

STRENGTHENING HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS FOR SOUTHERN THAI STUDENTS THROUGH PARTICIPATORY OUTREACH AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT This international community service program aimed to strengthen higher education access for students in Southern Thailand through participatory educational outreach and the development of international institutional partnerships. The program was implemented by Universitas Malikussaleh in Yala and Pattani on 28–30 July 2026 and involved the Islamic Council of Yala Province, Islamic Patana School, Islam Sasn Withya School, Fatoni University, Muhammadiyah Thailand/Islamic Lukmanul Hakim School, and Suntisart Wittaya School. The implementation combined partner mapping, institutional visits, presentations, videos and brochures, participatory question-and-answer sessions, institutional dialogue, partnership exploration, MoU signing, documentation, and follow-up planning. Direct outreach at Islamic Patana School and Suntisart Wittaya School involved approximately 200 final-year students and at least 15 teachers. The activities produced three signed MoUs, recorded Islamic Patana School's expectation of sending approximately 20 graduates to Universitas Malikussaleh in 2027, and documented Muhammadiyah Thailand's commitment to assist in identifying five prospective scholarship candidates. Discussions with Fatoni University identified opportunities for student and faculty exchanges, Accounting collaboration, instructor support, and possible joint academic programs. Because no pre-test-post-test or standardized satisfaction instrument was administered, outcomes are reported descriptively and are not interpreted as statistically measured changes in knowledge or attitudes. The program established an initial cross-border pathway linking educational information, prospective student recruitment, scholarship access, and institutional cooperation, with sustainability directed toward MoU implementation, online consultation, applicant assistance, reciprocal visits, and measurable academic follow-up.

KEYWORDS: *Higher Education Access; Participatory Outreach; International Partnerships; Southern Thailand; International Student Recruitment; Community Service.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education access in an international and cross-border context depends not only on the availability of academic programs but also on whether prospective students can obtain clear, reliable, and contextually meaningful information about admission requirements, tuition and related costs, scholarships, accommodation, academic support, and the social environment of the destination institution. International students frequently make educational decisions while navigating unfamiliar institutional systems, and information asymmetry can therefore become a practical barrier to access. Xin-lei (2019) emphasizes the importance of higher education policy and information structures in shaping participation, while He (2017) shows that internationalization policy is closely connected with institutional responses and international student mobility. Financial support is also central to access because scholarships and student-finance mechanisms can affect whether educational opportunities are realistically attainable (Knight, 2009; Adnett, 2006; Callender & Wilkinson, 2013). In the context of Southern Thailand, these issues are particularly relevant because prospective students require direct information on study programs, costs, scholarships, dormitories, admissions, and the socio-religious environment in Aceh. The Universitas Malikussaleh international community service program was therefore designed not merely as university promotion but as an outreach mechanism connecting educational information with institutional support and cross-border cooperation.

The program was conducted in Yala and Pattani, Southern Thailand, where Muslim communities, Islamic schools, religious institutions, universities, and community organizations form an important educational ecosystem. The social, historical, cultural, and religious proximity between Southern Thailand and Aceh provided a contextual basis for communication between Universitas Malikussaleh and local partners. The program involved six partner settings: the Islamic Council of Yala Province, Islamic Patana School, Islam Sasn Withya School, Fatoni University, Muhammadiyah Thailand/Islamic Lukmanul Hakim School, and Suntisart Wittaya School. Beneficiaries included final-year students, teachers, school and foundation leaders, university leaders, Islamic Council officials, and the Muhammadiyah Thailand network. Islamic Patana School serves approximately 2,500 students, Islam Sasn Withya School approximately 800 students, and Suntisart Wittaya School approximately 1,500 secondary-level students. Needs identified through partner coordination and dialogue included scholarship information, postgraduate study opportunities, registration procedures, the socio-religious environment in Aceh, Accounting cooperation, graduate pathways, recruitment channels, and reciprocal institutional visits. These needs demonstrate that access is simultaneously informational, financial, social, and institutional.

The urgency of the activity also lies in the need to move from one-time information dissemination toward structured institutional pathways. Cross-border higher education partnerships can provide mechanisms for mobility, capacity development, and broader educational access when governance and institutional responsibilities are clearly defined (Tsiligiris, 2025; Chen et al., 2026; Charles et al., 2026). Ramaswamy et al. (2021) situate internationalization within the broader social mission of higher education and the Sustainable Development Goals, while Tamrat and Teferra (2021) show that transnational higher education requires alignment between policy aspirations and implementation realities. In this program, educational outreach was therefore combined with institutional dialogue, partnership exploration, MoU signing, and follow-up planning. The approach allowed the team to address prospective students' immediate information needs while simultaneously discussing longer-term cooperation with schools, religious organizations, community networks, and Fatoni University. The resulting design was intended to create a pathway from information access to consultation, application, scholarship selection, registration, exchange, and academic collaboration.

The program pursued five objectives: introducing the profile, academic programs, facilities, academic environment, and student support services of Universitas Malikussaleh; providing information on study opportunities and planned scholarships for prospective students from Yala and Pattani; establishing institutional relationships with Islamic schools, religious bodies, community organizations, and universities; exploring cooperation in education, student and faculty exchanges, research, community service, and joint academic programs; and encouraging MoU implementation through work plans, responsible persons, and measurable targets. Based on these objectives and the documented needs, the community service problem was formulated around three questions. First, how can educational outreach and participatory dialogue provide Southern Thai students and educational stakeholders with direct access to relevant higher education information? Second, how can schools, religious institutions, community organizations, and universities establish institutional pathways supporting prospective student identification and cross-border educational access? Third, how can the resulting commitments be sustained through MoU implementation, applicant assistance, online communication, reciprocal visits, and academic cooperation? These questions provide the analytical framework for examining the implementation and outcomes of the program.

2. METHOD

The program used a participatory, institution-based community service design combining partner coordination and mapping, institutional visits, educational outreach, question-and-answer sessions, institutional dialogue, partnership exploration, documentation, and follow-up planning. Activities were conducted in Yala and Pattani on 28–30 July 2026 as part of an official visit from 27–

31 July 2026. The Universitas Malikussaleh team consisted of Azhari as team leader and Alfian, Ikhyannuddin, and Zarkasyi as members. Participants and beneficiaries included final-year students, teachers, school and foundation leaders, university leaders, Islamic Council representatives, and the Muhammadiyah Thailand network. Direct school outreach at Islamic Patana School and Suntisart Wittaya School involved approximately 200 final-year students and at least 15 teachers.

Educational materials consisted of university presentations, profile videos, brochures, and direct explanations covering programs, facilities, accommodation, student activities, scholarships, admissions, and the socio-religious environment in Aceh. The implementation sequence comprised initial coordination and partner mapping; visits to the Islamic Council of Yala Province, Islamic Patana School, Islam Sasn Withya School, Fatoni University, Muhammadiyah Thailand/Islamic Lukmanul Hakim School, and Suntisart Wittaya School; documentation of agreements and commitments; and preparation of follow-up actions.

Data were collected descriptively from participatory dialogue, questions raised during activities, institutional discussions, field documentation, photographs, MoUs, activity reports, and records of prospective cooperation. No special training module, role-play, counseling intervention, standardized observation sheet, pre-test-post-test, quantitative needs-assessment survey, or satisfaction questionnaire was reported. Evaluation was consequently descriptive and focused on participation, expressed information needs, institutional responses, signed agreements, prospective recruitment commitments, and planned follow-up indicators rather than statistical comparison.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Participant Involvement and Educational Outreach

The program was implemented through six institutional agendas in Yala and Pattani. Direct educational outreach at Islamic Patana School involved approximately 100 students and 15 teachers, while approximately 100 final-year students participated at Suntisart Wittaya School. At Islam Sasn Withya School, students were unavailable because they were attending activities outside the school; information was therefore delivered to leaders and teachers and brochures were provided for subsequent dissemination to the school's approximately 800 students. Across the two principal student sessions, approximately 200 final-year students and at least 15 teachers were directly reached. The outreach materials presented study programs, university facilities, accommodation, student activities, scholarship opportunities, admission information, and the socio-religious environment in Aceh. The available documentation does not classify participants according to levels of activeness and does not provide individual attendance records for all institutional meetings.

3.2 Responses and Commitments at Partner Schools

At Islamic Patana School, students raised questions concerning scholarship opportunities and teachers asked about opportunities to pursue a Master's degree in Educational Management. The school communicated an expectation of sending approximately 20 graduates to Universitas Malikussaleh in 2027, and an MoU was signed during the visit. At Islam Sasn Withya School, discussion with leaders and teachers covered academic programs and a planned scholarship opportunity for prospective students from Southern Thailand; the school indicated that the information would be disseminated to its students. At Suntisart Wittaya School, approximately 100 final-year students received information through a university-profile video, brochures, and direct explanation of seven faculties and 46 study programs, student activities, nearby Islamic boarding schools, and planned scholarship opportunities for five prospective students in 2027. An MoU was also signed with Suntisart Wittaya School. No verbatim interview transcripts, structured observation scores, or participant satisfaction scores were recorded.

3.3 Institutional Networking and Higher Education Cooperation

The meeting with the Islamic Council of Yala Province addressed the role of the religious institution, the social and religious proximity between Southern Thailand and Aceh, higher education opportunities, and possible institutional cooperation. The meeting with Muhammadiyah Thailand/Islamic Lukmanul Hakim School addressed Islamic education, religious and social activities, and prospective student recruitment. Muhammadiyah Thailand committed to assisting in identifying and recommending five prospective scholarship candidates, and an MoU was signed. A reciprocal visit involving approximately 20 representatives from Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat to Aceh was planned for the end of February 2027. At Fatoni University, discussions with university leaders identified opportunities for student and faculty exchanges, inter-program collaboration, Accounting cooperation at undergraduate and graduate levels, instructor needs, and a possible double-degree arrangement. No MoU was signed with Fatoni University during the visit because further internal review was required, but communication was expected to continue.

3.4 Quantitative and Qualitative Outputs

The documented quantitative outputs comprised approximately 200 final-year students and at least 15 teachers directly involved in the two principal school outreach sessions, three signed MoUs, a commitment to identify five prospective scholarship candidates, an expectation that approximately 20 Islamic Patana School graduates could pursue study at Universitas Malikussaleh in 2027, and a planned reciprocal visit involving approximately 20 representatives from Southern Thailand. Qualitative outputs included direct communication channels with partner institutions, student

interest in scholarships, teacher interest in postgraduate study, discussion of international admissions, strengthened religious and community networks, and identification of academic cooperation opportunities with Fatoni University. Documentary outputs included the final report, photographs of institutional meetings and school outreach, MoU-signing documentation, administrative records, and an official Universitas Malikussaleh news publication. These figures are reported as documented outputs and commitments and are not treated as completed medium-term outcomes.

3.5 Evaluation Evidence and Follow-up

The available records contain no pre-test-post-test data, standardized observation scores, quantitative satisfaction survey results, or verbatim student, teacher, interview, or focus-group quotations. Consequently, no numerical claim can be made regarding increased knowledge, attitude change, or statistical effectiveness. Evaluation evidence is descriptive and consists of participant questions, institutional responses, signed MoUs, photographic documentation, recruitment commitments, and follow-up plans. The follow-up schedule includes appointing partner coordinators and preparing an MoU implementation matrix, developing accessible international admission materials, conducting online follow-up outreach and consultation, assisting scholarship candidates and other applicants, organizing the reciprocal visit, and developing student/faculty exchange and Accounting cooperation proposals with Fatoni University. Planned monitoring indicators include the numbers of consultations, applicants, candidates passing selection, scholarship recipients, registered students, and collaborative programs implemented.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that higher education access in this cross-border community service context was addressed through a combination of information provision and institutional mediation. Students received direct information concerning programs, facilities, accommodation, scholarships, admissions, and the social environment, while teachers and institutional leaders were positioned as intermediaries who could continue disseminating information and guiding prospective applicants. This is important because access to higher education is affected by both informational and financial conditions. Scholarship and student-finance literature shows that financial support can influence participation and educational choice (Adnett, 2006; Callender & Wilkinson, 2013; Knight, 2009).

He (2017) likewise situates international student mobility within wider internationalization policy and institutional response. The program therefore addressed an identifiable access barrier by taking information and institutional contacts directly to prospective students and partner organizations. However, the absence of pre-test-post-test data means that this result should be

interpreted as improved availability of information rather than a measured increase in participant knowledge.

The first community service question concerned how educational outreach and participatory dialogue could provide direct access to higher education information. The results show that presentations, videos, brochures, direct explanations, and question-and-answer sessions created multiple channels for information delivery. At Islamic Patana School, the questions about scholarships and postgraduate study demonstrate that participants used the interaction to seek information relevant to their own educational interests. At Suntisart Wittaya School, the presentation of seven faculties and 46 study programs broadened the range of academic options communicated to final-year students.

At Islam Sasn Withya School, the absence of students required an indirect dissemination strategy through leaders and teachers. These different implementation patterns show the practical adaptability of the outreach process while also revealing an evidence limitation: the available data do not establish how many indirectly reached students subsequently received or understood the information. The program thus answered the first question at the level of information provision and communication access, but not yet at the level of measured learning or enrollment conversion.

The second question concerned the role of institutional partnerships in supporting prospective student identification and cross-border access. The three signed MoUs demonstrate that several partner relationships moved beyond informal dialogue into formal institutional commitment. Islamic Patana School's expectation of sending approximately 20 graduates and Muhammadiyah Thailand's commitment to identify five prospective scholarship candidates illustrate how local institutions can function as bridges between prospective students and Universitas Malikussaleh. Cross-border partnership literature emphasizes that sustainable transnational cooperation depends on institutional governance, reciprocity, capacity, and context-sensitive arrangements (Tsiligiris, 2025; Chen et al., 2026; Charles et al., 2026). The program's engagement with religious institutions and community networks is particularly relevant because these organizations have access to communities beyond a single school. At the same time, the Fatoni University case demonstrates that partnership formation may progress at different speeds: substantive academic opportunities were identified, but formal agreement remained subject to internal review. This variation should be regarded as part of the institutional process rather than as a uniform partnership outcome.

The dialogue with Fatoni University extends the program's contribution beyond prospective student recruitment. Opportunities for student and faculty exchange, Accounting collaboration, instructor support, and possible joint academic programs indicate a potential pathway toward broader academic internationalization. Ramaswamy et al. (2021) argue that internationalization can

be connected to the social mission and sustainable development responsibilities of higher education, while Tamrat and Teferra (2021) emphasize the gap that can arise between transnational education policy and implementation. The program's results are consistent with this distinction because the discussions created a prospective agenda but did not yet constitute implemented exchange or joint-degree programs. The practical value of this dialogue will therefore depend on whether the planned 2027 proposals are developed, approved, and implemented. This distinction between opportunity and realized collaboration is essential for maintaining accurate claims about the program's outcomes.

The third community service question concerned sustainability. The follow-up plan provides a staged mechanism extending from August 2026 through 2027, including partner coordinators, an MoU implementation matrix, accessible international admission materials, online consultation, applicant assistance, a reciprocal visit, and academic cooperation proposals. This staged design is consistent with the argument that cross-border partnerships require more than symbolic agreements and must be translated into operational responsibilities and measurable activities (Tsiligiris, 2025; Charles et al., 2026). Digital and online modes may also help maintain communication between physical visits, consistent with the broader role of digitally mediated transnational education discussed by Dutt and Saha (2026). The planned indicators—consultations, applications, selection, scholarships, registrations, and implemented collaborative programs—are particularly important because they create a basis for future outcome evaluation. At the time of the reported activity, however, these were prospective indicators and not completed results.

The program contributes to community service practice by integrating educational outreach with cross-border institutional development. Rather than treating promotion as a stand-alone event, the activity linked student information needs with school leadership, religious institutions, community organizations, and higher education partners. The contextual proximity between Aceh and Southern Thailand provided a social and religious foundation for engagement, while formal agreements and follow-up planning created mechanisms for continuity. This integrated approach is relevant to community service in border and cross-border educational settings because prospective students often require both reliable information and trusted institutional pathways. The program also demonstrates the importance of distinguishing direct beneficiaries from wider institutional populations: approximately 200 students were directly reached in the principal school sessions, while the larger student populations of partner schools represent potential rather than verified direct reach. Maintaining this distinction strengthens the credibility of reported community service outcomes.

The principal limitations arise from the evaluation design and the timing of the reported outcomes. No pre-test-post-test instrument, standardized observation sheet, quantitative needs-assessment survey, or satisfaction questionnaire was administered, and the records do not contain verbatim interview or focus-group quotations. The results therefore cannot establish causal changes in knowledge, attitudes, or educational decisions. In addition, the approximately 20 prospective Islamic Patana graduates, five prospective scholarship candidates, reciprocal visit, and Fatoni University cooperation are future-oriented commitments rather than completed outcomes.

The absence of medium-term application and registration data also means that the effect of the program on actual international student enrollment cannot yet be determined. These limitations do not negate the documented outputs, but they define the level at which conclusions can appropriately be drawn. Future monitoring should therefore use the indicators already specified in the program so that immediate outreach outputs can be connected with subsequent educational and institutional outcomes.

4. CONCLUSION

The Universitas Malikussaleh international community service program in Yala and Pattani established an initial cross-border mechanism for strengthening higher education access through educational outreach, participatory communication, and international institutional partnership development. Direct outreach involved approximately 200 final-year students and at least 15 teachers, while partner-based dissemination expanded the potential reach of educational information. The program generated three signed MoUs, an expectation from Islamic Patana School regarding approximately 20 prospective graduates in 2027, a commitment from Muhammadiyah Thailand to assist in identifying five prospective scholarship candidates, and prospective academic cooperation with Fatoni University.

The immediate benefits consisted of direct access to information, institutional communication channels, formal partnership outputs, and identified pathways for scholarship and international student recruitment. The team also learned that outreach must be adapted to partner circumstances and that institutional relationships develop at different levels of readiness. Because no pre-test-post-test or standardized participant evaluation was used, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence of statistically measured knowledge or attitude change. Sustainability should therefore focus on implementing the signed MoUs, assigning responsible coordinators, preparing accessible admissions information, maintaining online consultation, assisting applicants, conducting the planned reciprocal visit, and developing academic cooperation with Fatoni University.

Future evaluation should document consultation, application, scholarship selection, registration, exchange, and implemented collaboration so that the initial institutional commitments can be assessed as medium-term educational outcomes.

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