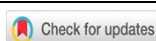


Digital Literacy Practices and Sustainable Development Goals 4: Experiences of International Students in Indonesian Higher Education

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.63230/jocsis.2.4.231>

Sections Info

Article history:

Submitted: February 16, 2026

Final Revised: May 6, 2026

Accepted: June 1, 2026

First Available Online: July 15, 2026

Publication Date: December 27, 2026

Keywords:

Digital literacy practices;

Higher education;

Indonesia;

International students;

SDG 4.

ABSTRACT

Objective: The growing number of international students in Indonesia has highlighted the importance of digital literacy in supporting academic success and cross-cultural adaptation. As higher education institutions strive to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), understanding how international students engage with digital literacy practices becomes increasingly relevant. **Method:** To explore the digital literacy practices of international students studying in Indonesia and examines their perceived contributions to sustainable and inclusive educational experiences. Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with international students enrolled in Indonesian higher education institutions. **Result:** The findings reveal that digital literacy practices support students in accessing academic resources, participating in online learning communities, developing intercultural communication skills, and navigating academic and social challenges in a foreign environment. **Novelty:** The study further demonstrates that digital literacy contributes to equitable access to learning opportunities and promotes inclusive educational participation, aligning with the objectives of SDG 4 and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). These findings suggest that digital literacy should be recognized as a critical component of sustainable international education. Universities are encouraged to strengthen digital literacy support systems to enhance international students' academic engagement and foster more inclusive learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education has become a significant global phenomenon, leading to increased student mobility and greater cultural diversity within universities. As more students pursue academic opportunities outside their home countries, higher education institutions are challenged to provide learning environments that support academic success, social integration, and intercultural engagement. Indonesia has emerged as one of the growing destinations for international students, particularly from Southeast Asia, due to its expanding higher education sector, cultural richness, and increasing participation in international educational collaborations (Yin et al., 2024). This growing presence of international students has created a need to better understand the factors that influence their learning experiences and educational development within Indonesian higher education contexts.

At the same time, rapid technological advancement has transformed how students access information, communicate, collaborate, and construct knowledge. Digital technologies have become an integral part of educational practices, making digital literacy an essential competency for learners in the twenty-first century. Digital literacy extends beyond the ability to operate digital devices; it includes the capacity to access, evaluate, create, and communicate information effectively through digital platforms (Nemorin, 2024). Within higher education, digital literacy enables students to engage

with academic resources, participate in online learning communities, develop critical thinking skills, and navigate increasingly technology-mediated learning environments.

For international students, digital literacy plays an even more crucial role. Studying in a foreign country often requires students to adapt to unfamiliar academic systems, linguistic environments, and sociocultural contexts. Digital tools and platforms can facilitate this adaptation by providing access to learning materials, communication channels, academic support networks, and intercultural interactions. Through digital literacy practices, international students can seek information, maintain transnational connections, participate in academic communities, and overcome challenges associated with language barriers and cultural adjustment (Sari, 2022). Consequently, digital literacy can be viewed not only as an academic skill but also as a resource that supports students' educational and social integration.

Digital literacy practices refer to the ways individuals use digital technologies in meaningful social, educational, and communicative activities. These practices encompass searching for information, evaluating online content, participating in digital communication, producing multimodal texts, engaging in collaborative learning, and utilizing digital platforms for problem-solving and knowledge construction. Rather than focusing solely on technical competence, digital literacy practices emphasize how digital technologies are embedded in learners' everyday experiences and shaped by specific social and cultural contexts (Sutiyono et al., 2023). For international students, these practices are influenced by their linguistic backgrounds, educational experiences, cultural identities, and adaptation processes in host countries.

The importance of digital literacy has gained further attention through its connection to sustainable development. In the contemporary educational landscape, digital literacy is increasingly recognized as a key component of sustainable and inclusive education. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, emphasize the importance of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Achieving this goal requires learners to possess the competencies necessary to participate effectively in digital learning environments and access educational opportunities regardless of geographical, cultural, or social differences (Rahmanov et al., 2025). Digital literacy supports these objectives by enhancing access to information, facilitating collaborative learning, and promoting active participation in educational processes.

Beyond SDG 4, digital literacy also contributes to SDG 10, which seeks to reduce inequalities within and among countries. International students often encounter challenges related to language proficiency, cultural adaptation, access to information, and participation in academic communities. Digital literacy practices can help mitigate these challenges by enabling students to access diverse educational resources, build support networks, and engage in intercultural communication (Hamzah et al., 2020). In this sense, digital literacy functions as a mechanism for fostering educational equity and inclusion, particularly for students navigating cross-border educational experiences.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated the positive role of digital literacy in enhancing academic performance, learner autonomy, critical thinking, and online engagement. Research has shown that students who effectively utilize digital resources are better equipped to access knowledge, participate in collaborative learning, and adapt to changing educational demands. Other studies have highlighted the role of digital technologies in supporting international students' academic adjustment, communication, and intercultural learning. Digital platforms have been found to facilitate information

seeking, social networking, and participation in learning communities, all of which contribute to more positive educational experiences (Vallès-Peris & Domènech, 2024).

Despite these contributions, existing scholarship presents several limitations. First, much of the current literature on digital literacy and international students has been generated within Western educational settings, particularly in countries with long-established internationalization agendas (Wöhlert, 2020). As a result, the experiences of international students in non-Western contexts remain relatively underexplored. Second, studies focusing on digital literacy often emphasize academic outcomes and technological competencies while paying less attention to broader issues of sustainable and inclusive education (García-Soto et al., 2019). Third, although the SDGs have become a central framework in educational policy and research, limited attention has been given to how everyday digital literacy practices contribute to the realization of SDG-related educational objectives. Finally, research specifically examining the intersection of digital literacy practices, international students, and sustainable development within Indonesian higher education remains scarce.

These gaps are particularly important given Indonesia's growing role in regional higher education and its commitment to promoting inclusive and quality education. Understanding how international students engage in digital literacy practices can provide valuable insights into the ways technology supports educational participation, intercultural interaction, and equitable learning opportunities. Such understanding can contribute to both theoretical discussions of digital literacy and practical efforts to strengthen sustainable educational development in internationalized learning environments.

Therefore, this study investigates the digital literacy practices of international students in Indonesian higher education and explores how these practices contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). By focusing on the experiences of international students in Indonesia, the study seeks to expand current knowledge on digital literacy and sustainable education while providing empirical evidence from a context that has received limited scholarly attention.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the digital literacy practices of international students in Indonesian higher education and their perceived contributions to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and meanings regarding their engagement with digital technologies in academic and social contexts (Morgan, 2022). The study sought to capture the complexity of students' lived experiences rather than measure predetermined variables.

Research context and participants

The study was conducted at an Indonesian higher education institution that hosts international students from Southeast Asian countries. The participants consisted of six international students who were enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs. They were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) being

registered as international students in Indonesia, (2) actively engaging in digital technologies for academic purposes, and (3) being willing to share their experiences related to digital literacy practices. The participants represented diverse academic backgrounds and had varying lengths of study experience in Indonesia. This diversity provided rich insights into how digital literacy practices were utilized across different educational and sociocultural contexts (Etikan, 2016).

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method allowed participants to describe their experiences, perceptions, and reflections while providing flexibility for the researcher to explore emerging issues in greater depth. The interview questions focused on participants' use of digital technologies in learning activities, communication practices, information seeking, academic collaboration, and adaptation to the Indonesian educational environment (Hofisi et al., 2014). Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or through online meeting platforms, depending on participants' availability. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed several stages (Yi et al., 2020). First, the interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. Second, meaningful units related to digital literacy practices and sustainable educational experiences were identified and assigned initial codes. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader categories. Fourth, these categories were refined and organized into themes that represented recurring patterns across participants' experiences. Finally, the themes were reviewed and interpreted in relation to the concepts of digital literacy and the Sustainable Development Goals. The thematic analysis enabled the researcher to identify how digital literacy practices supported learning processes, academic participation, intercultural communication, and educational inclusion among international students.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. First, member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Second, peer debriefing was carried out through discussions with academic colleagues to review the coding process and thematic development. Third, detailed descriptions of the research procedures and findings were provided to enhance transparency and allow readers to assess the credibility of the study (Donkoh, 2023).

Ethical considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Informed consent was obtained before data collection, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. All collected data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

Data analysis framework

To interpret the findings, the identified themes were examined through the lens of digital literacy practices and their contribution to sustainable education. Particular attention was given to how participants' engagement with digital technologies facilitated access to learning opportunities, academic participation, intercultural communication, and educational inclusion, which are central principles reflected in SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis revealed three major themes concerning how international students utilized digital literacy practices to support their educational experiences in Indonesia and contribute to the realization of Sustainable Development Goals. These themes include: (1) accessing and constructing academic knowledge through digital platforms, (2) fostering intercultural communication and social inclusion through digital engagement, and (3) developing learner autonomy and lifelong learning competencies.

Theme 1: Accessing and constructing academic knowledge through digital platforms

The findings showed that digital literacy practices enabled international students to access academic resources efficiently and support their learning activities. Participants reported frequently using search engines, digital libraries, online journals, educational websites, and artificial intelligence tools to obtain information, complete assignments, and enhance their understanding of course materials. Digital technologies allowed students to overcome limitations related to geographical distance and access a wider range of academic resources than would otherwise be available (Dwivedi et al., 2020). In addition to accessing information, participants actively constructed knowledge by comparing multiple sources, evaluating information credibility, and integrating digital resources into their academic work. Several participants explained that digital platforms helped them understand unfamiliar concepts and bridge language-related difficulties encountered during their studies in Indonesia. These findings suggest that digital literacy extends beyond technological proficiency and involves critical engagement with information. Through digital literacy practices, international students became active participants in knowledge construction rather than passive consumers of information (Rinekso et al., 2021).

From the perspective of sustainable development, these practices support SDG 4 by promoting equitable access to quality educational resources and enhancing learning opportunities. The findings reinforce the notion that digital literacy functions as an essential educational competency that enables students to participate effectively in contemporary higher education environments. For international students, digital access serves as a mechanism for reducing barriers to academic participation and supporting educational success.

Theme 2: Fostering intercultural communication and social inclusion through digital engagement

Another significant finding was the role of digital literacy practices in facilitating intercultural communication and social integration. Participants described using social media platforms, messaging applications, online discussion forums, and collaborative learning tools to communicate with lecturers, classmates, and fellow international

students. These digital interactions enabled them to establish social networks, exchange academic information, and maintain connections with both local and international communities. For many participants, digital platforms served as spaces where they could negotiate cultural differences and develop a sense of belonging within the university environment. Online communication reduced anxiety associated with face-to-face interactions and provided opportunities to seek support when encountering academic or cultural challenges.

The findings further indicated that digital engagement contributed to greater educational inclusion. Through digital communication channels, students were able to participate more actively in classroom activities, collaborative projects, and academic discussions regardless of linguistic or cultural differences. Digital technologies therefore functioned as tools that facilitated participation and minimized exclusion. These findings align closely with the objectives of SDG 10, which emphasizes reducing inequalities and promoting inclusion. International students often experience challenges related to language barriers, cultural adaptation, and limited social networks. Digital literacy practices helped address these challenges by providing alternative pathways for communication and participation. Consequently, digital technologies contributed not only to educational engagement but also to more inclusive learning environments.

Theme 3: Developing learner autonomy and lifelong learning competencies

The third theme highlights how digital literacy practices fostered learner autonomy and lifelong learning skills among international students. Participants reported independently seeking learning materials, enrolling in online courses, watching educational videos, utilizing language-learning applications, and exploring various digital resources beyond formal classroom requirements (Mansfield, 2020). Many participants emphasized that digital technologies allowed them to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Rather than relying solely on lecturers, they actively identified learning needs, searched for solutions, and evaluated information independently.

These practices encouraged self-directed learning and strengthened their confidence in managing academic challenges (Letseka, 2021). The findings also revealed that participants viewed digital literacy as a competency that would remain valuable beyond their university studies (Dwivedi et al., 2020). They recognized the importance of digital skills for future professional development, career advancement, and continued learning in an increasingly digitalized world. This theme reflects the broader vision of SDG 4, which promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all (Strielkowski et al., 2024). Digital literacy practices enabled students to become autonomous learners capable of adapting to evolving educational and professional demands. The findings suggest that sustainable education involves not only providing access to learning resources but also empowering learners to continuously acquire and apply knowledge throughout their lives (Bank, 2017).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that digital literacy practices play a significant role in supporting international students' educational experiences and contribute to the broader goals of sustainable development. First, digital literacy facilitated access to academic knowledge and enhanced learning participation, supporting the achievement of inclusive and equitable quality education as envisioned by SDG 4 (Ozturk & Ohi, 2019; Soifah et

al., 2021). Second, digital engagement promoted intercultural communication and social inclusion, aligning with SDG 10's objective of reducing inequalities and fostering participation among diverse student populations (Rahmanov et al., 2025). Third, digital literacy encouraged learner autonomy and lifelong learning competencies, which are fundamental elements of sustainable educational development (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Zhou et al., 2023). The study also highlights the importance of viewing digital literacy as a social and educational practice rather than merely a technical skill. International students utilized digital technologies not only to access information but also to construct knowledge, build relationships, negotiate cultural differences, and participate in academic communities. These findings suggest that digital literacy functions as a multidimensional resource that supports both educational achievement and social inclusion. Furthermore, the Indonesian context provides valuable insights into the relationship between internationalization, digital literacy, and sustainable education. As Indonesian universities continue to attract students from diverse cultural backgrounds, strengthening digital literacy support systems may contribute to more inclusive and sustainable learning environments. Such efforts can help ensure that international students are able to access educational opportunities, participate fully in academic communities, and develop competencies necessary for success in a digital society.

Overall, the findings indicate that digital literacy practices constitute an important pathway through which higher education institutions can contribute to the realization of Sustainable Development Goals. By empowering international students to access knowledge, engage in intercultural communication, and become autonomous learners, digital literacy supports the creation of educational environments that are more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental finding: This study explored the digital literacy practices of international students in Indonesian higher education and their contributions to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). The findings revealed that digital literacy practices played a significant role in supporting students' academic and social experiences. Through digital technologies, international students were able to access and construct academic knowledge, engage in intercultural communication, participate in learning communities, and develop learner autonomy. These practices not only facilitated academic success and adaptation to a new educational environment but also promoted more inclusive and equitable participation in higher education. The findings further demonstrate that digital literacy should be understood as a multidimensional practice that extends beyond technical competence to encompass knowledge construction, communication, collaboration, and lifelong learning. **Implication:** The study has several implications for higher education institutions seeking to strengthen sustainable and inclusive education. Universities should provide greater support for the development of digital literacy competencies among international students through accessible digital resources, technology-enhanced learning environments, and targeted support programs. Such efforts can contribute to reducing educational inequalities and improving students' engagement in diverse academic communities. **Limitation:** Nevertheless, the study is limited by its small sample size and focus on a single educational context, which may restrict the transferability of the findings. **Future research:** Future research may involve

participants from multiple universities and employ mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how digital literacy practices contribute to sustainable educational development. Further investigations may also examine the connections between digital literacy and other SDGs to expand knowledge of the role of digital competencies in advancing sustainable higher education.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Lestari Budianto led the study by developing the research concept and design, conducting data collection and analysis, interpreting the findings, and preparing the original manuscript. **Slamet Setiawan** contributed to the methodological design, provided academic supervision throughout the research process, and critically reviewed and refined the manuscript. **Pratiwi Retnaningdyah** supported the study through academic supervision, validation of the research process and findings, and substantive review of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the development of the study, reviewed the final manuscript, and approved its publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest, either financial or personal, that may have influenced the content or outcome of this study.

ETHICAL COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

This manuscript complies with research and publication ethics. The authors affirm that the work is original, conducted with academic integrity, and free from any unethical practices, including plagiarism.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF AI OR DIGITAL TOOLS IN WRITING

The authors acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (OpenAI) as a language-support tool during the preparation of this manuscript. The tool was utilized solely to assist with language refinement, grammar checking, and improving the clarity and readability of the text. ChatGPT was not involved in the research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or the generation of research results. All AI-assisted outputs were carefully reviewed, verified, and revised by the authors to ensure accuracy, academic integrity, and compliance with ethical standards. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this manuscript and all conclusions presented herein.

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