

MERDEKA BELAJAR-KAMPUS MERDEKA (MBKM) CURRICULUM IN ENGLISH STUDIES PROGRAM: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

This article was written with the impetus to see the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn), *Kampus Merdeka* (Independent Campus) program launched by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Indonesia), particularly on the policy of students' right to take up to three semesters outside of their program. This policy aims to give students independence in developing their own knowledge and interests so that they will be better prepared upon graduation. In practice, the application of this curriculum innovation is not as smooth as expected because the study program faces various challenges, both technical and administrative, when facilitating students in pursuing their studies. To date, many researchers have reviewed *Merdeka Belajar*, *Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) policies in Higher Education, but there has been yet article specifically discussing the implementation of students' rights from English Studies program in taking credits outside their study program, so this research attempts to fill this gap. In this qualitative descriptive study, the method used was observation and documentation. Data were collected from learning activities at the English Studies Program, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, in the 2020/2021 Academic Year. The results of the study show that the main challenge in implementing MBKM curriculum and its policy is administrative issues such as building partnership between study programs and external parties. However, one of the positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic is that the online learning turns out to be very supportive for the implementation of this program. It is more likely that the program stays open for opportunities and there is room for improvement by offering more elective courses in the curriculum to give students more freedom.

Keywords: *Challenges and opportunities; English studies; Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka*

INTRODUCTION

The amount of unemployment from bachelor graduates has recently become a primary concern in Indonesia. According to Central Bureau of Statistics, educated unemployment in Indonesia in August 2020 was recorded at 6.27 million people or 64.24 percent of the total unemployed in Indonesia (Fizriyani, 2020). This figure has surged to 34.16 percent compared to that of August 2019, and the increase in educated unemployment was inseparable from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. What makes it worse is that in 2021 there will be additional

unemployment around 2.6 million people in the new workforce who cannot be absorbed in the industry as well as a result of the global pandemic (Karunia, 2021).

To tackle the unemployment issue in the country, graduates have to improve their competence including both soft and hard skills so that they will be better prepared (Sudaryanto, Widayati, & Amalia, 2020). At the same time, the government needs to tidy up the overlapping bureaucratic system, thus designing an innovative program of *Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka* (hereafter, MBKM). This "Freedom to

Learn-Independent Campus” program is aimed to grant campus autonomy through several liberating policies for higher education. One of the key regulations is to provide right for students to take courses outside of their study program. Even though the mandate is not mandatory, it has been the most highlighted due to its direct impact on undergraduates.

Students who are interested can take credits for one semester within other programs at the same university and can spend two semesters in studying outside campus through an internship, research activity, student exchange program, or community service. The policy, however, has yet to explain the details of the application or implementation for each related activity. Therefore, to implement the MBKM policy that prioritizes active learning by developing creativity, innovation, and critical thinking in the learning process, curriculum change is inevitably necessary for a study program.

In order to adopt the policy, a study program must compile or adapt the curriculum to the implementation model of Independent Campus policy. Furthermore, the study program has to facilitate students who want take courses within other programs at the same institution and offer courses, along with the requirements, that can be taken by students from other study program or other campus. It is also worth noting that the program needs to conduct course equivalence between its own curriculum and learning activities from outside.

On the other hand, students must plan together with academic supervisors to find suitable courses or programs that will be taken outside their home program. Furthermore, students who intent to register for an activity outside their program may be required to complete some requirements for the activities outside the study program, including

participating in the selection (if any). Last but not least, they will later have to attend the chosen program in accordance with the existing academic guidelines.

In today’s curriculum development in Indonesia context, MBKM is one of the most essential curriculum goals at higher education level (Rahmattullah & Syamsu, 2021). For this ground, many scholars have attempted to analyse the implementation and application of the MBKM program in the higher tier of educational environment. For instance, Sudaryanto et al. (2020) probed into the relationship between the concept of the Freedom to Learn-Independent Campus and the knowledge field of Indonesian language and literature education. Similarly, Arifin and Muslim (2020) examined and reviewed the application of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy and the challenges of its implementation at private Islamic universities in Indonesia. In the same vein, Kurniawan, Saputra, Daulay, and Zubaidah (2020) revealed that the paradigm occurring in practice shows that the implementation of MBKM policy has not been fully implemented due to various issues. In this global era, there has been yet a research that examines the implementation of MBKM program in English Studies program, and that is what this article attempts.

METHOD

English Studies program at Universitas Padjadjaran (Unpad) is one among some others in the country that has been implementing MBKM curriculum since the middle of 2020, thus the study program became a suitable site for data collection. Active students between year of 2019 and 2020 registering in the MBKM program (2020/2021 Academic Year) became the participants observed in this research. The researcher then conducted non-participant observation with the students. Students’ anonymity has been

applied in the process of data analysis to guarantee the protection of research subjects' privacy.

This qualitative descriptive study was conducted using observation and documentation method. Learning activities observation and curriculum documents were gathered for data collection. The observation was carried out to investigate the enactment of curriculum, and the documents were analysed to comprehend its surrounding impact. As an academic adviser I myself supervised and observed important events from students who took part in the MBKM program. Additionally, monthly meetings held by the study program were also recorded and observed to provide more experiences and insights about the MBKM implementation and circumstances. Numerous documents applicable to the MBKM curriculum were collected. These documents were made up of Unpad's English Studies official website, formal curriculum papers used by lecturers (books, SOPs, schedules) and notes written by the researcher.

Following Creswell (2014), the data were analysed through procedures carried out as follow: recording the emergence of key events and then interpreting the findings. Emerging events were pinpointed to answer the research topic questions and analysed the curriculum system in order to reinforce the interpretation of data from observation. Interpretation was focused on identifying the challenges and opportunities from the implementation of the MBKM program. Ultimately, document analysis was performed to complement and explain the findings of the analyses from the observation data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study highlighted the urge of curriculum restructuring in order to be able to apply the MBKM program. The primary objective of the innovative

program is to improve undergraduates' competence so that they can equip themselves better with work exposure and experiences prior to graduation. To achieve this goal, a study program has to provide newly relevant courses or learning activities for students to take outside their program.

Unpad's English Studies program has tailored its existing curriculum to accommodate the MBKM program through some ways including but not limited to: changing some compulsory courses to elective courses, application of course waivers for English skills courses, and addition of elective courses. These learning activities have been accommodated and carried out in English Studies program, Universitas Padjadjaran. Some of the newly added elective courses require mutual cooperation or legal framework with other parties to be realised. In achieving the common goal, the study program and students were sometimes faced with new challenges in the implementation of the MBKM program.

Meeting the challenges

First of all, course waivers were introduced for students so that they could be exempted from the obligation of taking certain English proficiency courses with approval from the head of study program. This course waiver program can be requested by students who have attained the competence and met the requirement of certain required course through various English proficiency tests like *TOEFL*, *IELTS*, or other similar tests. One of my supervised students had an English Language Test (ELT)-Unpad certificate, which is equivalent to TOEFL PBT, with a score of 627. Since the score from each section acquired was greater than or equal to 60, she could naturally waive all English proficiency courses including

Grammar, Lab Works (speaking included), and Reading.

Waiving some courses mean students would have empty slots that can be filled on their Course Selection Form (*Kartu Rencana Studi/KRS*). Therefore, when selecting their courses for the upcoming academic year, the students along with their academic advisor should plan and select their courses carefully. Since it will take more effort to change a course once a selection is made, it is imperative that students adhere to the guidelines before starting to make course selections. The academic advisor thus should review the students' transcripts and plan or revise, not one-semester nor one-year, but the four-year educational plans. Students must complete all graduation and enrolment requirements, and additionally, they should select courses that support their passion, plans for college and other training. In English Studies program students eventually have to choose specialization whether they want to take linguistics or literature, and waiving courses means they should think forward and it will enable them to take specialization sooner.

The MBKM program also prompts the curriculum to open more elective courses for students including courses that can be taken in other programs or other universities. However, some courses must meet the equivalent learning outcomes set by the study program. There was a case in which one participant with literature specialization took an online course from *Coursera*. This course, although literally belongs to Arts and Humanities, can nevertheless be similar to any literary courses offered in the existing curriculum. Therefore, should students intend to take certain courses outside of their study program be it compulsory or elective, it is very essential to consult to the academic advisor or study program head in order to ensure its compliance with the MBKM

curriculum. It also worth-noting that students should earn a certificate, which is usually NOT free, upon completion of an online course so that it can be eligibly converted to credits in the transcript.

Another elective course is Internship, which is designed for students so that they will be empowered in order to be prepared for the job market as well as proactive for job hunting. Clearly Internship will play a pivotal role in growing career adaptability (Ocampo et al., 2020), but it also presents some MBKM implementation challenges to tackle. First of all, the Ministry of Education and Culture has not provided the details and mechanism and how the internship is carried out, so the study program must produce guidelines and procedures for the students. And second, one of the emerging issues is the conversion and its grading system. When a student takes an internship course, he/she must complete a minimum of certain hours (100 for instance) per semester. Students are also responsible for arranging or adjusting their schedule so that the internship program will not collide with other lectures, so it turns out that having online learning would be reasonably beneficial to avoid the potential problem.

Sometimes, when cooperation between apprenticeship place and study program has not been established, students must secure their own internship in order to participate in the course meaning they need to ensure (with academic counsellor/study program head) that the internship program can be transferred to credits. The Internship outcome credits might also vary like between two and three, since the time (hours) spent by students during their internship program will be different from one another. If the apprenticeship or the employer does not provide individual internship certificate for students upon their completion, then it is necessary for the study program to assign

an internship supervisor or lecturer for the grading.

Other learning activity that can be taken by students to achieve the learning outcomes in the MBKM program is Student Exchange. The primary objective of student exchange is to help students in studying across study programs in other universities and developing their insight regarding *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (“Unity in Diversity”) as well as multiculturalism (Baharuddin, 2021). However, to enrich undergraduates’ learning outcomes through Student Exchange program is not an easy matter since cooperation with other universities needs to be established. Well-established universities like Legal Entity State University (Indonesian abbreviation: *PTN-BH*) will more likely prefer cooperation with other universities with the same status or even higher. Universities with good accreditation scores, by all means, will prefer to accept students from universities with equal status, though this is not always the case. This is certainly not beneficial for students who come from universities whose accreditation status is lower, and many private universities in the region will be affected from this matter. In a recent survey, Unpad’s English Studies program was offered to collaborate with a private university in the region, but students from the class of 2020 were mostly reluctant to take part in the student exchange program due to various reasons.

Last but not least, the implementation of the MBKM curriculum in English Studies program will require synergy from many parties involved, especially education staffs and lecturers. When a student from English Studies intended to take a course from other faculty, it was essential to ensure that the academic and administration system used be able to support the program application. Taking courses in favourite study programs results on accumulation of

students in the class, not to mention these courses are often open for public. Therefore, both teaching and academic staffs were required to be informed and trained in order to serve the participants well.

Interestingly, all the previously mentioned challenges have something in common: an established system in order to implement the program. Universities using a centralized online academic system for grades, study result sheets, and transcripts will be less likely to have a problem, but the program will be challenging for universities that have not used an integrated academic application. Thus, this program can only be somewhat implemented at established universities that have complete facilities.

Opportunities for future curriculum development

The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly affected the MBKM program learning activities such as in-class activities and field lectures. For this very reason, the curriculum is required to be designed for online and hybrid learning. Thus, students still acquire learning achievements even though they do not meet their lecturers in person. The MBKM curriculum compiled must be in line with the needs of the society, the government, and industry even amidst today’s pandemic with its large-scale social restrictions and public activity restriction enforcement policies.

Despite the program’s challenges, the MBKM curriculum can provide benefit not only for students, but also for study programs and universities. Course waivers will be able to earn their degree less than four-year time. Should they exclude elective course of Internship from the final transcript, then they can get one or alternately improve their soft skills to be more prepared before entering the world of work.

While Internship is often discussed in both higher education and the MBKM contexts, research assistantship course is possibly considered new by students from English Studies. It is an academic activity where a student assists with a lecturer (assistant professor ranking or above) in the same university or other university in exchange for credits. Students who take research assistantship will be assigned to help the faculty member conduct research in the faculty or study program. The supervisor may be the student's counsellor or others, and their duties spread from data collection and analysis to reviewing the literature, basically all tasks required to complete a research in English linguistics or literature area. Even though some students may consider these activities menial, taking research assistant course will boost them with valuable experience on how to conduct research. Their experiences as a research assistant are definitely good preparation before writing their undergraduate thesis later.

In the future, this study program will accept published journal article as a substitute for undergraduate thesis. Publishing an article in either nationally accredited or international journals are less common for undergraduates than for graduates, but it is certainly possible since many undergrads have been successful in getting their articles published. However, their options for getting an article published in an accredited academic journal appears to be more challenging compared to thesis' defence. Even though journal article has less writing than a bachelor's thesis, getting it published may take longer than one term (semester) because students have no control and really depend on other people (journal's editors and reviewers), let alone manuscript rejection. Thus, they need to be guided in choosing where to submit their work best.

Extraordinary students might be encouraged to consider this option, but common students can always write their undergraduate thesis since it is more definite. Students may choose this path to enhance their portfolio and is suitable for master's degree. When a student is successful in getting their final work published, the campus will also get the benefit from the author's affiliation to climb the university ranking. This mutual benefit is particularly favourable because many higher educations around the world are targeting to internationalise (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019), and this includes Universitas Padjadjaran which aims to enter the top 500 World University Rankings.

Since graduates from English Studies program (or other language program) become a writer from time to time. It is also worth-considering to give them option to submit a creative work instead of undergraduate thesis or published journal article as their final project. The first- and second-year students gain a solid grounding about fiction, drama, poetry, and English (American) literature, and further they can choose a variety of subjects such as Women's Writing or screenwriting. Creative writing helps students follow their passion, consider their career options, and shape their future. Their final creative project can be in the form of creative writing (poetry, plays, short stories, novel chapters), performance (drama or music), and media (short film or even computer game). This possibility can surely become a distinguished or signature program for English Studies.

There are also other potential activities from the MBKM program to be implemented in the study program such as entrepreneurial project and humanitarian project for students. Clearly, millennials in Indonesia are interested in entrepreneurship, but the entrepreneurial

potential has not been managed properly by all parties so far. The MBKM policy encourages the development of student entrepreneurial interests with appropriate learning activity programs. Entrepreneurial project in the curriculum is an effort to improve the quality of graduates to be ready in competing and opening up business opportunities in today's digital era.

Universities are undoubtedly at the forefront of solving social problems, in which students equipped with scientific competencies and interests can become "workers" that can channel their spirit through courses like humanitarian project or social service activities. In practice, students can take part in either structured humanitarian project (such as disaster management narcotics eradication, state defence, and anti-corruption education) or incidental project (for instance, peace-building of social conflict in an area or language teaching in rural areas).

This community involvement aims to prepare students to excel and uphold human values in carrying out tasks based on faith, morality, and ethics. Students will experience real events and be trained to have social sensitivity to explore and identify social problems and later contribute to providing solutions. On the other hand, problem-solving programs in the society and local government will be supported and strengthened since students will be proactively educate and help the public in solving their social problems.

CONCLUSION

The *Merdeka Belajar, Kampus Merdeka* (Freedom to Learn, Independent Campus) or MBKM program is an effort from the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, which aims to encourage students to master various competencies. The implementation of the MBKM curriculum can be carried out within the study program and outside the study

program through Student Exchange program, Internships, Research Assistantship, Humanitarian project or Social Service, and other programs.

Since its first launch in 2020, the curriculum has been implemented with some challenges like four-year educational planning, online courses grade conversion, internship credit conversion, building a partnership, and re-establishing academic and administration system. Almost all the challenges experienced during the application of MBKM program is related to administrative or paper work and few technical issues in the process. However, the impact of COVID-19 has a blessing on disguise on education, the MBKM programs can be carried out using online learning method. The problems occur since the government rules or policies were implemented not as expected or anticipated, and other possible cause was lack of details of the MBKM program.

Every cloud always has a silver lining, and despite its demerits this program provides opportunities for both students and study program to develop more adaptive MBKM curriculum. Further courses of action that can be realized immediately is to offer a wide range of elective courses and project-based activities that is in line with the learning achievement and curriculum of study program. It is immediately evident that developing joint guidelines among English Studies programs in the Freedom to Learn, Independent Campus (MBKM) framework is as important as building cooperation with other institutions and companies. Lastly, socializing the MBKM curriculum to lecturers, students, and academic staffs will definitely strengthen the core system in the implementation of this program.

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