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# DIGITAL NATIVES AND THE CALL FOR INNOVATION IN ARABIC LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** Today's graduate students in Arabic language education are unmistakably digital natives—predominantly young women (70.6%) aged 21–25, graduates of Islamic higher education institutions across Indonesia, and deeply embedded in digital culture. This study explores their research interests, academic expectations, and aspirations through a structured survey of 51 newly enrolled master's students at Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University (UIN Malang). Findings reveal a decisive shift in scholarly orientation: 37.3% identified "technology and media in Arabic language education" as their primary research interest, far surpassing traditional domains like linguistics or literature. Their call for innovation is not merely technological but pedagogical—they seek curricula that integrate digital tools, emphasize practical application, and align with 21st-century competencies. Simultaneously, a significant academic preparedness gap emerges: 72.5% requested intensive training in scholarly writing, and 64.7% demanded access to international journals, signaling a need for methodological scaffolding. Global aspirations are equally strong, with multiple students explicitly advocating for student exchange programs to Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Madinah. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses yielded five strategic priorities: (1) strengthening academic capacity, (2) advancing internationalization, (3) ensuring curriculum relevance in the digital era, (4) improving internal management, and (5) nurturing an Islamic scholarly vision that fuses linguistic mastery with civilizational mission. This study argues that the voices of digital-native students are not peripheral feedback but central diagnostic data for transforming Arabic language education into a dynamic, responsive, and globally engaged discipline in the Global South.

## INTRODUCTION | مقدمة | PENDAHULUAN

Higher education in Indonesia is undergoing a quiet but profound transformation, driven by generational change, digital saturation, and rising academic expectations. Nowhere is this more evident than in postgraduate programs in Arabic Language Education (ALE), where a new cohort of students—digital natives raised in an era of smartphones, social media, and instant connectivity—is redefining what it means to study, teach, and research the Arabic language.

At Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University (UIN Malang), the Master's Program in ALE has become a magnet for this new generation. In the 2025/2026 academic year, 80 new students enrolled—a national draw that reflects the program's growing reputation. Of these, 51 (63.75%) participated in a structured survey, offering a rare window into their motivations, expectations, and aspirations.

These students are not accidental enrollees. They are predominantly women (70.6%), aged 21–25 (98%), and graduates of State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKINs) from Aceh to East Nusa Tenggara. They embody what Prensky (2001) termed "digital natives"—individuals for whom digital environments are not add-ons but the very fabric of cognition, communication, and identity formation. Unlike previous generations who adapted to technology, they were born into

it, shaping their learning preferences around interactivity, immediacy, and visual literacy (Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

This generational shift carries deep implications for ALE. Globally, language education is being reimagined through *Technology-Enhanced Language Learning* (TELL), which leverages digital tools to boost engagement, personalization, and learning outcomes (Zou et al., 2022). Yet, in the Indonesian context—where Arabic is taught as both a sacred and foreign language—research on TELL remains scarce, and institutional responses are often reactive rather than strategic.

Compounding this is the rising expectation for academic rigor. While 80.4% of students enrolled to "enhance their academic competence in Arabic," 72.5% simultaneously admitted needing intensive training in scholarly writing, and 64.7% requested access to international journals. This paradox—high motivation paired with methodological insecurity—is a hallmark of graduate education in the Global South (Boud & Lee, 2009). Without structured support, such gaps can lead to frustration, delayed graduation, or attrition.

Moreover, these students harbor global ambitions. Multiple respondents explicitly called for student exchange programs to Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Madinah—not as tourism, but as strategic academic immersion. As one student from Banten wrote, "Study exchange to Madinah." Another from East Java emphasized that international collaboration "is not just for CV enhancement, but for knowledge that can be applied."

This study responds to these dynamics by asking: How do digital-native graduate students articulate their research interests and academic expectations in Arabic language education, and what do their voices reveal about the future of the discipline in Indonesia?

Theoretically, this research contributes to three underexplored areas: (1) the application of *digital native theory* in non-Western, non-English language contexts; (2) the expansion of *TELL* into Arabic pedagogy in Southeast Asia; and (3) the use of *student voice* as a diagnostic tool in Islamic higher education—a space where participatory governance remains nascent (Marginson, 2020). Practically, it offers a roadmap for curriculum innovation, faculty development, and institutional policy that centers student agency without compromising academic standards. In doing so, it aligns with Indonesia's *Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka* (Freedom to Learn–Independent Campus) policy, which champions student-centered, flexible, and globally connected education.

## METHOD | منهج | METODE

This study employed an exploratory mixed-methods design, strategically integrating quantitative and qualitative data to capture both the breadth and depth of graduate students' experiences, expectations, and aspirations. The choice of a mixed-methods approach was grounded in the principle of complementarity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), which posits that numerical patterns and narrative meanings are not competing forms of evidence but rather mutually reinforcing dimensions of understanding. In the context of this research—where the goal was not to test hypotheses but to listen deeply to student voices and translate their input into actionable insights—this design proved particularly apt. By combining structured survey responses with open-ended reflections, the study was able to move beyond surface-level descriptions toward a nuanced interpretation of how digital-native students envision the future of Arabic language education in Indonesia.

### *Participants and Sampling*

The population of this study comprised all 80 newly enrolled students in the Master's Program in Arabic Language Education (S2 PBA) at the Graduate School of Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University (UIN Malang) during the odd semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. From this population, 51 students voluntarily completed a structured online survey, resulting in a response rate of 63.75%. The sampling strategy combined purposive and voluntary response approaches: only individuals who met the criteria of being officially registered first-semester master's students were eligible, and participation was entirely self-initiated through an open invitation disseminated via the official WhatsApp group. Although this method does not yield a statistically random sample, it is methodologically appropriate for an exploratory, institution-specific study aimed at internal program evaluation rather than population-wide generalization. The demographic profile of the sample reveals a striking homogeneity that enhances contextual validity: 70.6% identified as female, 98% were aged 21–25 years, and 88.2% were graduates of State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKINs) across Indonesia, with only 11.8% coming from private universities. This composition reflects a national draw, as respondents hailed from more than 15 provinces—from Aceh and West Sumatra to East Nusa Tenggara and West Kalimantan—demonstrating the program's broad appeal beyond its regional base. Such homogeneity, while limiting external generalizability, strengthens the internal coherence of findings and ensures that insights are directly relevant to the program's immediate stakeholder group.

### *Instrument and Data Collection*

Data were collected using a digital questionnaire developed on Google Forms, a platform selected for its accessibility, user-friendliness, and seamless integration with the university's primary communication channel (WhatsApp). The instrument was carefully designed to align with the research questions and consisted of 17 items organized into three thematic blocks. The first block gathered demographic and academic background information, including optional name, student ID (NIM), active WhatsApp number, gender, age range, city and province of origin, and undergraduate program and institution. The second block featured closed-ended questions using multiple-choice and checkbox formats to assess motivations for pursuing graduate study, factors influencing the choice of UIN Malang, exclusivity of institutional preference, post-graduation expectations, intended study duration, research interests, sources of academic information, and needed academic facilities. The third block contained a single open-ended question: "What suggestions, expectations, or recommendations do you have for the future development of the S2 PBA program?"—an optional item intended to capture rich qualitative input without imposing response burden. Prior to deployment, the questionnaire underwent a pilot test with five non-participant graduate students to ensure clarity, logical flow, and cultural appropriateness; no significant revisions were required. The final survey was distributed over a three-day period (September 3–5, 2025) via the official cohort WhatsApp group, accompanied by a clear statement of purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality assurance. Participation was incentivized not financially but through the promise that responses would directly inform program improvements, framing engagement as an act of academic citizenship. All data were automatically logged in Google Sheets and later exported to Microsoft Excel for analysis, with timestamps used to verify response timing and internal consistency checks (e.g., ensuring that those who selected "did not consider other universities" did not list alternative institutions) applied to ensure data integrity.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis followed a sequential mixed-methods approach, with quantitative and qualitative strands analyzed separately before being integrated during interpretation. Quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel. Frequency distributions and percentages were calculated to summarize demographic characteristics, motivational drivers, institutional selection factors, research interests, and academic support needs. Cross-tabulations were performed to explore potential associations between variables—for instance, whether students from certain regions exhibited distinct research preferences or whether gender correlated with specific facility requests. However, no inferential statistical tests (e.g., chi-square or regression) were conducted, as the study's exploratory orientation prioritized pattern identification over hypothesis testing. Qualitative data from the 42 substantive open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with repeated immersion in the dataset to achieve familiarity, followed by the generation of initial codes that captured key ideas within each response (e.g., "need weekly Arabic speaking practice" was coded as Active Language Development; "request exchange to Madinah" as Global Mobility Aspiration). These codes were then systematically grouped into potential themes, which were iteratively reviewed, refined, and defined through team discussion until five overarching themes emerged: (1) Strengthening Academic Capacity, (2) Advancing Internationalization, (3) Ensuring Curriculum Relevance in the Digital Era, (4) Improving Internal Management, and (5) Nurturing an Islamic Scholarly Vision. To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation by geographic origin and gender was employed during theme development, and partial member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with a subset of respondents to confirm alignment with their original intent. This dual-analytic strategy ensured that findings were both statistically grounded and narratively rich.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The research adhered strictly to established ethical principles for social science inquiry. Informed consent was obtained implicitly through voluntary survey submission, preceded by a transparent explanation of the study's aims, procedures, voluntary nature, and data usage. All responses were collected anonymously; while participants could optionally provide their names for illustrative quotes (e.g., "a student from Palembang suggested…"), this was never required, and no personally identifiable information beyond student ID (used solely for internal verification) was retained in the public dataset. Data were stored on a password-protected university server and used exclusively for academic improvement purposes within the Graduate School of UIN Malang. The research team upheld the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence by ensuring that participation posed no psychological, social, or professional risk to respondents and that findings would be used constructively to enhance—rather than critique—the program. Finally, data integrity was maintained through honest and complete reporting: all findings are presented as they emerged from the data, without selective omission or embellishment, and limitations (e.g., non-random sampling, self-report bias) are openly acknowledged in the conclusion. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the university's internal review process under the oversight of the Graduate School Directorate.

## RESULTS | نتائج | TEMUAN

### *Demographic and Academic Background of Respondents*

The cohort of 51 newly enrolled master's students in the Arabic Language Education (ALE) program at Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University (UIN Malang) in the 2025/2026

academic year presents a remarkably cohesive demographic and academic profile that reflects both national trends in Islamic higher education and the unique appeal of the program itself. As detailed in Table 1, the overwhelming majority of respondents are female (70.6%), a pattern consistent with the broader feminization of humanities and teacher education fields across Southeast Asia, where women increasingly dominate postgraduate enrolment in language and pedagogy disciplines (UNESCO, 2023). Nearly all students (98.0%) fall within the 21–25 age range, firmly situating them as members of Generation Z—digital natives who have come of age in an era defined by smartphones, social media, and instant access to information. Geographically, the sample demonstrates impressive national reach, with students originating from more than 15 provinces across Indonesia, including Aceh, West Sumatra, East Nusa Tenggara, South Sulawesi, West Kalimantan, and Lampung, though the largest concentration (18 students) hails from East Java, reflecting the university's regional base. Academically, the cohort is highly homogeneous: 88.2% are graduates of State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKINs), primarily UINs and IAINs, and 98.0% hold a bachelor's degree specifically in Arabic Language Education (PBA). Only one respondent holds a degree in Arabic Language and Literature from UIN Khas Jember. This near-universal alignment between undergraduate and graduate fields indicates that students arrive with a strong foundational knowledge base, ready to engage in advanced theoretical and methodological discourse. The profile thus reveals a group that is not only demographically cohesive but also academically prepared and nationally representative—making their collective voice a powerful diagnostic tool for program development and curriculum innovation.

**Table 1 Demographic and Academic Background of Respondents (N = 51)**

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Female | 36 | 70.6 |
| | Male | 15 | 29.4 |
| **Age** | 21–25 years | 50 | 98.0 |
| | 26–30 years | 1 | 2.0 |
| **Undergraduate Institution** | PTKIN (UIN/IAIN) | 45 | 88.2 |
| | Private Islamic University (PTS) | 6 | 11.8 |
| **Bachelor's Degree** | Arabic Language Education (PBA) | 50 | 98.0 |
| | Arabic Language and Literature | 1 | 2.0 |

### *Motivations and Institutional Choice*

When asked about their primary motivations for pursuing graduate study, respondents revealed a blend of intrinsic intellectual drive and pragmatic professional goals. A striking 80.4% cited "improving academic competence in Arabic" as their main reason, underscoring a deep commitment to scholarly mastery rather than mere credential acquisition. This was complemented by 51.0% who expressed a personal desire to "gain more knowledge and earn a higher degree," and 45.1% who identified professional teaching requirements as a key motivator. Notably, 35.3% explicitly stated they are preparing for doctoral studies, signalling long-term academic ambitions. This motivational profile aligns closely with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), which posits that sustained engagement in higher education arises from the interplay of intrinsic curiosity and extrinsic career utility. In terms of institutional choice, the data reveal a decisive role for formal quality assurance mechanisms: 84.3% of students identified the program's "Unggul" (Excellent) accreditation status as the primary factor in their decision—a finding that echoes global research on graduate student choice, where institutional reputation

and external validation consistently outweigh cost or convenience (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Further reinforcing this, 49.0% highlighted the quality and reputation of faculty as influential, and 35.3% cited recommendations from alumni or peers. Perhaps most telling is the fact that 51.0% of respondents (26 students) did not consider any other university—they applied to UIN Malang exclusively. This level of brand loyalty indicates that the program has successfully established itself not just as an option, but as the definitive destination for advanced Arabic language education in Indonesia, particularly among graduates of the PTKIN network.

### *Research Interests, Academic Expectations, and Support Needs*

The research interests expressed by students reflect a clear generational and pedagogical shift toward contemporary, technology-integrated, and application-oriented scholarship. As shown in Table 2, "Technology and Media in ALE" emerged as the dominant interest, selected by 37.3% of respondents—nearly double the next most popular category. This was followed by "Curriculum Development in ALE" (27.5%) and "Assessment and Evaluation in Arabic Language Learning" (23.5%). Traditional domains such as pure linguistics, classical literature, or philology received no selections, signalling a decisive move away from descriptive, text-centered approaches toward dynamic, learner-centered, and evidence-based pedagogy. This trend is further reinforced by students' post-graduation expectations: 68.6% aim to enhance their professional teaching capacity, 47.1% hope to publish in scholarly journals, and 33.3% plan to pursue doctoral studies. However, these ambitious goals are tempered by a candid acknowledgment of academic unpreparedness. A striking 72.5% of students requested intensive training in academic writing, and 64.7% emphasized the urgent need for access to international, Scopus-indexed journals. Additionally, 43.1% called for scheduled academic consultations with faculty, and 37.3% expressed a desire for technical guidance on research tools and statistical software such as SPSS or SmartPLS. These findings reveal a critical tension: students arrive with high motivation and clear visions for their academic futures, yet they recognize a significant gap between their current competencies and the rigorous demands of postgraduate research. Their call is not for easier standards, but for stronger scaffolding—structured support that can transform aspiration into scholarly achievement. As one student from Lamongan noted, "Many new students lack sufficient skills in academic writing and publishing," a sentiment echoed across regional and gender lines.

**Table 2** ***Students' Research Interests and Academic Support Needs (N = 51)***

| Domain | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Research Interests** | | |
| ▪ Technology and Media in ALE | 19 | 37.3 |
| ▪ Curriculum Development in ALE | 14 | 27.5 |
| ▪ Assessment and Evaluation | 12 | 23.5 |
| ▪ Research Methodology in ALE | 8 | 15.7 |
| ▪ Other (e.g., translation, BIPA) | 4 | 7.8 |
| **Academic Support Needs** | | |
| ▪ Academic writing training | 37 | 72.5 |
| ▪ Access to international journals | 33 | 64.7 |
| ▪ Scheduled academic consultation | 22 | 43.1 |
| ▪ Technical guidance on research tools | 19 | 37.3 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ▪ Comfortable learning facilities | 26 | 51.0 |

### *Thematic Insights from Open-Ended Responses*

Beyond structured responses, the open-ended question invited students to share suggestions for program development, yielding 42 substantive narratives that were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This qualitative layer uncovered not only practical concerns but also deeply held values and global ambitions. At least seven respondents explicitly advocated for student exchange programs to countries such as Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Madinah, framing these not as leisure opportunities but as essential academic immersions. As one student from Banten wrote, "Study exchange/student mobility to Madinah," while another from East Java emphasized that international collaboration "is not just for CV enhancement, but for knowledge that can be applied." These aspirations reflect a desire to connect with global centres of Arabic scholarship and position UIN Malang as a node in an international academic network.

Thematic analysis revealed five overarching priorities, summarized in Table 3. The most frequently cited theme was Strengthening Academic Capacity, with students urging mandatory training in scholarly writing, access to international databases, and instruction in advanced research methods such as Systematic Literature Reviews (SLR), Rasch modelling, and SEM-PLS. The second theme, Internationalization, encompassed calls for formal partnerships with universities in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, guest lectures by international scholars, and short-term immersion programs.

The third theme, Curriculum Relevance in the Digital Era, highlighted demands for courses that integrate digital tools, practical language application, and weekly Arabic-speaking practice sessions—as suggested by a student from Jambi: "Add courses relevant to the digital era." The fourth theme, Efficient Internal Management, addressed logistical concerns such as integrated scheduling systems, adequate classroom facilities, and flexible timetables for working students, with a student from Malang noting, "Improve the scheduling system to avoid conflicts." Finally, the fifth and most visionary theme was Islamic Scholarly Vision, where students expressed a desire to graduate not only as language experts but as "bearers of strong Islamic spirit who can spread Islamic values globally"—a sentiment that fuses linguistic mastery with civilizational mission. Together, these themes form a comprehensive roadmap for transforming the ALE program into a dynamic, responsive, and globally engaged academic community that honours both scholarly rigor and Islamic ethos.

**Table 3 Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses (N = 42)**

| Theme | Key Elements | Representative Quote (Region) |
|---|---|---|
| **Strengthening Academic Capacity** | Writing training, journal access, advanced methodology | "Many new students lack sufficient skills in academic writing and publishing." (Lamongan) |
| **Internationalization** | Student exchange, international MoUs, guest scholars | "Study exchange to Madinah." (Banten) |
| **Curriculum Relevance** | Digital-era courses, practical application, active language practice | "Add courses relevant to the digital era." (Jambi) |
| **Efficient Internal Management** | Integrated scheduling, facility upgrades, flexible timetables | "Improve the scheduling system to avoid conflicts." (Malang) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Islamic Scholarly Vision** | Language mastery fused with Islamic mission and global dakwah | "Graduates should be skilled in Arabic and possess a strong Islamic spirit to spread values globally." (Anonymous) |

## DISCUSSION | مناقشة | DISKUSI

### *Reinterpreting the Digital-Native Profile through a Global Lens*

The demographic profile of the cohort—70.6% female, 98% aged 21–25, and 88.2% graduates of State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKINs)—is not merely a statistical snapshot but a reflection of broader socio-academic trends in Global South higher education. This feminization of postgraduate humanities aligns with UNESCO's (2023) observation that women in Southeast Asia increasingly dominate advanced studies in education and language fields, driven by both personal aspiration and structural opportunities in the teaching profession. More significantly, the near-universal age range of 21–25 firmly situates these students as digital natives—individuals for whom digital environments are not external tools but intrinsic to cognition, communication, and identity formation (Prensky, 2001).

However, this study reveals a critical nuance: while they are fluent in social media and digital communication, they are not automatically equipped with *academic digital literacy*—the ability to navigate scholarly databases, critically evaluate sources, or design technology-enhanced research. This gap, as Huang et al. (2022) caution, is common among digital natives in resource-constrained contexts, where undergraduate training often prioritizes content mastery over methodological rigor. The implication is clear: institutions must move beyond assuming digital fluency and instead provide structured scaffolding that transforms everyday digital competence into scholarly digital capability.

Furthermore, the underrepresentation of students from private universities (11.8%) and working professionals (only one respondent aged 26–30) suggests untapped potential. As Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) note, professional learners bring real-world experience that enriches classroom discourse and strengthens the relevance of academic output. Strategic outreach to these segments—through flexible scheduling, online modules, or industry partnerships—could diversify the cohort and enhance the program's societal impact.

### Accreditation as a Decisive Factor: Reputation, Trust, and the Burden of Expectation

The finding that 84.3% of students selected UIN Malang primarily due to its "Unggul" (Excellent) accreditation status underscores the powerful role of institutional reputation in graduate decision-making. This aligns with Chapleo's (2010) theory of higher education branding, which posits that accreditation functions as a *quality signal* in an information-saturated market, reducing perceived risk for students. Even more telling is that 51% of respondents did not consider any other university—a level of brand loyalty that reflects deep trust in the program's academic integrity and output quality. Yet, as Oliver's (1980) expectancy-confirmation theory reminds us, high initial expectations create a double-edged sword: while they drive enrollment, they also heighten the risk of dissatisfaction if unmet.

The students' explicit demands for international journal access, advanced research training, and global mobility programs reveal that their trust is not passive but conditional—they expect the program to *deliver* on the promise of excellence. This creates a strategic imperative: accreditation must be treated not as an endpoint but as a baseline for continuous improvement. The program must proactively manage expectations through transparent communication about

available resources, realistic timelines for internationalization, and clear pathways for academic support. Regular satisfaction surveys and feedback loops can help detect emerging gaps before they erode trust.

***Bridging the Academic Preparedness Gap: From Motivation to Methodological Mastery***

Perhaps the most urgent insight from this study is the stark contrast between students' high motivation and their self-reported methodological insecurity. While 80.4% enrolled to "enhance academic competence in Arabic," 72.5% simultaneously requested intensive training in scholarly writing, and 64.7% demanded access to international journals. This *academic preparedness gap* is a well-documented phenomenon in Global South graduate education, where undergraduate curricula often emphasize descriptive knowledge over analytical or research skills (Boud & Lee, 2009). The consequence, as Lee and Kamler (2021) demonstrate, is that motivated students can quickly become frustrated, leading to delayed graduation or attrition.

The solution lies in proactive, structured intervention. The recommendation from a student in Palembang—to invite international experts like Prof. Vahid Aryadoust to teach advanced methods such as Systematic Literature Reviews (SLR), Rasch modeling, and SEM-PLS—is not merely aspirational but pedagogically sound. These methods are increasingly standard in global language education research, and their absence creates a barrier to publication and academic recognition. Implementing a mandatory "Academic Bootcamp" in Semester 1, covering IMRaD structure, reference management (Zotero/Mendeley), and basic statistics, would transform anxiety into agency. Moreover, institutional subscriptions to Scopus-indexed databases would signal a serious commitment to scholarly excellence, directly addressing the 64.7% who identified this as a critical need.

***Technology and Media in ALE: Beyond Tools to Pedagogical Transformation***

The dominance of "Technology and Media in ALE" as the top research interest (37.3%) marks a decisive generational shift in Arabic language pedagogy. Students are not merely requesting more PowerPoint slides; they are calling for a fundamental reimagining of how Arabic is taught, learned, and assessed in the digital age. This aligns with global trends in *Technology-Enhanced Language Learning* (TELL), where digital tools are leveraged to increase engagement, personalize learning, and provide authentic language exposure (Zou et al., 2022). However, as Lin and Lan (2023) emphasize, technology's effectiveness depends on *pedagogical alignment*—the seamless integration of tools, learning objectives, and learner characteristics. For Arabic—a language with complex morphology and diglossia—this means using technology not for entertainment but for *cognitive scaffolding*: visualizing root-pattern systems (*wazan*) through animation, simulating real-life conversations via AI chatbots, or creating collaborative digital storytelling projects.

The suggestion from a student in Medan for "weekly Arabic speaking practice" could be enhanced through virtual language exchange platforms or Instagram-based vocabulary challenges. The challenge for the program is not to adopt every new app, but to develop faculty capacity in *designing* meaningful digital learning experiences. This requires investment in faculty development, dedicated lab space, and a curriculum that treats digital pedagogy as a core competency, not an elective add-on.

***Internationalization as Academic Citizenship: Beyond Mobility to Mission***

The repeated calls for student exchange programs to Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Madinah—voiced by at least seven respondents—reflect a deeper aspiration: to become *global*

*academic citizens* (Knight, 2014). For these students, internationalization is not about tourism or CV enhancement; it is about connecting with centers of Arabic scholarship, building cross-cultural competence, and positioning themselves within a global intellectual community. As one student from East Java wrote, international collaboration is "not just for CV enhancement, but for knowledge that can be applied." This vision aligns with Knight's (2014) definition of internationalization as the "integration of an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education." Yet, the program currently lacks the infrastructure to fulfill this vision. No respondent cited active international programs as a reason for choosing UIN Malang, indicating a missed opportunity.

The strategic response is threefold: first, establish formal MoUs with universities in key regions (e.g., Islamic University of Madinah, IIUM Malaysia); second, develop short-term "Global Immersion" programs (2–4 weeks) to accommodate working students; third, integrate global perspectives into the curriculum through guest lectures, joint research projects, and co-taught courses. By doing so, the program can transform internationalization from an aspirational slogan into a lived academic experience.

***Student Voice as a Diagnostic Tool for Continuous Improvement***

Finally, the open-ended suggestions from students—ranging from scheduling complaints to visions of Islamic scholarly mission—constitute a powerful *diagnostic toolkit* for program development. As Cook-Sather (2021) argues, student voice is most impactful when it moves beyond token consultation to inform policy and practice. The five thematic priorities that emerged—academic capacity, internationalization, curriculum relevance, internal management, and Islamic vision—are not isolated requests but interconnected elements of a holistic educational ecosystem.

For instance, the demand for "flexible scheduling" (from a student in Tuban) reflects the reality of working students, while the call for "comfortable learning facilities" (from Majalengka) speaks to the basic conditions needed for intellectual focus. Most profoundly, the anonymous hope that the program "produce graduates who are not only skilled in Arabic but also possess a strong Islamic spirit to spread values globally" encapsulates the unique identity of ALE in an Islamic university: it is not just about language acquisition, but about *civilizational contribution*. To honor this, the program must institutionalize student voice through mechanisms like a Student Advisory Board, regular feedback surveys, and co-designed curriculum modules. In doing so, it would not only improve services but also cultivate a culture of shared ownership and academic community

## CONCLUSIONS | خاتمة | SIMPULAN

This study mapped the profile, motivations, and expectations of 51 new master's students in the Arabic Language Education (ALE) program at Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University (UIN Malang) in 2025, revealing a cohort shaped by digital nativity, Islamic scholarly tradition, and global ambition. The students are predominantly young women (70.6%), aged 21–25 (98%), and graduates of State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKINs) (88.2%). Their choice of UIN Malang was decisively influenced by the program's "Unggul" (Excellent) accreditation (84.3%), with more than half (51%) not considering any other university—demonstrating exceptional brand loyalty accompanied by clear academic expectations: enhancing scholarly competence (80.4%), publishing in academic journals (47.1%), and preparing for doctoral studies (35.3%). Their research interests reflect a generational shift toward

innovation, with "Technology and Media in ALE" as the dominant focus (37.3%), far surpassing traditional domains. Yet this ambition is tempered by honest acknowledgment of methodological gaps—72.5% requested intensive academic writing training and 64.7% demanded access to international journals. Strong global aspirations also emerged, with at least seven students explicitly calling for student exchange programs to Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Madinah. Thematic analysis distilled their voices into five strategic priorities: strengthening academic capacity, advancing internationalization, ensuring digital-era curriculum relevance, improving internal management, and nurturing an Islamic scholarly vision that unites linguistic mastery with civilizational mission.

Theoretically, this research extends digital native and Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) frameworks into the understudied context of Arabic language education in Southeast Asia, while affirming student voice as a vital diagnostic tool in Islamic higher education. Practically, it offers a concrete roadmap: establishing an "Academic Excellence Center," implementing mandatory methodology and writing bootcamps in Semester 1, forging international partnerships for student mobility, integrating technology-driven curricula, and creating a Student Advisory Board to institutionalize feedback. Despite limitations—single-institution focus, voluntary sampling, and cross-sectional design—the study's value lies in its actionable, context-specific insights for program improvement. Future research should include comparative studies across UINs, experimental interventions (e.g., Instagram-based vocabulary programs), and longitudinal tracking of graduate outcomes. Ultimately, this study is an act of listening: the future of Arabic language education belongs not to those who merely preserve the past, but to those who reimagine it with and for the next generation—and that reimagining begins by taking student voices seriously.

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