for authority (Hofstede, 2001). This sense of security in expressing opinions is a prerequisite for engagement, as psychological safety has been identified as one of the key antecedents of voice behavior within groups (Liang et al., 2012).

The level of psychological safety can be identified through students' behavioral patterns. In classrooms with high psychological safety, students are willing to ask questions and share opinions even when they are uncertain, openly acknowledge mistakes, and receive constructive feedback without feeling personally judged. Conversely, low psychological safety is characterized by students' tendency to remain silent despite having an understanding of the material, reluctance to ask questions due to concerns about appearing unprepared, and discussion patterns dominated by only a few participants. The reluctance to ask questions or challenge ideas often indicates limited psychological safety among Indonesian students, particularly in international classrooms that require spontaneous critical thinking and communication in a second language.

Academic stress refers to an emotional, cognitive, and physiological response that occurs when educational demands are perceived to exceed an individual's available resources or coping capacity (Misra & McKean, 2000). Among international students, stress arises not only from academic demands but also from language barriers, cultural adjustment challenges, social isolation, and pressure to maintain scholarships and represent their home countries positively (Sawir et al., 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wang et al., 2012). Stress management refers to the ability to recognize, regulate, and cope with psychological stress in order to maintain emotional balance and academic performance. The transactional model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emphasizes that stress responses are determined by individuals' subjective appraisal and adaptive responses, distinguishing between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping strategies. Another perspective highlights the importance of cognitive restructuring in modifying negative thought patterns (Gross & John, 2003) and the role of social support as a protective factor that buffers the effects of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Persistent unmanaged stress may impair concentration, contribute to academic burnout, and reduce social engagement (Misra & Castillo, 2004).

More specifically, stressors experienced by international students include differences in communication and learning cultures, difficulties in understanding academic terminology despite adequate English proficiency, feelings of social isolation, and pressure to maintain academic performance to preserve scholarship status and represent their home countries positively. When unmanaged, accumulated stress may negatively affect mental health through increased anxiety and sleep disturbances, academic performance through reduced concentration and productivity, and social relationships through withdrawal behaviors that further limit access to emotional support (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). A recent meta-analysis confirmed a consistent association between acculturative stress and various negative psychological outcomes, including depression and psychological distress, among international students (Soufi Amlashi et al., 2024). An environment that fosters psychological safety may reduce these negative impacts because students feel supported, understood, and provided with opportunities for personal and academic growth.

These two constructs are considered closely interrelated. Psychological safety provides students with the space to acknowledge the stress they experience, communicate their difficulties with others, and select coping strategies that align with their needs. Conversely, when psychological safety is limited, students may conceal academic challenges and withdraw from social interactions, resulting in maladaptive coping strategies such as avoiding responsibilities or engaging in self-blame. Therefore, the relationship between psychological safety and stress management is likely reciprocal and dynamic rather than representing a simple one-way causal relationship (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Although psychological safety and stress management have been widely examined, studies explicitly connecting these two constructs have predominantly focused on organizational and workplace contexts. Evidence within cross-cultural higher education settings, particularly among students from collectivist cultures participating in international mobility programs, remains limited. This research gap provides the foundation for the present study. Drawing on the experiences of IISMA 2024 awardees at Yale University, this article aims to identify the forms of academic and psychological pressure experienced by awardees, analyze the development of psychological safety and its influence on stress management strategies, and explain the relationship between these constructs in shaping adaptive and productive learning experiences. Theoretically, this study extends the application of psychological safety from organizational teams to international classroom contexts. Practically, its findings may serve as a basis for developing student support strategies within mobility programs. Based on these objectives, the research questions guiding this study are: (1) what forms of academic and psychological pressure are experienced by IISMA 2024 awardees at Yale University; (2) how is psychological safety developed and how does it influence the stress management strategies employed by students; and (3) how does the relationship between psychological safety and stress management contribute to the formation of adaptive and productive learning experiences?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to systematically describe contextual phenomena based on participants' experiences. This approach was selected because the research focused on students' subjective experiences of developing psychological

safety and managing academic and psychological pressures, which could not be adequately represented through numerical measurements. The study was conducted based on the experiences of the author and fellow awardees during the Yale Summer Session at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, United States, as part of the IISMA 2024 program. The program was conducted offline for three months, from May 25, 2024, to August 9, 2024.

The participants consisted of 15 Indonesian students who participated in the IISMA 2024 program at Yale University and represented nine public and private universities in Indonesia with diverse academic backgrounds. To maintain confidentiality, participants' individual identities were excluded, and all information was presented anonymously and in aggregate form. The data consisted of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through participatory observation, informal interviews with fellow awardees, and periodic reflective notes documenting personal experiences throughout the program. Secondary data were collected from official IISMA documents, as well as relevant academic literature discussing psychological safety and stress management.

Informal interviews were conducted using open-ended questions regarding the academic and psychological pressures experienced by awardees, their coping responses, and their perceptions of lecturer attitudes and classroom environments. Participatory observations focused on classroom participation dynamics, lecturer–student interactions, and changes in students' engagement throughout the program. Reflective notes were used to document personal experiences and learning processes during the mobility program. These three data sources were integrated to provide complementary perspectives from observation, participant narratives, and self-reflection.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the findings, source triangulation was conducted by comparing observational data, statements from fellow awardees, and reflective notes. The researcher's position as both participant and observer enabled deeper understanding of classroom dynamics, while continuous reflection was used to minimize potential interpretation bias. Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework by identifying and organizing recurring patterns into key themes, including academic and psychological pressures, the development of psychological safety, coping strategies, and the relationship between these constructs. The outcomes were evaluated qualitatively based on observed changes in learning attitudes and behaviors, including transitions from passive to active participation, the adoption of more adaptive coping strategies, and reduced psychological barriers in engaging with classroom activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Academic and Psychological Stress

Despite the learning environment at Yale full of psychological safety, IISMA awardees still face significant academic pressure. The main pressure comes from the fast and intensive pace of learning: in one semester students are required to read, analyze, and discuss heavy texts from journals and scientific books every week. This burden is heavy for international students who are not used to the critical reading approach, especially because of the lack of academic vocabulary in English and the shock of adaptation due to the arrival schedule that is only one day before the lecture starts. This condition triggers feelings of overwhelm, inferiority, and hesitation to speak in class in the early weeks.

Pressure is also internal. The desire not to disappoint a supportive lecturer turns into self-imposed pressure: even in the absence of explicit external demands, the expectation of performing well in discussions, essays, and presentations creates its own inner burden. In addition, the most prominent structural stress is double load. While participating in the program at Yale, the awardee is not exempt from academic obligations at the home campus, so they must undergo two learning systems at once, complete with assignments, quizzes, and Final Semester Exams. This burden is compounded by the time zone difference of about 11 to 12 hours, which forces some exams and assignment deadlines to be completed in the early hours of local time. Many awardees are forced to stay up late, then attend morning classes with physical and mental conditions that have not yet recovered, causing chronic fatigue, time disorientation, anxiety, guilt, and emotional exhaustion.

Some awardees were reluctant to speak in the discussion because they were worried about giving irrelevant responses or being considered disconnected. The pressure is heightened by the fact that the texts discussed generally come from scientific journals and books that demand in-depth understanding, while the expectation of completing a heavy reading every week is new to many participants. In contrast to the academic pressure inherent in the learning process, the double burden is administrative and can actually be reduced through policy adjustments, so it is more appropriate to read it as a gap in mobility governance rather than a mere issue of individual resilience.

The Establishment of Psychological Safety in the Yale Classroom

Psychological safety is seen through direct interaction between lecturers and students. From the beginning of the lecture, the lecturer explicitly emphasized that no question is considered stupid and that every contribution has a valid value, so that students are positioned as thinking partners, not just recipients of knowledge. When the awardee expressed concern via email because they felt they were not ready to follow the rhythm of the weekly reading, the lecturer responded with empathy and asserted that such anxiety is natural as part of the intellectual process. The open-ended discussion-based class structure also strengthens the sense of security: students are invited to submit critical reflections and questions from the first session, while lecturers often mention and appreciate comments from previous sessions.

Based on these interaction patterns, the level of psychological safety at Yale is relatively high because of three things: explicit support of lecturers for freedom of thought and questioning, responsive two-way communication so that safe interpersonal relationships are created, and an academic culture that values the learning process and not just the end result. This kind of interpersonal support encourages the awardee to move from simply feeling welcome to having the courage to actively contribute ideas.

As a concrete example, lecturers not only know each student's name, but also monitor their participation and convey personal attention when anyone seems passive, either through direct conversations or emails. Instead of creating intimidating pressure, this approach builds a sense of value and expectation, which encourages students to dare to try rather than fear of failing. In a learning space like this, the courage to think critically is considered more important than adherence to standard answers. This observation corroborates the evidence that psychological security contributes to increased student motivation, creativity, and resilience in the face of academic pressure, as students who feel safe are more open to critical thinking, admitting ignorance, and receiving feedback (Carmeli et al., 2009; Frazier et al., 2017).

Stress Management Strategies Used

The main strategy used is mindset adjustment. The awardee recognizes that Yale's academic standards are indeed high, but comparisons do not need to be made in absolute terms with local students; Instead of striving for perfection, they prioritize a progressive learning process. Self-regulation and time management are the keys to maintaining emotional stability and performance, such as dividing study time in a structured manner, setting daily reading targets, and setting rest time. Journaling is a significant coping tool because it provides a space to express emotions while evaluating learning progress. Social support from fellow awardees who are experiencing similar distress fosters emotional solidarity, while the warm response of the lecturer reinforces the feeling of being valued. Thus, the strategies used are a combination of problem-focused coping, such as managing time and focusing on learning, and emotion-focused coping, such as journaling, self-reflection, and social support.

Writing a daily reflection gives a sense of control over the ongoing adaptation process, while the feeling of having a comrade creates warm emotional solidarity through sharing experiences, exchanging tips, and listening to each other. This combination of individual and social strategies forms the foundation for the awardee to survive and thrive during an intellectually and emotionally challenging period of study.

The Relationship between Psychological Safety and Stress Management

The experience of the IISMA program at Yale shows that psychological safety is closely related to the effectiveness of stress management strategies. A psychologically safe environment, where students feel heard and not afraid of negative judgment, lowers stress levels while encouraging active participation. The sense of security to ask questions and admit ignorance makes students more open to exploring understanding, even in high-pressure conditions. When the awardee faces the double burden of homeschool assignments that coincide with attending Yale, psychological safety serves as an important buffer in maintaining emotional resilience, preventing burnout, and maintaining consistency in stress management strategies. A sense of security in the community also makes it easier for the awardee to establish emotional closeness because they believe that stress experiences are understood together, not borne alone.

A sense of support from the learning environment and community is a key factor in preventing burnout, maintaining focus, and implementing stress management strategies consistently. Thus, psychological safety not only eases the psychological burden due to stress, but also strengthens the academic and social resilience of awardees in competitive international classrooms.

In summary, this study shows that Indonesian students who move to participatory Yale classrooms face layered pressures, but the psychological security built by lecturers helps them manage that pressure in a healthy way. These findings give an idea that the success of adaptation is not solely determined by individual ability, but also by the classroom climate that accepts mistakes as part of learning.

The findings regarding the formation of psychological safety are in line with Clark's (2020) four-stage model. In the early days, most of the awardees were at the inclusion and learner safety stages, hampered by the limitations of academic vocabulary and fear of being judged. Empathetic lecturer support plays a role in bridging them to contributor safety, which is the point when they begin to dare to contribute ideas. This pattern reinforces the argument

that emotional support from authority figures increases a sense of security and engagement (Carmeli et al., 2009; McLeod & Gupta, 2023; Newman et al., 2017), as well as enlarging an individual's capacity to learn from difficult experiences (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). The coping strategies that emerged are also consistent with the framework of Lazarus and Folkman (1984): mindset adjustments reflect cognitive reappraisal, while time management is problem-focused coping that is in line with self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002). Prioritizing process over perfection reflects a growth mindset (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), while journaling and social support reinforce emotional regulation (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

A prominent theoretical contribution is the expansion of the role of psychological safety as a stress buffer. If the stress buffering hypothesis places general social support as a stress buffer (Cohen & Wills, 1985), these findings suggest that a psychologically safe classroom climate can serve a similar function in cross-cultural academic contexts. The relationship between psychological safety and stress management is reciprocal, not linear one-way: a safe environment enhances stress management, while effective coping strategies reinforce a sense of security over time. These findings complement the literature on international student stress that has been highlighting the source of stress (Sawir et al., 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wang et al., 2012) by emphasizing the role of classroom climate as a protective factor.

The findings also reveal an important cultural dimension. For students from a collectivist society, argumentative classrooms can feel intimidating, so a sense of psychological security is a prerequisite for participation, not just a complement (Hofstede, 2001). The practice of Yale lecturers greeting students personally and responding to concerns with empathy shows that simple interventions based on interpersonal relationships can accelerate students' transition to active engagement. This is in line with the idea that emotions and relationships are an inseparable part of the learning process in the classroom (Pekrun, 2006), while emphasizing that creating a sense of security is a shared responsibility of lecturers and institutions, not just a burden on students.

Two reflective findings enrich this understanding. First, psychological security does not necessarily eliminate stress, but can shift the source from interpersonal pressure to self-imposed norms. Implicitly, support doesn't stop at creating a welcoming classroom climate, but it also needs to help students manage expectations of themselves so that insecurity doesn't turn into exhausting perfectionism. Second, the double burden of campus assignments is administrative and can actually be reduced through policy adjustments; Therefore, it is more appropriate to read as a gap in mobility governance rather than a mere issue of individual resilience.

This study has both strengths and limitations. Its strength lies in the depth of insider perspective gained through three months of direct engagement, so that it is able to capture the nuances of the experience that are difficult to reach by remote methods. The limitations of the study are reflective and limited to one case context with a small number of participants and rely on observations and informal interviews, so the findings are not intended to be generalized. Practically, these findings suggest three directions of action: strengthening the academic and psychological readiness of prospective awardees through critical reading, academic speaking, and time management simulations before departure; adjustment of the double academic burden policy by the organizer and the home campus, e.g. assignment replacement, exam rescheduling, or partial academic leave; and the preservation of

interpersonal empathy-based teaching practices by partner institutions, including providing early feedback to students who appear passive. This recommendation to strengthen preparedness is in line with evidence that intervention programs, especially those of a psychoeducational nature, are effective in reducing acculturative stress and increasing the adjustment of international students to a new educational environment (Aljaberi et al., 2021). Further research with qualitative and quantitative designs involving a wider range of participants from different countries and destination universities is needed to test the robustness of these findings. Thus, in cross-cultural learning such as IISMA, psychological safety has proven to be an important foundation that ensures students not only survive, but also develop intellectually and emotionally.

CONCLUSION

This study showed that IISMA 2024 awardees at Yale University experienced academic and psychological pressures in the forms of intensive learning demands, English language requirements, differences in academic culture, self-imposed expectations, and overlapping academic responsibilities at their home universities. Psychological safety was developed through empathetic faculty support, two-way communication, freedom of expression, and an inclusive classroom environment, enabling students to feel safe asking questions, contributing ideas, and perceiving mistakes as part of the learning process. This condition encouraged the adoption of adaptive stress management strategies, including mindset adjustment, time management, journaling, self-reflection, and social support. Therefore, psychological safety functioned as a stress-buffering factor that strengthened students' resilience and engagement, while effective coping strategies also contributed to maintaining psychological safety. The relationship between these two constructs was reciprocal, indicating that successful adaptation within an international educational environment depended not only on individual preparedness but also on the establishment of a supportive, inclusive, and empathetic learning climate.

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