

Are We Independent Yet? An Examination of the Implementation of "Independent Learning Independent Campus" Initiative in Indonesia from 2020 to 2025

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Are We Independent Yet? An Examination of the Implementation of MBKM (Independent Learning Independent Campus) Policy in Indonesia from 2020 to 2025

Abstract

Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM), which translates to Independent Learning Independent Campus, is a national policy enacted to govern higher education institutions (HEIs) in Indonesia. Originally enacted by Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in 2020, the stated purpose of MBKM is to prepare university graduates to face rapid changes in social, cultural, workplace, and technology in the 4th industrial revolution era and sustain the continued growth of the nation. MBKM aims to expand academic freedom for students to pursue academic activities outside their study program and strengthen collaborations between all stakeholders in Indonesian higher education. In this paper, we conducted exploratory textual analysis of MBKM policy's stated main components, stated aims, and relevant stakeholders. Then we conducted text analysis on the implementation of MBKM policy from the year 2020 to 2025, focusing on key metrics such as the national education attainment rate and MBKM participation rate from both students and institutions. We presented the results of our analysis, discussed possible issues in the implementation, and proposed recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the MBKM policy enactment in Indonesia.

Introduction

Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM), which translates to Independent Learning Independent Campus, is a national education policy aimed at expanding academic freedom for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Indonesia. Enacted by Indonesia's former Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in 2020, the stated purpose of MBKM is to prepare university graduates to face rapid changes in social, cultural, workplace, and technology settings to match the demands of the future. HEIs were instructed to develop and implement innovative learning processes to support their students in achieving relevant learning outcomes in attitude, knowledge, and expertise [1], [2]. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the key stakeholders of the MBKM policy include the national governing body, HEIs, the community, and industry.

The MBKM policy was implemented from 2020 to 2025, after which the government introduced a new national policy to serve as its continuation. In this paper, we aim to evaluate the impact of the implementation of the MBKM policy in Indonesia. We conduct textual analysis of official reports and press releases and analyze whether the policy achieved its stated outcome in providing greater academic freedom to HEIs. We provide recommendations and discuss what we can learn from the implementation of the MBKM policy and how to move forward with the new national policy.

Literature Review

Indonesia is experiencing a demographic bonus, defined as an abundance of a working, productive age population, which can potentially lead to significant economic growth. This demographic bonus is expected to last until 2036 [4]. Coinciding with the demographic bonus,

Indonesia enacted the “Golden Indonesia 2045 Vision” to become a sovereign, advanced, fair, and prosperous nation by its centennial in 2045. The four pillars of the Golden Indonesia 2045 vision are: 1) Human Capital Development and Expertise in Science and Technology; 2) Continued Economic Growth; 3) Equitable Growth; 4) National Defense and Governance [3]. The MBKM policy supports this vision by providing multiple opportunities for university students to explore their interests and develop competencies that contribute to one or more of the four pillars of the Golden Indonesia 2045 vision.

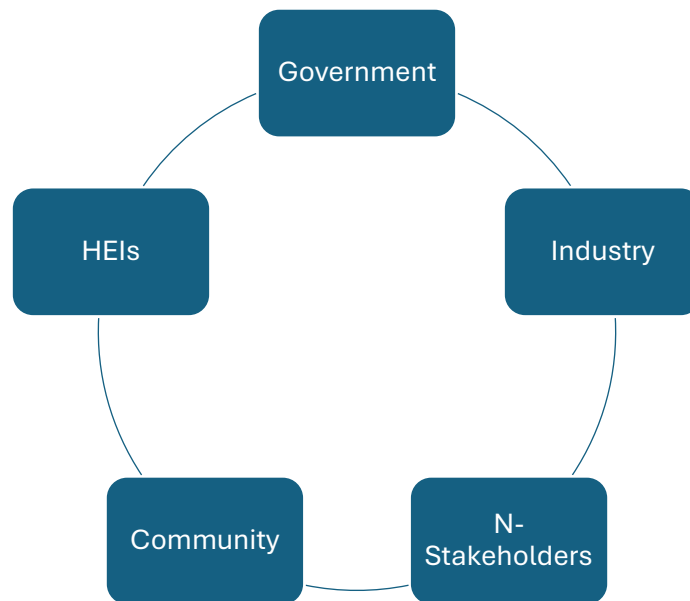


Fig. 1 The N-helix illustration for cooperation between stakeholders in Golden Indonesia 2045 (adapted from [3]).

The infographic in Fig. 2 shows the importance of human capital development in Indonesia. Indonesia is still severely lacking in a highly educated workforce, as only less than 5% (about 14 out of 280 million) of the population has attained a Strata 1 degree (equivalent to a bachelor’s degree) or higher in 2022 [5]. This compares poorly with other nations. For example, the United States reported that 37.7% of its population aged 25 and older had at least a bachelor’s degree in 2022 [6]. The MBKM initiative contributes to the development of human capital and improving expertise in science and technology by enriching students’ learning experience and providing a high-quality STEM workforce equipped with 21st-century skills [7]. The increased availability of a high-quality STEM workforce would help the nation to catch up with developed countries and support the three other pillars of the Golden Indonesia 2045 vision.

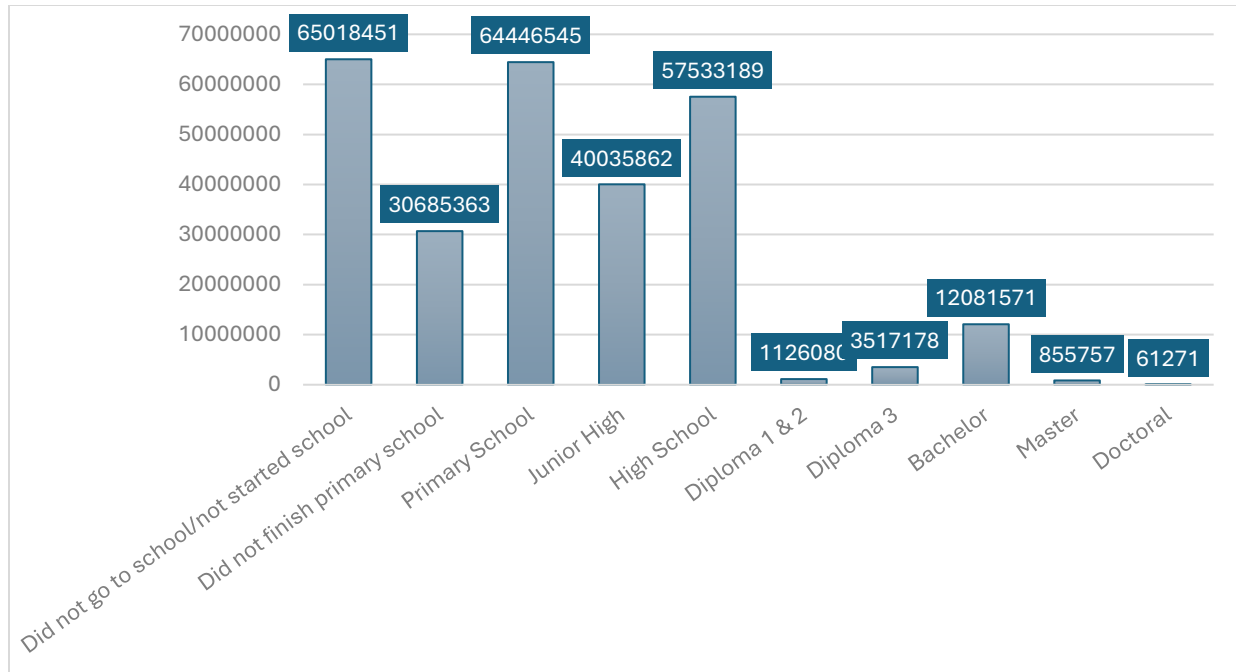


Fig. 2 Education attainment level in Indonesia in 2022 (adapted from [5]).

Theoretical Background

We use Kezar's [8] change framework as a theoretical basis to analyze the enactment of changes in national higher education policy in Indonesia. MBKM policy was implemented mainly through a centralized, top-down approach, as the change was initiated by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, while and other stakeholders in this change were instructed to follow through with little agency [8]. What the governing body attempted to do can be classified as transformational leadership according to Northouse's categorization of leadership approaches [9]. However, approaching a national-level transformational change using a heavily top-down approach makes it difficult to achieve buy-in from relevant stakeholders because of the lack of establishment of a shared vision [10]. We also identified from Kezar's change framework that the level of change is second-order change, as this new policy challenged stakeholders' understanding and expectations of their roles in how to conduct higher education in Indonesia [8]. Second-order change can take significantly more time and consideration to implement, and when combined with the top-down approach, it makes stakeholders reluctant to adopt the policy changes and establish cooperation and understanding..

Methodology

To examine the effectiveness of MBKM policy implementation in Indonesia, we conducted an exploratory textual analysis of a corpus of official documents outlining the main components of the MBKM policy, stated objectives, and its relevant stakeholders. Then, we conducted another round of textual analysis to collect and analyze documents describing the implementation of the MBKM policy from 2020 to 2025, focusing on relevant metrics such as national education attainment rate and MBKM participation rate from stakeholders. We chose this year range

because MBKM was officially enacted in 2020 and effectively ended in 2025, as the newly elected government enacted a new policy called *Kampus Berdampak* (Impactful Campus). This new policy is designed as a continuation of the MBKM policy and reframed the primary objectives towards enhancing the impact of HEIs on communities, industry, and research [11]. In both rounds of analysis, we collected data from official websites and documents, research publications, and press releases from the year 2019 to 2025, focusing on topics such as MBKM policy development, implementation, and evaluation. We checked for validity and consistency by comparing documents released by different organizations and institutions and found them to be mostly reliable and consistent. We analyzed the data and provided our findings and interpretations using our theoretical framework to evaluate the implementation of the MBKM policy.

MBKM Policy Description

MBKM is one of the components in the overarching *Merdeka Belajar* (Independent Learning) initiative proposed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in 2019, with the stated aim to provide more academic freedom to learners at all academic levels [12], [13]. The Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation Number 3 in the year 2020 defined the main programs of the MBKM initiative, namely facilitating the opening of new study programs, changing the higher education accreditation process, facilitating state universities to become legal entities, and granting university students the right to take three semesters of study outside of their study program. Students can choose to participate in any of the eight activities listed in Fig. 3 for a maximum of three semesters. These activities would greatly benefit students in the STEM field as they can gain valuable workplace experience and skills such as negotiation, teamwork, and time management. Exposing STEM students to different learning and working environments would enrich their learning experience and prepare them to effectively navigate their transition to work experience [14].

MBKM is designed to provide more autonomy to HEIs, reduce bureaucracy for HEIs and faculties, and give freedom for university students to pursue their interests through any of the eight activities described in the policy [1]. The MBKM policy allows conversion of up to 40 credit hours to be counted toward their graduation requirements through the fulfillment of three semesters of the eight activities listed in the MBKM Initiative. Students can start participating in MBKM programs from the second semester onwards. Students who wish to participate must be registered as active students in their respective institution, and they can only enroll in one program per semester [16].

Evaluation of Policy Implementation

According to data retrieved on April 15th, 2025 from official MBKM sources, over 725,000 students have registered accounts on the website. In addition, the official website reported that more than 14,000 schools have received teaching aid from MBKM initiatives, more than 3,000 industries and organizations have registered to partner with MBKM, and more than 1,300 HEIs have participated in various MBKM initiatives [17]. In comparison, data collected on the same date from Data Center for Higher Education in Indonesia showed that a total of 9,992,473 active

students are currently enrolled in 4,393 institutions [18]. Comparing both datasets showed that the MBKM participation rate is about 7.25% of all students and 29.59% of all HEIs in Indonesia. The disparity between students and HEI participation rates may reflect significantly higher level of enthusiasm regarding the policy from HEIs, influenced by institutional leadership mandates or government incentive programs such as *Program Kompetisi Kampus Merdeka* (PKKM) or Independent Campus Competition Program, which provided government funding to HEIs that proposed relevant programs and initiatives designed to support MBKM-related activities [19]. In contrast, students may be less eager to participate due to lack of socialization, awareness, and understanding of MBKM activities. In addition, students may not perceive the policy to be beneficial to them [20]. Referring to Kezar's change framework, this is an example of what could happen in second-order changes that do not have enough buy-in from stakeholders, which resulted in apathy or rejection of the change [8].



Fig. 3 Components of MBKM Policy in Indonesia (adapted from [15]).

Studies also showed that lasting effects of Covid-19 Pandemic were also a contributing factor, as students report significant learning issues which affected their motivation and academic

performance [21], which further reduces their motivation to participate in new, unfamiliar programs. Multiple publications highlighted the challenge in launching the MBKM policy during the height of a global pandemic, which contributed to issues such as unclear and conflicting directives, misaligned policies between stakeholders, difficulty in converting industry activities into institutional credit hours, and stakeholders lacking the infrastructure to manage MBKM-related activities [22], [23].

One unintended consequence of the MBKM policy is that although it was designed to increase academic and overall freedom in learning, it ended up creating additional constraints and burdens for key stakeholders. For example, HEIs need to navigate how to revise their curricula to incorporate credits earned from MBKM activities, which courses can be replaced by MBKM activities, and how to monitor students' performance levels from MBKM activities and convert them into academic grades. Stakeholders from industry reported confusion and frustration in figuring out how to design their internship program to satisfy the requirements of educational governing bodies and HEIs, which may not align with each other [20].

Discussion and Implications

The MBKM policy is designed to expand academic freedom to levels that never existed before in Indonesia and is well aligned to support the overarching initiatives of Independent Learning and the Golden Indonesia 2045 Vision. However, our analysis showed that the implementation of the MBKM policy faced significant issues and challenges. We argue that the independence offered by this policy was only experienced by one stakeholder, namely a select group of students who were able to participate in select MBKM activities. Other stakeholders in the Indonesian higher education landscape experienced reduced independence, as they had to navigate through barriers and obstacles to implement and evaluate MBKM activities, ending up with new processes and policies that added bureaucracies, entanglements, and restrictions on top of existing processes and policies.

One key issue moving forward is in managing policy transition to respond to changes in the Indonesian political landscape. In 2024, the elected president enacted two orders to separate the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology into two ministries that focused on K-12 and higher education, respectively, where supervision of Impactful Campus, as a continuation of the MBKM policy, falls under the latter [24], [25]. We foresee that one possible implication of this policy change is how it can negatively impact the K-12 to higher education pipeline. The overarching Independent Learning initiative attempts to address fragmentation in the Indonesian educational pipeline by establishing a shared vision for education from early childhood to higher education [13], [26]. However, the restructuring of governing bodies may exacerbate the fragments in the Indonesian educational pipeline. Maintaining shared vision and alignment between stakeholders in K-12 and higher education in Indonesia is necessary to ensure that all stakeholders can fully benefit from the Independent Learning policy.

Our recommendation for the implementation of Impactful Campus is to retain the MBKM policy's key activities, as regardless of the difficulties encountered, the adoption rate indicated stakeholder interest in these activities. However, past implementation of these activities must be

thoroughly and rigorously assessed, and future implementations must be regularly monitored across all levels. According to Kezar's change framework, the sensemaking approach can be utilized to develop a shared vision, bringing all stakeholders on board to provide their feedback and clear all misunderstandings on the policy [8], [10]. The new ministry must bring the higher education stakeholders in Indonesia to have a discussion on whether the MBKM policy is effective in affecting key metrics related to human capital development and expertise in science and technology, such as perception toward effectiveness and quality of the key activities, graduation rate, employment rate, and employer satisfaction. Incentive programs such as PKKM, while effective in getting HEIs to participate, must be assessed and extended to clarify how other key stakeholders, such as students, industry, and community, can benefit from their participation.

If the new ministry decides that a change in approach is necessary in implementing Impactful Campus, we recommend conducting comparative studies of how other countries enact national-level changes in their higher education policy. For example, another Southeast Asian nation, namely the Philippines, enacted policy change where select HEIs were granted special status as Autonomous or Deregulated HEIs. These HEIs enjoy special privileges, such as being able to launch new courses or programs without securing a permit from the Commission of Higher Education, although they still have to comply with the governing body's policies, standards, and guidelines [27]. We argue that this approach of implementing national-level policy by starting with a select group of HEIs would be easier to manage and monitor for all stakeholders involved. The cascaded implementation of Impactful Campus can begin with a select group of public and private HEIs serving as model institutions, which can be evaluated for their impact and then expanded nationwide to all HEIs.

Whichever course of action the governing body decides to pursue, we recommend increasing socialization of policy changes and two-way communication among all relevant stakeholders. A decentralized approach for policy governance [13] can be adopted to share the workload and responsibility across higher education stakeholders in Indonesia. This approach can foster a shared vision and a sense of ownership of the policy, while reducing reluctance to adopt policy changes that typically occur in second-order changes [8].

Conclusion

We examined the MBKM policy by synthesizing its goals and the realities of its implementation during its enactment from 2020 to 2025. The MBKM policy was designed to expand academic freedom and support the Golden Indonesia 2045 Vision. While the policy introduced innovative programs to prepare students for the challenges of the 4th industrial revolution, its implementation faced significant challenges. Our analysis of official reports revealed that, although the policy had substantial participation from students, higher education institutions (HEIs), and external partners, overall participation rates remained limited. With only 7.25% of students and 29.59% of HEIs participating in the eight MBKM activities, uptake was limited relative to the total student population and the total number of institutions in Indonesia. Additionally, implementation has been constrained by governance and coordination challenges, including uneven stakeholder engagement, limited two-way communication, and the additional time and negotiation required for second-order policy change. These limitations hinder the

independence that the MBKM policy sought to promote. These gaps suggest that the policy's outcomes may vary depending on the level of engagement across different institutions and regions. Consequently, participation metrics alone may inadequately reflect policy success without robust evidence of learning quality, equity, and sustained outcomes.

Although the MBKM policy was superseded by the Impactful Campus policy in 2025 following the election of the new government, the latter should be regarded as the successor to the former. The Impactful Campus policy should refine and extend MBKM's objectives by focusing more on societal, industrial, and research impacts of HEIs. We recommend that the new ministry overseeing Impactful Campus engage stakeholders in discussions about the effectiveness of MBKM and its impact on key metrics, including graduation rates, employment rates, and employer satisfaction. We also suggest adopting a more decentralized approach to policy governance and conducting comparative studies with other countries to improve implementation.

As Indonesia progresses towards the implementation of the Impactful Campus policy under a restructured governing body, it is essential to sustain alignment among K-12 and higher education stakeholders to avert fragmentation within the educational pathway. By promoting collaboration, enhancing socialization, and securing a shared vision, the new policy can strengthen the foundation established by MBKM and contribute to the realization of the Golden Indonesia 2045 Vision.

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