Chapter by Chapter, Prayer by Prayer: An Indonesian Muslim Woman's Autoethnography of Faith, Labour, and Learning in Australian Higher Education

Ana Nurhasanah Surjanto, Monash University, Australia

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Abstract

This article presents a scholarly autoethnography that intertwines multiple aspects, covering the personal, spiritual, and intellectual journey of an Indonesian Muslim woman pursuing a PhD in Australia. It reflects on the lived experience of navigating the doctoral process, chapter by chapter, in which academic labour is sustained by daily prayers performed five times a day. Prayer, as both a spiritual discipline and an embodied practice, provides continuity, grounding, and resilience, positioning scholarly writing as inseparable from acts of faith and emotional endurance. The narrative demonstrates how each stage of the doctoral journey corresponds to confirmation, data collection, analysis, and submission. Drawing on Islamic feminism and care-focused feminism, this work highlights how women's voices and lived realities must be placed at the centre of both religious and academic discourse, challenging reductive interpretations that marginalise women's contributions to international education. Meanwhile, Institutional Ethnography (IE) provides an analytic lens for connecting personal experiences to broader institutional structures, covering key requirements and university regulations. Through situating the self within these intersecting frameworks, this autoethnography illustrates how prayer, care, and writing form a triadic structure of survival, resilience, and agency for Muslim women scholars in the Western academic field. Ultimately, the article contributes to discussions of international doctoral education by foregrounding how faith and care practices are not peripheral but central to the intellectual and institutional negotiations of Muslim women's academic lives.

Keywords: Indonesian Muslim woman, international education, academic, spirituality, feminism

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Introduction

I began writing this article in the quiet corner of the PhD hub. Then, the call to *Dzuhur* echoed softly through my headphones. I closed my laptop, performed ablution, and stood in prayer. Between the rhythmic cycles of bowing and prostration, I felt the tension of argument loosen and the clarity of intention sharpen. I returned to my writing and typed the opening line: *In the name of God, I begin my article*.

This article emerges from such moments in which spiritual devotion and academic labour do not compete but coexist, intersect, and sustain one another. Prayer, in this sense, is not an interruption of productivity but constitutive of it. As an Indonesian Muslim woman doctoral student studying within Australian higher education, I experience prayer not as a suspension of intellectual work but as a reorganisation of it.

In dominant imaginaries of Western higher education, religion is often framed either as a private belief system or as a potential impediment to rational inquiry (Casanova, 1994; Habermas, 2008). Secular academic norms tend to position knowledge production as detached, neutral, and disembodied (Asad, 2003; Taylor, 2007). This framing reflects what scholars have described as the implicit secularism of modern universities, where faith is tolerated as identity but marginalised as epistemology (Ahmed, 2012; Braidotti, 2013).

The marginalisation of spiritual epistemologies within Western academia has produced what some scholars describe as an artificial disembodiment of knowledge production (Asad, 2003; Connolly, 1999). Modern universities, shaped by Enlightenment rationalism, tend to define legitimate knowledge as secular, objective, and detached from devotional commitments (Taylor, 2007). Within this framework, religious practice is frequently treated as either irrelevant or suspect within scholarly environments. Yet scholars of Islam and embodiment challenge this secular binary and need the reconceptualisation. It is crucial for understanding Muslim women scholars' engagement with academia. Prayer structures time; fasting reconfigures bodily rhythms; intention (*niyyah*) reorients purpose. These practices are not external to intellectual labour but shape how it is understood and enacted.

Muslim woman scholar Amina Wadud (2006) argues that worship is not merely ritual observance but an ethical and intellectual discipline that shapes moral reasoning and interpretive authority. Similarly, Saba Mahmood (2005), in Politics of Piety, reconceptualises agency through embodied religious practice. Studying women's mosque movements in Egypt, Mahmood (2005) demonstrates that ritual acts such as prayer, veiling, and bodily discipline are not signs of passivity but modes of ethical self-formation. Agency, in this framing, is cultivated through disciplined repetition rather than oppositional resistance.

Within such contexts, religious practice is rendered largely invisible in formal academic discourse, even as institutions rhetorically celebrate diversity (Ahmed, 2012; Stevenson, 2014). However, for visibly Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab, religion is neither invisible nor easily privatised. Instead, it becomes embodied, spatial, and often hyper-visible within university environments. Research on Muslim students in Western universities demonstrates that religious practices such as prayer, fasting, and veiling frequently shape experiences of belonging, visibility, and negotiation within secular campuses (Mir, 2014). These experiences highlight the ways institutional norms of secularism intersect with gender, race, and religion in shaping Muslim women's academic lives.

Drawing on scholarly feminist autoethnography, this article narrates my doctoral journey chapter by chapter, prayer by prayer. In doing so, it contributes to three intersecting conversations: first, scholarship on religion within secular higher education; second, feminist autoethnography as an embodied epistemological practice; and third, critical analyses of Muslim women's intellectual labour. By foregrounding prayer as both a spiritual discipline and an epistemic practice, I challenge the presumption that faith must remain peripheral to academic life for scholarship to be considered legitimate. Instead, I argue that recognising faith as an epistemic practice exposes the narrowness of secular productivity norms and invites more pluralistic understandings of knowledge-making.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This article is grounded in the intersecting theoretical perspectives of Islamic feminism and care-focused feminist theory. Together, these frameworks challenge dominant secular assumptions about knowledge production and illuminate how spiritual practice, care, and intellectual labour can coexist within academic life.

Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism provides a critical lens for understanding the relationship between spiritual devotion and intellectual inquiry. Within this framework, acts of *ibadah* (worship) and the pursuit of *'ilm* (knowledge) are not opposed but mutually reinforcing practices (Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 2006). Islamic intellectual traditions have historically positioned knowledge-seeking as a form of devotion, in which learning itself becomes an act of worship (Halstead, 2004; Nasr, 2001). Contemporary Islamic feminist scholars emphasise that ritual practices such as prayer, fasting, and charity cultivate ethical discipline, moral accountability, and spiritual reflection that inform both personal and intellectual life (Mahmood, 2005; Wadud, 2006).

As Etin Anwar (2018) argues, Islamic feminism reclaims interpretive authority by foregrounding women's lived religious experiences and their engagement with Islamic ethical traditions. Through this lens, religious practices are not merely personal rituals but sites of meaning-making and agency. Prayer, fasting, and other devotional acts become forms of embodied resistance against secular narratives that portray faith as incompatible with intellectual autonomy (Mahmood, 2005). In this sense, Islamic feminism reframes spiritual practice as a source of intellectual resilience, ethical orientation, and epistemic grounding within academic environments that often marginalise religious ways of knowing.

Despite these contributions, Islamic feminism also has certain limitations when applied to the analysis of academic labour within secular institutions. Much of the scholarship within this field focuses on scriptural interpretation, gender justice in Muslim societies, or legal reforms within Islamic traditions. While these discussions are crucial, they sometimes pay less attention to how Muslim women navigate institutional structures such as universities, bureaucratic policies, and academic productivity regimes. As a result, Islamic feminism alone may not fully account for how institutional power relations shape the everyday experiences of Muslim women scholars within Western higher education.

Care-Focused Feminism

Care-focused feminist theory further deepens this analysis by foregrounding relationality, interdependence, and emotional labour within knowledge production. Scholars such as Joan

Tronto (1993) challenge dominant academic norms that prioritise detachment, productivity, and individualism. Instead, they conceptualise care as a central ethical and political practice that sustains both communities and intellectual work.

Within this perspective, care extends beyond interpersonal relationships to include practices that nurture the self, the body, and the spirit. Rest, reflection, and spiritual devotion are therefore not interruptions to academic productivity but essential conditions that enable sustained intellectual engagement. Building on these insights, Rosemarie Tong (2009) highlights how diverse feminist traditions recognise care as both a moral orientation and a methodological approach that shapes the production and sharing of knowledge. By framing care as a method, care-focused feminism invites a reconsideration of academic labour as relational and embodied. Writing, prayer, rest, and reflection become interconnected practices situated within a broader ecology of care. In this article, these practices are understood not as separate domains of life but as mutually sustaining forms of labour that support intellectual creativity, emotional resilience, and spiritual grounding.

However, care-focused feminist theory also has limitations in this context. Much of the literature on care ethics emerges from Western philosophical traditions and often focuses on interpersonal relationships, caregiving roles, and social welfare structures (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993). While these frameworks illuminate the importance of relational labour, they do not always address how spiritual practices and religious commitments shape care experiences (Held, 2006). Consequently, care-focused feminism may not fully capture how faith-based practices such as prayer function as forms of self-care, discipline, and ethical orientation for religious scholars.

Methodology

Feminist Autoethnography and Institutional Ethnography (IE)

This article employs a feminist autoethnographic methodology informed by Institutional Ethnography (IE). The study is grounded in the lived, embodied, and spiritual experiences of a Muslim woman doctoral student navigating an Australian university. Feminist autoethnography recognises the researcher's lived experience as a legitimate site of knowledge production and challenges the assumption that scholarly inquiry must remain detached from personal or embodied perspectives (Adams et all., 2014). Rather than positioning the researcher as a distant observer, this approach acknowledges that knowledge is produced through situated experiences shaped by identity, power, and institutional structures (Smith, 2005).

In this study, my positionality as an Indonesian Muslim woman and a visibly hijabi doctoral student forms the starting point of inquiry. Experiences of prayer, writing, fatigue, and moments of reflection are not treated merely as personal anecdotes but as analytically significant sites through which broader institutional processes become visible. Feminist autoethnography enables the examination of how everyday academic practices, such as writing deadlines, supervisory meetings, and navigating campus spaces, intersect with spiritual practices, including prayer, fasting, and intentional reflection (Ellis et al., 2011; Hopkins, 2016). Through this approach, embodied experiences of faith within academic spaces are analysed as forms of knowledge that reveal how secular institutional norms shape the possibilities and constraints of academic life (Smith, 2005).

This autoethnographic approach is further informed by the IE developed by Dorothy E. Smith (2005). IE begins with people's everyday experiences and investigates how these experiences are coordinated by broader institutional relations. Rather than studying individuals in isolation, IE traces how daily activities are organised through what Smith (2005) describes as "ruling relations": the complex networks of texts, policies, administrative procedures, and institutional expectations that structure social life.

By integrating feminist autoethnography with IE, this study connects personal narrative with institutional analysis. Experiences of prayer during writing sessions, negotiating Ramadan within academic schedules, or encountering the visibility of the hijab within predominantly secular spaces are analysed not simply as individual experiences but as entry points for examining how universities organise academic labour. In this way, the autoethnographic account becomes a methodological tool for tracing how institutional norms surrounding productivity, secularism, and professional conduct shape the everyday lives of Muslim women scholars.

Data Sources

The analysis draws on multiple forms of qualitative material generated throughout the PhD journey. These include reflexive journals documenting everyday academic practices, emotional responses, and spiritual reflections encountered in spaces such as prayer rooms, libraries, and workshops. These journals capture the rhythms of daily academic life and record moments where spiritual practice intersected with intellectual labour (Ellis et al., 2011; Habermas, 2008). Reflexive journaling is widely used in qualitative research to document the researcher's evolving interpretations, emotions, and positionality throughout the research process.

The study also incorporates memory work reflecting on significant moments of visibility, vulnerability, and decision-making within academic spaces. These moments include navigating prayer within institutional schedules, negotiating expectations during Ramadan, and encountering the visibility of the hijab in academic environments. Memory work allows for the reconstruction of events that reveal how personal experiences are shaped by broader institutional contexts (Smith, 2005).

Fieldnotes were also developed through ongoing engagement with institutional settings. These notes document interactions in academic environments regarding the organisation of space, time, and academic expectations at the university. In addition, the analysis engages with institutional texts encountered in everyday academic life. These texts include academic schedules, doctoral workshops, university policies, and access to prayer spaces. Within IE, such texts are not merely background documents but active coordinators of institutional life, shaping how doctoral work is organised and evaluated (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005).

Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

Reflexivity forms a central component of this research. As both the subject and author of the study, I continuously interrogated my positionality as an Indonesian, Muslim woman and international doctoral student within Australian higher education. Reflexive writing served as a methodological tool for examining how my embodied experiences of faith, identity, and academic labour were shaped by institutional contexts. These reflections were further enriched through conversations with peers and mentors, which helped situate personal experiences within broader social and institutional dynamics (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003).

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. References to specific individuals or institutional locations have been anonymised to protect confidentiality. At the same time, the research acknowledges an ethical responsibility to represent experiences honestly and respectfully, recognising accountability not only to academic audiences but also to the broader spiritual and scholarly communities with which the researcher identifies (Ellis et al., 2011; Tolich, 2010).

Analytic Process

The analytic process followed an iterative and reflexive approach consistent with both feminist autoethnography and IE. Journal entries, fieldnotes, memory narratives, and institutional texts were read and re-read to identify recurring patterns and moments of tension within everyday academic life. Themes were derived inductively through this process, with particular attention to moments of disjuncture, instances where institutional expectations clashed with lived realities (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smith, 2005).

Within IE, such disjunctures are analytically significant because they reveal how institutional norms operate in practice. In this study, moments when prayer schedules conflicted with academic timelines or when embodied religious practices intersected with expectations of academic productivity became key points of analysis. These moments were then traced to broader relations of ruling embedded within institutional texts, policies, and cultural norms governing academic life.

Through this analytic process, the study moves beyond personal reflection to examine how faith-based academic labour is often rendered invisible within secular institutional frameworks. By tracing connections between individual experiences and institutional structures, the analysis highlights how Muslim women scholars negotiate the intersections of spirituality, care, and intellectual work within contemporary universities (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005).

Results and Discussion

Faith, Prayer, and Academic Life

In Islam, faith is understood as *iman*, encompassing belief in the heart, profession by the tongue, and action through embodied practice. Central to this faith is the declaration known as the *Shahadah*, the foundational testimony that affirms belief in the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad "أَشْهَدُ أَنْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللهُ وَأَشْهَدُ أَنَّ مُحَمَّدًا رَسُولُ اللهِ" (*I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah*).

Within Islamic life, faith is not merely a belief but a lived discipline structured through acts of worship. Among these practices, *ṣalāh* (daily prayer) holds a central place. Performed five times a day, Subuh, Dzuhur, Ashar, Maghrib, and Isya prayer structures time, shapes bodily rhythms, and sustains a continuous awareness of God. As the second pillar of Islam, prayer is both a spiritual obligation and a source of ethical orientation, discipline, and reflection (Hopkins, 2016; Nasr, 2001; Qur'an 29:45). The Prophet Muhammad also described prayer as the "pillar of religion," emphasising its central role in Muslim life (Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 2616).

During my doctoral journey, these five daily prayers gradually became more than moments of worship; they formed a temporal framework through which my academic labour unfolded. Rather than interrupting scholarly work, prayer organised it. The rhythm of prayer created a

structure that sustained writing, reflection, and intellectual struggle. Through the lens of feminist autoethnography and Institutional Ethnography (IE), this alignment between prayer and academic labour reveals how spiritual practices can serve as epistemic and emotional support within institutional environments that often privilege secular norms of productivity (Anwar, 2018; Nasr, 2001).

Chapter by Chapter, Prayer by Prayer

Subuh (Before Sunrise) – Beginnings and Epistemological Reflection

The first chapter of my article emerged during the early hours surrounding *Subuh* prayer. Before sunrise, when the world had not yet fully awakened, I reflected on the epistemological tensions between institutional expectations and my lived experiences as a Muslim woman scholar in Western academia. In these moments of stillness, the research aim began to take shape. These insights did not emerge solely through intellectual reasoning but also through prayer, reflection, and *dua* (supplication), practices that in Islamic tradition cultivate mindfulness and spiritual intention (Nasr, 2001).

From the perspective of IE, these moments reveal that academic inquiry begins in lived experience rather than in abstract theoretical spaces. Starting from the standpoint of a hijabi doctoral student makes visible the disjunctures between the secular assumptions embedded in university structures and the spiritual practices that shape everyday academic life (Smith, 2005). Beginning from one's standpoint is central to IE because it allows researchers to trace how institutional relations organise everyday experiences (Campbell & Gregor, 2004).

Dzuhur (Midday) – Literature Review and Intellectual Reorientation

As the day progressed toward the *Dzuhur* prayer, the work of synthesising literature often demanded sustained cognitive focus. Reading and engaging with Western feminist theories sometimes produced intellectual dissonance, particularly when religion was framed primarily as a constraint on women's agency. Pausing for prayer during *Dzuhur* created a moment of recalibration.

These pauses challenged dominant academic norms that view interruptions as inefficiencies. Instead, prayer functioned as a form of intellectual care. Through the lens of care-focused feminist theory, particularly Rosemarie Tong's (2009) work, such practices can be understood as part of an ethics of care within academic labour. Feminist scholars have long argued that intellectual work is sustained not only by productivity but also by practices of care, reflection, and relational well-being (Tronto, 1993). In this context, prayer becomes a moment of restoration that enables sustained intellectual engagement rather than disrupting it.

Ashar (Afternoon) – Methodological Struggles and Embodied Discipline

The writing of the methodology section coincided with the afternoon period associated with the *Ashar* prayer. During this time, I navigated complex research processes, including designing and developing the approach for my article. Much of this work occurred during Ramadan, when fasting intensified both physical fatigue and spiritual awareness.

From an Islamic feminist perspective, prayer and fasting are not simply acts of ritual obedience but practices that cultivate ethical discipline, intentionality, and spiritual consciousness. Islamic

feminist scholarship highlights how women's lived religious practices function as sites of knowledge production and agency (Anwar, 2018; Tong, 2009). Within this framework, fasting did not diminish my academic capacity but deepened my commitment to the research process. The discipline of fasting reinforced a sense of purpose that grounded the methodological decisions shaping this study. The Qur'an also emphasises fasting as a practice that cultivates self-discipline and moral consciousness (*taqwa*) (Qur'an 2:183).

Maghrib (After Sunset) – Discussion and Self-Reflection

As evening approached and the *Maghrib* prayer marked the transition from day to night, I often engaged in analysis and self-reflection by journaling about my daily experiences and those of other women navigating academic life. These reflections revealed shared tensions between faith, identity, and institutional expectations.

Through the lens of IE, such narratives illustrate how individual experiences are coordinated through broader institutional structures. University policies, doctoral timelines, and productivity norms shape how scholars organise their daily lives (Smith, 2005). Yet religious practices such as prayer, fasting, and spiritual reflection provide resources for resilience, ethical orientation, and identity formation within these structures. These practices can be understood as forms of spiritual scaffolding that sustain academic life within institutional environments that often privilege secular norms.

Isya' (Night) – Writing in the Silence of Night

The final stages of writing frequently occurred after the *Isya* prayer, when the quiet of the night created space for concentrated work. In these moments, writing and prayer existed side by side. Drafting chapters, revising arguments, and engaging in spiritual reflection became intertwined practices.

Writing in the silence of the night gradually transformed academic labour into a form of devotional practice. Within Islamic intellectual traditions, the pursuit of knowledge (*'ilm*) is itself understood as a form of worship when undertaken with sincere intention (*niyyah*) (Nasr, 2001). The process of producing knowledge, therefore, became inseparable from spiritual intention. In this sense, the thesis itself evolved into a space where intellectual inquiry and spiritual devotion converged, illustrating how faith can sustain scholarly life within secular institutional environments.

Institutional Ruling Relations and Spiritual Scaffolding

While prayer provided rhythm and grounding, the doctoral journey remained deeply shaped by institutional ruling relations. Institutional Ethnography (IE) highlights how everyday activities are coordinated through texts, policies, and bureaucratic processes that organise institutional life (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005). Milestone deadlines, ethics applications, supervision meetings, and university regulations structured the temporal rhythms of doctoral study.

These institutional structures often operate on the basis of secular assumptions about productivity and time. Prayer schedules, Ramadan fasting, and other religious practices are rarely considered within official timelines or institutional policies. As a result, Muslim PhD students frequently navigate a hidden negotiation between institutional expectations and

spiritual commitments (Ahmed, 2012; Braidotti, 2013). Research on Muslim students in Western universities has also shown how visible religious practices, such as wearing the hijab or observing prayer, can create tensions within academic environments that assume religion to be private or invisible (Pouraskari et al., 2023).

Within this context, faith functioned as a form of spiritual scaffolding. Prayer was a structured time when institutional pressures created chaos. Fasting cultivated discipline when exhaustion threatened motivation. Spiritual reflection provided meaning during moments of uncertainty and grief. Islamic traditions have long emphasised that acts of worship cultivate patience (*sabr*), mindfulness, and perseverance (Nasr, 2001; Qur'an 2:153). The alignment between religious routines and academic tasks was therefore not accidental but intentional and deeply resilient.

Beyond academic achievement, the doctoral journey became a spiritual process of self-discipline, resistance, and transformation. Recognising this dimension challenges dominant assumptions that treat faith as irrelevant to scholarly work. Instead, the experiences documented in this study highlight the importance of legitimising spiritual labour and acknowledging the epistemic value of faith-based practices within academic environments (Anwar, 2018; Braidotti, 2013).

Rethinking International Doctoral Education

The experiences presented in this study also raise broader questions about how international higher education understands student well-being and support. Universities often emphasise academic skills, productivity, and professional development while overlooking the diverse realities that shape the lives of international doctoral students (Mir, 2014).

For many global scholars, doctoral education involves navigating multiple temporal, emotional, and spiritual dimensions simultaneously. Temporal realities include managing academic schedules alongside religious calendars and prayer times. Emotional realities involve balancing academic demands with personal responsibilities, family expectations, and experiences of cultural displacement. Spiritual realities include maintaining religious practices that provide meaning, resilience, and identity. Studies on international students have shown that religious and cultural practices often serve as important sources of belonging and psychological support during study-abroad experiences (Yakushko, 2010).

Recognising these dimensions requires universities to expand their understanding of student support. Rather than viewing religious practices as private matters outside academic life, institutions could acknowledge how spiritual practices contribute to students' well-being and intellectual engagement. Providing prayer spaces, flexible scheduling during religious observances, and culturally responsive support systems are important steps toward creating more inclusive academic environments (Ahmed, 2012; Hopkins, 2016).

From the perspectives of Islamic feminism and care-focused feminism, such changes also represent broader commitments to justice and relational care within higher education. Islamic feminism highlights how Muslim women's religious practices can function as sources of agency and intellectual authority (Anwar, 2018; Tong, 2009), while care-focused feminism emphasises the importance of recognising emotional, relational, and ethical labour within academic life (Tong, 2009; Tronto, 1993).

Together, these perspectives invite a reimagining of doctoral education that acknowledges the full humanity of scholars. For international Muslim women PhD students in particular, faith is not separate from intellectual life but deeply intertwined with the pursuit of knowledge, resilience, and becoming.

Conclusion

For many Muslim women like myself, the PhD is more than an academic pursuit; it is a spiritual journey of self-discipline, resistance, care, and becoming. Conventional framings of scholarly work as purely cognitive or disembodied overlook the full labour of international scholars who navigate complex temporal, emotional, and spiritual realities, including time-zone differences, gendered responsibilities, and religious rituals. This feminist autoethnography calls on international higher education institutions to expand their definitions of support, inclusion, and well-being to better recognise the lived realities of global scholars. Universities should consider practical measures such as inclusive scheduling, accessible prayer spaces, and culturally responsive support systems that acknowledge spiritual practices as part of academic life. Faith-based practices are not interruptions to scholarly productivity; they function as infrastructures of resilience. The prayer mat and the manuscript are not opposites but allies. In affirming the epistemic legitimacy of spiritual labour, this study offers not a narrative of deficit but one of depth, highlighting how faith can sustain intellectual life and enrich the possibilities of knowledge-making.

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I acknowledge the use of Microsoft Copilot (https://copilot.microsoft.com/) to refine the academic language and accuracy of my own work. I significantly adapt and critically modify the content generated by this tool to accurately reflect my unique style and voice. Consequently, I take full responsibility for the final content of this document, noting that it represents my original ideas and adheres to academic integrity and quality requirements.

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Contact emails: ana.surjanto@monash.edu
anasurjanto@gmail.com