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Exploring the Implementation and Challenges of the Indonesian Curriculum: Pathways to Effective Education Reform

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Abstract

The implementation of curriculum reforms in Indonesia has been an ongoing process aimed at improving the quality of education and addressing the diverse needs of students across the nation. This paper explores the challenges and opportunities within the implementation of the current Indonesian curriculum, specifically the *Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*, and provides pathways for effective educational reform. The objective of this study is to analyze the effectiveness of the curriculum's implementation across various educational levels, identify the barriers hindering its success, and propose feasible solutions to enhance its outcomes. Through a comprehensive review of relevant literature and qualitative research methods, this paper highlights key challenges such as resource limitations, inconsistencies in teacher training, and disparities between urban and rural educational settings. The findings suggest that while some progress has been made, substantial gaps remain, particularly in terms of curriculum alignment with national educational goals and regional adaptation. Based on these findings, this paper offers practical policy recommendations for addressing these challenges, emphasizing the need for improved teacher professional development, resource allocation, and curriculum flexibility. The study concludes that a collaborative approach involving policymakers, educators, and local communities is essential to ensuring success.

Keywords: *Freedom Curriculum; Challenges; Solutions; Curriculum Implementation.*

Introduction

Indonesia's recent educational reforms, marked by the introduction of the Freedom Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka), represent an ambitious effort to transform a traditionally rote-based system into one that nurtures critical thinking, creativity, and character development. This paradigm shift is motivated by the need to equip students with competencies that are essential for success in an increasingly globalized economy (Ainissyifa et al., 2024; Pak et al., 2020). The reform aligns with the broader global trend of modernizing

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curricula to meet the challenges posed by rapid technological and socio-economic changes,

thereby preparing students for future professional landscapes (Lokmic-Tomkins et al., 2024).

Despite its progressive objectives, the implementation of the Freedom Curriculum faces substantial challenges. One significant hurdle is the entrenched traditional teaching practices within Indonesia's educational institutions. The long-standing norm of teacher-centered instruction makes it difficult to adopt the holistic, student-centered methodologies promoted by the new curriculum. Studies focused on learner autonomy in Indonesia have shown that, despite policy intentions, the prevailing classroom dynamics still lean towards conventional methods, thereby undermining the intended outcomes (Ramadhiyah & Lengkanawati, 2019). Moreover, this paradigm shift requires substantial professional development for teachers, yet many educators find themselves underprepared to pivot from rote teaching to facilitating active and inquiry-based learning (Son & Lee, 2024).

Resource constraints further compound these challenges. Insufficient training programs, lack of comprehensive guidelines, and variability in support across different regions undermine the uniform adoption of the curriculum's

innovative practices. Research on curriculum implementation in varying contexts indicates that such systemic reforms demand not only technical resources but also adaptive leadership to address evolving challenges in real-time (Thornton et al., 2023). Additionally, during disruptive periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers reported that the sudden shift to distance learning further exacerbated difficulties in adhering to the new curriculum's principles, highlighting the fragility of implementation under external pressures (Onyura et al., 2022). While the Freedom Curriculum embodies a transformative vision designed to foster critical competencies among students, its efficacy is curtailed by challenges rooted in ingrained teaching cultures, inadequate support systems, and resource limitations. Addressing these obstacles will require a multifaceted approach that includes sustained professional development, clearer policy frameworks, and robust support mechanisms to ensure that the curriculum's holistic and learner-centered goals are fully realized (Cooke et al., 2024; Whiting & Luhtala, 2021).

Indonesia's expansive archipelagic geography and diverse socio-cultural landscape create multifaceted challenges for implementing a modern, student-centered curriculum. The Indonesian education system is characterized by

disparities in resource availability, infrastructural support, and teacher readiness across its islands, complicating the uniform adoption of curriculum reforms designed to move away from traditional rote-based instruction (Hoet et al., 2020). In such an environment, curriculum initiatives must be sufficiently flexible to account for local cultural, socio-economic, and infrastructural variations while adhering to national standards, reflecting findings from studies in other low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) that emphasize the need for localized curricular adaptations (Keogh et al., 2018).

One primary challenge stems from logistical and resource constraints. Remote and rural areas in Indonesia often experience limited access to technological infrastructure, modern teaching materials, and professional development opportunities for educators. These constraints hinder the implementation of innovative pedagogical practices and diminish the capacity of teachers to shift from established, teacher-centered methods to more dynamic, learner-centered approaches (Ahamad et al., 2019). Research on curriculum implementation challenges in disparate

regions indicates that overcoming these obstacles requires decentralized decision-making and locally tailored teacher support mechanisms that empower educators to adapt the curriculum to their specific contexts while maintaining its overarching goals (Al-Bukhari, 2024).

To address these challenges, a multifaceted strategy is necessary. First, strengthening teacher professional development is essential, ensuring that educators are not only well-versed in the theoretical underpinnings of the freedom curriculum (*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*) but also equipped with practical tools and adaptive strategies to manage diverse classroom settings (Onyura et al., 2022). This should include targeted training initiatives and the establishment of dynamic support networks that facilitate the exchange of best practices between urban centers and remote schools. Second, investment in digital infrastructure and the utilization of blended learning models can help bridge the gaps created by physical remoteness, enabling access to quality educational resources regardless of location (Chimbunde & Kgari-Masondo, 2020). Finally, adaptive leadership at both the school and district levels is critical to

fostering an environment where curriculum innovations can be effectively localized and continuously refined based on feedback from the classroom, ensuring that reforms are both sustainable and responsive to the evolving needs of students across the archipelago (Eneji et al., 2023).

By integrating these pathways, policymakers and educational leaders can build a more resilient and inclusive education system, one that is capable of addressing the complexities inherent in a geographically and culturally diverse nation like Indonesia while keeping pace with global educational trends. The primary objective of this paper is to explore the implementation of the Freedom curriculum (*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*) and examine the challenges faced by educators, students, and policymakers. Through an in-depth review of the current curriculum, the paper aims to identify barriers that hinder its successful implementation and propose solutions that could enhance its impact. The scope of this paper focuses on the Freedom Curriculum, evaluating its effectiveness across various educational levels and settings, including urban and

rural areas. By highlighting key challenges and opportunities, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about educational reform in Indonesia.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive research design and a qualitative approach to investigate the complexities concerning the implementation of the "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" curriculum in Indonesia's State Islamic Higher Education Institutions. The key objective of this research is to elucidate the real-world challenges and experiences encountered during the program's ongoing action, with the ultimate objective of informing and improving future program cycles (Nugrahani, 2014). More specifically, this study aims to identify and assess the impact of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program implementation by presenting a genuine portrayal of both lecturers' and students' perceptions.

Participants

The primary data for the study comes from a variety of sources, primarily in-depth observations and interviews with 15 respondents. These respondents include Vice Chancellors, Deans, Quality Assurance Institution officials/staff, lecturers, and students from the State Islamic University of

Syarif Hidayatullah, State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga, and State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim, all of which are involved with the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" implementation. They are equipped with a firsthand understanding of the implementation of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" curriculum. In addition, insights obtained through a structured closed questionnaire supplement the primary data source. This questionnaire is designed to elicit students' and lecturers' perspectives on the implementation of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*," and it consists of a series of questions about the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" initiative.

Data Collection Tools

The research proceeds through a well-defined set of procedural stages, following Miles' framework for qualitative research (Miles, 2014). The pre-field stage, fieldwork stage, and data analysis stage are all part of this process. The pre-field stage consists of activities carried out by researchers before data collection. This phase begins with field research to define the research's central problem or inquiry. Researchers meticulously prepare a field plan, select appropriate research settings, and assemble the necessary research equipment during this stage (Galustyan et al., 2024; J. Amos Hatch, 2023; Mukhtar et al., 2021). The fieldwork stage is the primary research activity carried out at the selected research sites.

Researchers gather data that is relevant to the research objectives and problem statement. Data collection techniques include observation, questionnaire administration, interviews, and examination of relevant documents. Researchers prepare essential tools such as interview schedules, questionnaires, photographic equipment, and audio recording devices in conjunction with these methods (Nassaji, 2020). Researchers conducted direct interviews with key informants for this study, including "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" leaders such as Vice-Rectors, Deans, and Quality Assurance personnel, as well as lecturers and students.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research occurs both concurrently with and following the fieldwork phase. This procedure entails compiling and organizing gathered data and information in order to align it with the research's central objectives, which are to elucidate the outcomes of implementing the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" curriculum. Following that, data gathered in the field is subjected to in-depth analysis using theoretical frameworks advanced by education experts. This analysis concludes with the formulation of conclusive findings and recommendations intended to guide stakeholders in improving organizational practices to achieve higher levels of

productivity, effectiveness, and efficiency (Creswell, 2014).

Findings and Discussion

This study undertook a comprehensive investigation to explore the complex terrain of "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" implementation within three different academic institutions: the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta, and the State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang. This research project aimed to explore the perspectives of distinguished lecturers and intrigued learners as they collectively navigated the complex landscape of "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" implementation within these educational institutions.

Further, we carefully selected our participants from these respected educational institutions, each of which possesses a distinctive perspective on the "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" encounter. Significantly, the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta provided a group of 8 participants, accounting for 40% of the total sample. Simultaneously, the inclusion of the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta provided valuable insights from a total of 5 respondents, constituting 25% of our sample. Similarly, the State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang enhanced

the depth of our study by incorporating the perspectives of 7 respondents, representing 35% of our cohort.

Furthermore, our research was conducted within the contextual framework of Indonesia's State Islamic Higher Education Institutions. Also, this study primarily focused on examining the perspectives of lecturers and students regarding the complex nature of "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" implementation. In addition to the domain of perception, our exploratory endeavors have shifted towards the examination of the intricate process of implementing "MERDEKA BELAJAR KURIKULUM MERDEKA". During our exploration of this instructional domain, our primary objective is to analyze the obstacles and solutions that impede or support the achievement of "MERDEKA BELAJAR KURIKULUM MERDEKA" 's ambitious educational goals.

The purpose of this narrative is to provide insight into the complex implementation of "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" across various esteemed academic institutions, each with its unique campuses that encompass a wide range of perspectives.

Perceptions of Lecturers and Students Regarding the Implementation of "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka"

Based on the findings of research investigations into the perceptions of both

lecturers and students within the framework of Indonesia's State Islamic Higher Education Institutions regarding the implementation of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" curriculum, an extensive questionnaire with 18 questions for lecturers and 15 questions for students was used. These inquiries covered policy implementation, lecturer and student preferences, and recommendations made by these stakeholders regarding the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program at three State Islamic Universities: State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta, and State Islamic of University Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang.

According to the results of the lecturers' perceptions, 37.5% of the lecturers at the State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang and 40% at the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta understand the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" policy. In contrast, only 87.5% of lecturers at the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta are aware of this policy. Furthermore, the majority of lecturers are aware of the minimum implementation threshold for "*MERDEKA BELAJAR KURIKULUM MERDEKA*", which is set in semester 4 with a credit requirement ranging from 10 to 20 credits, as stipulated by Permendikbud No. 3 of 2020. In terms of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" dissemination of information, the majority of

lecturers at all three institutions (State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta: 50%, State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang: 42.9%, and State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta: 60%) receive it through campus-based socialization activities and online channels provided by the Ministry of Education. In terms of document availability, a substantial number of lecturers recognize their presence in various forms such as Rector's Regulations, academic guidelines, and specialized "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" guidelines (State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta: 50%, State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang: 71.4%, State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta: 80%).

However, when it comes to "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" derivative guidelines, such as conversion guidelines, only 12.5% of the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta lecturers assert that they have access to them. 12.5% of State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta lecturers and 42.9% of State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang lecturers report their availability for the Internship Guidelines. Guidelines for recognizing student learning experiences in "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" implementation, on the other hand, are available to 25% of State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta lecturers, 28.6% of State Islamic University of

Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang lecturers, and 60% of UIN Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta lecturers. 12.5% of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta lecturers and 28.6% of State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang lecturers have access to guidelines and technical guidance for teaching assistance in Mangajar units. SOPs for "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" implementation are recognized by 37.5% of the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta lecturers and 40% of the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta lecturers. To summarize, it is clear that not all necessary guidelines are consistently available across the three State Islamic Universities under investigation.

In terms of lecturers' contributions to the "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" program, it is worth noting that a significant number of lecturers have been actively involved in discussions, meetings, and workshops related to the preparation of "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" implementation within their respective study programs or universities. Lecturers from the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah (75%), the State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang (71.4%), and the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta (60%) played critical roles in these preparations. Nonetheless, some respondents identified their participation as team members, while others acknowledged their awareness of

these activities but expressed a lack of interest in active participation. The lecturers' knowledge of "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" is bolstered by their experiences as field supervisor lecturers at State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (75%), State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang (100%), and State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta (80%). Furthermore, lecturers were actively involved in the development of Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) for study programs and credit equivalency assessments, with State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (87.5%), State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang (71.4%), and State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta (100%) reporting participation. It has been noted that a significant proportion of instructors have familiarized themselves with the "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" guidebook and have actively engaged in "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" socialization initiatives, both in person and through digital platforms such as the YouTube channel of the Directorate General of Higher Education, Research, and Technology. Moreover, it has been noted that instructors have demonstrated a keen inclination to assume the role of mentors in "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" initiatives, as well as to actively promote and provide guidance to students in their engagement with "Merdeka

Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" activities (Tjaija, 2022)(Purwanti, 2022).

Regarding the outcomes of the program, the responses from lecturers suggest a favorable influence on both the process of student learning and the attainment of Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). The State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta observed a notable enhancement of 37.5% and 12.5% in the domains above. Similarly, the State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang reported a substantial improvement of 57.1% and 57%. Furthermore, the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta demonstrated significant advancements of 20% and 100% in the respective areas. Moreover, the program above has proven to be advantageous in enhancing both the technical and interpersonal abilities of the students, as evidenced by notable enhancements observed at State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (75%), State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang (57%), and State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta (60%). In addition, the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program has assisted in the enhancement of lecturers' professional growth. It has been regarded as a commendation for students to engage in "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" initiatives as an integral component of their academic pursuits. The lecturers have offered

valuable insights regarding the implementation of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program, highlighting the importance of conducting extensive socialization initiatives that encompass both academic programs and students, with the aim of fostering interest and active engagement. Moreover, the significance of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" Guidelines that are customized to the distinct attributes of study programs in Indonesia's State Islamic Higher Education Institutions, particularly those with a religious focus, has been underscored. Additional proposed improvements include the establishment of standardized funding criteria and the implementation of an integrated credit conversion system for students enrolled in the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program. Lecturers have expressed support for continuous collaboration among diverse stakeholders, alongside frequent evaluations of programs.

Furthermore, as part of this study, a questionnaire was distributed to students in order to determine the level of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" implementation awareness among this demographic. The resulting data shows that only a subset of the student body is fully aware of the MB-KM policy. State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta has a 12.5% awareness rate, State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang has a 12.5% awareness rate,

and State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta has a 50% awareness rate. In terms of semester eligibility for conducting "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" activities outside of the university, the results show that the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta has 37.5%, State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang has 50%, and State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta has 83.3%. In terms of sources for details on the "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" policy, 25% of students rely on the Ministry of Education and Culture's online channels (websites, social media). In comparison, the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (12.5%) and the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta (33.2%) prefer online university platforms (websites and social media). According to the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (25%) and the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta (50%), offline and online socialization events organized by universities are also a valuable source.

The majority of students specify a range of 10 to 20 credits for the credit conversion process (i.e., the number of course credits recognized/equated as "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" activities), with State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta at 62.5% and State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta at 100%. 50% of students

affirm the existence and accessibility of curriculum documents, guidelines, and operational procedures for participating in "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" activities at the university. In terms of student readiness to participate in "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" activities, 100% of students express a strong desire to do so. Concerning the program's impact on the length of their studies, it was discovered that it positively influenced timely degree completion at the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (87.5%), State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang (75%), and State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta (83.3%). Aside from influencing study duration, the majority of students believe that off-campus learning activities provide additional competencies, such as problem-solving skills for complex real-world issues and professional ethics. Furthermore, the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (75%), the State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang (50%), and the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta (66.7%) all noticed "Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka" activities as being beneficial in developing competencies and skills in preparation for post-graduate employment. However, only 25% of students from State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta and State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang report an improvement in soft skills after

participating in "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" activities as part of their preparation for post-graduation employment, while 50% of students from State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta report such gains (Irvani et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (75%), State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang (100%), and State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta (83.3%) all agreed that the implementation of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" activities in higher education is congruent with the future needs of graduates. After gaining comprehensive knowledge, 62.5% of State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah students, 25% of State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang students, and 50% of State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Jogjakarta students express a willingness to recommend the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program to peers and family members.

Students have also provided useful suggestions and critiques, emphasizing the importance of broader socialization efforts related to the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program. Furthermore, they emphasize the need for improvements in "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" management systems and advocate for the creation of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" platforms similar

to those available through the Ministry of Education and Culture. Furthermore, students express a desire for a transparent funding system, particularly for "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" activities that take place off campus, even in other provinces or countries.

As previously stated by (Solikhah, 2022; Sopiansyah et al., 2022), a key consideration in the development of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" curriculum within study programs is the alignment of core competencies with compulsory courses, the realization of graduate profiles, and the incorporation of supporting courses. The "Free to Learn" slogan fosters a natural learning process conducive to individual independence, relieving academic pressure and stress caused by both personal and environmental variables. Students are thus encouraged to pursue creative and innovative endeavors free of constraints. Surprisingly, only 21% of students responded positively in this regard, with the remaining 79% refusing to respond to the distributed questionnaire (Irvani et al., 2024; Laga et al., 2021)

The Implementation of "*MERDEKA BELAJAR KURIKULUM MERDEKA*"

Data collection in this part of the paper was conducted through interviews, which were used to elicit relevant information about the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*"

curriculum implementation, obstacles encountered, and potential solutions. Interviews with key stakeholders, including the quality assurance Institution team, lecturers, and students, were conducted to gain insights into the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" implementation process at the State Islamic University of Jakarta. Since 2021, regulatory frameworks governing "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" have been established and enforced at the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah and State Islamic University of Malik Maulana Malik Ibrahim, according to the investigation. In contrast, the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga initiated these regulations in 2020, with effective implementation beginning in 2022 for 5th-semester students. The origins of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" in Indonesia's State Islamic Higher Education Institutions can be traced back to regulatory directives issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture in early 2020, which were reinforced by Ministry of Religion guidelines. These regulatory frameworks served as the foundation for the development of the Rector's regulations at the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah, the State Islamic University of Malik Maulana Ibrahim, and the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga.

The results of interviews conducted at all three Islamic Universities shed light on the delegation of authority to faculties and study

programs for curriculum evaluation. This includes decisions about the courses to be offered and the nature of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" programs, which include both inbound and outbound components. The predominant approach at the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta is to conduct internship programs in collaboration with partner institutions such as the State Training Center and the National Research and Innovation Agency, among others. State Islamic University of Malik Maulana Ibrahim manages "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" with the help of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" Team, which includes representatives from faculties (Vice Dean) and study programs. In addition to existing off-campus and on-campus learning modes, new initiatives introduced in 2023 include student participation in internship programs at partner institutions, international student exchanges, and state defense programs. The implementation framework at the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga is consistent with the Rector's Decrees, "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" Guidelines, and Quality Assurance Institution Technical Guidelines. Within this framework, study programs have the authority to curate course packages and determine the types of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" programs that students can access (Apriliyani et al., 2022).

The "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program's implementation at numerous State Islamic Higher Education Institutions has revealed distinct methods and approaches. This analysis will largely focus on the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program implementation experiences of the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah, State Islamic University of Malik Maulana Ibrahim, and State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta.

The "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program is being implemented at the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah in accordance with the Quality Assurance Institution's requirements for technical execution. These rules are shared with the relevant faculties and study programs. The study programs have significant autonomy in designing and selecting two program forms, which are then coordinated with appropriate stakeholders prior to student implementation. This method emphasizes adaptability to the specific needs of each program (Nursapia Harahap, 2022).

The State Islamic University of Malik Maulana Ibrahim, on the other hand, follows a strategy in which most study programs have the authority to determine program content for students and orchestrate the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" implementation process, which includes the study program selection

process, interviews with partners, mid-semester and end-of-semester assessments, and grade conversions. While the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" Team oversees existing programs such as student exchanges and internships, the institution has also invested in a specialized "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" web platform and actively engages in offering "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" programs through the Permatasari application. The Quality Assurance Institution is in charge of monitoring and evaluating the progress of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program (Heny Hartono et al., 2022; Zakiyyah et al., 2021). Similarly, various stakeholders are involved in a coordinated strategy at the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta. The Quality Assurance Institution provides regulations and guidelines, the Information Technology and Database Center creates supporting apps for entering "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program details into the system, and faculties/study programs participate by developing curriculum that includes "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" offerings. The alignment of program material with the study program's Competency of Learning Outcomes and Course Learning Outcomes is critical. This integration attempts to ensure that "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" is relevant and coherent with the broader academic program.

Overall, the outcomes of these State Islamic Higher Education Institutions' "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program deployments have been positive. Students at the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah, for example, have had the option to engage in programs at partner universities and internships overseas, broadening their perspectives and refining their skill sets. Similarly, at the State Islamic University of Malik Maulana Ibrahim, students have participated in student exchanges to Europe and secured internships in a variety of businesses, enhancing their job-market readiness. It is worth mentioning, however, that some "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" programs may require further refining in order to correspond with students' interests and talents (Putera & Sugianto, 2020). Interviews were performed not only with instructors and quality assurance agencies but also with students to acquire a more holistic perspective. These interviews revealed students' awareness of curriculum changes as well as the positive influence of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" programs on their development of hard and soft skills. Students at the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah, for example, noticed advances in their talents outside of the regular academic program.

Further, State Islamic University of Malik Maulana Ibrahim students remarked that

"*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" programs, such as internships, played a critical part in strengthening their self-competence, a vital asset for future employment (Wati et al., 2022). Similarly, interviews with State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga students revealed how "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" programs aided in the actual application of learned information.

Furthermore, these findings are consistent with a larger body of studies, such as a study from the university in Flores that found students responded favorably to the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program. According to the findings of the study, universities' socializing platforms, both online and offline, were critical in distributing information about "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" programs and regulations. Furthermore, internships were found to be particularly appealing to students due to their apparent alignment with post-graduation career prospects (Meke et al., 2021).

Barriers and Solutions to "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" Implementation

This study discovers an in-depth investigation of the barriers encountered and the related solutions during the execution of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program at State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in addition to the assessment of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program

implementation. Common issues arise from interviews done across three selected State Islamic Universities, including value conversion, monitoring and evaluation systems, and financial limits.

Interview findings highlight prevalent difficulties at the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. For starters, there is a significant hurdle in the conversion process of student internship programs. Furthermore, the lack of a specific instrument for evaluating program execution creates challenges, necessitating reliance on human evaluation techniques. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" derivative standards or technical requirements for both inbound and outgoing programs generates ambiguities for faculty, study programs, and students alike (Bhakti et al., 2022).

Similarly, the State Islamic University of Malik Maulana Ibrahim faces obstacles similar to those of the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah. The conversion process remains a significant barrier, as does the presence of programs that do not seamlessly correspond with the different study programs' Competency of Learning Outcomes (CPL) and Course Learning Outcomes, as well as student's interests and talents. According to the prevalent pattern, evaluation processes are carried out manually, with no specialized

Instruments for efficient assessment (Wahyuningtyas et al., 2022).

The State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga faces obstacles, such as a significant lack of student enthusiasm in engaging in inbound and outbound programs. Furthermore, the lack of specialized instruments or apps for program evaluation demands manual evaluation processes, which are typically carried out through leadership meetings and reviews of students' project reports at the end of their "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program participation. Another key problem is value conversion, particularly to correspond with the Competency of Learning Outcomes. Furthermore, financial constraints are especially prevalent for students participating in off-campus "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program activities.

These findings are in line with comparable studies undertaken at the National Veteran University Jakarta, demonstrating similar challenges in the execution of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program. Notable among these challenges are: 1) the complexity of converting courses; 2) the difficulty in securing cooperation partners and conducting activities outside the confines of study programs; 3) the intricate nature of inter-university collaboration, driven by varying interpretations of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program; 4) the need to

manage multiple programs and activities concurrently within limited timeframes; 5) an incomplete system infrastructure that supports the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program; 6) The deficiency of proper alignment between lecture schedules and extracurricular activities; 7) The existence of restricted quotas for student exchange programs; 8) Supervisors' limited familiarity with the intricacies of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program; 9) Insufficient support provided to students; 10) Issues pertaining to network connectivity (Puspitasari & Nugroho, 2021).

Finally, the investigation of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program implementation in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions reveals consistent challenges across various institutions, emphasizing the need for standardized guidelines, efficient value conversion processes, improved evaluation instruments, and long-term funding solutions to improve the program's effectiveness and overall success. These difficulties are consistent with broader research patterns, emphasizing the importance of overcoming these challenges in order to improve the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program's outcomes in higher education.

Addressing the challenges inherent in the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program's implementation necessitates a

nuanced understanding of both facilitating and inhibiting factors. These factors have been elucidated through research efforts, shedding light on critical considerations for improving "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" implementation.

The findings of the study show that several factors contribute to the successful implementation of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program. For starters, students' proactive engagement and initiative are critical to program participation and efficacy. Furthermore, the presence of committed partners who are aligned with the university's overarching goal of implementing Outcome-Based Education (OBE) in support of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" represents a critical enabling factor. Furthermore, faculty and study program administrators' unwavering support in navigating the complexities of grade conversion mechanisms strengthens the program's implementation (Alfikalia et al., 2022). However, there are some barriers to effective "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" implementation. Among these are insufficient program information dissemination, negative perceptions of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" among certain faculty members, a lack of comprehensive technical guidance, and resource availability constraints (Syarif, 2020).

Further, empirical research identifies additional barriers to "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" curriculum implementation, which span four major domains: curriculum alignment, financial resources, partner engagement, and changes to academic information systems. Given these challenges, it is critical that the consequences of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" implementation be meticulously planned, executed, and evaluated through collaborative efforts involving both governmental authorities and academic institutions, particularly study programs serving as the frontline in implementing the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" curriculum (Cakrawala & Halim, 2021; Ningrum et al., 2021). Furthermore, research findings reveal the four underlying tenets of the Independent Campus policy. For starters, this policy gives universities complete autonomy in developing new Study Programs. Second, it simplifies and automates the reaccreditation process. Third, it makes it easier for Public Universities with Public Service Bodies to transition to Legal Entity Universities (Maulana, 2022).

Finally, it allows students to pursue studies outside of their designated study program, even beyond the boundaries of their campus. In contrast to fears that the Independent Campus policy would reduce student competencies and weaken the Indonesian higher education system, evidence suggests

that it fosters a diverse educational landscape, preparing the nation's youth to engage globally (Nofia, 2020; Sari et al., 2023). Given the multifaceted perceptions and the interplay of supporting and inhibiting factors in the context of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" implementation at State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia, systematic evaluation initiatives are critical. This evaluation ought to happen place at the ministry level, with the objective of producing comprehensive technical guidelines that universities and study programs can use to effectively manage "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" activities for their students (Riyadi et al., 2022; Solikhah, 2022; Supriyoko et al., 2022). A thorough understanding of the complex dynamics, challenges, and opportunities associated with the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program implementation highlights the importance of strategic evaluation and policy development at multiple levels, with the goal of optimizing program outcomes and advancing higher education in Indonesia.

Conclusion

Several key conclusions can be drawn from the research findings. First, in terms of lecturers' and students' perceptions of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" curriculum implementation, it is apparent that not all lecturers and students are fully aware of the

existing "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" policies. Policies articulated in official regulations, such as "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" guidelines and their derivative guidelines, are included. Nevertheless, the majority of lecturers and students have acknowledged the program's positive impact on self-development, encouraging students' hard and soft skills to improve.

In the context of "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" implementation at Indonesia's State Islamic Higher Education Institutions, namely State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, State Islamic University of Malik Maulana Malik Ibrahim, and State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga, interviews reveal that the program's preparation began in response to a regulation issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2020, with subsequent regulation by the respective institutions' rectors in 2021. The strategies and methods used in the implementation process, on the other hand, differ. The program was implemented by the State Islamic University of Malik Maulana Ibrahim with the assistance of the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" Team and the Quality Assurance Agency, which provides regulatory and technical guidance. In contrast, the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah and the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga are regulated, and the Quality Assurance Agency coordinates technical

guidelines. Still, their faculties and study programs have full implementation authority. Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain, including the lack of a standardized value conversion process, a dedicated instrument for monitoring and evaluating the "*Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka*" program, and clear funding mechanisms, particularly at the Ministry of Religious Affairs level.

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