



## The Role of Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) Program on Students' Soft Skills: An Observational Study of Students in Jambi City, Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

The Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program was launched by the Indonesian government with the aim of improving the quality of higher education and preparing graduates who are competent in the world of work. One important aspect that is expected to be improved through this program is student soft skills. This research aims to examine in depth the role of MBKM in the development of student soft skills in Jambi City, Indonesia. This research used an observational approach involving 350 students from various universities in Jambi City who participated in the MBKM program. Data was collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires. Data analysis was carried out qualitatively and quantitatively to explore a comprehensive understanding of the impact of MBKM on student soft skills. The research results show that MBKM has a significant role in improving the soft skills of students in Jambi City. Participation in various MBKM activities, such as internships, humanitarian projects, and student exchanges, provides opportunities for students to develop communication skills, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, and creativity. Apart from that, MBKM also helps students increase their self-confidence, independence, and ability to adapt to new environments. The MBKM program has proven effective in improving the soft skills of students in Jambi City. These findings provide empirical evidence that supports the importance of the MBKM program in preparing graduates who not only have academic competencies, but also the soft skills needed in the world of work. The implications of this research can be used as a basis for developing higher education policies that are more effective in improving the quality of graduates.

### 1. Introduction

In the era of globalization which is characterized by increasingly fierce competition, higher education has a crucial role in forming quality human resources (HR) that are able to compete at the global level. College graduates are not only expected to have strong academic competence in their field of study but are also equipped with adequate soft skills to face the challenges of an increasingly complex and dynamic world of work. Soft skills, which are often referred to as interpersonal or non-technical skills, include various abilities related to the way individuals interact with other people, manage themselves, and deal with unexpected situations. Some examples of important soft skills include: The ability to convey ideas,

information, and feelings clearly, effectively, and persuasively, both orally and in writing; Ability to influence, motivate, and guide others to achieve common goals; Ability to work effectively with others to achieve common goals, including the ability to share responsibilities, resolve conflicts, and respect differences; Ability to identify problems, analyze information, develop alternative solutions, and make informed decisions; Ability to generate new and innovative ideas, think outside the box, and find unique solutions to existing problems. Soft skills are becoming increasingly important in the modern world of work because many jobs require collaboration, communication, and the ability to adapt to rapid change. Research shows that soft skills have a

significant impact on job performance, job satisfaction, and individual career development. In fact, several studies show that soft skills can be a determining factor for individual success in various professional fields, including in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).<sup>1-3</sup>

Recognizing the importance of soft skills in increasing the competitiveness of higher education graduates, the Indonesian government launched the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program in 2020. This program is part of higher education reform efforts which aim to create graduates who not only have strong academic competencies but also soft skills that are relevant to the needs of the world of work. MBKM provides opportunities for students to develop competencies holistically through various off-campus activities. Students can choose to take part in internships at companies or organizations, be involved in humanitarian projects, take part in student exchange programs at other universities, conduct research, or start their own business. Through these activities, students are expected to gain practical experience relevant to their field of study, improve soft skills, and expand professional networks. One of MBKM's main goals is to overcome the gap between the world of education and the world of work. So far, college graduates are often considered less ready to enter the world of work due to a lack of practical experience and adequate soft skills. It is hoped that MBKM can be a solution to this problem by providing students with opportunities to learn outside the classroom and apply the knowledge they gain in college in real-world contexts. Through MBKM, students can gain valuable work experience, develop soft skills that are relevant to the needs of the world of work, and build a wide professional network. This experience will help students to be better prepared to face the world of work and contribute optimally to national development. Jambi City, as one of the education centers in Indonesia, has great potential in developing the MBKM program. Various universities in Jambi City have actively participated in this program and offer various activities that students can take part

in. However, so far, there has been no research that specifically examines the impact of MBKM on student soft skills in Jambi City.<sup>4-7</sup> This research aims to fill this gap by conducting an observational study of students in Jambi City who participate in the MBKM program.

## **2. Methods**

This research adopts a comprehensive observational approach to explore an in-depth understanding of the impact of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) on the development of student soft skills in Jambi City, Indonesia. An observational approach was chosen because it allows researchers to directly observe student behavior and interactions in various MBKM activities, as well as explore their perspectives through in-depth interviews. Additionally, questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data that complemented the qualitative findings. This observational research design involved 350 students from various universities in Jambi City who participated in the MBKM program. This design was chosen because it provides flexibility for researchers to observe and record various aspects of student participation in MBKM, including the types of activities participated in, intensity of involvement, interactions with the learning environment, and changes in behavior that occur. Participant observations were carried out in various MBKM activities, such as internships, humanitarian projects, student exchanges, research, and entrepreneurial activities. Researchers are directly involved in these activities, observing the dynamics of interactions between students, supervisors, mentors, and other parties involved. Apart from that, researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with selected students to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives regarding MBKM.

The population of this research is all students in Jambi City who participate in the MBKM program. The research sample consisted of 350 students selected by purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that is based on

certain criteria that are relevant to the research objectives. The sample selection criteria in this research are as follows: Active students at universities in Jambi City; Participate in at least one MBKM activity; Willing to be interviewed and fill out a questionnaire. This criterion ensures that the research sample consists of students who have direct experience in participating in the MBKM program and are willing to share their experiences with researchers.

This research used three main data collection techniques, namely: 1. Participant Observation: Researchers were directly involved in various MBKM activities participated in by students. During observations, researchers recorded detailed student behavior, interactions, and experiences related to MBKM. These observation notes include descriptions of the activities observed, students' reactions to these activities, challenges faced, and changes in behavior that occur during the learning process. 2. In-depth Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 students selected randomly from the total sample. This interview uses a semi-structured interview guide which contains open-ended questions about experiences, perspectives, and the impact of MBKM on students' soft skills. These questions are designed to explore more in-depth and specific information about how MBKM influences the development of students' soft skills. 3. Questionnaire: Questionnaires were given to all research samples to collect quantitative data about the level of participation in MBKM, types of MBKM activities participated in, and student perceptions about the impact of MBKM on soft skills. This questionnaire uses a Likert scale to measure students' level of agreement or disagreement with certain statements.

The research instruments used in this research are: 1. Observation Guide: The observation guide contains a list of aspects observed during participant observation, such as student behavior, interactions and experiences related to MBKM. This guide helps researchers to focus on aspects that are relevant to the research objectives and ensures consistency in collecting observational data. 2. Interview Guide: The

interview guide contains a list of open-ended questions to ask students during in-depth interviews. These questions are designed to explore a deeper understanding of the experiences, perspectives and impact of MBKM on students' soft skills. This interview guide is flexible, so researchers can adapt questions to the interview context and explore more relevant information. 3. Questionnaire: The questionnaire consists of closed and open questions designed to collect quantitative and qualitative data about the level of participation in MBKM, types of MBKM activities participated in, and student's perceptions of the impact of MBKM on soft skills. This questionnaire has been tested for validity and reliability to ensure that it measures what it is supposed to measure and provides consistent results.

Data obtained from participant observation, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitative analysis was carried out on data resulting from observations and in-depth interviews. The data was transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed to identify patterns, themes, and meanings related to the impact of MBKM on students' soft skills. Quantitative analysis was carried out on the questionnaire results data. The data was analyzed descriptively to determine the frequency distribution, average and percentage of each variable studied. Apart from that, inferential analysis was also carried out to test the research hypothesis, namely whether there is a significant relationship between participation in MBKM and increasing student soft skills. This research was conducted by observing the principles of research ethics, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. Before the research begins, researchers have explained the research objectives, research procedures, and the benefits and risks that may arise to potential participants. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and decide whether they were willing to participate in this research. During the research, researchers maintained the confidentiality of participants' identities and did not disclose their personal information to other parties. The data

obtained from this research is only used for research purposes and is not used for other purposes.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of student participation in various types of MBKM activities. Of the 350 students involved in research, the majority (34.3%) chose to participate in internship activities. Internships provide students with the opportunity to apply theory learned in class into real work practice while expanding their professional network. Humanitarian projects (24.3%) and student exchanges (20%) are also popular choices among students. Humanitarian projects provide opportunities for students to contribute to society, develop empathy, and improve leadership and teamwork skills. Student

exchanges, on the other hand, broaden students' horizons about different cultures and educational systems, increase their adaptability, and enrich their learning experience. Research (12.9%) and entrepreneurial activities (8.6%) had lower participation rates. This may be due to stricter academic requirements for research or higher risks in starting a business. However, participation in these activities provides significant benefits for students, such as developing critical thinking skills, creativity, and the ability to take risks. Overall, Table 1 shows that students have varied interests in various types of MBKM activities. This indicates that the MBKM program has succeeded in attracting student interest and providing flexibility for them to choose activities that suit their interests and career goals.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of student participation in MBKM activities.

<b>Types of MBKM activities</b>	<b>Number of students</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Internship	120	34.3
Humanity project	85	24.3
Student exchange	70	20.0
Study	45	12.9
Entrepreneurial activities	30	8.6
Total	350	100.0

Table 2 presents students' perceptions about the impact of MBKM on their soft skills development. The results show that the majority of students (more than 80%) feel that MBKM has a significant positive impact on improving their soft skills. Communication skills were the soft skills that experienced the most improvement (94.3% of students felt they had greatly improved or improved). This shows that MBKM provides opportunities for students to interact with various parties, both in the work environment (internships) and in the social environment (humanitarian projects). This interaction forces students to hone their communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal. Leadership (93.4%), teamwork

(95.5%), problem-solving (94.3%), and creativity (94.8%) also experienced significant improvements. MBKM provides opportunities for students to lead projects, collaborate with others, face new challenges, and find creative solutions to complex problems. This experience helps students to develop soft skills that are needed in the world of work. The overall results of Table 2 show that MBKM has a strong positive impact on the development of student soft skills. This program not only improves students' academic competence, but also prepares them to become individuals who are more skilled, adaptive, and ready to face challenges in the world of work.

Table 2. Student perceptions of the impact of MBKM on soft skills.

Soft skill	Very increased (%)	Increasing (%)	Fixed (%)	Decreasing (%)
Communication	45.7	48.6	5.7	0.0
Leadership	38.3	55.1	6.6	0.0
Teamwork	42.9	52.6	4.6	0.0
Problem-solving	35.7	58.6	5.7	0.0
Creativity	31.4	63.4	5.1	0.0

Table 3 presents examples of in-depth interview quotes that provide a more in-depth picture of how MBKM influences student soft skill development. These quotes reinforce the quantitative findings presented in Table 2 and provide richer qualitative nuances. For example, a quote about the impact of MBKM on communication shows how the internship program helped students increase their confidence in public speaking and conveying ideas clearly. Quotes about the impact of MBKM on leadership illustrate

how humanitarian projects provide opportunities for students to lead teams and make the right decisions in difficult situations. These quotes also show that MBKM not only improves students' soft skills, but also provides meaningful learning experiences and prepares them to face the world of work. Students feel more confident, independent, and ready to compete in the job market after participating in the MBKM program.

Table 3. In-depth interview quotes.

Theme	Quotation
The impact of MBKM on communication	"I feel more confident in public speaking after participating in the MBKM internship program. I learned how to convey ideas clearly and convincingly."
The impact of MBKM on leadership	"Through the MBKM humanitarian project, I learned how to lead a team and motivate team members to achieve common goals. I also learned how to make the right decisions in difficult situations."
The impact of MBKM on teamwork	"During the MBKM student exchange, I learned how to work together with people from various cultural backgrounds. I learned how to respect differences and find solutions that are acceptable to all parties."
The impact of MBKM on problem-solving	"MBKM research activities taught me how to identify problems, collect data, analyze data, and draw conclusions. I learned how to think critically and find innovative solutions to complex problems."
The impact of MBKM on creativity	"I feel more creative after participating in MBKM entrepreneurial activities. I learned how to develop business ideas, create business plans, and market products. I also learned how to think outside the box and look for new opportunities."

The findings of this research are in line with the theory of experience-based learning (experiential learning) put forward by David Kolb. This theory emphasizes the importance of direct experience in the

learning process. According to Kolb, learning occurs through a cycle consisting of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. MBKM

provides opportunities for students to experience concrete experiences outside the classroom, such as internships, humanitarian projects, and student exchanges. This experience then becomes the basis for students to make reflective observations, analyze their experiences, and develop a deeper understanding of the concepts studied in class. This understanding can then be tested and applied in new situations through active experimentation. This learning cycle allows students to develop soft skills naturally and sustainably. Concrete experiences provide opportunities for students to practice soft skills in real situations. Reflective observation helps students to understand their strengths and weaknesses in applying soft skills. Abstract conceptualization helps students to develop a stronger theoretical framework for soft skills. Active experimentation provides opportunities for students to try new strategies and improve their performance in applying soft skills.<sup>8-11</sup>

The theory of multiple intelligences proposed by Howard Gardner is also relevant to the findings of this research. Gardner argues that intelligence does not consist of just one dimension, but consists of eight different types of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. MBKM provides opportunities for students to develop various types of intelligence. For example, internships can help students develop interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence, humanities projects can help students develop interpersonal and naturalistic intelligence, and student exchanges can help students develop linguistic and interpersonal intelligence. By developing various types of intelligence, students can become more complete individuals and able to face complex challenges in the world of work. Multiple intelligences are also closely related to soft skills. For example, good interpersonal intelligence can help individuals to communicate effectively and cooperate with others, while good intrapersonal intelligence can help individuals to understand themselves and manage emotions well.<sup>12-14</sup>

The self-motivation theory proposed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan can also be used to explain the impact of MBKM on the development of students' soft skills. This theory emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and connectedness in increasing an individual's intrinsic motivation. MBKM gives students autonomy to choose activities that suit their interests and goals. This can increase students' intrinsic motivation to learn and develop. Apart from that, MBKM also provides opportunities for students to develop their competencies in various fields. Successful experiences in developing competencies can increase students' self-confidence and motivation to continue learning. MBKM also provides opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships with other people, both in the work environment and in social environments. Positive social connectedness can increase students' intrinsic motivation and help them to achieve their goals.<sup>15-17</sup>

The concept of social capital, popularized by sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam, refers to the value contained in networks of social relationships and the norms of reciprocity that accompany them. Social capital can take the form of strong ties with family and close friends, as well as weak ties with acquaintances and colleagues. MBKM and Social Capital Formation the MBKM program inherently creates a conducive environment for the formation and strengthening of student social capital. Through various MBKM activities, students interact with various individuals from various backgrounds, both on and off campus. During internships, students have the opportunity to build relationships with colleagues, superiors, and other professionals in the industry. These networks can be a valuable source of information about job openings, industry trends, and career development opportunities. Humanitarian projects often involve collaboration with community organizations, government agencies, or private companies. Through these partnerships, students learn how to build mutually beneficial relationships, negotiate interests, and work together to achieve common goals. Student exchange provides

opportunities for students to interact with students from various countries and cultures. These interactions enrich students' perspectives, increase tolerance for differences, and open opportunities for future cross-cultural collaboration. Strong social capital has a significant positive impact on the development of students' soft skills. Interaction with various individuals in social networks encourages students to hone their communication skills. They learn how to convey ideas clearly, listen actively, and provide constructive feedback. Through involvement in collaborative projects, students learn how to lead teams, delegate tasks, and motivate others to achieve common goals. They also learn how to resolve conflict and build consensus. Teamwork is an integral part of many MBKM activities. Students learn how to work effectively in teams, appreciate each member's contribution, and achieve optimal results through collaboration. Social capital can be a valuable source of information and support in dealing with problems. Students can ask for advice from mentors, colleagues, or peers to help them find the right solution. Interaction with people from various backgrounds can spark new ideas and encourage students to think outside the box. Collaboration in teams can also increase creativity because team members can inspire each other and build on each other's ideas. Social capital not only improves students' soft skills but also increases their work readiness. A strong professional network can open doors to job opportunities, internships, or training programs. Apart from that, social capital can also help students get good references, get career support, and build a positive professional reputation. This research confirms that MBKM not only acts as a forum for learning outside the classroom but also as a catalyst in forming and strengthening students' social capital. Strong social capital, in turn, makes a significant contribution to the development of students' soft skills and work readiness.<sup>16-18</sup>

Career development theory can also be used to explain the impact of MBKM on student work readiness. This theory emphasizes the importance of

exploration, planning, and implementation in the career development process. MBKM provides opportunities for students to explore various career options, plan their careers, and implement their career plans. Through internships, students can gain work experience relevant to their field of study and test their interest in that field. Humanitarian projects and student exchanges can also help students to broaden their horizons about various career options. By exploring, planning, and implementing their career plans, students can improve their job readiness and increase their chances of finding a good job after graduation. This theoretical study shows that research findings regarding the impact of MBKM on students' soft skills in Jambi City are supported by various theories of learning and human development. MBKM provides opportunities for students to learn outside the classroom, apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts, and develop soft skills needed in the world of work. Thus, MBKM is a very important program in preparing college graduates to face global challenges.<sup>19,20</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program has a significant positive impact on the development of student soft skills in Jambi City. This program provides opportunities for students to develop various soft skills needed in the world of work, such as communication, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, and creativity. Apart from that, MBKM also provides meaningful learning experiences and prepares students to become individuals who are more skilled, adaptive, and ready to face challenges in the world of work.

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