

Student Understanding Of The Independent Campus Learning Program And Its Relevance To Strengthening Soft Skills As Professional Teachers

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Abstract. The introduction of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka program motivates students to excel in various knowledge domains within their respective fields of expertise, thereby preparing them to compete both nationally and globally. This study aims to investigate students' perceptions of the MBKM program and evaluate its contribution to enhancing students' soft skills as future educators. The research employs a quantitative descriptive approach, with data collected through interviews and observations. Data analysis follows Miles & Huberman's framework, involving data reduction, presentation, and verification. The findings of this research indicate that students possess a comprehensive understanding of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka program. Furthermore, it demonstrates that students firmly believe in the program's significant relevance in nurturing their soft skills, particularly in areas such as responsibility, discipline, self-reliance, diligence, self-assurance, and teamwork. Consequently, it is apparent that the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka program plays a pivotal role in molding students into competent future educators.

Keywords: Independent Learning, Independent Campus, Soft Skills, Professional Teachers.

1 Introduction

Ever since the inception of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program in 2020, it has wielded a substantial influence on the advancement of students' capabilities. This program was introduced in accordance with Minister of Education and Culture Regulation Number 3 of 2020, which incorporates provisions regarding the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program. The fundamental objective behind the MBKM program policy is to augment students' competencies in alignment with the demands of the 21st century, where citizens are required to possess a diverse range of skills extending beyond their academic

fields. To attain this objective, there are a minimum of eight programs available for student participation. These programs encompass, firstly, assisting in educational institutions as teachers; secondly, engaging in student exchanges; thirdly, undertaking practical training or internships; fourthly, embarking on independent projects; fifthly, conducting research; sixthly, participating in entrepreneurial activities; seventhly, contributing to community development or specialized practical lectures; and eighthly, engaging in humanitarian initiatives [1].

Subsequently, how this program is implemented is of interest. Suggests that the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus policy encourages campuses to conduct more independent and flexible learning [2]. indicates that students participating in the MBKM program possess higher soft skills compared to those who do not, especially in terms of leadership skills [3]. This research aligns with the findings of Mulyana et al. (2022), who revealed that the impact of the MBKM program is not limited to students; it also has a positive effect on enhancing the capacities of lecturers [4].

Based on the aforementioned studies, the researcher aims to examine the impact of the MBKM program on strengthening the soft skills of students aspiring to become teachers, particularly at Universitas Negeri Medan. Soft skills refer to an individual's abilities to interact and build relationships with others, as well as their self-management skills for self-development and optimal job performance. Soft skills are generally acquired through one's living environment, daily interactions, habits, and traits, in addition to technical skills [5].

In the field of education, strengthening soft skills is crucial, especially for teachers, as they play a pivotal role in shaping the character of their students. Teachers serve as role models for their students and are expected to continuously develop their personal qualities and social skills, including interpersonal skills such as smiling, mediating, communication, humor, empathy, and a lack of complacency [6].

2 Method

This research aims to understand how students comprehend the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program and to determine the program's relevance in enhancing the soft skills of students aspiring to become professional teachers. To achieve these objectives, this research employs a qualitative approach through a case study method. A case study involves utilizing various sources of information to collect detailed and in-depth insights into the responses to a specific event. In this context, the event in question refers to students who have participated in the MBKM program and whether it contributes to the strengthening of soft skills as future professional teachers [7].

This research is conducted at Universitas Negeri Medan (Unimed), which is an educational institution offering the MBKM program. The research subjects include students who have engaged in various MBKM program components, such as (1) student exchange; (2) internships/work placements; (3) teaching assistance in educational institutions; (4) research; (5) entrepreneurial activities; (6) independent studies/projects; and (7) community development/thematic real-work lectures. In addition to students, the research also involves faculty members and stakeholders participating in the MBKM program at Universitas Negeri Medan.

Data collection techniques are tailored to the specific needs of each research phase. However, in general, the data collection techniques used include (1) interviews, (2) questionnaires, and (3) observations. The data analysis employed in this research is qualitative in nature. Qualitative data analysis is a systematic process of tracking and organizing field notes obtained from interviews, observations, and other materials to report research findings. Data analysis involves activities such as data reduction, data presentation, pattern recognition, and drawing conclusions/verification. This analysis is an ongoing, iterative process, and in this research context, it encompasses three main phases: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions/verification [8].

3 Result and Discussion

To gather information regarding Unimed students' understanding of the Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka program, the researcher conducted interviews with students participating in the MBKM program. The results are outlined in the table below:

Table 1. Unimed Students Comprehension Of The MBKM

Question	Answer
Are you familiar with MBKM (Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka)	Respondents' answers indicate that the majority of students are knowledgeable about the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka program. They are aware of the program's structure, objectives, and the benefits students gain after participating in MBKM.
Where do you usually obtain information about the MBKM program	In this section, all students stated that they typically acquire information about MBKM from various websites that provide information, Instagram, and through campus announcements and promotions.
Have you ever participated in any of the MBKM programs	Almost the majority of students have confirmed their participation in MBKM programs.
In your opinion, what is the purpose of the MBKM program	Students understand that the MBKM program aims to enhance graduates' competencies, both in terms of soft skills and hard skills, to make them better prepared and relevant to the demands of the times. It also aims to prepare graduates as future national leaders who are competent and have strong character.

What are the benefits for students	According to students who have participated in this program, MBKM fosters collaboration among students and provides a wealth of experiences outside the campus that strengthen their competencies.
What are the types or forms of activities within the MBKM program	Several types of MBKM program activities include Certified Internships, Independent Studies, Campus Teaching, Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA), Merdeka Student Exchange, Community Development (Thematic Community Service), Humanitarian Projects, and Research.

From the results shown in the table above, it is evident that nearly the majority of respondent answers indicate an understanding of the MBKM program. As understood, the Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) Program is an effort to address the challenges faced by Higher Education Institutions in producing graduates who are in line with the advancements of the era, technological progress, the demands of the business world and industry, as well as societal dynamics [9]. These demands must be met through various programs that support more optimal learning outcomes, where students are given the "right to study for three semesters outside their study program" in order to enhance graduate competencies, both in terms of soft skills and hard skills, to be better prepared and relevant to the needs of the times.

To maximize this learning right, there are several programs or activities that students can engage in, such as:

- (1) magang/praktik kerja di Industri atau tempat kerja lainnya,
- (2) melaksanakan proyek pengabdian kepada masyarakat di desa,
- (3) mengajar di satuan pendidikan,
- (4) mengikuti pertukaran mahasiswa,
- (5) melakukan penelitian,
- (6) melakukan kegiatan kewirausahaan,
- (7) membuat studi/proyek independen, dan
- (8) mengikuti program kemanusiaan.

According to Suryaman (2020), these various activities aim to enhance the link and match between academia and the business and industrial sectors, as well as to prepare students for the workforce from the early stages of their education. Students are introduced to various off-campus activities that support the strengthening of their academic fields [10]. This aligns with what Field, Duffy, & Huggins (2015) have proposed, that learning practices outside the campus environment teach students engagement, collaboration, active learning, transitions, and assessment, resulting in more meaningful learning experiences. Students acquire various new experiences by studying outside their program of study or university.

Furthermore, it is essential to understand the relevance between the Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka (MBKM) program and the strengthening of soft skills for future professional teachers. The results of the responses are presented in the table below:

Table 2. Relevance of the (MBKM) Program to the Strengthening of Soft Skills.

Question	Answer
Understanding the concept of soft skills	Students comprehend soft skills as characteristics or behaviors possessed by them, which significantly influence their lives.
Soft skills required for a teacher	The majority of students express that teachers should possess specific soft skills. A teacher's soft skills involve their ability to self-manage and interact with others, particularly students, to ensure effective learning processes. These essential soft skills include collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, networking building, and more.
The relationship between the MBKM program and the strengthening of soft skills	Nearly the majority of respondents acknowledge that MBKM activities are highly relevant to enhancing students' soft skills. Programs such as Campus Teaching, Internships, and Community Development teach skills such as collaboration, communication, cooperation, and more.
Types of Soft Skills that can be developed through the MBKM program	The soft skills that can be fostered through the MBKM program include collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, networking building, and more.

To cultivate the professionalism of teachers, the strengthening of soft skills is essential. Teacher's soft skills are the abilities or skills that teachers possess to manage themselves and interact with others, especially students, to facilitate effective learning processes [11]. Unlike hard skills, soft skills are more about an individual's ability to build relationships with others and self-management. Therefore, according to Kaswan (2019), soft skills are generally acquired by individuals through their living environment, daily interactions, habits, and characteristics, aside from their technical abilities [5]. It is not uncommon for soft skills to have a greater impact on an individual's success than hard skills, with a percentage split of 80% - 20% [12].

Law Number 14 of 2005 concerning Teachers and Lecturers, in Article 10 paragraph (1), states that "Teacher competencies include pedagogical competence, personality competence, social competence, and professional competence acquired through professional education." Teacher competencies encompass a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that manifest as intelligent and responsible actions in carrying out their role as learning agents.

Among these four professional competencies, soft skills are among the competencies that must be possessed by future professional teachers. Soft skills involve the ability to control one's personality, collaborate, take initiative, make decisions courageously, adapt, problem-solve, and teach in a friendly, warm manner while communicating effectively with students.

4 Conclusion

The research findings indicate that students have a good understanding of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka program. Moreover, the research findings also reveal that students firmly believe in the program's high relevance in strengthening students' soft skills, particularly in aspects such as responsibility, discipline, independence, hard work, confidence, and collaboration. Consequently, it can be understood that the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka program is highly relevant in shaping students as future professional teachers. The essential soft skills include collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, networking building, and more. Several MBKM programs capable of enhancing students' soft skills include (1) internships/work placements in industries or other workplaces, (2) community service projects in villages, (3) teaching in educational institutions, (4) participating in student exchange programs, (5) conducting research, (6) engaging in entrepreneurial activities, (7) undertaking independent studies/projects, and (8) participating in humanitarian programs.

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