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Implementing Kampus Merdeka: The Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins with One Tentative Step

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Abstract

In 2020, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia introduced a significant educational policy reform entitled Kampus Merdeka. Kampus Merdeka provides a national approach for Work Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities for Higher Education students to enhance their future career prospects. However, many challenges have clouded Kampus Merdeka's execution and its desired resultant impact. Indonesian Higher Education institutions are experiencing significant implementation challenges. This discussion paper aims to undertake a review of the currently available literature related to Kampus Merdeka, to better understand the policy's broader operationalization and future implications for the sector. This discussion focuses on four key themes: Higher Education Management and Administrative Practices, Curriculum Change, Academic Staff Preparedness and Defining and Reshaping Roles and Responsibilities of Academics. The article concludes with reflections concerning the strengthening of the evidence base for Kampus Merdeka's future operationalization.

Keywords: Community Engagement; Industry Engagement, Kampus Merdeka; Partnership Development; Work-Integrated Learning.

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1. Introduction

Kampus Merdeka is a transformative education policy recently begun in 2020 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia. The policy has a universal goal of better connecting higher education institutions with industry and the broader community by incorporating more focused WIL initiatives into the curriculum to build resilient communities. Falah (2021) posits that *Kampus Merdeka* forms a key pillar in the Indonesian Government's realization and commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). It also serves as a valuable policy catalyst to meet the increasing human capability challenges arising from rapid National economic development. Firdaus, Andayani, Walipah, Yudsono (2020) further opine that *Kampus Merdeka*, through provisioning student competency development, plays a pivotal role in soft skills development by building a bridge between graduates and the world of work (Siminjutak et al., 2022).

It is timely now to evaluate what we currently know about *Kampus Merdeka* implementation and operationalization. Intending to inform such endeavours, these paper reports findings from a thematic review of research literature since its inception in 2020. The review scrutinized the academic and public discussion via four key themes, Higher Education Management and Administrative Practices, Curriculum Change, Academic Staff Preparedness and Defining and Reshaping Roles and Responsibilities of Academics, Industry and Students. Further, a more deliberate aim of the review was to identify whether there is a need for further research and, if so, to identify useful foci for future studies.

2. Higher Education Management and Administration Practices

In many parts of the Indonesian University sector, collaborating with industry and civil society is fraught with unfamiliarity. Faudi and Aswita (2021), in describing the internship programs in private Universities in Aceh, noted that the Universities are experiencing many obstacles, essentially because they do not have in place appropriate institutional mechanisms for external engagement. To be useful, these guiding frameworks need to be embedded in a culture of ongoing professional development, and Wibowo (2021) noted that a school's culture plays an important role in supporting the professional development of teachers. This impact of school culture regarding supporting teacher development is categorised into four categories: institutional management; school environment; facilitation for learning; and relationships between teachers (Wibowo, 2021).

Zainal (2021) noted that, while the *Kampus Merdeka* remains 'optional' and that there is a lack of 'socialization' of the policy across the university sector, there is concurrently a 'lack of understanding from university administrators' of the requirements for implementing the actions relevant to *Kampus Merdeka* policy, and as a result, the strategies needed for collaboration with industry remain elusive. It appears, though,

that in order to facilitate Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) programs, University management needs to respond more clearly to the demands and needs of industry and community, openly articulating the relevant learning demands and subsequently designing responsive learning programs.

Siregar et al. (2020) also suggest that there are obstacles when attempting to encourage Universities to change, noting that processes and procedures need to be in place to 'socialise' the *Kampus Merdeka* policies across the University sector and to build greater awareness of the benefits for their students. Putra et al. (Putra et al. 2021) noted that, in the three universities that they studied, there were difficulties around the accreditation of 'external' study programs relating to the accreditation status of the participating Universities. This impasse requires further analysis and resolution, which, it is suggested, could be resolved with more detailed negotiations in order to build understanding and support from stakeholders for the *Kampus Merdeka* policy. Such a path, seen in this context, requires acceptance and trust in the development of partnerships building organisational resilience, whilst accepting and acknowledging differences in understandings and participation requirements.

It is now widely agreed that reform of the university sector is needed, especially in relation to campus accreditation, in order to build organisational resilience, with Rosser (2022) noting that the poor quality of Higher Education institutions in Indonesia is partly because of the paucity of governance at the institutional level. Rosser further argues that this failure reflects the dominance of sector interests and business groups in institutional governance, leading to a jaundiced and sectoral view of the role of Higher Education institutes. This new stance, which is embodied in *Kampus Merdeka*, is unwittingly creating relative marginalization of elements that favour traditional research, teaching, and community service approaches that are better aligned with neoliberal or idealistic conceptions of quality (Fairman et al., 2022).

3. Curriculum Change

In Indrawati and Kuncoro's analysis of the *Kampus Merdeka* program (Indrawati & Kuncoro, 2021) it is suggested that strong and strategic leadership in the Universities may be required to implement the new policies for education. They suggest the Ministry of Education and Culture could have implemented the *Kampus Merdeka* program more systematically, rolling out Pilot Programs prior to full implementation of the regulations (Indrawati & Kuncoro, 2021). It is felt that this staged approach may have helped overcome the current levels of resistance and confusion about the regulations among Higher Education institutions. According to Indrawati and Kuncoro (2021), the aim of these Pilot Projects may have facilitated a better understanding of the current situation at the institutional level (Indrawati & Kuncoro, 2021). A pilot program may have allowed for greater customisation, rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' program, which ultimately requires adjustment during implementation to suit individual institutions.

Notwithstanding the problems with this changeover period, it is generally recognised that the *Kampus Merdeka* policy will provide opportunities for students to gain wider learning experiences and new competencies. This will come through the provision of several learning activities outside of their existing study program, which are designed to produce graduates who are ready to engage in the increasingly complex challenges of life in the 21st century. Junaidi (2020) argues that it is therefore, incumbent upon all Indonesian Universities to make the necessary curriculum adjustments to ensure the quality and intention of the new learning processes in accordance with the Ministry of Education's SN-Dikti program guide for the support of the *Kampus Merdeka* program. This 'guide' defines the curriculum changes required in the development of 'new' literacies, which are understood to be (i) Data literacy, (ii) Technological literacy, (iii) Human literacy and (iv) a noble character based on a deep understanding religious beliefs (Junaidi, 2020).

Although the goal of *Kampus Merdeka* is to modify the experience of education to make it more adaptive and flexible, there are several problems inherent in this process of implementation. During the changeover, many aspects of University courses will need to be overhauled, both paradigmatically and administratively. In this respect, during the initial stages of enactment of the change, a range of comments in the literature suggest that Universities will be busy with arranging administrative matters, similar to what Fuadi and Aswita (2021) described in their study of the limitations and problems that Universities in Aceh faced in their implementation of *Kampus Merdeka*. These Universities found that there was considerable time and effort needed to make revisions to the curriculum to suit the new program demands. In addition, the study indicated that there were difficulties and limitations in relating activities on campus to the needs of industries and the requirements of other government institutions. Another problem that arises in this respect is related to the abilities and actions of educators and their students, which need to be adjusted to be more in tune with the changing demands. Not surprisingly, in the context of these changes, budgeting issues related to internship activities are also something that needs to be contemplated.

Systematic work on curriculum changes to meet the requirements stipulated in the *Kampus Merdeka* program is a fundamental thing that needs to be initially considered. Also, referring to the case observed for the Universities in Aceh, the development of the abilities of the teaching staff is something that deserves attention. A good curriculum will be the first step toward producing University graduates who have qualifications and experience suitable for developing a productive workforce and ensuring that networks between Universities, industries, communities and government agencies will remain strong, resulting in valuable work-integrated learning programs related to sectoral needs, ensuring a more resilient community.

In a parallel study of private Universities in Bogor, Hudjimartsu, Prayudyanto, Permana and Heryansyah (Hudjimartsu et al., 2021) found that Universities are still in the stage of revitalizing the curriculum. It is only when this task has been completed that they will be able to become more autonomous and flexible in order to accommodate the curriculum directions expressed by *Kampus Merdeka*. Whilst

these private Universities already had a *Kampus Merdeka* document used as a guideline for implementing policy activities. Hudjimartsu et al. (2021) noted that the challenges faced in the implementation stage are related to creating an outcome-based and education-based curriculum. The development of such outcome-based educational initiatives requires an alternative learning management system that can replace traditional approaches, be used both within the University, and be available for the learner off-campus. In this respect, work-integrated learning outcomes require flexible and adaptive support structures to administer and support learning activities.

Zunaidi, Fatmawatie, Natalina, and Mushlihin (2021) discussed the community service process that attempted to introduce the *Kampus Merdeka* curriculum changes into campus circles. This socialization process regarding *Kampus Merdeka* is still in a very simplistic phase, meaning that the material that could be presented was related to an introductory level, dealing with (i) the basic concepts of *Kampus Merdeka*, (ii) the suggested preparation of *Kampus Merdeka* curriculum goals and stages of curriculum development, and (iii) other procedures related to the new orientation of the independent campus. This study further confirmed that many Universities are still grappling with how to implement the detailed steps of *Kampus Merdeka*. Whilst the adaptation process is being carried out by many Universities, they are still attempting to more accurately define the *Kampus Merdeka* policies and determine how they might be implemented. In understanding the tasks needed for the implementation of *Kampus Merdeka* and preparing the curriculum, another problem that must be faced is the limited availability of resources to assist the teaching staff in this area.

Suryaman (2020) explains the importance of improving the quality of learning by optimally designing the curriculum in higher education, but in order to develop the right curriculum, a curriculum development policy is needed. This must consider the University's vision and mission, the development of knowledge and the needs of stakeholders. Such curriculum development requires clear guidelines on how to consider feedback from stakeholders and how to pay attention to strategic issues. According to Suryaman (2020), the curriculum contains not only goals to be achieved but must also provide an understanding of the requisite learning experience for students.

In separate work, Mariati (2021) described the various challenges faced by campuses in developing their approach to *Kampus Merdeka*, suggesting ways in which they might strategically prepare their graduates. These graduates must be ready to face the various changes required to the traditional curriculum, which will respond aptly to the development of (i) science and technology (the scientific vision), (ii) community needs (the needs of society), and (iii) the needs of the employers of graduates (the stakeholder needs). According to Mariati, there are still diverse understandings regarding the *Kampus Merdeka* program, especially in relation to curriculum development under the set rules of the National Higher Education Standards (Mariati, 2021). Higher education institutions will need to design curricula and implement innovative learning processes in order that students can achieve optimal learning outcomes. Mariati's (2021) explanation shows

that changes in *Kampus Merdeka* require precise management because, as many aspects of learning should be fulfilled, strong campus internal capacity and flexible networking capabilities are needed to support the successful implementation of *Kampus Merdeka* (Mariati, 2021).

According to The Future of Jobs Report 2020 (Forum, 2020), the acceleration in the adoption of new technologies in various companies has increased in recent years. Consequently, the development of a workforce who are familiar with concepts such as cloud computing, big data and e-commerce will have the highest priority. The Future of Jobs report highlights the concern that, in the future, labour will be replaced by machines and the level of disruption that will occur shall depend on the individual's work knowledge and expertise. Reports from these world institutions seem to have caught the attention of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Technology, leading to the situation where Universities are currently being urged to teach these new technology skills.

In this context, data literacy has been defined as the understanding needed to read, analyse, and use data and information (big data) in the digital world. According to Gee (2014), there are several aspects that illustrate the power of literacy. For example, data literacy leads to (i) logical, analytical, critical, and rational thinking, (ii) both general and abstract uses of language, (iii) sceptical and questioning attitudes, (iv) allowing a distinction to be made between myth and history, (v) a recognition of the importance of time and space with relative-based knowledge, (vi) the complex nature of modern governments, emphasising the separation of church and state, the development of political democracy, with concomitant growth of greater social equity, a lower crime rate, (vii) a community of better citizens, (viii) the growth of economic development, wealth and productivity, (iv) lasting political stability, (x) sustainable increases in urbanization, and (xi) a lower birth rate. However, Gee (2014) also stated that since 1980, many academics have debated this, arguing that only a few of these aspects have matured, saying that the role of literacy is more complex than it appears and is prone to be influenced by a wide range of issues (Gee, 2014).

Technological literacy can be thought of as an understanding of how machines work and appreciating how applications of technology, such as coding, artificial intelligence and engineering principles, are developed. UNESCO (2011) has defined technological literacy, which was previously called computer literacy, as entailing a deeper understanding of digital technology and its manifestation, comprising both practical and technical computing skills. According to UNESCO, technological literacy is an important part of digital literacy, which suggests why technological literacy can be a part of digital literacy. Other components which emerge as subsets from digital literacy are Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy and information literacy. ICT literacy refers to a set of user skills that enable active participation in a society where services and cultural offerings are computer-supported and distributed on the internet. In parallel with this, information literacy focuses on a key aspect of our Knowledge Society, which is the ability to locate, identify, retrieve, process and use digital information optimally (UNESCO, 2011).

According to Mariati (2021), there are many misconceptions held by lecturers and education stakeholders regarding *Kampus Merdeka* policies, particularly in relation to implementing these new literacies and the challenges in developing appropriate curricula in the Industrial Era 4.0. Mariati (2021) further notes that the *Kampus Merdeka* policy should realize an autonomous and flexible learning process in Higher Education, in order that a learning culture is created that is innovative, unfettered by student needs and encourages students to master various sciences, whilst at the same time integrating the learning in the classroom with real-life activities. This, it is expected, will provide opportunities for students to advisedly determine the courses they wish to take, which will consequently prepare them for the desired world of work. This approach clearly aims to establish a meaningful engagement with industry and the world of work, allowing the student to become prepared with the real-world competencies which are required for lifelong learning (Abdullah et al., 2021).

As part of *Kampus Merdeka*, it is proposed that students can seek 'credit' for their study of up to three semesters by engaging in an outside study program; according to Agung, Ferdi, Purwanto and Noviyanti (2020), Universities face significant challenges in implementing this type of program, since they include (i) the preparation of extensive curriculum changes, (ii) the operationalization of the right to study for at least two semesters, (iii) determining whether the financial support for the changes will come from either the Institute or be self-funded by the student, and (iv) redressing the current lack of socialization of the *Kampus Merdeka* policy, in order to garner strong support from external stakeholders, particularly in relation to the external study program.

Valero et al. (2020) similarly explained that Universities need to internalize professional skills or employment aspects explicitly in the developed curricula. Subsequently, there is an urgent need to carry out curriculum alignment at the program level so that it will align key elements of teaching, learning, and assessment (Valero et al., 2020). In addition, there is the need for the development of integrative learning, allowing learning activities to absorb new ideas from a range of disciplines and be carried out to develop new understandings and new solutions to unfamiliar problems and be carried out constructively. Finally, there is a need to conduct sessions of experiential learning that will build active and constructive students, and provide an atmosphere where students autonomously seek to build their engagement with, and knowledge of, challenging issues, and reflect upon their emerging understanding.

4. Academic Staff Preparedness

Bringing all parties within an Institute to be *au fait* with the *Kampus Merdeka* policies and directions is fundamental for the success of this program. In this respect, academic staff within Institutes may be required to commit to the University's vision and mission for implementing *Kampus Merdeka*; seen in this light, it is essential to ensure that academic staff are active in not just curriculum reform but also the administrative implementation of *Kampus Merdeka* (Defrizal et al., 2022). This latter requirement will include staff engaging in planning for curriculum conformity and

implementation of the *Kampus Merdeka* program in the field, and to determine the suitability of student interests and program placement within the auspices of the *Kampus Merdeka* program (Defrizal et al., 2022).

It is recognised that students choosing to study *Kampus Merdeka* activities in multiple Institutions may find that work within the 'collaborating' Institution is at a 'different' level. This opportunity for segmentation of a student's course in the Indonesian Higher Education sector may prove to be a disincentive for student mobility, and as a result, greater collaboration between Institutes will be needed to counter this impasse (Purwanti, 2021).

Fitriasari et al. (2020) noted that students commented universities should be prepared to (i) host undergraduate students who wish to engage in study programs outside the campus and (ii) be recognised as the destination campus for the students' qualification. This implies that the home institute must provide full support to the students who will study outside the campus, and this includes their assessment of the students' final capabilities and moral readiness. The Institute should also embrace a culture of learning which has a significant influence and impact on the personal development of all students. To ensure that these aims are attained, the home University and the locations of the external study programs require the full support of the participating staff in all learning activities off-campus.

Honkimäki et al. (2022) further suggest that top-down curriculum management changes do not necessarily produce the best results and that problems in university management can arise from managerial practices, process guidelines and lack of participation by staff at lower levels. The active involvement of academic staff in the change process appears to be very important in order to avoid any suggestion of interference with professionalism and academic freedom. Indeed, the success of curriculum reform requires an environment of trust between the consulting parties (Abdullah, 2014). It is very important to ensure that the general principles and curriculum guidelines, which are finally determined, have been seen to be negotiated between University's central management, faculty management and lecturers at the grassroots level. This implies that all involved parties must be able to take part in active discussions in order to obtain a curriculum that is agreeable to all contributors.

5. Defining And Reshaping Roles and Responsibilities of Academics, Industry and Students

Managing the implementation of *Kampus Merdeka* requires a tripartite response from academia, community and students. Defining each partner's roles and responsibilities is critical for the social acceptance of this policy initiative. However, even with wider collaboration, there still remains some concern regarding the 'socialisation' of *Kampus Merdeka* activities within some Universities (Siregar et al., 2020). Some observe that the response to introducing *Kampus Merdeka* policy has been variable across the University sector, with some institutes immediately embracing the paradigm shift,

whilst others, whilst acknowledging the relevance and importance of the policy, are awaiting further developments before they implement the changes (Siregar et al., 2020).

Agung et al. (2020) noted that the gaining of support from the community in relation to the actions required from community stakeholders in implementing *Kampus Merdeka* policies is still in its infancy. This is especially so regarding the fulfilment of the students' right to study for two semesters in an outside 'community' study program away from the host University campus. Agung et al (2020) commented that there was an acute need to 'socialise' this program within the broader community of stakeholders in order to gain acceptance and traction with specific stakeholders.

Relevant to this issue is the widely held notion that there is an expectation that the students themselves organise and managing their engagement under the *Kampus Merdeka* program (Agung et al., 2020). In this respect, Meke et al. (2022) in a study of the University of Flores' biology students, found that they had prepared themselves for implementing *Kampus Merdeka* principles. Indeed, most students chose the 'internship' program of *Kampus Merdeka* primarily because there were clear links to the world of work which they had envisaged at the completion of their University course (Meke et al., 2022). However, the challenge for policymakers, academics and University management is to find ways of 'sharing' the burden of administering *Kampus Merdeka* protocols, and relying on the students to implement the program will not achieve broader industry and community engagement. In addition, the 'financial constraints' of engaging in *Kampus Merdeka* activities were of concern to many of those students surveyed in this study, and the question of who should share the financial burden remains unresolved for *Kampus Merdeka* (Agung et al., 2020).

Mathisen and Jørgensen (2021), in Northern Norway, have argued that shared knowledge is very important for collaboration between industry and universities. Changes in the global situation can cause Universities or industries to interpret, integrate, and use knowledge quickly and more innovatively. This strongly suggests that Universities must abandon outdated education patterns, while industry and regional players must be agreeable to a reduction of unemployment rates. Mathisen and Jørgensen (2021) argued that using a shared perspective to increase understanding of the value created by a collaboration between Universities and industry is thus essential to establishing positive outcomes for this program.

The underpinning rationale of the *Kampus Merdeka* policy requires a change in the learning culture of Universities and institutes, which implies a movement toward educational curriculum and design that will meet the current needs of 'industry'. According to Kodrat (2021), this change suggests that *Kampus Merdeka* programs must emphasize the development of skilful workers who can fulfil the reasonable demands of business and industry. This would evidence a significant cultural shift in learning directions within the Indonesian education system.

Junaidi (2020) also noted that the *Kampus Merdeka* policy provides opportunities for students to gain wider learning experiences and new competencies through WIL activities outside of their study program (Junaidi, 2020). This underlines the hope that, in the future, they will produce graduates who are

ready to meet the increasingly complex challenges of life in the 21st century. The challenge for many Indonesian Universities is to make the curriculum adjustments and improve the quality of the learning process under the policy directives from SN-Dikti to support the *Kampus Merdeka* program (Junaidi, 2020).

Yulianto et al. (Yulianto et al., 2022) emphasised the critical importance of including stakeholder involvement from the industrial sector in order to provide a broader context and choice for students placed in the industry. However, they also affirmed the relevance of developing a research culture between industry and institutions, intending to develop research collaborations between lecturers and/or students and business investors. The intent here is to develop innovative learning and research practice that can be directly applied to the *Kampus Merdeka* activities.

Perdana et al. (2021) opined that the Ministry of Education needs to lead the dissemination and implementation of the *Kampus Merdeka* imperatives because of the complexity of the problems faced in the University sector (Perdana et al., 2021). These authors commented on their findings on the lack of academic guidelines and revisions, the delay of academic information systems, and the limited partnership schemes in existence. The strategic intent of *Kampus Merdeka* has not been communicated well enough to the University sector, leading to a fundamental problem in that information about policies is incomplete and fragmentary (Perdana et al., 2021). As a result, the *Kampus Merdeka* design has been described as a 'patchwork', with Perdana et al. (2021) suggesting that the *Kampus Merdeka* policy was not prepared comprehensively enough. For example, it did not consider the projected administrative and curriculum changes when adopted by the university sector. In addition, the curriculum developed has not paid attention to the students' perspectives, who have traditionally preferred a lecturer-directed approach to teaching, partly because it is considered more expert and scientifically legitimate (Fairman, 2018).

Students clearly have not been positioned as stakeholders in determining the learning schemes outside the classroom, and this is a critical pedagogical shift which is required for work-integrated learning to be effective. Perdana et al. (2021) said that discursive and democratic communication examples were still difficult to find, and have been so since the beginning of the *Kampus Merdeka* policy.

According to Fitriyanti, Budimansyah and Insani (2020), the positive implication of the *Kampus Merdeka* policy is to provide opportunities for Universities to be more independent in achieving their vision, mission and goals in accordance with the conditions and challenges of the times. In addition, the existence of learning activities outside the campus contributes to improving the quality of the students' abilities, allowing them to compete in the global environment. However, according to Fitriyanti, Budimansyah and Insani (2020) the implementation of this program must be accompanied by mature individual (student) readiness, program mechanisms and supporting infrastructure.

Referring to De Vega and Nur's (2022) article, respondents complained that the most problems came from technical problems regarding unequal funding, and there was a lack of credit recognition in the academic field for several Universities in Indonesia. In the view of De Vega and Nur, the

Kampus Merdeka program requires a comprehensive evaluation, and Universities must comply with the guidelines and prepare themselves well before undertaking and implementing this program.

6. Concluding Remarks

This paper has looked at a range of collaborative conversations regarding the *Kampus Merdeka* program which arise from members of academic institutions and policy makers in the Indonesian Government and civil society. Reflecting upon the journey so far has highlighted the enormity of the task that lies ahead to build resilient communities, and notes that much research is still necessary to build a systematic image of University-Community engagement. Although the initial steps have been tentative, and no doubt there will be many falls along the way, no matter how long the journey takes, and how arduous it may be, there is much anticipation that this will prove to be a positive experience for many students.

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