

## Optimization of the MBKM Role in Enhancing Student Career Capacity Through Learning Experiences

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**Abstract**— *This research focuses on improving the accessibility of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program and its impact on enhancing students' career capacity through inclusive and diverse learning experiences. The main objective of this study is to identify the role of scholarships and the flexibility of the MBKM program in expanding access for students with financial limitations and how this affects their job readiness. The research method used is descriptive qualitative, with data collected through in-depth interviews with students participating in the MBKM program and analysis of documents related to MBKM policies. The findings indicate that strengthening the synergy between higher education institutions and industries, improving the quality of learning through practical experiences, diversifying the MBKM program, and significantly enhancing the accessibility of the MBKM program increases student participation, especially from lower-middle economic groups, contributing to the development of practical skills and their readiness to face the job market. The implications of this research underscore the importance of designing more inclusive and adaptive higher education programs to create competent graduates ready to compete in the global job market. This study also recommends the need for more comprehensive further research to accommodate variations in gender, age, and broader methods to understand the impact of educational accessibility on diverse student groups.*

**Keywords**— *Educational Accessibility, Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM), Student Job Readiness*

### 1 Introduction

Significant changes in higher education in Indonesia have gained attention, particularly with the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology [1]. This policy aims to provide freedom and flexibility for students to explore their interests and talents through various learning programs outside the campus [2]. With this program, students are expected to develop their abilities and expand their learning experiences relevant to the job market [3]. Social facts indicate that in this era of globalization, competition in the job market is increasingly fierce [4]. Students are not only required to have strong academic knowledge but also practical skills that align with industry needs [5]. However, there is a tendency for graduates to still face challenges in securing jobs that match their fields of study [6]. This indicates a gap between the competencies possessed by graduates and the expectations of the job market. Therefore, optimizing the role of MBKM becomes crucial to enhance students' career capacities through varied and relevant learning experiences that meet market demands [7].

The theories underlying this topic include experiential learning theory by Nazla, which emphasizes the importance of learning through direct experience as an effective method for developing practical skills and knowledge [8]. Additionally, the employability skills theory by Indriati & Djaddang is also relevant, as it stresses the importance of developing skills that can enhance graduates' competitiveness in the job market. Despite the implementation

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of the MBKM policy, challenges remain in its execution, affecting the effectiveness of this program in enhancing students' career capacities [9]. One major issue faced is the lack of synergy between the learning programs outside the campus and industry needs [10]. Many students participating in the MBKM program still struggle to identify the relevance of the experiences they gain with the careers they wish to pursue in the future [11]. Furthermore, a comprehensive evaluation of MBKM's success in improving graduate employability has yet to be conducted.

This research will focus on how to optimize the role of MBKM to effectively enhance students' career capacities through the learning experiences provided by this program. The study will examine whether the learning experiences gained through the MBKM program are genuinely relevant and supportive of students' career development, as well as how this program can be optimized to yield better outcomes.

Previous research has discussed various aspects of MBKM and its relevance to students' career development. For example, research by Hasnawati found that student participation in the MBKM program can enhance the interpersonal and professional skills required in the workplace. Another study by Darmawan & Aliyyah showed that the MBKM program positively contributes to expanding students' professional networks, ultimately increasing their career opportunities. Meanwhile, a study by Az-Zahra revealed that students actively involved in the MBKM program tend to be better prepared to enter the job market compared to those who are not engaged in the program. Research results indicate that the MBKM program significantly boosts students' motivation to learn and develop skills, which are essential for career readiness in both soft and hard skills [12]. However, research gaps still exist regarding how the MBKM program can be optimized to achieve better outcomes. Previous studies have generally focused on a broad evaluation of the MBKM program, with few exploring specific strategies that can be implemented to enhance the effectiveness of this program in the context of students' career development.

This research offers novelty by developing an optimization model for the MBKM program that is more focused on enhancing students' career capacities. This model will be based on an in-depth analysis of the relevance of learning experiences in the MBKM program to industry needs. Additionally, this study will explore how synergy between higher education institutions and industry can be improved to ensure that the MBKM program provides maximum benefits for students. This research aims to make a significant contribution to improving MBKM implementation so that university graduates in Indonesia have higher competitiveness in the global job market.

The objectives of this research are to examine how to optimize the role of MBKM to enhance students' career capacities through the learning experiences provided by this program. This study also aims to identify the challenges faced in the implementation of MBKM and formulate strategies that can be applied to improve the effectiveness of this program. Thus, the results of this research are expected to provide useful recommendations for policymakers, higher education institutions, and industry in developing a more effective and relevant MBKM program in line with job market needs.

## 2 Method

This research employs a qualitative research method with a case study approach. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the role of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program in enhancing students' career capacity through learning experiences. A case study was selected because it provides flexibility in exploring complex and contextual phenomena related to the implementation of MBKM in an educational institution. The focus of this research is to reveal the experiences, perceptions, and views of students and stakeholders regarding the MBKM program.

Data collection techniques in this study include in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with students who have participated in the MBKM program, supervising lecturers, and industry representatives involved in the program. Observations were carried out to directly monitor the

implementation of the MBKM program on campus, including internship activities, industry projects, and student exchange programs. This research was conducted at STAI Nurul Huda Kapongan, Situbondo, East Java. The data obtained from interviews and observations were then combined with document analysis related to the MBKM program published by the university and relevant ministries.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The analysis process began with transcribing the interview data, followed by coding the data to identify key themes related to the role of MBKM in enhancing students' career capacity. The findings from this thematic analysis were then interpreted to explain the identified patterns and to answer the research questions. The results of this analysis are expected to provide deeper insights into how the MBKM program can be optimized to support students' career development.

### 3 Findings And Discussion

This research aims to explore how the role of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program can be optimized to enhance students' career capacities through the learning experiences provided by this program. Through in-depth qualitative analysis, it was found that strengthening the synergy between higher education institutions and industry, improving the quality of learning through practical experiences, diversifying MBKM programs, and increasing the accessibility of these programs are key factors contributing to the success of MBKM in achieving its objectives. Below are the research findings derived from in-depth interviews with various stakeholders, including directors, program heads, lecturers, and students.

#### Strengthening Synergy Between Universities and Industry

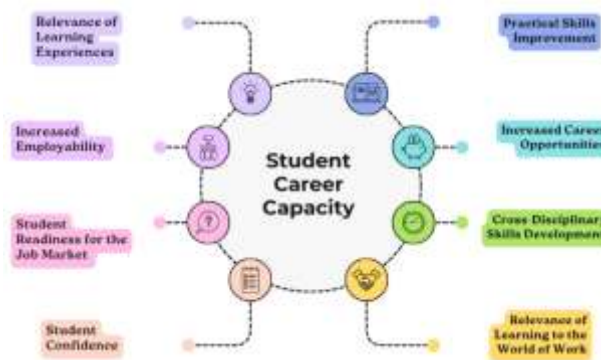
One of the key findings of this study is the importance of strengthening the synergy between universities and industry in the implementation of the MBKM program. Close collaboration between these two parties enables the development of programs that are more relevant to the needs of the industry, allowing students to acquire skills that align with labor market demands [13]. The synergy between universities and industry has become a crucial element in creating graduates who are job-ready and highly competitive [14]. Strengthening this collaboration not only enriches academic curricula but also provides students with real-world learning experiences, which in turn enhances their career capacity [15].

According to the head of the study program, "Collaboration with external industries ensures that our students get relevant internships, which can improve their employability after graduation." This statement demonstrates that strategic partnerships between universities and companies are essential to ensuring that internship programs offered are not mere formalities but add real value for students. It indicates that the educational institution prioritizes its relationship with the industrial world. Through this collaboration, students gain internships aligned with their field of study, providing not only practical experience but also preparing them for the labor market. These relevant internships are seen as a key factor in increasing the employability or competitiveness of graduates in the job market. With real work experience during their studies, students not only gain academic knowledge but also the practical skills needed by the industry.

A lecturer involved in curriculum development expressed a similar sentiment, saying, "Through this synergy, we can align the curriculum with market needs, making our graduates more prepared to compete." This statement shows that the synergy between universities and industry allows for a more dynamic and responsive curriculum to changing market demands, ultimately improving students' readiness to compete in the job market. With synergy between education and industry, they can adjust the teaching materials, skills, and competencies taught to students to be in line with what the job market requires. The goal is for graduates from these institutions not only to have strong academic knowledge but also skills and abilities relevant to the current labor market needs. As a result, graduates

will be better prepared to compete in the job market, have a higher level of competitiveness, and find it easier to secure jobs that match their fields after graduation.

This aligns with the statement from a student who participated in the internship program, sharing that, "The internship I took part in was very relevant to my study program and gave me a direct view of the career I want." This experience demonstrates that through strong collaboration between universities and industry, students can more easily understand and prepare for their chosen career paths. The internship provided significant benefits in helping individuals connect the theories learned in the classroom with practices in the workplace. This experience allows them to gain deeper insight into the profession they want to pursue, including the challenges and skills required. It also indicates that the internship plays an important role in validating or even clarifying their career aspirations. In other words, the internship not only strengthens their academic understanding but also gives them a real picture of how the field they are studying is applied in the professional world. This helps them make more informed decisions about the career path they want to take after graduation.



**Figure 1.** Strengthening Synergy Between Universities and Industry to Enhance Students' Career Capacity

This finding indicates that a strong synergy between universities and industry is a key factor in the success of the MBKM program in enhancing students' career capacity. Through close collaboration, the programs offered are more relevant and can have a greater positive impact on student competency development [16]. This shows that relevant learning experiences significantly increase employability and students' readiness to enter the job market [17]. Through these experiences, students are able to enhance the practical skills needed in the workforce, which in turn also strengthens their confidence [18]. Learning designed with high relevance to industry needs allows students to connect theory with practice, supported by flexibility in learning methods [19]. Furthermore, the development of cross-disciplinary skills has proven to broaden students' perspectives and improve their career opportunities in various fields [20]. Overall, these indicators underscore the importance of alignment between higher education and the workforce in equipping students with comprehensive and ready-to-use skills.

### Improving Learning Quality Through Practical Experience

Another important finding from this study is that improving learning quality through practical experience in the MBKM program is significant in helping students develop skills relevant to the workforce. This practical experience not only enhances mastery of technical skills but also essential soft skills in professional environments [21]. Improving learning quality through practical experience has become an effective strategy in preparing students for success in the workforce [22]. Practical experience not only complements the theoretical knowledge gained in class but also provides students with the opportunity to develop skills highly needed in the field.

A program director responsible for the MBKM program stated, "The practical experience students gain during MBKM is crucial in sharpening skills that cannot be taught in the classroom." This statement emphasizes the importance of field experience as a key component of learning, which cannot be replaced by classroom theory or studies. The MBKM program provides students with hands-on experience in the workforce or real-world environments that allow them to hone practical skills, such as problem-solving, adaptability, effective communication, and project management, which may not be fully learned through theory and classroom discussions. These skills are often dynamic and contextual, developed through interaction with complex situations and real-world challenges. This statement also indicates that practical experience during MBKM is considered an essential element in the comprehensive learning process, helping students better prepare to enter the workforce with ready-to-use skills relevant to industry needs. It reinforces the idea that learning does not only occur in the classroom but also through direct experiences that provide a deeper understanding of how knowledge and skills are applied in real life.

A lecturer who supervised the internship program expressed a similar view, "Our students are now more confident in facing the challenges of the workforce because they have experienced the situations firsthand." This shows that practical experience through MBKM has a direct impact on students' confidence, which is crucial when they transition from the academic world to the workforce. Students who have been involved in real-world work situations during their studies become more prepared and confident when facing actual challenges in professional environments. This hands-on experience provides them with a better understanding of what is expected in the workforce, as well as how to adapt to the dynamics and demands of the job. This confidence arises because students already have a clear picture of the work environment, including how to interact with colleagues, handle complex problems, and meet professional targets or responsibilities. This experience helps reduce the anxiety or uncertainty typically faced by new graduates when they enter the workforce for the first time.

One student involved in the internship program also acknowledged this benefit, stating, "The internship I did helped me understand how work is done in the real world, which is very different from the theory in class." This statement illustrates how practical experience provides deeper and more realistic insights into the workforce, which cannot always be gained through classroom learning. The outcome of this interview reveals that the internship experience gave the individual a profound understanding of how the theory learned in class is applied in real-world practice. This shows that while academic teachings are important, they do not always fully reflect the complexities and dynamics encountered in actual work situations. Through internships, the individual realized that the workforce has challenges, processes, and demands that may not be fully represented in theoretical learning. This experience helps them better understand the practical context, adjust their expectations, and prepare themselves more effectively to face the realities of the professional world.



**Figure 2.** Improving Learning Quality Through Practical Experience to Enhance Students' Career Capacity

The findings suggest that improving learning quality through practical experience in the MBKM program has a significant impact on students' skill development and readiness to enter the workforce [23]. This experience helps students integrate theoretical knowledge with practical applications, which is essential in the complex and dynamic world of work. The results show a significant difference between the theories taught in class and their application in the workplace [24]. Students who engage in internships or real-world work realize that academic theory, though important as a knowledge base, does not always reflect the complexities and dynamics present in professional environments [25]. This experience provides them with deeper insights into how theoretical concepts are applied in real situations, often requiring adjustments and more contextual understanding [26]. Additionally, the findings reveal that practical experience substantially enhances students' understanding of actual work processes, which in turn strengthens their readiness and confidence in facing the challenges of the working world [27]. Students who have firsthand experience in the workplace tend to be better prepared to adapt and transition from academic to professional settings [28]. This confidence grows from a better practical understanding and real-life experience in handling situations encountered during internships, making them more prepared to start their careers with greater confidence and competence [29].

#### **Diversification of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) Program**

The diversification of the MBKM program was also found to be an important factor contributing to the enhancement of students' career capacity. This diversification offers greater flexibility for students to choose programs that align with their interests and career goals [30]. The diversification of the MBKM program plays a crucial role in enriching students' learning experiences, which in turn boosts their career capacity [31]. By offering a wide range of options, including internships, industrial projects, cross-disciplinary learning, soft skills training, and entrepreneurship programs, MBKM helps students holistically prepare for the challenges of the complex workforce [32]. This approach ensures that students not only possess strong academic knowledge but also practical skills, adaptability, and the confidence needed for career success.

The head of the study program responsible for the MBKM program stated, "The diversification of the MBKM program gives students the freedom to explore fields that may not be covered in the standard curriculum." This interpretation indicates that by offering a variety of program options, students can explore their interests more deeply and develop skills in areas that may not be fully covered in the formal curriculum. Through the diversification of the MBKM program, students are given the opportunity to explore fields of study and learning experiences not included in the traditional curriculum. This allows them to choose and participate in programs that align with their personal interests or career aspirations, which may not be offered in-depth within their study programs. This freedom enables students to develop knowledge and skills beyond the boundaries of their primary academic discipline, enriching their understanding and opening up new opportunities that may not have been available through more conventional educational pathways. Thus, this diversification not only supports academic development but also fosters innovation, creativity, and flexibility in learning, all of which are crucial for success in a constantly evolving job market.

A lecturer involved in program development also emphasized the importance of this diversification, stating, "With the variety of MBKM programs, students can discover their passions and develop skills outside of their main discipline." This statement highlights that the diverse programs allow students to explore various fields, ultimately helping them discover career interests and potential they may not have previously realized. The variety of programs offered by MBKM provides students with the flexibility to explore different areas outside their main academic discipline. This allows them to discover and pursue passions or interests that may not be accessible within the traditional curriculum. Beyond discovering their passions, students also gain the opportunity to develop additional skills outside their primary field of study. These skills may include soft skills, new technical

knowledge, or even cross-disciplinary experiences that enrich their overall profile. Therefore, the variety of MBKM programs not only supports more holistic learning but also prepares students to be more flexible and adaptable to the diverse demands of the workforce.



**Figure 3.** Diversification of MBKM Programs in Enhancing Students' Career Capacity

The findings indicate that the diversification of MBKM programs provides significant added value to students' career development. The flexibility and wide range of program options allow students to explore and develop broader skills, enhancing their opportunities in a competitive job market. The results from these indicators show that the flexibility in choosing MBKM programs gives students the freedom to explore various fields beyond their primary disciplines [33]. With this freedom, students can not only discover personal passions or interests that may not have been addressed during their studies but also have the opportunity to develop these interests more deeply [34]. These diverse programs enable students to explore a wider range of knowledge and skills, creating a more personalized and relevant learning path aligned with their career aspirations [35]. Moreover, through the discovery and development of passions and cross-disciplinary skills, students become better prepared to face the challenges of the workforce [36]. Their ability to adapt to various situations and dynamic industry needs is strengthened because they have gained diverse experiences and skills [37]. This also contributes to enriching students' profiles, where they not only possess competence in their primary discipline but also have a combination of technical skills and soft skills, making them more competitive in the job market [38]. Overall, these indicators demonstrate how the diversification of MBKM programs can significantly enhance students' readiness for career success.

### **Increasing Accessibility of MBKM Programs**

This study also found that increasing the accessibility of MBKM programs is a key factor in ensuring that all students, regardless of financial background, have equal opportunities to participate in these programs. Improving accessibility to the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) programs plays an important role in enhancing students' career capacity through more inclusive and diverse learning experiences [39]. By expanding access, particularly through initiatives like scholarship provision and flexibility in program selection, MBKM allows more students to engage in various activities that enrich their skills and knowledge beyond the traditional academic environment [40].

This is supported by a statement from a director who mentioned, "We are committed to increasing access to MBKM programs, especially for students with financial limitations." The interview results with this informant show a systematic effort from the university to ensure inclusivity in MBKM programs, which is essential to providing fair opportunities for all students. The institution's commitment to ensuring that all students, including those with financial constraints, have equal opportunities to participate in the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program reflects efforts to reduce economic barriers that may prevent underprivileged students from exploring the educational and personal development

opportunities offered by MBKM. By increasing access, the institution aims to ensure that all students, without exception, can benefit from the various learning experiences provided by MBKM, ultimately enhancing their future career capacity.

A lecturer involved in the scholarship program also acknowledged the importance of this accessibility, stating, "Providing scholarships for MBKM programs can greatly help students who previously couldn't participate due to financial issues." This statement highlights the key role scholarships play in increasing student participation in MBKM, particularly for those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The interpretation of this interview reveals that specific scholarships for MBKM have opened access for students previously hindered by financial barriers. With this financial support, students who may not have had the resources to participate in the program now have equal opportunities to benefit from the diverse learning experiences offered by MBKM. This means that scholarships not only reduce the financial burden but also ensure inclusivity and more equitable opportunities for all students in pursuing self-development and career growth through MBKM.

This sentiment is echoed by a student who received a scholarship and experienced the positive impact of increased accessibility, stating, "I was able to join MBKM thanks to the scholarship, which was not possible before due to the costs." This informant's statement reflects an experience where financial support allowed more students to participate in the MBKM program and benefit from the provided learning experiences. The interpretation of this interview is that the scholarship has been crucial for students facing financial constraints, enabling them to participate in the MBKM program. Previously, the costs required to join the program may have been a significant barrier, but with financial assistance, the student now has the opportunity to engage in valuable learning experiences. This confirms that scholarships not only provide financial support but also open up previously unreachable opportunities, allowing students to develop themselves and enrich their academic and professional experiences through MBKM.



**Figure 4.** Increasing Accessibility of MBKM Programs in Enhancing Students' Career Capacity

The findings suggest, from a theoretical perspective, that increasing the accessibility of MBKM programs through the provision of scholarships and other financial support is a crucial step in ensuring that these programs are available to all students [41]. This initiative not only increases participation but also ensures that the benefits of the MBKM program are equitably distributed among all students [42]. The results from these indicators show that the provision of scholarships within the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program has expanded access for financially disadvantaged students [43]. Scholarships have become a key factor in encouraging the participation of students who were previously unable to join the MBKM program due to financial constraints [44]. With this financial



assistance, more students from diverse economic backgrounds can now engage in the MBKM program, making access to quality education more inclusive and equitable [45].

Additionally, the role of scholarships not only increases participation but also opens up broader opportunities for personal development for students [46]. This inclusivity ensures that all students, without exception, have the same opportunity to participate in programs that can enrich their academic and professional experiences [47]. These scholarships also help remove financial barriers that often hinder access to quality education, enabling students to fully benefit from the MBKM program and better prepare themselves for their future careers [48].

#### 4 Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that increasing the accessibility of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program has a significant impact on enhancing students' career capacities through more inclusive and diverse learning experiences. A key finding from this research is that providing scholarships and flexibility in choosing MBKM programs not only opens greater opportunities for students from various economic backgrounds to participate but also enriches their practical skills and readiness to face the job market.

The takeaway from this research is the importance of expanding inclusive educational access as a strategic step in preparing competent graduates ready to compete in the global market. This paper contributes to academic discourse by updating perspectives on the significance of diversification and accessibility in higher education programs for developing students' career capacities.

Through this research, a new perspective on how flexibility and financial support can influence graduates' job readiness has emerged, providing guidance for educational institutions in designing more inclusive and relevant programs. However, this study has limitations in terms of case scope and participant variation. It is confined to specific cases and locations and does not sufficiently accommodate variations in gender, age, and broader methodologies. Therefore, further comprehensive research is needed, encompassing various age groups, genders, and employing more varied survey methods, to obtain a more complete picture that can inform more effective and targeted educational policies.

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