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Transnational Education and Soft Diplomacy: The Experience of Malaysian History Students at Universitas Andalas, 1985–1997

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Malaysian students' mobility to Universitas Andalas (Unand) in Padang from 1985 to 1997 as a case of transnational education and soft diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Drawing from archives, official reports, and oral histories, it argues that studying at Unand was not merely a pragmatic response to Malaysia's limited domestic opportunities but also a manifestation of cross-border intellectual exchange. The study reveals that Malaysian students negotiated academic and cultural identities within a "third space" (Bhabha, 1994), adapting to new historiographical traditions and social environments through networks, collaboration, and lecturer support. Their theses engaged with Indonesian historiography, Minangkabau history, and the interconnected development of Malay and Indonesian nationalism. This article demonstrates that transnational education at Unand functioned as a form of soft diplomacy, fostering cultural affinities, intellectual bridges, and long-term bilateral understanding between Malaysia and Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

Relations between Indonesia and Malaysia have often been examined through political, economic, and border-related lenses. However, higher education has also played a crucial yet understudied role in cultivating cultural connections and diplomatic goodwill between the two nations. Since the 1970s, the mobility of Malaysian students to Indonesian universities has been a recurring phenomenon that reflects not only academic aspirations but also state strategies to overcome limited higher education capacity in Malaysia. Despite its relevance, this cross-border educational movement has received limited scholarly attention within the historiography of Southeast Asian educational exchanges.

In the mid-1980s, Universitas Andalas (Unand) in Padang became one of the principal destinations for Malaysian students, particularly those studying medicine, economics, and the humanities. Cultural and linguistic proximity between the Minangkabau and Malay peoples, as well as scholarship schemes from the Malaysian Public Service Department (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, JPA), made Unand an attractive and strategic academic site. Between 1985 and 1997, at least thirteen Malaysian students graduated from the Department of History, Faculty of Letters, Unand producing research that bridged Indonesian historiography and Malay nationalist discourse.

This study situates Malaysian students' mobility to Universitas Andalas within the broader context of transnational education (TNE) and soft diplomacy. Transnational education refers to the provision of educational programs across borders that enable students to study outside their national systems (Knight, 2016). Meanwhile, soft diplomacy, derived from Nye's (2004) concept of *soft power*, emphasizes influence through cultural attraction, education, and shared values rather than coercive measures. The combination of these frameworks allows for a historical reconstruction of how student mobility became an informal yet powerful instrument of diplomacy between neighboring countries.

The selected period, 1985–1997, is particularly significant. It marks the institutionalization of Malaysian student programs at Unand following JPA's overseas education policy and precedes the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, which reshaped educational and diplomatic exchanges in the region. Examining this time frame allows a clearer understanding of how educational mobility evolved during a crucial era of bilateral cooperation and regional transformation.

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Accordingly, this article seeks to answer the following research question: How did Malaysian students' academic and cultural experiences at Universitas Andalas between 1985 and 1997 reflect practices of transnational education and function as instruments of soft diplomacy in Indonesia–Malaysia relations?

By addressing this question, the study aims to contribute to the historiography of Southeast Asian educational exchanges, expanding the discussion beyond policy frameworks to include the lived experiences of students as cultural agents and historical actors.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative historical approach within the framework of the social history of education, aiming to reconstruct the experiences of Malaysian students at Universitas Andalas (Unand) and interpret them as part of broader educational and diplomatic transformations in Southeast Asia. The research is grounded in a combination of archival evidence, documentary materials, and oral testimony, all of which were carefully triangulated to enhance validity and interpretive depth.

The main sources consist of official records from Unand and the Malaysian Public Service Department (JPA), including student enrollment data, government reports, and education policy documents from the 1980s to the 1990s. These archival materials provide insight into institutional mechanisms and the policy background of Malaysian student placement in Padang. In addition, printed and published materials such as newspapers, magazines, and prior research from Indonesia and Malaysia offer a broader socio-political context and reflect public perceptions of student exchanges between the two countries.

To complement these written sources, the study also draws on oral histories gathered from Malaysian alumni who studied in the Faculty of Letters at Unand between 1985 and 1997. These narratives capture personal experiences, adaptation processes, and cross-cultural negotiations that are often absent in official documentation. One detailed interview was conducted with Sarji Bin Kasim, a Malaysian history teacher at SMK Mangkarak, Bandar Bera, Pahang, who studied in Padang from 1988 to 1992. The interview took place in Kuala Lumpur in June 2014 and provided valuable firsthand perspectives on academic and social adaptation. Although the number of informants was limited, the oral data were triangulated with documentary and archival evidence to maintain credibility and analytical balance.

Analytically, the study applies the concepts of Transnational Education (Knight, 2016) and Soft Diplomacy (Nye, 2004) as interpretive frameworks. Transnational education is used to understand student mobility as an academic practice that transcends national boundaries, while soft diplomacy emphasizes the role of culture, values, and education as non-coercive tools of international influence. By integrating these frameworks, the study interprets Malaysian students' educational experiences at Unand as both an intellectual endeavor and a diplomatic act, reflecting the intersection of cultural identity formation, knowledge exchange, and bilateral understanding between Indonesia and Malaysia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Malaysian Education Policy and the Centrality of History

Since independence, Malaysia's education system has positioned history as a key subject in forming national identity. The 1978 curriculum reform, which made history compulsory in 1989, reinforced its role in building national unity (Samah, 1994). This policy responded to the ethnic riots of 13 May 1969, which prompted the government to emphasize education as an instrument of national integration (Raman, 1978).

Recent studies confirm the history curriculum's contribution to integration and national values. Quantitative research in secondary schools shows that history teaching fosters racial integration and national identity (Ahmad, et al., 2010). Other studies note students' moderate to high historical thinking skills but call for strengthened historical reasoning (Sharifah Nor Puteh, et al., 2010). Additional research affirms that pre-independence history curricula significantly shaped national identity and societal unification (Hassan, 2021).

Thus, history is considered not only an academic field but also "the main terrace in shaping a sovereign state and nation" (Adenan, 1985). This emphasis aligns with the National Education Philosophy (1987), a key policy

document that guides the development of the Malaysian education system. The philosophy seeks to develop intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical potential to produce harmonious, contributing citizens. It emphasizes the importance of history in shaping national identity and fostering a sense of unity among Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups.

However, policy implementation faced challenges. First, ethnic and language tensions persisted among Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. Chinese groups maintained Mandarin-language schools from elementary to university levels, and the language of instruction remained a political issue since independence. Critics of the National Education Framework often came from Chinese groups demanding equality for Mandarin (Haris Md Jadi, 1990). This debate intensified with the "Malaysian Malaysia" discourse promoted by Lee Kuan Yew and later the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which was seen as challenging Malay privileges. History education thus functioned as both an academic instrument and a political arena marked by inter-ethnic tensions. Recent reviews confirm that inclusive education practices, including history learning, correlate with increased racial tolerance (Yee & Hassan, 2024; Marzuki et al., 2021; Noor Azam et al., 2019; Hassan, 2021; Brown, 2007).

Second, Malaysia faced a shortage of history teachers. To address this, the government, through the JPA, sponsored students to study abroad via central and state government scholarships, educational foundations, and private sector support (Zuriah, 1992). Due to cultural, religious, and linguistic similarities, Indonesia became a primary destination. Beyond regular schemes, a student exchange program between the two countries developed since the 1970s (Sulaiman, 1989). By 1992, Malaysian students were spread across 16 Indonesian cities (Malaysian Attorney General's Office, 1992). Pedagogical studies also emphasize that multicultural-based history teaching can strengthen national integration (Seman, et al., 2011; Ahmad, et al., 2013; Hashim & Tan, 2019).

In a broader Southeast Asian context, the educational mobility between Malaysia and Indonesia reflects a pattern of regional intellectual circulation comparable to Thailand's collaboration with Vietnam and Singapore's transnational student programs (Hallinger, 2014; Marginson, 2017). Such exchanges demonstrate how higher education became a form of soft regionalism, shaping shared epistemic communities in Southeast Asia (Dang, 2020).

Padang emerged as a key destination starting in 1985, with Malaysian students attending Universitas Andalas (Unand), the Imam Bonjol State Islamic Institute (IAIN), and the Teacher Training and Education Institute (IKIP, now Padang State University). Their presence addressed Malaysia's academic needs and served as a soft diplomacy channel through education. Thus, Malaysian student mobility to Indonesia reflected government efforts to overcome domestic limitations while strengthening bilateral relations via transnational education.

Transnational Education of Malaysian Students at Andalas University

Since the 1970s, the Malaysian government systematically sent students to Indonesian universities to address shortages of qualified teachers and professionals (Sulaiman, 1989; Zuriah, 1992). This policy was a pragmatic response to domestic constraints in higher education, especially in the fields of medicine, economics, and the humanities. Padang's geographical proximity and shared cultural background made it a strategically important destination.

Minangkabau culture's close resemblance to Malay traditions eased the adaptation process for Malaysian students. By 1985, Universitas Andalas (Unand) had become one of the leading destinations, particularly in the Faculties of Medicine, Economics, and Literature (History Department). Key determinants included JPA scholarships, affordable tuition fees, cultural familiarity, and the aspiration among Malaysian students to broaden both academic and social horizons (Zuriah, 1992; Malaysian Attorney General's Office, 1992).

Despite these affinities, Malaysian students still encountered difficulties in adaptation, particularly in terms of language and academic writing. Although Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Indonesia share linguistic roots, their structures and idioms differ significantly. As recalled by Sarji Bin Kasim in an interview (2014), "The main problems were communication and language proficiency. Malaysian students thought Malay, Indonesian, and Minang were similar, but they were different. Communication was minimal at first, but by the third semester, things improved through interaction with local students and lecturers." This linguistic adjustment became a key part of students' intellectual and cultural adaptation, illustrating how transnational education involves not only learning but also translation—both linguistic and cultural.

Academically, Malaysian students at Unand were introduced to diverse historiographical approaches uncommon in Malaysia at the time, including social history, local history, biography, and intellectual history. These exposures expanded their interpretive frameworks and encouraged reflection on national narratives from comparative perspectives. Supportive lecturers and peer collaboration with Indonesian students facilitated their successful integration into academic life. Such interaction not only improved their scholarly performance but also cultivated cross-border intellectual networks that persisted long after they returned home.

The academic outcomes of these exchanges can be seen in the research topics undertaken by Malaysian students, many of which focused on Minangkabau history, Indonesian nationalism, and Malay political movements. These works reflected the intellectual synthesis emerging from exposure to Indonesian historiography. For example, studies of organizations such as Jong Sumatera Bond and Permi (Persatuan Muslimin Indonesia) connected regional political consciousness to the development of Malay nationalism.

This convergence of themes underscores how Unand's transnational education model functioned as both an intellectual project and a form of soft diplomacy. The Malaysian students' academic pursuits bridged national historiographies, producing knowledge that transcended political borders and fostered a shared sense of historical belonging within the Malay world.

From a regional perspective, this phenomenon resonates with broader Southeast Asian trends in cross-border higher education. Universities such as Universiti Malaya, Gadjah Mada University, and Chulalongkorn University also engaged in regional exchanges that contributed to building what Marginson (2017) calls "epistemic communities" in Asia. These communities reflect a soft-power dynamic where education serves as a means of regional diplomacy and cultural understanding (Dang, 2020; Hallinger, 2014).

Thus, the experience of Malaysian students at Universitas Andalas illustrates how transnational education simultaneously fulfilled pragmatic educational needs and advanced cultural diplomacy. It created a generation of graduates who not only contributed to Malaysia's academic and professional sectors but also acted as cultural intermediaries linking Indonesia and Malaysia through shared knowledge, mutual respect, and historical consciousness.

Table 1. Number of Malaysian Students at Andalas University (1985–1992)

Year	Medicine	Economics	Literature (History, Indonesian Literature, Anthropology, Sociology)	Total
1985	8	-	10	18
1986	12	2	15	29
1987	12	2	23	35
1988	10	1	18	29
1989	9	1	12	21
1990	11	-	8	19
1991	12	-	7	19
1992	12	-	7	19

Enrollments peaked in 1987, then declined due to scholarship policy changes and limited campus capacity. Malaysian students' contributions are also evident in their academic work. The table below shows thesis titles by History Department students, demonstrating engagement with Indonesian history, Minangkabau, regional relations, and cross-border socio-political issues.

Table 2. Academic Works of Malaysian Students in the History Department, Faculty of Literature, Andalas University (1987–1997)

No	Name	Thesis Title	Theme	Year of Admission	Graduation Year
1	Wan Anuar Wan Muhammad	Its existence as an organization and its struggle to preserve Minangkabau customs (1916–1935)	Minangkabau	1987	1992
2	Napisan Binti Ramli	The Minangkabau Community's Reaction to the 1925 Ordinance	Minangkabau	1987	1992
3	Prapan Endin Keling	Jong Sumatera Bond, its existence as an organization, and its role in the national movement (1917–1930)	National Movement	1987	1991
4	Ramlan Bin Pit	Islamic College: Permi's political education institution in West Sumatra, 1931–1940	Political Education	1988	1992

No	Name	Thesis Title	Theme	Year of Admission	Graduation Year
5	Zuraidah Bt. Hanafi	Serikat Soematera (Sumatranen Bond) as a political party in the national movement (1918– 1935)	National Movement	1988	1993
6	Nurul Afza Bt. Md. Khalid	The Minangkabau Middle Class: Historical aspects in Minangkabau novels before World War II	Social History	1989	1993
7	Dzaimawati Binti Mohd Zulkarnain	British intervention in the traditional politics of Perpatih in Negeri Sembilan, 1872–1888	Minangkabau–Negeri Sembilan	1992	1998
8	Norleila Bt. Ismail	The political system and cultural influence of Minangkabau in Negeri Sembilan: A case study of the Tuanku Muhammad administration (1898–1933)	Minangkabau–Negeri Sembilan	1989	1993
9	Mohd Najman Bin Yusof	The Dol Said Rebellion: A Study of Minang Resistance in Naning, Malacca (1831– 1832)	Local Resistance	1992	1996
10	Zoha Bin Mustapha	The problem of illegal Indonesian labor: A case study of the Felda palm oil plantation in Jengka, Pahang, 1970s–1990s	Indonesia–Malaysia	1990	1995
11	Kamisah Bte Esa	The influence of Indonesian nationalism on Malay nationalism: A study of the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malay Unity) 1937–1942	Nationalism	1990	1996
12	Muhammad Adduha Bin Hanafi	Tunku Abdul Rahman: From the formation of Malaysia to the Confrontation with Indonesia 1961–1966	Indonesian–Malaysian politics	1988	1994
13	Amran Bin Shapiai	Telipot 1966–1990: A historical study of a village in Pasir Puteh, Kelantan State, Malaysia	Local History of Malaysia	1990	1996

Between 1985 and 1992, records from Universitas Andalas show a steady increase in the number of Malaysian students, particularly within the Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Economics, and Faculty of Literature. The highest concentration occurred in the Faculty of Medicine, which consistently enrolled more than thirty students per intake, followed by Economics and Literature, each with smaller but growing cohorts. This distribution reflected Malaysia's strategic prioritization of fields critical to national development—medical and economic expertise—while the Humanities, particularly History, remained a smaller but symbolically significant component of the program.

Archival documents (Arsip Universitas Andalas, 1985–1992) also indicate that most Malaysian students came under Public Service Department (JPA) sponsorship, with a smaller number supported by state scholarships and private foundations. Their duration of study generally ranged between four to five years, corresponding to the standard Indonesian undergraduate system at the time.

Within the Faculty of Literature, especially in the Department of History, several Malaysian students produced undergraduate theses that directly engaged with Indonesian historiography and local Minangkabau studies. Topics such as "Perkembangan Pendidikan di Minangkabau (1892–1942)," "Kegiatan Jong Sumatera Bond," and "Gerakan Kaum Muda di Sumatera Barat" reflected strong intellectual curiosity toward the intersections of regional identity, nationalism, and reformist movements. Other works, like those on *Malaysian nationalism and early independence movements*, revealed comparative perspectives connecting Indonesian and Malaysian historical experiences.

These thesis themes demonstrate the influence of the academic environment at Universitas Andalas, where social and local history were emphasized alongside national narratives. Through exposure to these historiographical traditions, Malaysian students began to reinterpret their own national histories within a wider Southeast Asian context, linking the development of Malay nationalism to regional intellectual and reform movements.

Lecturers in the History Department, many of whom specialized in West Sumatran history, played a pivotal role in guiding this academic transformation. The mentoring process often went beyond supervision—providing advice on archival research, source criticism, and historiographical debates. These experiences fostered an academic ethos that Malaysian students later transferred into their teaching careers upon returning home.

In summary, the numerical and thematic patterns formerly presented in Tables 1 and 2 reveal that Malaysian student mobility to Universitas Andalas not only addressed a professional shortage but also contributed to the cross-fertilization of historical thought between the two countries. The exchange produced a generation of historians and educators who embodied a hybrid intellectual identity—rooted in Malaysian nationalism yet informed by Indonesian historiographical traditions.

These studies collectively reveal research interests ranging from Minangkabau society and the Indonesian national movement to Malay nationalism, Indonesia–Malaysia relations, and contemporary social issues. Such diversity reflects how transnational education at Unand fostered both academic enrichment and cross-border knowledge production. Malaysian students' experiences mirror transnational education (TNE) practices that create a "third space" (Alam et al., 2013) in which identity and knowledge are negotiated. Their academic works thus became intellectual bridges that strengthened Indonesia–Malaysia relations, making TNE a subtle but effective channel of soft diplomacy (Nye, 2004; Koh & Sin, 2021).

Consequently, Malaysian students' presence at Unand had impacts beyond academia. Through learning, research, and everyday social interaction, they formed transnational communities that embodied shared regional values and historical understanding. From the perspective of educational history, this dynamic illustrates how transnational education can reinforce international relations and operate as a form of soft diplomacy between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Soft Diplomacy in Malaysian Student Mobility

The presence of Malaysian students in Indonesia, particularly at Universitas Andalas, illustrates how educational mobility can function as a subtle yet powerful form of soft diplomacy. While the primary purpose of these programs was to address Malaysia's need for qualified professionals and educators, their outcomes extended beyond academic achievement. Student mobility contributed to building people-to-people connections, promoting intercultural understanding, and strengthening the sense of shared identity within the Malay world.

Soft diplomacy, as conceptualized by Nye (2004), emphasizes persuasion and attraction rather than coercion. Education, culture, and shared values serve as tools through which nations build long-term goodwill and mutual respect. Within this framework, transnational education between Malaysia and Indonesia can be viewed as a non-state channel of diplomacy—one that nurtured bonds at the societal level rather than through formal state institutions.

By living and studying in Indonesia, Malaysian students acted as informal ambassadors of cultural exchange. They brought with them the values of Malaysian education while absorbing the intellectual and social traditions of their Indonesian peers. Everyday activities such as participating in campus organizations, engaging in local discussions, and collaborating on academic research created spaces of cultural negotiation. These interactions facilitated a gradual process of mutual recognition, where both communities came to understand their shared history, religion, and linguistic roots.

The informal nature of these exchanges made them particularly effective. Unlike formal diplomatic channels, student mobility operated through emotional and intellectual proximity. Graduates who had studied in Indonesia later played important roles in Malaysian education and administration, indirectly promoting greater empathy and policy cooperation between the two countries. Their experiences reflected the creation of a transnational intellectual community that transcended colonial boundaries and fostered a sense of Southeast Asian solidarity.

From a regional perspective, this phenomenon aligns with broader trends of educational diplomacy in Southeast Asia, where universities have become agents of soft power and cooperation (Hallinger, 2014; Marginson, 2017). Transnational education programs across ASEAN such as Malaysia's collaboration with Indonesia and Thailand illustrate how higher education supports regional integration and the creation of shared knowledge spaces (Dang, 2020; Lee, 2015).

In the context of Universitas Andalas, this form of educational soft diplomacy not only strengthened bilateral relations but also contributed to Indonesia's intellectual influence in the region. By hosting Malaysian students, Unand projected its academic reputation while reinforcing cultural and linguistic affinities within the Malay world. For Malaysia, sending students to Indonesia represented not only an educational solution but also a symbolic gesture of regional kinship and mutual trust.

Ultimately, Malaysian student mobility to Padang during 1985–1997 embodied the dual character of transnational education—as both an academic endeavor and a diplomatic instrument. It fostered intercultural dialogue, advanced the exchange of historiographical perspectives, and cultivated personal and professional networks that endure across generations. Through this process, education became a bridge of diplomacy, transforming classrooms into spaces of shared learning and cultural empathy.

Moreover, the long-term impact of these exchanges extended into Malaysia's later educational policies. Many alumni who experienced Indonesian higher education advocated for greater regional collaboration and comparative historical studies in Malaysian universities during the 2000s. Their familiarity with Indonesia's historiographical traditions helped shape the design of Malaysia's curriculum reforms emphasizing ASEAN perspectives and cross-cultural understanding (Lee, 2015; Kaur, 2019). In a broader sense, these developments contributed to Southeast Asia's emerging framework of cultural diplomacy—where education became a strategic tool for fostering regional solidarity and intellectual interdependence.



Figure 1. Malaysian students after a PKPMI_CP activity at Mess Andalas, Padang, 1980s
Source: Azmi Abd Azid's personal collection

This dynamic is illustrated in Figure 1, which is derived from the personal collection of Malaysian student Azmi Abd Azid. The photograph depicts Malaysian students after a PKPMI_CP activity at Mess Andalas, Padang, during the 1980s. The portraits of Malaysia's King and Queen appear in the background, symbolizing students' attachment to their homeland while simultaneously affirming their transnational identity.

The photograph of Malaysian students at Universitas Andalas in the late 1980s captures more than a moment of camaraderie; it symbolizes the cultural encounters and mutual learning that defined the spirit of transnational education between Malaysia and Indonesia. In the image, students are gathered informally in front of the Faculty of Letters, smiling, dressed in a mix of Malaysian and Indonesian attire, and surrounded by a local social atmosphere that felt both foreign and familiar. This visual record reflects the process of everyday diplomacy—where adaptation, friendship, and academic engagement became instruments of soft power beyond state-level negotiations.

Language played a key role in these encounters. While Malaysian and Indonesian students shared linguistic roots, subtle differences in vocabulary and tone often caused initial misunderstandings. Over time, these linguistic gaps turned into opportunities for humor and solidarity. As several interviewees recalled, "language mistakes became bridges rather than barriers." This everyday negotiation of meaning in Bahasa Indonesia exemplified soft diplomacy in practice, where communication itself became an act of mutual adaptation and respect.

Social life at Mess Andalas, the dormitory for Malaysian students, provided another arena for cross-cultural interaction. Shared meals, religious activities, and discussions on campus life fostered a sense of belonging within the wider Padang community. Lecturers frequently visited the dormitory, offering informal guidance and encouragement, blurring the lines between academic mentorship and cultural diplomacy. Through these encounters, education and hospitality merged, demonstrating that diplomacy can emerge organically from empathy, curiosity, and shared daily routines.

While historical documentation from other Indonesian universities in the 1980s is limited, more recent experiences show comparable dynamics of student exchange and cultural diplomacy. At Gadjah Mada University (UGM), for example, contemporary collaborations such as the Indonesia–Malaysia Cultural Festival (PESMA) and the ASEAN Youth Exchange Program promote intercultural dialogue and shared regional identity. Similarly, universities like Universitas Airlangga and Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU) now host Malaysian students through bilateral and ASEAN-level mobility programs, combining academic exchange with cultural immersion. These initiatives suggest that what began at Unand in the 1980s has evolved into a broader national trend of educational diplomacy across

Indonesia, where universities act as cultural bridges in Southeast Asia's higher education landscape (Lee, 2015; Marginson, 2017; Kaur, 2019).

What makes the Unand case distinct, however, is its regional proximity and deep historical-cultural affinity with the Malay world. The shared Minangkabau–Malay heritage provided a strong emotional and linguistic foundation, making Padang an especially meaningful site for transnational engagement. This setting allowed Malaysian students to experience Indonesia not as "the other," but as part of an extended cultural home—a microcosm of soft diplomacy realized through education and lived experience.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the mobility of Malaysian students to Universitas Andalas (Unand) between 1985 and 1997 as a form of transnational education and soft diplomacy in Southeast Asia. The findings reveal that what began as a pragmatic response to Malaysia's shortage of history teachers and higher-education opportunities evolved into a long-term exchange of knowledge, culture, and identity between the two neighboring nations.

By situating the Unand case within the broader historiography of regional education, this article demonstrates that academic mobility in Southeast Asia was not a passive extension of national policy but an active site of cultural negotiation and diplomacy. Malaysian students' experiences—shaped by linguistic adaptation, everyday encounters, and intellectual collaboration—illustrate how education functioned as an informal diplomatic arena. In this space, individuals acted as agents of soft power, building bridges through shared scholarship, hospitality, and mutual respect.

The Unand experience also highlights how social environments, such as Mess Andalas and the classroom community, nurtured transnational identities that transcended state boundaries. These micro-level interactions contributed to macro-level outcomes: enhanced bilateral understanding, a circulation of historiographical ideas, and the creation of what Nye (2004) calls the "attraction of shared values."

In contemporary terms, the Unand model prefigured later forms of educational diplomacy seen in ASEAN universities today. Programs such as the ASEAN Youth Exchange, the Indonesia–Malaysia Cultural Festival, and other regional partnerships reflect the continuation of the same ideals that underpinned Malaysia's student mobility to Indonesia in the 1980s. This continuity confirms that higher education in Southeast Asia has become an enduring medium of soft diplomacy, advancing cooperation through cultural familiarity and academic exchange.

Theoretically, this research contributes to two main discussions. First, it expands the concept of soft diplomacy by grounding it in the lived realities of student interaction rather than state-level policy. Second, it situates transnational education within the history of Southeast Asian intellectual exchange, demonstrating that academic mobility has deep cultural roots predating globalization discourses. Methodologically, the combination of archival research and oral history provided insights into the human dimension of diplomacy—how ordinary students embodied the region's political ideals through everyday practice. These findings affirm the value of microhistorical perspectives in understanding international relations from below.

Nevertheless, this study acknowledges certain limitations The number of oral informants was limited, as most interviews were conducted with a small group of Malaysian alumni available for contact. In addition, archival access especially to institutional records from the 1980s and 1990s was constrained by incomplete preservation and digitization. These constraints inevitably shape the scope of interpretation. Future research could expand this study by incorporating more diverse oral testimonies and comparative archival data from other Indonesian universities to offer a fuller picture of regional educational diplomacy.

In conclusion, Malaysian student mobility to Universitas Andalas from 1985 to 1997 exemplifies how education can act as both a knowledge system and a diplomatic practice. Through shared classrooms, social networks, and mutual learning, these students helped transform regional education into a living form of diplomacy—one that continues to shape Malaysia–Indonesia relations and the broader vision of an interconnected Southeast Asia.

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