

THE HUMAN COST OF GLOBAL INTERNSHIP MOBILITY: LESSONS FROM THE FERIENJOB PROGRAM IN GERMAN

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ABSTRACT

The international internship program, examined through the case study of the *Ferienjob* in Germany from October to December 2023, involved thousands of Indonesian university students. These students were promised internship opportunities in Germany; however, the reality of the program did not align with those promises. Many students were found to be working in non-procedural conditions, ultimately leading them to feel exploited. The findings of this study highlight the crucial role of both the government and universities in ensuring safe and supportive working environments, as well as in strengthening protections for student participants. Using a qualitative research method and descriptive analysis, this study identifies key challenges faced by interns, including the mismatch between expectations and actual working conditions, as well as the lack of support from organizing institutions.

Keywords: Students, Internship Program, Ferienjob, Human Trafficking

INTRODUCTION

Fereinjob is an official program by the German government aimed at filling labor shortages in various companies, especially for physical jobs. It is intended for university students who want to earn extra money. However, this program was misused by an agency that promoted it to students at 33 universities in Indonesia by claiming it was part of the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM)* internship program.

This case gained public attention after it was revealed that sending Indonesian students to Germany was not part of the MBKM program. Many students who joined the program felt deceived because their expectations did not match the reality. Some even felt exploited. On the other hand, a few

students said the program was still beneficial despite its flaws.

This raises questions about the role of universities and the government in protecting students who go abroad for internships (Laily Rahmawaty, n.d.). As the world continues to advance, students are expected to develop both skills and competencies. Therefore, universities must offer innovative learning to help students grow in knowledge, attitude, and ability. To support this goal, the Ministry of Education launched the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) policy. One of its key programs allows students to learn outside the campus, including through internships.

Internships give students real work experience and help them gain both hard skills and soft skills. If an internship is officially part of the MBKM program, universities are responsible for monitoring and protecting the students involved. In this case, not only was the internship wrongly claimed to be part of MBKM, but it also became a suspected case of human trafficking (*Tindak Pidana Perdagangan Orang*, TPPO). The Indonesian police (Bareskrim Polri) stated that this was a TPPO case where the internship program was used as a cover to attract students. The students were made to work outside proper procedures and many felt exploited (Purwaningsih, 2024).

Student internships are supposed to provide insights into the real working world. However, studies show that most students focus more on interpersonal skills during internships (Zehr, 2019). Supervisors play a key role in guiding students and ensuring they have meaningful learning experiences. They help make sure students understand their tasks, and a good internship experience can help companies attract the best talent. Universities must be careful in choosing companies for internships and must understand the real purpose of the program (Virolainen, 2013).

The students who joined Fereinjob not only felt deceived because they didn't receive the promised benefits, but they also faced health and safety risks. This case highlights the negative impact on students and the need for stronger protections in international internships. There should be stricter

supervision of the agencies running these programs. It also shows the need for deeper understanding of the moral and legal responsibilities involved, and the importance of building a system that prioritizes student safety and well-being.

To prevent similar cases in the future, this paper aims to offer a theoretical contribution in the area of student protection by identifying the existing gaps and the principles that need to be enforced. Future research is encouraged to use an interdisciplinary approach and involve active participation from the victims and the communities affected.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research design used in this study is descriptive qualitative with a content analysis approach. This design aims to understand the experiences, perceptions, and dynamics of human trafficking (TPPO) within the context of internships in Germany. The data is collected through secondary sources, including social media content and articles, which are analyzed to explore the issues being studied and to build a theoretical understanding based on existing literature. This research design allows the researcher to explore the underlying narratives and power dynamics that shape the discourse around international internship programs. By focusing on publicly available data, such as student testimonies, news coverage, and institutional responses, the study seeks to uncover patterns of exploitation and misrepresentation that may not be captured through official reports alone. This approach not only highlights the vulnerability of students in cross-border internship schemes but also contributes to the broader discourse on ethical international education and the responsibilities of academic institutions and governments in ensuring student protection.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Overview of research data interpretation on human trafficking in internship programs in germany shot that many victims reported being

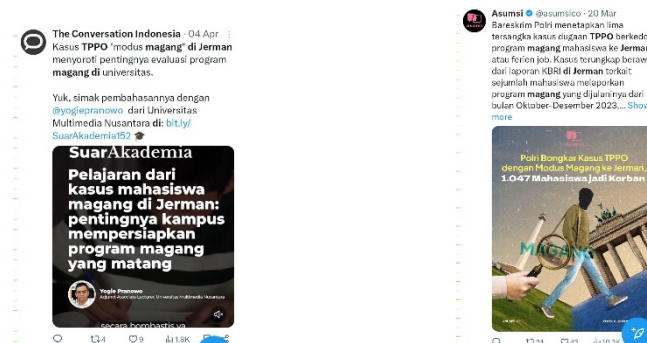
tricked by fake job or internship promises. They were promised good positions and fair working conditions, but in reality, they had to work in poor environments with low wages. These poor working conditions included long working hours, unfair pay, and a lack of legal protection. The people behind human trafficking often used strategies like hiding important information, changing work contracts, and taking advantage of weak laws or poor supervision (Fika Nurul Ulya, 2024).

There is also negative public sentiment. Most social media posts express anger and disappointment toward the internship programs in Germany that are linked to human trafficking. The public believes that interns are not well protected and demand stronger action from the authorities. Looking at data validation through triangulation, there is consistency across multiple social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This supports the idea that the findings reflect a wider reality.

Contextually, there are weaknesses in regulations and supervision. Weak rules and lack of oversight of recruitment agencies and companies offering internships may be one of the reasons for the high number of human trafficking cases (Baharuddin, 2024). Existing policies are not strong enough to stop exploitation and protect the rights of interns.

Based on these cases, several suggestions can be made. First, there needs to be stricter regulations and better supervision of recruitment agencies and companies offering internships. This includes tighter verification processes and strict penalties for violators. Second, support services for trafficking victims need to be improved, including access to legal help, protection, and rehabilitation. Government and non-government organizations should work together to provide proper support. Finally, public awareness campaigns are very important. These can help educate people about the risks of human trafficking in internship programs and help future interns make better-informed and safer decisions.

Figure 1.1 The X Tweet About TPPO



Legal Regulations Concerning Human Trafficking (TPPO)

The internship-related human trafficking (TPPO) cases in Germany reveal significant weaknesses in the existing legal protection system. Regulations governing internships are often insufficiently detailed or strict in ensuring fair and decent working conditions, which opens the door to exploitation (Alfani, 2024). Gaps in law enforcement are also evident, as the monitoring of employer and recruitment agency compliance is often inadequate. This situation is worsened by limited resources and a shortage of competent inspectors. Moreover, enforcement of the law tends to be inconsistent and ineffective, allowing irresponsible employers or agencies to exploit these legal loopholes.

In addition, complex legal procedures and the lack of access to information for foreign interns make it difficult for them to claim their rights or report violations. As a result, many cases of exploitation remain hidden or are not properly addressed. Offenders often escape appropriate punishment, while victims are left without fair justice. Many interns remain trapped in exploitative situations without clear avenues for help or resolution.

Figures 1.2 The Human Trafficking News



In the reported case of human trafficking disguised as internship programs in Germany, the suspects face severe legal consequences. They are charged under Article 4 of Law No. 21 of 2007 concerning the Eradication of Human Trafficking (TPPO), which stipulates a prison sentence ranging from three to fifteen years and fines between IDR 120 million and IDR 600 million (Nainggolan, 2012). Additionally, they are charged under Article 81 of Law No. 18 of 2017 on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, which provides for imprisonment of up to ten years and fines up to IDR 15 billion for individuals who violate Article 69 of the same law by unlawfully placing migrant workers (Tambajong, 2021).

The failure of both universities and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbud Ristek) to adequately protect Indonesian students participating in internships abroad—particularly in Germany—is primarily due to weaknesses in oversight and verification mechanisms. These institutions often do not thoroughly investigate the background and credibility of companies or recruitment agencies that offer such internships. In many cases, excessive trust is placed in foreign partners without proper ongoing evaluation or monitoring. This assumption—that these external parties will operate in accordance with ethical and legal standards—has proven to be misguided, resulting in students being placed in unsafe and exploitative environments.

Compounding the issue is the lack of sufficient education and awareness among students about the risks associated with international

internship programs. Many universities fail to provide adequate information about the dangers of exploitation and do not equip students with the knowledge or skills to recognize and respond to potential trafficking practices. Moreover, institutional mechanisms for handling complaints are often underdeveloped. There are no clear or accessible channels for students to report abuse, and even when reports are made, responses are frequently slow and ineffective, leaving students without proper support or resolution.

These conditions underline the urgent need for reform in several areas. Stronger monitoring, improved educational initiatives, and enhanced complaint-handling systems are essential to ensure the safety and rights of students involved in overseas internships.

Kampus dan Kemendikbud Dalam Mengawasi Program Magang

The failure of universities and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbud Ristek) to protect Indonesian students from human trafficking (TPPO) during internship programs in Germany is primarily due to weak supervision and verification systems for internship opportunities offered by third-party companies abroad. Universities and the Ministry often do not conduct thorough background checks on the companies or recruitment agencies that promote such programs. In many cases, there is excessive trust placed in foreign partners without continuous evaluation and monitoring. It is commonly assumed that these companies or agencies will act according to ethical and legal standards; however, this is not always the case. As a result, students are sometimes placed in programs that do not meet appropriate safety or welfare standards.

Moreover, there is a significant lack of education and awareness among students about the risks associated with internships abroad. Many universities fail to provide sufficient information about potential risks of exploitation or the rights students have during their internships. Consequently, students are often unprepared to protect themselves or to identify signs of trafficking.

Additionally, there are weaknesses in the mechanisms for monitoring and addressing complaints from students while they are interning. Both universities and Kemendikbud have failed to provide clear and accessible communication channels through which students can report problems or violations they experience. Even in cases where students succeed in submitting a complaint, responses from the institutions are often slow and ineffective, failing to provide timely solutions or necessary protection.

This negligence highlights the urgent need for improvement in various aspects, including stricter monitoring, better education, and enhanced mechanisms for reporting and resolving complaints. These improvements are essential to ensure more effective protection for students participating in internship programs abroad.

In response to the ongoing case of human trafficking disguised as internships through the *Ferienjob* program in Germany, Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Nadiem Anwar Makarim publicly addressed the issue. He stated that Kemendikbud Ristek has a major responsibility, not only in ensuring the quality of students' academic learning but also in guaranteeing their safety—particularly within internship programs. "Our responsibility is not only to ensure the quality of education for our students but also to ensure their safety. This is not something we merely talk about—it is something we are actively doing," Nadiem said during a working meeting with Commission X of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) in Jakarta on Wednesday, April 3, 2024.

Nadiem also clarified that the internship activities in Germany through the *Ferienjob* program are not part of the Kampus Merdeka–Merdeka Belajar (MBKM) initiative under Kemendikbud Ristek. He stressed his desire to eliminate the misunderstandings that have developed concerning the MBKM program and its association with *Ferienjob*. Supporting this statement, the Director General of Vocational Education, Kiki Yuliati, explained

that *Ferienjob* is a legal program conducted in Germany, but it is not under the MBKM framework.

Kiki elaborated on the differences between *Ferienjob* and MBKM programs. *Ferienjob* tends to offer physically demanding jobs, while MBKM is designed to enhance student competencies. Their investigation found that *Ferienjob* typically takes place during official semester breaks and is not based on any bilateral agreement between governments. According to Kiki, the program is also not related to academic activities. "There is no agreement between the Indonesian and German governments. Since this program occurs during semester breaks, German policy does not allow participating students to take on academic responsibilities. The goal is to address labor shortages in Germany by filling temporary positions during academic holidays. Students may only participate in the program for a maximum of 90 days per year," she explained. Furthermore, Kiki confirmed that currently, no Indonesian students are taking part in the *Ferienjob* program, and the Ministry remains committed to supporting the legal process regarding the ongoing TPPO case.

Human Security Theory in the Ferienjob Case

The case of the Ferienjob internship program in Germany (October–December 2023) can be analyzed through the lens of Human Security Theory, which encompasses various dimensions such as economic, health, personal, and social security. This theory emphasizes the importance of protecting and empowering individuals to live free from fear and deprivation while enabling them to pursue a meaningful life. In the context of international internships, it is crucial to evaluate the extent to which such programs ensure financial security through fair compensation, access to healthcare services, safe working environments, and adequate social support to help participants adapt to new cultural settings and maintain psychological well-being. This theoretical framework also integrates intercultural and international adjustment theories, highlighting the cultural adaptation process faced by interns relocating to a foreign country. Additionally, career development

theory is employed to assess how international experience contributes to the enhancement of professional skills and future employability. By combining these theories, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the Ferienjob internship program in Germany impacts various aspects of human security and to identify the key factors that influence the success and satisfaction of participants during the internship period.

Previously, it was reported that a number of Indonesian students were promised internship opportunities in Germany but instead became victims of exploitation. The Indonesian National Police's Criminal Investigation Department (Bareskrim Polri) uncovered a suspected human trafficking case linked to these student internship programs. Five individuals have been named as suspects. The suspects offered internships that were falsely claimed to be part of the Ministry's Kampus Merdeka–Merdeka Belajar (MBKM) initiative. However, the program in question turned out to be a "Ferienjob"—a German term referring to short-term physical labor jobs during school breaks. These jobs typically include tasks such as packaging, dishwashing, or baggage handling at airports and are aimed at addressing labor shortages in Germany.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology clarified that the Ferienjob program is not part of the MBKM initiative, and universities have been instructed to terminate their participation. On March 20, 2024, Police Commissioner General Wahyu Widada announced that the fraudulent internship scheme involved 33 Indonesian universities, with 1,047 students having been sent to Germany. One of the participants, RM, a student from West Kalimantan, worked in three different locations from October 11 to December 30 and experienced various forms of exploitation. Upon arrival in Frankfurt, RM and other students were under the management of a labor placement agency named Brisk United. After two weeks of unemployment, RM began work at ID Logistics, a cargo company in Kaiserslautern, on October 31, 2023, alongside 15 other students—mostly female—performing physically

demanding tasks such as moving packages from the warehouse to the packaging section.

The theoretical contribution to understanding this phenomenon includes several key frameworks. Power dynamics theory helps reveal the imbalance between perpetrators and victims in trafficking cases, showing how victims often lack the means to resist or escape exploitative situations. Human trafficking theory aids in analyzing the perpetrators' modus operandi, including deceptive recruitment tactics and forced labor conditions. It provides a structured approach to understanding how exploitation unfolds. The social and economic impacts of trafficking are also significant, with victims suffering both physical and psychological harm, while the broader community faces growing distrust toward legitimate internship programs. These theoretical insights guide the formulation of policy recommendations, such as tightening recruitment regulations, strengthening oversight, and improving victim support mechanisms.

Human Security Theory, in particular, centers on protecting individuals from threats to their survival, safety, and dignity. In the context of labor exploitation within internship programs, the theory underscores the need to ensure that the rights and well-being of interns are safeguarded. This includes creating safe workplaces, guaranteeing fair wages, and providing accessible channels for complaints and assistance. By addressing these needs, interns can be shielded not only from economic exploitation and abuse but also assured of their dignity and human rights, fostering a sense of security and holistic protection throughout their internship experience.

Recommendations

To prevent human trafficking (TPPO) within internship programs such as those in Germany, the government should adopt several regulatory and supervisory measures:

1. **Clear Regulations and Standards:** The government must require transparent work contracts that clearly outline compensation, working hours, roles and responsibilities, and intern rights. Additionally, a minimum wage standard should be set to prevent economic exploitation.
2. **Monitoring and Control:** Only companies certified by the government should be allowed to host international interns. Certification should follow strict evaluation of workplace conditions. Routine inspections must also be conducted to ensure compliance with regulations and to detect potential exploitation.
3. **Support and Protection for Interns:** A reliable and easily accessible reporting system must be established for interns to file complaints. Confidential and secure communication channels should be available. Counseling services and psychological support should also be offered to those facing difficulties or abuse.
4. **International Cooperation:** Bilateral agreements should be developed with host countries to ensure the protection of interns, including mechanisms for joint monitoring and information exchange. Enhanced international coordination is essential for addressing cases of exploitation.
5. **Education and Awareness:** Awareness campaigns should inform prospective interns about their rights and the risks of TPPO. Pre-departure training programs should be provided, covering essential information such as legal rights, key contacts, and emergency procedures.
6. **Legal Enforcement:** Strict penalties must be enforced against companies found guilty of exploiting interns, including heavy fines,

license revocations, and legal prosecution. Legal protections should be guaranteed for interns, ensuring they can report violations without fear of retaliation.

CONCLUSION

The case of human trafficking under the guise of internship programs in Germany highlights how many victims were lured by attractive offers but ended up in exploitative and inhumane working conditions. The poor working environments—including long hours, inadequate pay, and lack of legal protection—demonstrate clear violations of fundamental rights. Perpetrators commonly used fraudulent recruitment processes, manipulated employment contracts, and took advantage of weak regulations and oversight. Public sentiment surrounding these internships is overwhelmingly negative, with strong criticism of the government's failure to provide adequate protection and calls for stricter action.

Regulatory weaknesses and ineffective supervision have been key enabling factors. Addressing this issue requires a combination of tighter regulations, stronger oversight, improved support services for victims, and public awareness campaigns to educate and inform future internship candidates. Through these comprehensive measures, it is hoped that human trafficking within internship programs can be effectively mitigated, ensuring the protection of interns' rights and preventing future exploitation.

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