









ORIGINAL

Redefining Vocational Learning in the Era of Educational Autonomy: Assessing the MBKM Policy's Effect on Practice-Based Education

Redefiniendo la formación profesional en la era de la autonomía educativa: Evaluación del impacto de la política MBKM en la educación práctica

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Cite as: Fajri Putri M, Muttaqin M, Haque A, Sumbodo W, Plangsom B, Kuswardinah A, et al. Redefining Vocational Learning in the Era of Educational Autonomy: Assessing the MBKM Policy's Effect on Practice-Based Education. Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología. 2025; 5:2649. <https://doi.org/10.56294/saludcyt20252649>

Submitted: 24-08-2025

Revised: 05-10-2025

Accepted: 14-12-2025

Published: 15-12-2025

Editor: Prof. Dr. William Castillo-González 

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy constitutes a major reform in Indonesian higher education, intended to enhance institutional autonomy and strengthen experiential learning through off-campus activities.

Objective: this study examines the influence of MBKM implementation on practice-based learning and vocational skill development among students in the Department of Education and Family Welfare at Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES).

Method: mixed-methods approach was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 175 active students using structured questionnaires, while qualitative insights were derived from interviews and observations. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics, complemented by thematic analysis to capture experiential patterns.

Results: MBKM participation significantly improved students' practical learning outcomes, motivation, and employability skills. Respondents reported marked progress in technical competencies and key soft skills, including communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. Nonetheless, several implementation challenges emerged, particularly in administrative coordination, credit recognition, and supervision consistency across programs.

Conclusions: MBKM effectively strengthens the integration between academic learning and real-world practice, contributing to a more responsive model of vocational higher education. Continued policy refinement and institutional alignment are needed to ensure broader accessibility and consistent program quality.

Keywords: Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM); Vocational Education; Practice-Based Learning; Experiential Learning; Higher Education Reform; Educational Autonomy.

RESUMEN

Introducción: la política Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) constituye una reforma importante en la educación superior indonesia, cuyo objetivo es mejorar la autonomía institucional y fortalecer el aprendizaje experiencial mediante actividades fuera del campus.

Objetivo: este estudio examina la influencia de la implementación de MBKM en el aprendizaje práctico y el desarrollo de habilidades vocacionales entre los estudiantes del Departamento de Educación y Bienestar Familiar de la Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES).

Método: se empleó un enfoque de métodos mixtos. Se recopilaban datos cuantitativos de 175 estudiantes activos mediante cuestionarios estructurados, mientras que la información cualitativa se obtuvo de entrevistas y observaciones. Los datos cuantitativos se analizaron mediante estadística descriptiva e inferencial, complementada con análisis temático para capturar patrones experienciales.

Resultados: la participación en MBKM mejoró significativamente los resultados del aprendizaje práctico, la motivación y las habilidades de empleabilidad de los estudiantes. Los encuestados informaron de un progreso notable en competencias técnicas y habilidades interpersonales clave, como la comunicación, la colaboración y la resolución de problemas. No obstante, surgieron varios desafíos en la implementación, en particular en la coordinación administrativa, el reconocimiento de créditos y la coherencia de la supervisión entre los programas.

Conclusiones: MBKM fortalece eficazmente la integración entre el aprendizaje académico y la práctica real, contribuyendo a un modelo más receptivo de educación superior vocacional. Se requiere un continuo perfeccionamiento de las políticas y la armonización institucional para garantizar una mayor accesibilidad y una calidad consistente del programa.

Palabras clave: Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM); Educación Vocacional; Aprendizaje Basado en la Práctica; Aprendizaje Experiencial; Reforma de la Educación Superior; Autonomía Educativa.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in Indonesia is currently undergoing a major paradigm shift toward educational autonomy through the *Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) policy launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. The MBKM framework aims to provide flexibility and independence for universities in curriculum design and academic management, while allowing students to gain real-world learning experiences beyond the classroom.^(1,2) This policy seeks to bridge the gap between academic learning and the demands of the workforce, emphasizing competence, creativity, adaptability, and lifelong learning.⁽³⁾ The transformation challenges universities to integrate experiential and practice-based learning models that promote both hard and soft skills development.⁽⁴⁾

In the broader context of higher education, students are increasingly required to develop not only academic knowledge but also employability attributes that align with 21st-century skill demands critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity.^(5,6) However, many university programs still focus on theoretical instruction with limited exposure to authentic, workplace-based learning.⁽⁷⁾ Consequently, graduates often face difficulties in applying their knowledge to practical contexts, leading to a mismatch between university outcomes and labor market expectations.⁽⁸⁾ The MBKM initiative was designed to address this imbalance by promoting off-campus learning opportunities, including internships, community projects, student exchanges, entrepreneurship, and independent studies.⁽⁹⁾

As one of Indonesia's leading institutions for teacher and vocational education, Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES) has implemented the MBKM program across its faculties, including the Faculty of Engineering's of Education and Family Welfare department. The Education and Family Welfare department emphasizes practical learning in areas such as household technology, culinary arts, fashion, and entrepreneurship education.⁽¹⁰⁾ However, the integration of MBKM activities, such as certified internships, *Kampus Mengajar*, and industry collaboration has created new challenges in balancing academic coursework with field experiences.⁽¹¹⁾ Although credit recognition mechanisms exist, not all practical competencies can be fully substituted by MBKM activities.⁽¹²⁾ This phenomenon highlights the need for an in-depth assessment of how MBKM participation affects students' practical learning and vocational skill mastery at UNNES.⁽¹³⁾

Previous studies have explored the MBKM program from various perspectives—its influence on soft-skill development,⁽¹⁴⁾ adaptability and career readiness,⁽¹⁵⁾ and life-skill enhancement.⁽¹⁶⁾ Other works have examined MBKM as a bridge between higher education and the world of work through link-and-match strategies.^(17,18) While these studies affirm MBKM's positive impact on students' employability and experiential learning, limited research focuses on its effect within *vocational education programs* particularly regarding how MBKM participation influences practice-based learning outcomes and vocational competence.⁽¹⁹⁾ This study addresses that gap by combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both measurable outcomes and lived experiences.

Although previous studies have explored MBKM's role in developing soft skills, career readiness, and link-and-match mechanisms, limited research has specifically examined its impact on practice-based learning and

vocational competence within vocational higher education programs. Therefore, the objective of this study is to evaluate how MBKM implementation influences practical learning processes and vocational skill development among students in the PKK program at UNNES, integrating both quantitative measurement and qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of MBKM's contribution to vocational education.

The novelty of this study lies in its *mixed-methods evaluation* of MBKM's impact on practice-based learning and vocational skill development, a domain that remains underexplored in Indonesian higher education research. Unlike previous studies that primarily measured soft skills or general learning outcomes, this research specifically investigates the intersection between MBKM participation and vocational pedagogy. The study also provides an institutional case analysis within UNNES, offering empirical insights into how MBKM aligns with the pedagogical framework of vocational higher education.

This research is essential for several reasons. First, it provides empirical evidence to inform universities and policymakers about the real effects of MBKM on vocational students' learning outcomes. Second, it contributes to the ongoing discourse on educational reform in Indonesia by evaluating whether autonomy-based policies truly enhance practice-oriented education. Third, by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of MBKM implementation in vocational programs, the study supports the development of more effective curriculum designs and industry partnerships.

METHOD

Research Approach and Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms to provide a comprehensive understanding of the MBKM program's impact on students' practical learning and vocational skill development.⁽²⁰⁾ The quantitative component was used to measure the perceived effectiveness of MBKM implementation through structured survey instruments, while the qualitative component was designed to capture participants' in-depth experiences, reflections, and contextual insights through interviews and observations.

The research design followed an explanatory sequential model, where quantitative data were first collected and analyzed to identify general patterns, followed by qualitative inquiry to explain and elaborate on the quantitative findings.⁽²¹⁾ This integrative design allowed for a holistic interpretation of both numerical trends and human perspectives, strengthening the validity of the conclusions.^(22,23)

Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of all active students enrolled in the Education and Family Welfare department within the Faculty of Engineering, Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES). The total population included 175 students from four academic cohorts (2021-2024). A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who had participated in one or more MBKM activities such as *Kampus Mengajar*, certified internships, student exchanges, or independent study programs. The final sample represented students with direct exposure to MBKM, ensuring data relevance and contextual accuracy.

The distribution of respondents in this study is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Research respondents	
Academic Year	Number of Active Students
2021	44
2022	43
2023	41
2024	47
Total	175

Instrument Validity and Reliability

The quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on theoretical constructs of program management (George R. Terry's management theory) and effective learning indicators.⁽²⁴⁾ The instrument measured three main variables: (1) Implementation of the MBKM program (planning, organizing, executing, and controlling); (2) Practical learning performance (teaching management, communication, learner response, learning activities, and outcomes); (3) Vocational skill competence (technical and non-technical skills). Each item was rated using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Not Suitable*) to 4 (*Highly Suitable*). Prior to distribution, the instrument underwent content validity testing through expert review by three vocational education specialists to ensure construct clarity and relevance.

The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha via the SPSS statistical software. The

coefficient value exceeded the minimum threshold of 0,70, indicating high internal consistency and acceptable reliability for further analysis.⁽²⁵⁾

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through four complementary methods to ensure data triangulation: (1) Literature Review to establish theoretical grounding and identify research gaps regarding MBKM implementation and vocational learning. (2) Survey (Questionnaire) to obtain quantitative data on students' perceptions of MBKM's impact on practical learning and vocational competence. (3) Observation to examine students' learning behaviors and engagement during practical sessions and MBKM activities. (4) Interviews to explore in-depth student reflections, challenges, and perceived benefits of participating in MBKM programs.

All participants were informed about the research objectives and provided consent prior to participation. Ethical considerations regarding data confidentiality and anonymity were fully observed.⁽²⁶⁾

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using descriptive and inferential statistics with the aid of SPSS software. Descriptive analysis provided frequency distributions and percentage scores to identify dominant response patterns.⁽²⁷⁾ Inferential analysis was applied to assess correlations between MBKM participation and indicators of practical learning and vocational competence.⁽²⁸⁾

The qualitative data derived from interviews and observations—were analyzed using a thematic analysis technique. This involved three iterative stages: (1) data reduction through coding and categorization, (2) data display through thematic matrices, and (3) conclusion drawing and verification.⁽²⁹⁾ Finally, results from both datasets were integrated during the interpretation stage to cross-validate findings. This integration allowed for an enriched understanding of how MBKM influences vocational learning in both measurable outcomes and experiential dimensions.⁽³⁰⁾

RESULTS

The implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) program within the *Pendidikan Kesejahteraan Keluarga* (PKK) Department of Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES) demonstrated a generally positive response from students. Quantitative analysis of the survey results revealed that most respondents perceived the planning, execution, and monitoring processes of the MBKM program as effective and well-structured.

In terms of program planning, 121 out of 175 students (69 %) indicated that the registration process was easy and transparent, while 105 respondents (60 %) agreed that the dissemination of information was clear and well-communicated. Additionally, 97 respondents (55 %) felt that program socialization efforts were adequate, and 101 respondents (58 %) confirmed that the media channels used for MBKM promotion were effective.

These findings suggest that the MBKM program has achieved procedural clarity in implementation, although several students noted the need for more detailed technical guidance and consistent communication between program coordinators and students.

Execution of the MBKM Program

Regarding program execution, the majority of students rated their MBKM experiences as relevant and aligned with their competencies and interests. More than 60 % of respondents rated the job descriptions assigned during MBKM as “appropriate” or “highly appropriate,” indicating that the activities were generally consistent with academic objectives.

Students reported that MBKM projects such as *Kampus Mengajar* and certified internships—allowed them to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts. Moreover, two-thirds (66 %) of respondents agreed that MBKM activities enhanced their ability to develop professional competencies and teamwork, while 59 % felt the program helped them clarify their career aspirations.

The data highlight MBKM's function as a bridge between academic learning and workplace experience, fostering both technical and interpersonal skill growth.

Monitoring, Supervision, and Reporting

Supervisory support from academic mentors was also positively evaluated. Approximately 65 % of students agreed that their DPL provided adequate monitoring, guidance, and constructive feedback during the program. The results show that 120 respondents (69 %) found the reporting system clear and easy to follow, while 106 respondents (61 %) considered the report format suitable for evaluating MBKM outcomes.

However, several qualitative interview responses revealed that some inconsistencies remained in feedback frequency and clarity, depending on each supervisor's engagement level. This finding suggests that while the monitoring mechanism is generally effective, more standardized mentoring practices could further enhance

program consistency.

Effect on Practical Learning

The analysis of variables related to practice-based learning demonstrated significant improvement across all indicators—management of learning, communication processes, learner responses, learning activities, and learning outcomes.

Learning Management: 82 % of respondents agreed that the structure and implementation of practical learning during MBKM were systematic and met their learning needs. **Communication Processes:** 77 % acknowledged that MBKM facilitated interactive and communicative learning environments, increasing their participation and collaboration. **Student Engagement:** 85 % of students reported higher motivation and engagement levels when learning was linked to real-world experiences. **Learning Activities:** More than 80 % agreed that MBKM fostered analytical thinking, problem-solving, and creative task execution. **Learning Outcomes:** 92 % of students indicated that MBKM participation led to measurable improvements in their practical performance and ability to apply skills in professional settings. These results confirm that the MBKM program has contributed significantly to enhancing experiential and applied learning outcomes in vocational contexts.

Impact on Vocational Skill Development

The study revealed that MBKM participation had a substantial positive effect on students' vocational skills, both technical and non-technical. From the quantitative findings:

- Technical skills (application of knowledge, work procedures, use of industry tools) showed marked improvement, with over 80 % of respondents indicating better mastery after participating in MBKM activities.
- Soft skills, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability, were also enhanced—88 % of respondents reported improved interpersonal competence.
- Qualitative interviews supported these findings. Students described MBKM as a “transformative experience” that enabled them to translate theory into real-world practice. Commonly cited improvements included stronger confidence, work discipline, collaboration skills, and creativity.
- A representative student statement noted: “Through MBKM, I learned to handle real tasks in the field and adapt to different work environments. I became more confident and aware of my professional abilities.”

These qualitative insights reinforce the quantitative evidence that MBKM effectively develops holistic vocational competence aligned with *Industry 4.0* demands.

Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Despite its overall success, several challenges emerged. Students reported unequal access to program placements, administrative complexities in credit conversion, and limited facilities or logistical support in some partner institutions.

In addition, some participants experienced difficulty managing time between academic coursework and MBKM activities, leading to workload imbalance. Faculty supervisors also noted that coordination between the university and external partners needed greater synchronization to ensure consistent learning outcomes across different MBKM schemes. These findings highlight the importance of establishing structured mentorship systems, improved inter-institutional coordination, and clearer policy guidelines to optimize MBKM's impact on vocational learning.

Table 2. Summary of Key Findings	
Focus Area	Key Findings
MBKM Implementation	Well-organized planning and communication, though technical coordination needs refinement.
Program Execution	Activities aligned with students' competencies; enhanced engagement and relevance.
Supervision	Strong mentoring support, but variation in DPL feedback practices.
Practical Learning	Significant improvement in activity quality, motivation, and learning outcomes.
Vocational Skills	Marked development in both hard and soft skills; improved workplace readiness.
Challenges	Administrative complexity, uneven support systems, and limited standardization in credit recognition.

In summary, the results indicate that the MBKM program has a positive and statistically significant influence on vocational students' practical learning experiences and skills development. The integration of academic theory with real-world application has strengthened students' readiness for professional practice—demonstrating MBKM's potential as a transformative model for higher education reform in Indonesia.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy aims to strengthen institutional autonomy and expand experiential learning opportunities. However, its success depends heavily on the readiness of higher education institutions to manage new administrative structures, coordinate with external partners, and support students in off-campus learning environments. The present study found that MBKM implementation within the PKK program at Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES) was generally well-organized, with students reporting clear procedures, effective planning, and supportive supervision mechanisms. These findings indicate that the faculty has been able to operationalize MBKM principles through structured planning, execution, and monitoring processes.

These results reinforce the management framework outlined by Terry—planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling—which serves as a theoretical lens for understanding program implementation.⁽²⁴⁾ The alignment between institutional procedures and Terry's model suggests that MBKM can be effectively sustained when universities adopt systematic management practices. This is consistent with previous studies reporting that MBKM promotes institutional flexibility and strengthens academic autonomy when supported by adequate internal governance structures.^(1,2)

However, our findings also demonstrate notable gaps in coordination, particularly between universities, industry partners, and field supervisors. Students reported inconsistencies in feedback quality and communication, indicating uneven implementation across supervising lecturers. Similar challenges were documented in prior evaluations of MBKM, which identified administrative complexity and weak inter-institutional collaboration as major barriers to consistent program quality.^(11,12) These patterns highlight a mechanism by which autonomy, if not matched with institutional capacity, can lead to fragmented supervision and varied learning outcomes.

Another important mechanism underlying the results concerns the balance between flexibility and structure. While MBKM grants students freedom to choose off-campus activities, the absence of standardized guidelines and uniform supervision practices may result in varied interpretations of learning objectives. This echoes findings from earlier studies noting that MBKM's success is contingent upon the establishment of clear supervision frameworks, streamlined administrative procedures, and well-defined credit recognition systems.^(16,18)

Taken together, the present findings suggest that UNNES demonstrates strong readiness in planning and organizing the MBKM program, but variations in supervisory engagement and technical coordination remain. Strengthening institutional capacity—particularly in terms of communication systems, monitoring mechanisms, and standardized procedures—will be essential to ensure that MBKM's autonomy-driven reforms translate into equitable and high-quality learning experiences for all students.

MBKM and Practical Learning Enhancement: From Theory to Application

Improving the quality of practical learning has been one of the central goals of the MBKM policy, which seeks to bridge the persistent gap between classroom-based instruction and real-world application. In this study, the most notable results show that MBKM participation significantly enhanced students' engagement, communication, motivation, and their ability to apply theoretical concepts during field-based activities. Students also reported a more interactive learning environment, supported by authentic tasks that required problem-solving and collaboration.

These findings indicate that MBKM successfully strengthens experiential dimensions of learning by situating students within real contexts where they must interpret, adapt, and operationalize academic knowledge. This mechanism aligns directly with Kolb's experiential learning theory, which emphasizes knowledge construction through concrete experiences, reflective observation, and active experimentation.⁽²⁹⁾ By engaging in internships, Kampus Mengajar, and community-based projects, students encountered iterative cycles of action and reflection that deepened conceptual understanding and improved performance.

The results are also consistent with Bistari's model of effective learning, which identifies organized learning management, interactive communication, and active participation as core drivers of meaningful learning outcomes.⁽²⁴⁾ The structured planning and monitoring embedded within MBKM provide conditions that support these elements, thereby reinforcing students' readiness to perform practical tasks.

Comparatively, our findings corroborate earlier studies showing that MBKM enhances collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking—key indicators of practice-based competence^(14,15). Similar qualitative studies in other educational contexts have demonstrated that real-world engagement helps students develop stronger analytical reasoning and adaptive skills necessary for workplace readiness.⁽⁷⁾ The improvement in students' motivation and engagement found in this study further supports evidence that experiential learning environments foster

deeper learner involvement than classroom-only instruction.⁽²²⁾

The mechanisms behind these improvements can be traced to three interrelated factors. First, MBKM exposes students to authentic challenges that require integration of theory and practice, thereby strengthening cognitive-behavioral connections. Second, active collaboration with supervisors, peers, and external partners promotes social learning processes that enhance communication and teamwork skills. Third, the autonomy embedded within MBKM encourages self-regulation, reflection, and professional identity formation—essential components of vocational competence.

Overall, the findings confirm that MBKM provides an effective platform for advancing practice-based learning, transforming theoretical instruction into applied, experiential, and context-rich learning experiences. This suggests that MBKM not only complements existing vocational curricula but also serves as a pedagogical mechanism for strengthening the link between academic knowledge and practical professional competencies.

Impact on Vocational Skills: Strengthening Employability and 21st-Century Competencies

These results suggest that MBKM functions as an effective mechanism for strengthening employability skills by immersing students in authentic contexts where they must apply theoretical knowledge to real tasks. This experiential engagement reinforces skill mastery through repeated practice, reflection, and adaptation—consistent with Kolb’s experiential learning model, which posits that competence develops through continuous cycles of concrete experience and reflective observation.⁽²⁹⁾ In the context of vocational education, this mechanism allows students to internalize tacit knowledge, refine work habits, and build practical problem-solving abilities.

Our findings are in line with earlier studies reporting that MBKM programs, such as Kampus Mengajar, promote leadership, collaboration, and responsibility among participants.^(14,15) Similarly, research on MBKM-aligned internships has shown that off-campus learning enhances students’ career adaptability and readiness for industry environments.⁽¹⁵⁾ These parallels reinforce the notion that experiential learning embedded within MBKM provides a structured pathway for developing both domain-specific competencies and transversal skills essential for 21st-century employment.

Furthermore, the improvement in soft skills observed in this study reflects the expectations set by the 4C competency framework—critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication—which is widely recognized as essential for future workforce preparation.⁽⁵⁾ Students’ engagement in real-world projects required them to navigate complex tasks, coordinate with partners, and communicate across diverse settings, thereby strengthening multidimensional skill sets that traditional classroom instruction may not fully cultivate.

The mechanisms underlying these outcomes can be attributed to three interrelated factors. First, authentic industry- or community-based activities require students to integrate cognitive, technical, and interpersonal skills in dynamic environments, facilitating deeper professional competence. Second, MBKM offers structured mentorship from supervisors and partner institutions, which supports guided practice and skill refinement. Third, the autonomy and responsibility embedded within MBKM activities encourage students to develop self-regulation, initiative, and confidence—attributes strongly associated with employability and lifelong learning.

The findings indicate that MBKM not only enhances practical vocational abilities but also prepares students to meet the broader demands of Industry 4.0 and 21st-century workplaces. By providing real-world practice, opportunities for collaboration, and reflective learning structures, MBKM strengthens both hard and soft skills, positioning vocational graduates to navigate complex professional environments more effectively. These results reinforce the growing body of evidence that experiential and autonomy-based policies like MBKM are critical drivers of holistic competence development in vocational higher education.

Challenges in MBKM Implementation: Balancing Flexibility and Structure

A persistent issue in implementing the MBKM policy is achieving an optimal balance between providing students with flexible learning pathways and ensuring adequate structure, supervision, and academic accountability. The findings of this study reveal that although MBKM offers significant opportunities for experiential learning, several challenges hinder its consistent execution—particularly in administrative coordination, supervision quality, and credit recognition procedures.

Students frequently reported inconsistencies in supervisory feedback, delays in administrative processing, and unclear guidelines regarding assessment and credit transfer. These issues indicate gaps in institutional readiness, especially in aligning internal systems with the expanded autonomy mandated by MBKM. The results suggest that flexibility without sufficient structural support can lead to uneven learning experiences and uncertainties in academic progression.

These findings resonate with earlier studies that identified administrative complexity, limited coordination with external partners, and the absence of standardized supervision mechanisms as major obstacles in MBKM implementation.^(11,12) Similar evaluations noted that while MBKM expands learning opportunities, its success relies heavily on institutional capacity and clarity of operational procedures.⁽¹⁶⁾ The present study reinforces

these patterns, showing that structural inconsistencies can dilute the intended benefits of experiential learning.

The underlying mechanisms behind these challenges can be understood through three dimensions. First, the increased autonomy provided by MBKM requires universities to adopt more agile administrative systems—yet many institutions remain constrained by rigid bureaucratic processes. Second, varied interpretations of MBKM guidelines among supervising lecturers and partner institutions create discrepancies in monitoring and assessment. Third, the absence of unified credit recognition standards across programs contributes to student confusion and inconsistent academic evaluation.

Our findings also support the argument that educational autonomy must be accompanied by robust governance frameworks to avoid fragmented implementation. Research on autonomy-based reforms in other contexts suggests that decentralized learning models require sophisticated quality assurance systems to maintain program consistency and protect students' academic trajectories.^(25,26) This aligns with the observed need for clearer communication channels, explicit supervision guidelines, and integrated digital platforms to streamline MBKM administration.^(31,32)

The results indicate that while MBKM offers substantial pedagogical advantages, its successful implementation demands stronger institutional alignment, standardized supervision, and improved administrative integration. Achieving a balance between flexibility and structure is essential to ensure that experiential learning remains equitable, reliable, and academically accountable for all participants.

Comparative and Theoretical Insights

A broader challenge in evaluating MBKM outcomes is determining how the program's experiential approach compares with established models of vocational learning and how its results correspond to existing theoretical frameworks. The present study demonstrates that MBKM aligns closely with contemporary theories of competency-based education and experiential learning, while introducing distinctive features related to autonomy, flexibility, and industry engagement. These findings position MBKM as a hybrid model that integrates structured academic pathways with adaptive, real-world learning environments.

Comparatively, the observed improvements in technical skills, soft skills, and student motivation are consistent with previous studies that highlight the value of workplace immersion and authentic learning activities in strengthening vocational competence.^(14,15) Similar research across Indonesian and international contexts has shown that programs emphasizing practical exposure—such as apprenticeships, service-learning, and cooperative education—produce stronger employment-readiness outcomes than traditional lecture-based models.⁽⁷⁾ The parallel between MBKM and these experiential models suggests that its design is theoretically robust and aligned with global best practices in vocational pedagogy.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings reinforce Kolb's experiential learning cycle, where students engage in concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation to deepen competence.⁽²⁹⁾ MBKM's structure inherently facilitates this cycle by requiring students to apply theory in real-world contexts, receive feedback, and refine their understanding through continuous practice. This mechanism explains the substantial gains in students' problem-solving abilities, communication skills, and professional confidence.

The results also correspond with competency-based education frameworks, which emphasize measurable skill outcomes, learner autonomy, and task authenticity. MBKM's flexibility—allowing students to choose learning pathways aligned with their interests—supports self-directed learning, a core component of competency-based models.⁽⁵⁾ At the same time, the program's structured supervision and assessment processes ensure that experiential learning remains academically accountable.

The comparative insights further indicate that MBKM contributes a unique dimension by combining institutional autonomy with national-level policy direction. This dual structure distinguishes MBKM from traditional decentralization models found in other countries. While institutional flexibility encourages innovation, overarching policy guidelines maintain coherence across higher education institutions. Prior studies suggest that such hybrid governance structures can strengthen program responsiveness and quality assurance when effectively coordinated.^(25,26)

Mechanistically, the strength of MBKM lies in its ability to integrate theory and practice through three synergistic processes: (1) authentic engagement in workplace or community settings, (2) reflective learning supported by structured supervision, and (3) adaptive learning pathways shaped by student autonomy. Together, these elements create a learning ecosystem that promotes both vocational competence and professional identity development.

These comparative and theoretical insights highlight MBKM as a pedagogically sound and internationally comparable model of experiential and competency-based education. The program demonstrates significant potential to modernize vocational higher education, provided that institutional support systems continue to evolve alongside its flexible learning framework.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results hold significant implications for policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers. For

higher education institutions, the findings underscore the necessity of aligning MBKM implementation with structured supervision, adequate facilities, and transparent credit conversion systems. For vocational education policymakers, the research highlights MBKM's role as an effective policy instrument to enhance workforce preparedness, thereby supporting Indonesia's goal of producing competitive human capital.⁽³⁴⁾ For educators, the integration of experiential learning within MBKM calls for the redefinition of pedagogical roles from knowledge transmitters to facilitators and mentors of applied learning.⁽³⁵⁾

In the long term, MBKM can serve as a national model for *competence-based vocational education* that harmonizes academic rigor with real-world relevance transforming the educational landscape toward innovation, adaptability, and lifelong learning.

In summary, this study affirms that the MBKM policy substantially enhances vocational students' practical learning and professional competencies through authentic, experiential, and autonomous learning frameworks. Theoretically, it validates key educational management and learning effectiveness models, while empirically extending prior research by situating MBKM within the context of vocational higher education. Nevertheless, its implementation requires continuous refinement, particularly in mentoring quality, inter-institutional coordination, and workload management. Addressing these issues will enable MBKM to fully realize its transformative potential redefining vocational learning in the era of educational autonomy.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to evaluate the influence of the MBKM program on practical learning processes and vocational skill development among students in the PKK program at Universitas Negeri Semarang. The findings demonstrate that MBKM effectively enhances students' practice-based learning, enabling them to apply theoretical concepts in real settings and strengthening both technical and interpersonal competencies. Students reported significant improvements in communication, collaboration, adaptability, and problem-solving—skills essential for employability and 21st-century workplace demands.

The results also indicate that MBKM contributes to a more engaging and authentic learning environment through experiential activities such as internships, teaching practice, and community-based assignments. However, the program's implementation still faces challenges related to administrative coordination, supervision consistency, and credit recognition, which may affect the overall learning experience.

In conclusion, MBKM serves as a relevant and impactful approach for advancing vocational higher education by integrating academic instruction with real-world application. To optimize its effectiveness, institutions must strengthen administrative systems, clarify supervision guidelines, and improve communication mechanisms. These steps are necessary to ensure that MBKM consistently supports student competence development and aligns with the broader goals of educational autonomy and workforce readiness.

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FINANCING

This research has received financial support from the Budget Implementation List (DPA) of the Faculty of Engineering, Semarang State University Number: DPA139.03.2.693449/2025.05/2025 dated December 29, 2024 in accordance with the Research Implementation Assignment Agreement Letter for the Faculty of Engineering, UNNES Year 2025 Number: 119.14.4/UN37/PPK.05/2025 dated April 14, 2025.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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