

## **The Challenges and Opportunities of the Merdeka Belajar Policy in Higher Education: The Prospects for Its Implementation**

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### **Abstract**

Permendikbudristek number 12 year 2024, explains that the Merdeka curriculum includes the basic curriculum framework and curriculum structure. It exists because Curriculum 13 (Kurtilas) sets standards but can be rigid, limiting schools' flexibility to adapt to local needs and student interests. This research aims to analyze further and beyond the challenges and opportunities of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum for the prospects of future curricula and the prospects of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum itself. This research used a systematic literature review from 34 highly regarded global and national indexes and computerized databases accessible via Scopus Dimension accounts. Data analysis in this paper entails the process of inspecting, filtering, and modeling data to discover useful information, draw conclusions, and support decision-making. The finding shows the diffusion of innovation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum adopted from Roger's theory (2003). The main challenges are curriculum adjustment, funding, and partnership exploration. While the opportunities are producing academically competent graduates and skills in the face of technological challenges and society's expectations, independent learning, enhancing students' competency in soft and hard skills as human capital that fits the age of digital technology, as well as inviting various partners and universities and providing a range of learning experiences and networking options for students.

Keywords: Policy, Merdeka Belajar, Educational Innovation, Higher Education, Prospects, Curriculum Flexibility

### **Abstrak**

Permendikbudristek No. 12 Tahun 2024 menjelaskan bahwa Kurikulum Merdeka mencakup kerangka dasar kurikulum dan struktur kurikulum. Kurikulum ini hadir karena Kurikulum 13 (Kurtilas) menetapkan standar yang dapat bersifat kaku, sehingga membatasi fleksibilitas sekolah untuk beradaptasi dengan kebutuhan lokal dan minat siswa. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis lebih jauh tantangan dan peluang Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar untuk prospek kurikulum masa depan dan prospek Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar itu sendiri. Penelitian ini menggunakan tinjauan literatur sistematis dari 34 indeks global dan nasional yang diakui serta basis data terkomputerisasi yang dapat diakses melalui akun Scopus Dimension. Analisis data dalam makalah ini mencakup proses inspeksi, penyaringan, dan pemodelan data untuk menemukan informasi yang berguna, menarik kesimpulan, dan mendukung pengambilan keputusan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan difusi dan inovasi Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar yang diadopsi dari teori Roger (2003). Tantangan utama adalah penyesuaian kurikulum, pendanaan, dan eksplorasi kemitraan. Sementara peluangnya adalah menghasilkan lulusan yang kompeten secara akademik dan memiliki keterampilan dalam menghadapi tantangan teknologi dan harapan masyarakat, pembelajaran mandiri, meningkatkan kompetensi siswa dalam keterampilan lunak dan keras sebagai modal manusia yang sesuai dengan era teknologi digital, serta mengundang berbagai mitra dan universitas serta menyediakan berbagai pengalaman belajar dan opsi jaringan bagi siswa.

Kata kunci: Kebijakan, Merdeka Belajar, Perguruan Tinggi, Prospek

## **BACKGROUND**

Permendikbudristek number 12 year 2024, explains that the Merdeka curriculum includes the basic curriculum framework and curriculum structure. According to Article 3 paragraph 1 of this constitution, the basic curriculum framework is the main foundation design in developing the curriculum structure. In Article 3 paragraph 2, the basic curriculum framework includes goals, principles, characteristics of learning, philosophical foundations, sociological foundations, and psychopedagogical foundations. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum aims to enhance graduate competence in both soft and hard skills, aligning with future workforce needs, supporting national progress, and fostering global competitiveness. The program utilizes experiential learning pathways and external lectures to effectively enhance critical skills necessary for adapting to and contributing to the internationalized environment (Direktorat Pembelajaran Dan Kemahasiswaan Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi, Riset, Dan Teknologi, Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, Dan Teknologi, 2024).

The Merdeka Belajar curriculum policy exists because Curriculum 13 (Kurtilas) sets standards but can be rigid, limiting schools' flexibility to adapt to local needs and student interests. Traditional teaching methods dominate, potentially stifling creativity and critical thinking. National Education Standards Agency, Curriculum, and Assessment of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia et al. (2024) discovered the urgency of implementing the Merdeka Belajar to replace Curriculum 2013 is evident. First, students bear a heavy burden of subject matter. Many teachers believe that mastery learning means completing all learning materials, thereby neglecting student understanding, whereas Curriculum 2013 aims for student comprehension (Sisdiana et al., 2019). Second, there is a lack of alignment between curriculum content and student needs. Third, teachers face a heavy administrative burden; generally, teachers in Indonesia spend considerable time preparing administrative documents. Fourth, a primary reason for the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is the lack of flexibility in its implementation. In this context, Curriculum 2013 does not provide schools the flexibility to adapt to diverse learning objectives and outcomes. This rigidity stems from government-prescribed content and sequences that all teachers in Indonesia must adhere to, limiting their autonomy in developing their teaching methods.

Thus, based on the discussion regarding Kurtilas above, the government is designing a curriculum that can provide more flexibility for educational institutions to implement and reduce the subject matter burden, while continuing the strengths of previous curricula. As stated by the Ministry of Education, Nadiem Makarim, in essence, the Merdeka Curriculum still utilizes Kurtilas but is drastically simplified through the Emergency Curriculum. The government is giving schools across Indonesia the option to adopt this approach (Rais & Xuezhi, 2024). In addition, to recover from post-pandemic learning where existing methods have resulted in significant learning loss and exacerbated disparities in education across regions and socio-economic groups, the Merdeka curriculum has been developed to be more flexible and has launched the Merdeka Belajar platform (Oudri, Romanti, 2022).

The change of curriculum in Indonesia is not new. Since 1945, the national education curriculum has undergone several changes, namely in 1947, 1952, 1964, 1968, 1975, 1984, 1994, 2004, 2006, and currently in 2013, continuing to the present with the Merdeka curriculum (Abdullah, 2007; Puspita & Atikah, 2021 ). This adaptation is because the curriculum in Indonesia continues to respond to changes and developments, aiming to address the evolving challenges of the times, which are unavoidable. Not only Indonesia, but developed countries like the UK have also adjusted their curricula to meet societal needs. Curriculum changes in UK higher education vary in their emphasis on integrating knowledge, action, and

self-components, necessitating customized strategies across different subject areas. In the United States, there are several trends involved in the collegiate curriculum where the academics involved have experienced many changes such as the over-accentuation of vocational training, majoring in education for majors, and minor in liberal training which aimed at enhancing STEM courses, and the application of new technology of teaching intellectual methods such as online and flipped classroom courses (Rury & Twombly, 2020).

Apart from that, generally, higher levels of educational attainment are perceived with better-paying job prospects, which are essential for reducing economic disparities in local areas (Udtohan & Galigao, 2024). However, education extends beyond this economic impact; education aims to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable individuals to become effective problem-solvers, independent critical thinkers, lifelong learners, and responsible members of society (Spector et al., 2014). Education for life and work involves cultivating transferable skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and self-management, all of which are crucial for adult success (Pellegrino et al., n.d.).

Although education is perceived to obtain good employment, new graduates from universities in Indonesia face challenges in job selection due to a lack of work experience and concerns about competition in the job market (Arif Karyanta et al., 2017). Therefore, the implementation of *Kampus Merdeka*, which is more flexible than the previous curriculum, aims to prepare students for the workforce by allowing them to participate in extracurricular activities such as internships, work placements, and student exchanges. These activities can improve work experience and help build social networks (Yunida et al., 2022). Individuals learn from their work experiences, which impact earnings and occupational patterns over their lifetimes (Trimble & Kmec, 2011). Building professional networks is important for exploring career paths and creating lasting professional relationships (Forret & Dougherty, 2004).

From the vantage points above, it is clear that to reflect the current situation of life and society, the curriculum in Indonesia requires frequent reviews. These changes stem from the assessment of the previous curriculum, specifically the Merdeka Curriculum, which is the result of the review of Curriculum 13 (Kurtilas). This curriculum turns the threats of Curriculum 13 (Kurtilas) into advantages and utilizes the opportunities arising from the legal act. For instance, given the flexibility introduced by the Merdeka Curriculum, it is essential to examine how this shift addresses the challenges faced by the traditional Curriculum 13 (Kurtilas), such as rigidity, lack of adaptability, and limited opportunities for practical learning. Flexibility was an issue with Kurtilas since Curriculum 13 could be inflexible. While the traditional curriculum poses some of these aforementioned limitations, the Merdeka Curriculum implements facets such as flexibility and responsiveness to counteract them. Especially in the context of higher education, where the Merdeka Curriculum focuses on flexibility and responsiveness, providing more autonomy to students and allowing for a more dynamic and personalized educational approach (Anggara, 2023; Manajemen Pendidikan Islam et al., 2024).

This underlines the need for research to provide a detailed analysis of the possible issues as well as the prospects of the Merdeka Curriculum. For this reason, such research will focus on the context of higher education. It becomes essential to guarantee that at present, the Merdeka Curriculum can not only improve the current conditions in the educational system of universities in Indonesia but also serve as a foundation for the future course of curriculum development. Through research, it also becomes easier for policymakers and educators to determine the extent to which the Merdeka Curriculum is effective in achieving its set goals and achievements; and to recommend what ought to be done or improved, or what should be done to leverage the success that has been recorded in the course of implementing the Merdeka

Curriculum to improve the effectiveness of the educational system in higher education. Thus, this research has several research questions:

Research Question:

1. What are the Challenges of the Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Policy in Higher Education
2. What are the opportunities for the Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar policy in higher education?
3. How is the prospects for the future Curriculum of Merdeka Belajar after having to assess the challenges and opportunities?

This research used a systematic literature review, which involves a comprehensive evaluation of study findings (Kitchenham, 2004; Okoli and Schabram, 2010). The main goals of this study are to recognize, scrutinize, and integrate existing research on challenges and opportunities of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum to gain the prospect for future research.

Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

To be considered for evaluation, the first search criteria stipulated that manuscripts must satisfy the following prerequisites:

1. The publication should be in a prestigious journal associated with a respected university or publisher, and it should be indexed by a highly regarded global database like Web of Science or Scopus and a national database like SINTA 1, SINTA 2, and SINTA 3.
2. The document must be written in English and Indonesian.
3. Integrate the principles of "Merdeka Belajar" with "Challenges and Opportunities."
4. Examine the notion of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum by employing either quantitative or qualitative research approaches.

There are no limitations or constraints regarding the year of publication to ensure richer data. Articles that do not include any of the four components in the abstract, results, or discussion sections will be considered invalid and will be rejected. In addition, several papers that met the inclusion criteria were found by reviewing similar journal articles discovered during the screening process and referring to books on participative leadership in education.

The researcher employed computerized databases accessible via Scopus account and Dimension accounts to identify published papers. The databases utilized in this study were selected by doing searches based on the titles and abstracts using the primary keywords (Merdeka Belajar OR MBKM) AND (Challenges OR Opportunities). After doing the initial evaluation of the papers and doing a secondary assessment using the stipulated criteria for inclusion and exclusion, it was found in that 11 publications acquired from the Scopus database satisfied the criteria. In addition, it was found that 23 publications acquired from the Dimension database satisfied the criteria. Thus, the total of the selected articles are 34.

Data analysis in this paper entails the process of inspecting, filtering, and modeling data to discover useful information, draw conclusions, and support decision-making. The selected papers underwent a rigorous examination utilizing a thorough data-gathering form that included both broad and detailed information. The data extraction process was effectively overseen by methodically documenting details such as the date of data extraction, article title, authors, conclusions, discussions, and source. The studies were carefully examined to obtain information that is relevant to the research aims, as per the defined criteria. The research established themes based on the subject matter of each study and then categorized the data from each investigation accordingly. The study incorporated emerging themes. After reaching a

state of thematic saturation, where no new important themes were found (Bryman, 2012), the concepts were carefully confirmed and sub-themes were identified inside each of them.

## **Literature Review**

There are many studies discussing the Merdeka Belajar curriculum (Arifin et al., 2021; Krishnapatria, 2021; Retnaningrum et al., 2023; Sahnun & Wibowo, 2023; Wardani et al., 2023), some studies believe that it can improve students' critical thinking (Afida et al., 2021; Nadhiroh & Anshori, 2023, 2023; Safitri & Admoko, 2024; Yansah et al., 2023), it is because the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is structured as a complement to the previous curriculum with a more active and flexible learning approach (Arifin et al., 2021; Krishnapatria, 2021; Retnaningrum et al., 2023; Sahnun & Wibowo, 2023; Wardani et al., 2023). There are also many studies focusing on Merdeka Belajar in higher education, known as Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) (Ade Kurnia Harahap et al., n.d.; Fuadi & Irdalisa, 2021; Purwanti, 2021; Simatupang & Yuhertiana, 2021; Supriati et al., 2022; Virly Apriliyani et al., 2022). Because Merdeka Belajar is a new curriculum implemented by the Minister of Education Nadiem Makarim, the majority of research focuses on its implementation and its impact on the Indonesian education system, as mentioned above. However, since changes in the Ministry of Education in Indonesia can lead to changes in the national education curriculum (Mahfud, 2019) it is important to think further and beyond the challenges and opportunities of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum for the prospects of future curricula and the prospects of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum itself.

There are also research about the challenges and opportunities of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum (Bustari & Putri, 2023; Krishnapatria, 2021; Sampelolo & Kombong, 2022; Sihombing & Panjaitan, 2023; Tangaran & Tulaktondok, 2024; Yansah et al., 2023; Yuhastina et al., 2020). Fajri and Trisna Andarwulan (2023) explored the challenges and opportunities in teaching and learning, discovering that the independent learning policy gives teachers complete control over their classrooms. This curriculum offers teachers the flexibility to tailor opportunities to each student's abilities, allowing for varied learning experiences. However, one of the major challenges is the attitudes and understanding of those implementing the curriculum. The success of this policy relies heavily on the implementers' comprehension of its general goals, basic standards, and objectives. Ultimately, the independent learning curriculum grants both students and teachers greater freedom in their educational approaches, requiring students to be more active and engaged in the learning process.

In 2021, Krishnapatria discussed students' policy to spend 3 semesters outside the program and argued that the primary struggle in implementing the MBKM curriculum is procedural, notably, in the development of cooperation between the study programs and external organizations. But average, the COVID-19 pandemic has been instrumental in supporting online learning in the implementation of this program. Based on the study by Nazar et al. (2024), this paper focuses on the process of curriculum Merdeka Belajar in State Elementary Schools (SES). The study reveals various issues, threats, and prospects reflected in its implementation. The study comes up with some of the findings as follows; there are key challenges to the implementation of curriculum: for instance pre-service teacher training, availability of resources, and adequate access according to the research, the curriculum enhances students' learning experience and facilitates teacher innovation. Also, it is mentioned that support from the Department of Education is one of the key requirements to consider when pursuing the implementation of the plan.

Furthermore, the research on the Merdeka Belajar curriculum covers the analysis of the problems and prospects of the implementation of this concept, including in terms of the organization of teaching and learning processes and learning at different levels, as it was discussed above. Knowledge about these aspects is therefore important in enhancing the probability of successful use of the curriculum and in enhancing its remodeled effectiveness for greater use in the future. It is also relevant to state that the national curriculum of Indonesia has not remained stagnant and has undergone changes at different stages of enactments, revisions, and adaptations mainly as a result of the interaction with political concerns, types of governments, social relationships, economy, and improvements in science and technology in curriculum development (Setiawan & Suwandi, 2022). These updates are to enhance and progress the earlier curricula towards meeting the national education standards (Pakpahan et al., 2023). Furthermore, the change in the curriculum of the Indonesian government's education system is a natural progression in response to the social transformation and advancement in science and technology to fulfill the requirements of society and its interests (Nurdin et al., 2023). Thus, while other research on the topic may explore the issues and opportunities related to the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum, this research would explore the issues and opportunities of the curriculum itself, noting how these aspects advance its prospects and the prospect of the curriculum's future. Thus, through exploring these factors, the study will be beneficial for further research on the matter and possible improvements in the curriculum. This paper aims to present how the Merdeka Belajar curriculum could potentially develop in the years to come to sustain the advancement of the goals of the country's education sector. In this way, this investigation becomes an important background of setting up further orientations for Indonesian educational policies and practices.

### **Independent Learning - Independent Campus As Known As Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka (MBKM)**

Merdeka Belajar provides freedom and autonomy to educational institutions and independence from bureaucracy, lecturers are freed from convoluted bureaucracy, and students are given the freedom to choose fields they like (Direktorat Pembelajaran Dan Kemahasiswaan Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi, Riset, Dan Teknologi, Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, Dan Teknolog, 2024). MBKM itself is part of the Merdeka Belajar policy by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia for higher education students, which provides opportunities for students to hone their skills according to their talents and interests by directly engaging in the workforce as preparation for future careers (lldikti8.kemdikbud). MBKM policy has been implemented since 2020 and formalized in Permendikbud No. 3 of 2020, which has spurred the development of these flagship programs. Permendikbudristek No. 53 of 2023 on Quality Assurance in Higher Education reaffirms students' rights to study outside their program for up to 3 semesters. This regulation's existence significantly broadens opportunities to bridge educational, professional, and personal development elements for students. Under this policy, students not only gain knowledge from lectures but also acquire real-world work experience. In addition, the purpose of the MBKM policy to allow students to study for a semester outside their regular program is aimed at fostering graduate competencies in both soft and hard skills, preparing them for future career challenges and global competitiveness. The program emphasizes experiential learning pathways and external lectures, which are expected to enhance critical thinking skills and prepare graduates to adapt and thrive in diverse professional environments (Direktorat Pembelajaran Dan Kemahasiswaan Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi, Riset, Dan Teknologi, Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, Dan Teknolog, 2024).

Moreover, the Kampus Merdeka initiative encompasses various programs aimed at enriching educational experiences and preparing students for future careers. Kampus Mengajar engages students directly in teaching processes at schools across Indonesia to enhance the quality of elementary education. Internship or MSIB (Magang dan Studi Independen Bersertifikat) offers direct workplace experience to prepare students for their careers. Studi Independen allows students to conduct research projects with real-world case studies from renowned industry practitioners. Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka facilitates domestic student exchanges, providing firsthand experiences to deepen understanding of Indonesia's cultural diversity. Wirausaha Merdeka enables students to participate in flagship programs at various universities aimed at fostering entrepreneurial skills. The Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards facilitates cultural exchange with universities worldwide. These initiatives under Kampus Merdeka aim to broaden students' horizons, enhance their skills, and prepare them to contribute effectively to society and the global workforce.

### **Diffusion of Innovation Theory in the Development of Educational Curriculum in Indonesia**

To establish competitive advantages across various educational sectors, prioritizing innovations is essential for sectoral development. Innovation encompasses new ideas, practices, or objects that are perceived as novel by individuals or groups (Singh & Aggarwal, 2022). Diffusion, on the other hand, involves disseminating an understanding of innovation gradually over time (Benoit & Rogers, 1964; Dearing & Cox, 2018). The ongoing communication of innovations from one individual to another leads to the continual presentation of messages as novel. Thus, the presence of effective communicators or message-bearers is influential in influencing others. The dissemination of discoveries or innovations through media channels can attract mass interest. The role of diffusion in shaping collective understanding is pivotal in influencing societal attitudes and behaviors, necessitating careful and deliberate communication efforts (Jiang & Jiang, 2015). Thus, The diffusion of innovation in education is the process of communicating new ideas, practices, or objects perceived as novel by individuals or organizations that adopt them. In the context of education, diffusion of innovation occurs when teachers, students, or educational organizations adopt new learning methods, technologies, or strategies that are more effective and efficient in enhancing learning outcomes. Therefore, governments and educational institutions must communicate curriculum changes to ensure public perceptions are accurately informed and not unduly biased or distorted.

Moreover, Rogers (2003) proposes that there are four essential elements in the theory of innovation diffusion. These consist of innovation, communication channels, time, and social systems. Innovation refers to an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by individuals or units that will adopt such innovation. The communication process begins with (1) innovation, which is then known by (2) parties or units that understand/know or have tried the innovation, then there are also (3) parties that do not yet know, experience, or try the innovation, and (4) a communication medium that helps to connect these two units. Time is the third element that plays a crucial role in the theory of innovation diffusion. The dimension of time clarifies when and how an innovation or the spread of an innovation occurs. In a social system, there are several categories of innovation adopters within a social system. These include innovators; early adopters; early majority; late majority; and laggards.

### **The Challenges of the Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Policy in Higher Education**

The studies discuss the challenges in the policy of MBKM, encompassing various dimensions. Twenty-three out of thirty-four studies examined the challenges of MBKM in curriculum adjustment. Curriculum adjustment in the context of the Merdeka Belajar refers to the need for universities to review and modify their existing curricula to align with the goals and framework of the MBKM program. This process entails the transformation of its curricular structures to support the learning experiences envisaged by MBKM as well as prepare the students to meet the dynamic demands of the workplace and industries (Dewirahmadanirwati & Agustina, 2024). The authors also stressed that the Curriculum setting presented crucial issues where universities would have to transform their existing curricula to meet the objectives of the MBKM program significantly. This adaptation process may force universities to redesign or transform some or all of their courses to implement the structure and learning/teaching methods of the MBKM curriculum successfully. It also involves the incorporation of elements of self-directed learning, interdisciplinary, and subject matter suitable for the 21st-century work and societal world to prepare students for the labor market (Dewirahmadanirwati & Agustina, 2024a, 2024b; Haryati et al., 2023; Heriyadi et al., 2023a; Hestyrosari & Damay).

Concerning the areas of recommendations mentioned above about curriculum adjustment in implementing the MBKM program. If adjustments are not made in a timely manner, the curriculum may become outdated or misaligned with current educational goals and societal demands, thereby failing to prepare students for future challenges (Habib & Hasanah, n.d.; Haq & Wakidi, 2024). Heriyadi et al. (2023) outlined that the institutions could take several strategic steps. First of all, it is necessary to conduct a critical analysis of the existing curriculum to understand what parts need to be edited to correspond to the goals and actions of the MBKM program (Rais & Xuezhi, 2024). This review process also helps in making sure that the curriculum is relevant to produce the next educated and professionally competent generation. Second, all the curriculum adjustment activities should involve stakeholders such as faculty members, industry partners, and students. This makes their input and collaboration important to the program, which makes the curriculum offer, more practical and closer to the real-life situations that students will encounter upon joining the workforce. The establishment of professional development for the faculty is also critical. These opportunities should aim at improving the competencies of the faculty in creating and implementing new processes of learning that will embrace the MBKM aspects of students' learning and personal growth in terms of their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains.

Financial challenges are also cited by twenty-one out of selected studies on Merdeka Belajar, which encompasses the issue of finances comprehensively, based on the requirement for sufficient funding to support the MBKM program effectively (Dewirahmadanirwati & Agustina, 2024b; Isnaini et al., 2024; Meke et al., 2021, 2022). In addition to this, according to Mike et al. (2024), students have the challenge of the possibility of incurring more expenses to participate in MBKM activities, and this is quite an important factor of consideration nowadays, bearing in mind that the majority of the students come from humble backgrounds. Research of Isnaini (2024) exemplify the financial adversities that students, enrolled in the IMP (International Mobility Program) as a part of Merdeka Belajar implementation in Indonesian higher learning institutions, have reported. These financial issues include the problems of finding enough money to fund travel costs, lodging, visas, and other incidental expenses incidental to studying in another country. Hence, an essential aspect for students to be actively involved in the IMP and international learning process is to find ways of obtaining sufficient financial means. Susanto et al. (2023) also investigated another case concerning students' financial burdens in the Merdeka Belajar Program, especially if they have to retake certain credits that may not be converted correctly. This matter can result in extra expenses for the tuition and the materials. This is evident where credit conversion is not done properly by



universities and students end up repeating the same courses, which prove financially burdensome. This raises problems of costs where uncertainty over the credit conversion will reflect on the costs that are incurred by the students under the Merdeka Belajar Program. Without proper funding and support for curriculum adjustments, teachers may struggle to implement new educational standards effectively. This inconsistency in curriculum delivery can leave students unprepared for subsequent educational challenges (Nevenglosky et al., 2019)

Several strategies to overcome financial challenges in the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program emerge from the provided sources. In 2021, the government allocated IDR 1.913 trillion for the program, an increase from IDR 1.884 trillion in 2020 (Utami et al., 2023). This funding covers various components of the program, including certified internships, independent studies, teaching campuses, student exchanges, and entrepreneurial programs. At university level, to overcome financial challenges in the MBKM program, strategies include securing funding from university leadership and allocating budgets specifically for program activities. Successful implementation involves effective communication and collaboration between the program study department and students to ensure understanding of requirements and support. Additionally, ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the program help identify areas for improvement and ensure resources are utilized efficiently (Nurhasanah et al., 2024).

Moreover, partnership exploration is pointed out as one of the implementation issues found in the MBKM curriculum, according to twenty-four out of the selected readings. The following is one of the challenges that the University faces to initiate and sustain its relationship with foreign universities to create mobility programs like IMP. There is a need to foster genuine partnerships to design quality partnerships with several partners for the improvement of the student's learning experience to guarantee the success of the MBKM program (Dewirahmadanirwati & Agustina, 2024b; Heriyadi et al., 2023; Isnaini et al., 2024; Meke et al., 2021; Nahdhiah & Sucipto).

In some studies, the real case described the issues with the goals and resources between the institutions and the partner (Dewirahmadanirwati & Agustina, 2024b). Thus there are also: Limited partnerships for tertiary institutions to effectively implement MBKM such as challenges in securing institutions or companies to partner with in providing student training programs (Lesi Hertati et al., 2023a). Hertati also claims that such a situation might be there because of the dissimilarities in objectives of the firms, problems related to operations, or lack of interest among the partner organizations. The risk for universities that are unable to benefit from industry partnerships is that they cannot provide financial support, expand the experience for students and faculty, enhance regional economic development, and increase job opportunities (Prigge, 2005).

To overcome partnership challenges with other universities and industries in the MBKM program, several strategies are employed. The Strengths and Opportunities (SO) strategy focuses on expanding the network of relationships to enhance cooperation, thereby opening opportunities for more courses and increasing student participation. The Weaknesses and Opportunities (WO) strategy aims to improve communication systems between lecturers and students, while also addressing discrepancies in course recognition by seeking middle ground solutions. Lastly, the Weaknesses and Threats (WT) strategy involves establishing a clear and accessible system for collaboration and actively engaging in discussions with potential partners to ensure smoother implementation of the program (Nurhasanah et al., 2024). These strategies collectively work to strengthen partnerships and address challenges in the MBKM program (Milwan et al., 2024).

Another significant obstacle is educational disparity, cited by eighteen of the selected studies on *Merdeka Belajar*, as there are considerable differences in educational quality across Indonesia's diverse regions, such as imbalances in numeracy skills between regions, logistical issues, the digital divide, and teacher preparedness. For example, students in Eastern provinces tend to have much lower literacy and numeracy scores compared to their counterparts in Java, making it difficult to apply the curriculum uniformly (Wang et al., n.d.). To address this, the MBKM program has focused on improving literacy and numeracy skills in primary education, aligning with broader national efforts to enhance educational outcomes (Lie et al., 2022).

However, while the focus on foundational skills is essential, it raises critical questions about equity and sustainability. Simply improving literacy and numeracy scores does not address the systemic issues that perpetuate these disparities. For example, targeting literacy alone may not suffice in regions where socioeconomic barriers significantly hinder educational access. Furthermore, Logistical issues further complicate implementation, as many schools lack the necessary infrastructure and digital resources to support modern teaching methods (Hunaepi et al., 2024). In rural areas, inconsistent or non-existent internet access exacerbates the digital divide, limiting students' ability to engage in online education effectively and deepening educational inequalities between urban and rural populations (Amin, 2024). The urban-rural education gap affects educational equity and causes negative impacts on the economy and society (Coker, 2020)

Mitigating regional disparities in quality education requires a multi-faceted approach. First, assessment and evaluation play a crucial role by conducting thorough evaluations of local study centers to identify disparities in teaching quality and student support services. This helps pinpoint areas that need improvement and ensures that resources are allocated where they are most needed. In addition, strategic repositioning can help local study centers adopt differentiated strategies that leverage their unique strengths and regional characteristics, leading to better educational outcomes (Tang et al., 2022).

Although the digital divide is acknowledged, efforts to bridge this gap have been sporadic and underfunded. Policies focusing on digital infrastructure development must be accompanied by strategies to address affordability and accessibility for underserved populations. Without such measures, the risk of perpetuating existing inequalities remains high, even as digital tools are integrated into education. Furthermore, the reliance on online platforms may inadvertently marginalize students who are already disadvantaged, further entrenching inequities.

### **The Opportunities for The Implementation of The Merdeka Belajar Policy in Higher Education**

In the meantime, nineteen readings argued that the opportunities of the MBKM program in higher education consist of producing academically competent graduates and skills in the face of technological challenges and society's expectations. The Outcome-Based Education (OBE) approach guarantees the outcome concentration regarding the basic learning achievements that make an individual ready to face the dynamic market situation (Dewirahmadanirwati & Agustina, 2024b; Heriyadi et al., 2023a; Isnaini et al., 2024; Meke et al., 2021; Salim & Wahidah, 202). This curriculum should cultivate well-educated people who, in addition to being theoretically prepared, can face the opportunities of employment. Various learning activities are facilitated by the program making it encompassed and flexible including; student exchange, internships, student-initiated research, self-sourced projects, project-based learning, research undertakings, internships, and community services, among others (Heriyadi et al., 2023a; Yudhawasthi & Christiani, 2022a).

Besides, includes guaranteeing students' right to learn beyond the department or university with credit transfer, as well as enhancing students' competency in soft and hard skills as human capital that fits the age of digital technology, as well as inviting various partners and universities, and providing a range of learning experiences and networking options for students (Aini et al., 2021; Sa'diyah et al., 2022; Yudhawasthi). This initiative enables the students to study numerous disciplines of knowledge other than their areas of specialty (Dewirahmadanirwati & Agustina, 2024b).

However, behind this opportunity, some challenges were raised in the studies including: The activities require students to be flexible and easily move from one environment to another without feeling constrained, learn the international language of communication as stated above, and be socially accepted when exposed to foreign learning institutions. Furthermore, different challenges may be experienced by students in terms of dealing with group discussions and presentations including public speaking, writing polished papers, and approaches to confidence building in a global perspective. Nevertheless, the prospects of students exposed to great diversity in learning activities foster their development in many ways and contribute positively to their academic education (Isnaini et al., 2024). Moreover, the challenges of developing students' learning activities outside the limited department or university involve changing the curriculum to conform with the MBKM program, integrating a limited number of partners with higher education institutions, inadequate human resources for lecturers as well as students, and the actuality of the competency and skills gained.

Further, working challenges including the areas of training and study differing from the work requirements, as well as insufficient development of long-term partnerships, become the barriers to the effective implementation of this initiative (Heriyadi et al., 2023a). The challenges also encompass ensuring the correct credit conversion procedures take place, liaising with other organizations about integration, and other issues such as scheduling and resource organizing. There might also be issues concerning the learning accomplishments of students, teaching achievements, and students' well-being while studying in other settings.

As for the teaching and learning context in higher education, the Merdeka Belajar program is seen as an opportunity to implement strategies for independent learning (Aini et al., 2021; Basit, 2003; Haryati et al., 2023; Hestyrosari & Damayanti, 2023; Nahdhiah & Suciptaningsih, 2024; Rais & Xuezhi). According to what was captured in the research, independent learning is a teaching and learning strategy that enables the learner to take full responsibility for his or her learning. It encompasses students as being independent, individualist and held accountable for the outcomes of learning (Lesi Hertati et al., Salim & Wahidah, 2023; Surahman et al). Merdeka Belajar may pose the following problems that learners have to face, including the necessity to change the typical approach to studying independently, and which can be quite a problem because one has to learn and study relying only on oneself (Dewirahmadanirwati & Agustina, 2024b; Heriyadi et al., 2023b; Sihombing et al., 2024). Also, learners may experience difficulties in their ability to acquire any help or material outside the classroom structures, which would influence their learning process (Dewirahmadanirwati & Agustina, 2024a; Meke et al., 2021; Surahman et al., 2022a).

Despite the aforementioned issues affecting independent learning in the Merdeka Belajar program, Dewirahmadanirwati and Agustina (2024b) emphasized that effective coordination is critical in such a setting to achieve the right goals and objectives by fulfilling the program's promises in practice. The key steps include, for instance, the process of establishing effective training strategies that aim at increasing the ability of existing educators to support students through the process of independent study and learners' support systems that enhance the effectiveness of learning activities that are conducted independently. Furthermore, the analysis and updating of curricula constantly to address the existing

challenges and demands throughout the industries and the education sector would assist in the overall improvement of the execution of independent learning within the context of the Merdeka Belajar.

### **The Prospects for the Future Curriculum of Merdeka Belajar after Having to Assess the Challenges and Opportunities**

Discussion about the sustainability of the Merdeka Curriculum remain a matter of debate. Will this curriculum be maintained or overhauled, as has often been the case with educational policies in Indonesia, especially during leadership transitions? However, returning to our earlier discussion, curriculum renewal is indeed essential to address the needs and challenges of the times. Nevertheless, the focus of this paper is not whether the Merdeka Curriculum should be sustained or not, but rather the identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, which implies prospects for the use of this framework and its components as part of the education curriculum in the future. The key to success lies in addressing the revealed challenges through strategic actions and leveraging opportunities to enhance educational outcomes (Chen et al., 2017). There are prospects for the future curriculum of Merdeka Belajar after having to assess the challenges and opportunities. First, curriculum adjustment means an analysis of the curriculum and ongoing changes in response to the needs in the context of the labor market and the economy. Stakeholders' involvement of faculty, industry partners, and students in curriculum development provides increased relevance and utilization (Heriyadi et al., 2023). Support also entails offering professional development to the teachers to enable them to improve on the kind of teaching methods that are promoted. Second, the program requires stable funding sources; therefore, funding has to be pursued in sustainable ways. Universities should look for sponsorship, grants, and other partnerships to support the MBKM that is to be implemented in universities, it can encourage potential donors and supporters to be involved in the implementation of new MBKM initiatives that ignore the role in the development of the students' character and pattern of the community involvement. Third, establishing and sustaining relationships with the industry and global organization is paramount in offering Real-life experiences and ensuring appropriateness in terms of the industry's requirements. This workshop focused on proactive response, communication, and planning aiming to develop effective and long-term cooperation (Salim & Wahidah, 2023).

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum has the potential to lead to the production of qualifying graduates in the twenty-first century. As a result from the challenges and opportunities mentioned above, there is a possibility of improving the quality of education and the readiness of students to have proper employment in Indonesian higher learning institutions. Moreover, further prospects of the curriculum in the future learning environment Merdeka Belajar can be observed by reviewing the Diffusion of Innovation theory adopted from Rogers (2003). This theory, which discusses the diffusion of new ideas and practices within a social system of time manner, gives a good understanding of how the MBKM curriculum can be applied and sustained in Indonesia's higher education system.

### **Elements of Diffusion of Innovation in MBKM Implementation**

The element of Diffusion of Innovation consists of four factors which include innovation, communication channels, time, and the social system (Roger, 2003). Merdeka Belajar curriculum is an innovation in the Indonesian Higher Education system. It presents a broad and students' friendly approach that embraces the culture of learning through participation and handling of real-life problems, producing

an interdisciplinary and vocational education approach. This understanding is necessary to accept this invention and incorporate it into the framework of education as a new stage.

In addition, there is a strong emphasis on details and organizational communication important to the diffusion of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. The authorities of universities need to disseminate information regarding the advantages and implementation of the new curriculum through all possible communication means. These sources include the policy documents and guidelines, workshops, and training programs, social networks, conferences, conversations, and case studies of the companies that used it first. Finally, maintaining clarity, consistency, and persuasiveness of the message decreases the amount of resistance and increases the possibility of building an organizational culture that embraces change.

The implementation of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum is also gradual and will undergo the same process described by Rogers' (2003) innovation adoption curve. First of all, the curriculum will be adopted by the innovators/earlier adopters from the academic field and then they will promote it. The early adopters' successes and resultant experiences will further encourage the rest of the early majority to use the curriculum upon realizing the impact and importance of bringing change. Finally, the last adopters, again the pioneers of the late majority and the laggards, will accept change, primarily because of enforced policies and compulsion by society. Knowing this timeline enables the planning of an incremental process and strategies that will be provided to support the change.

Moreover, the social structure in universities comprises the learners, instructors, management, corporate entities, and government. All the groups have their specific responsibility in disseminating the change. For example, in the curriculum implementation, it is faculty members who are responsible for the provision of the curriculum and delivery of the same while students are responsible for the feedback in the implementation process and achievements indicate the implementation achievements. Industry partners support the process and provide real-life scenarios and feedback on the curriculum regarding the current availability of the positions. This can only be done if the policymakers and administrators ensure that an environment is put in place through the formation of policies and the availability of resources.

### **Addressing Challenges and Enhancing Prospects**

Thus, according to the challenges and opportunities highlighted in the previous section, four prospects can be developed further in the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum. First Curriculum Adjustment, which brings us to the idea of the second phase of the training, a phased approach to curriculum adjustment will effectively reduce resistance to change since people resist trends that they never incurred. But having made this particular argument, it becomes possible to provide the second part of the general idea of the training toward implementing a phased approach to the adjustment of the curriculum. Some of the faculty members can be selected and trained on the new curriculum modules to prove their usefulness before widespread usage. Consequently, constant professional development and support of educators assist them in embracing knowledge of newer methods of teaching and assessment.

Second, Funding, alternative sources of funding like collaboration with industrial partners, alumni funding, and international funding can help to supplement government funding. The education endowment can be obtained by proving that the Merdeka Belajar curriculum has positive outcomes and impacts on the performance of the graduates and the success stories of the students can help to acquire the financial support needed. When it comes to the management of financial concerns, value analysis of

the costs involved, formulation, and implementation strategies, and ways of enhancing costs (Floyd & Prebble, 1995).

Third, Partnership Exploration, to build strong strategic partnerships with the industry and international institutions it is necessary to look for them and have a clear message of what and how both parties will benefit from this cooperation. Universities can create special offices or special investigation groups for the search and development of cooperation offers. These partnerships would benefit from the development of shared programs that include internships and research, collaborations as well as exchange programs for students. It was established that only the successes and benefits of partnership need to be communicated to the public to popularity attract more stakeholders. To sort out this conflict, the best approach involves active participation, proper communication, and planning to create strong and beneficial partnerships in the advancement of the MBKM program goals and objectives (Salim & Wahidah, 2023). In the same respect, universities require partnerships with industries to augment the gap between the kind of education provided and the industrial expectations. This challenge also involves the assurance that the skills and competencies being taught in educational programs correspond to the required and desired ones for the job market to improve the employment chances of education program graduates. Thus, universities can help industrial partners reach student talents and engage in cooperation with businesses to create practice experiences, internships, or real-life applications of knowledge for graduates. The last, Independent Learning, As with the previous aspects, promoting independent learning implies a change in culture in the educational system. Teaching or molding the students to have skills in independent learning, organizational skills, analysis skills, and searching skills is crucial. Students also face difficulties in independent learning, therefore, establishing appropriate relations with the mentor and other assistants, and information resources plays an important role for students.

The findings on the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar policy highlight key implications for policymakers, universities, and the broader education community. Policymakers must prioritize creating standardized guidelines for curriculum adjustments, ensuring equitable funding, reducing regional educational disparities, and incentivizing industry partnerships to support the program's goals. Universities should focus on comprehensive curriculum reviews, professional development for faculty, establishing long-term industry and international partnerships, and optimizing resource allocation to enhance program implementation. The education community must embrace independent learning strategies, actively participate in feedback mechanisms, and foster collaboration through networking and mentorship opportunities. Addressing these challenges collaboratively can reduce financial and logistical barriers, promote equity, and ensure that students gain the skills needed to thrive in a dynamic, globalized workforce

## **CONCLUSION**

Merdeka Belajar curriculum is an innovation in the Indonesian Higher Education system. It presents a broad and students' friendly approach that embraces the culture of learning through participation and handling of real-life problems, producing an interdisciplinary and vocational education approach. This understanding is necessary to accept this invention and incorporate it into the framework of education as a new stage by adopting the diffusion of innovation theory by Roger (2003). This review highlights the challenges and opportunities in MBKM and its prospects for future curricula and for Merdeka Belajar itself. The main challenges are curriculum adjustment, funding, and partnership exploration. Besides, the opportunities of implementing MBKM are producing academically competent

graduates and skills in the face of technological challenges and society's expectations, guaranteeing students' right to learn beyond the department or university with credit transfer, and independent learning, as well as enhancing students' competency in soft and hard skills as human capital that fits the age of digital technology, as well as inviting various partners and universities, and providing a range of learning experiences and networking options for students. The identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum implies prospects for the future use of the educational product. Thus, it is possible to assume that the key to success is in approaching the revealed challenges through strategic actions and utilizing the opportunities to augment the educational outcomes. First, curriculum adjustment means an analysis of the curriculum and ongoing changes in response to the needs in the context of the labor market and the economy. Second, the program requires stable funding sources; therefore, funding has to be pursued in sustainable ways. Universities should look for sponsorship, grants, and other partnerships to support the MBKM that is to be implemented in universities, it can encourage potential donors and supporters to be involved in the implementation of new MBKM initiatives that ignore the role in the development of the students' character and pattern of the community involvement. Third, establishing and sustaining relationships with the industry and global organization is paramount in offering Real experiences and ensuring appropriateness in terms of the industry's requirements. This workshop focused on proactive response, communication, and planning aiming to develop effective and long-term cooperation.

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