



Implementing Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka in Arabic Language Education: A Qualitative Case Study on Curriculum Transformation and Graduate Readiness

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM); Curriculum Implementation; Stakeholder Engagement; Quality Assurance

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This study explores the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) curriculum in the Arabic Language Education Program at Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten. The MBKM policy, introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia, aims to strengthen graduate employability and institutional adaptability in the digital era. A qualitative case study design was employed. Participants were selected using purposive sampling targeting key academic stakeholders, followed by snowball sampling to identify additional informants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman’s interactive model. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation and member checking. The findings reveal five core implementation strategies: leadership commitment, stakeholder engagement, MBKM-oriented curriculum redesign, external partnerships, and internal quality assurance. The process unfolded in three phases: planning, execution, and monitoring. The study demonstrates that coherent governance and collaborative networks are critical enablers of MBKM adoption. These findings provide practical insights for Islamic higher education institutions implementing reforms based on outcome-based and experiential learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions worldwide are under increasing pressure to redesign their curricula to respond to rapid technological advancement, shifting labor market demands, and heightened expectations for graduate employability (Ajani et al., 2024). This issue is socially significant because universities function as strategic agents in preparing human capital capable of sustaining economic

competitiveness and social development. When curricula fail to adapt, graduates risk experiencing skill mismatches, underemployment, and limited professional mobility. Empirical evidence demonstrates that employers increasingly prioritize transferable competencies—such as critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability—over purely disciplinary knowledge (McKinney et al., 2024). Consequently, higher education reform is not merely an institutional concern but a societal imperative. The alignment between academic preparation and workforce requirements determines the broader effectiveness of national education systems. Therefore, curriculum transformation toward experiential and outcomes-based learning becomes essential to ensure that universities remain relevant and socially accountable.

In Indonesia, the challenge of aligning higher education with workforce demands has been institutionally addressed through the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology under the leadership of Nadiem Makarim (Isnawan & Sudirman, 2022; Pahrudin et al., 2024; Santri Fahmi, 2022). MBKM promotes academic flexibility, experiential learning, and cross-sector collaboration to strengthen both hard and soft skills. However, the transition from conventional content-based curricula toward student-centered and outcomes-based frameworks requires substantial institutional restructuring (Amalia & Hasanah, 2023; Rodin et al., 2024). Universities must redesign curricula, establish partnerships, and implement governance mechanisms that support off-campus learning opportunities. The problem emerges when institutional readiness, leadership coordination, and quality assurance systems are uneven across institutions. Without coherent implementation, MBKM risks being reduced to administrative compliance rather than transformative educational reform capable of addressing systemic employability challenges.

At the study program level, the implementation of MBKM reveals varying degrees of adaptation and effectiveness, particularly within Islamic higher education institutions. Arabic Language Education programs, for example, hold strategic potential due to the increasing global demand for multilingual competencies and cross-cultural communication skills (AlJaberi, 2024; Chazy & Thomure, 2022). Nevertheless, field observations indicate that experiential learning integration remains uneven and often fragmented (Harlanu et al., 2024; Heriyadi et al., 2023). Some programs have established partnerships and off-campus learning schemes, while others struggle with curriculum alignment, credit transfer mechanisms, and supervision models. These inconsistencies demonstrate that regulatory endorsement alone does not guarantee effective transformation. Instead, leadership commitment, stakeholder engagement, and embedded quality assurance practices appear to determine whether MBKM generates meaningful academic and professional outcomes within specific institutional contexts.

Existing scholarship on MBKM largely emphasizes policy discourse, conceptual justification, and normative objectives at the national level (Adrianus Sihombing et al., 2021; Suharno et al., 2023; Voak et al., 2023). These studies provide valuable insights into the philosophical foundations of academic freedom and experiential learning but offer limited empirical analysis of institutional implementation processes. Moreover, research frequently isolates specific components—such as curriculum adjustment or student perception—without examining how governance, leadership, partnerships, and quality assurance interact as an integrated system. Broader international studies on educational reform highlight the importance of systemic alignment among institutional drivers (Haile & Mekonnen, 2024; Olowoselu, 2024; Virgolesi et al., 2020). However, these analyses are rarely contextualized within Indonesian Islamic higher education. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of how MBKM operates at the program level remains underdeveloped, leaving a significant gap in evidence-based implementation models.

Furthermore, previous investigations predominantly employ descriptive or survey-based approaches that capture perceptions rather than process dynamics (Adrianus Sihombing et al., 2021; Suharno et al., 2023). While such studies identify general challenges, they seldom explore the operational phases, decision-making patterns, and governance mechanisms that enable sustainable curriculum transformation. International literature underscores that successful educational reform depends on leadership coherence, stakeholder alignment, and continuous quality monitoring (Haile & Mekonnen, 2024; Olowoselu, 2024). Yet, limited research synthesizes these variables into a unified implementation framework within the MBKM context. As a result, there is insufficient empirical explanation regarding how policy mandates translate into actionable institutional strategies. Addressing this research gap is crucial to move beyond fragmented accounts toward a process-oriented perspective capable of informing both institutional practice and national policy evaluation.

This study advances the MBKM discourse by developing a process-based institutional model grounded in an in-depth qualitative case analysis of the Arabic Language Education Program at Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin State Islamic University, Banten. Rather than focusing solely on policy intentions or outcome indicators, this research systematically examines implementation strategies, operational stages, leadership roles, partnership development, curriculum redesign, and internal quality assurance integration. Methodologically, it combines purposive-snowball sampling with multi-source triangulation to capture stakeholder dynamics and institutional decision-making processes. The novelty of this study lies in its integrative analytical framework that positions leadership commitment, collaborative networks, curriculum

transformation, and quality governance as mutually reinforcing drivers of MBKM sustainability. By articulating these interconnections, this research contributes a transferable institutional model applicable to other Islamic higher education settings implementing outcomes- and experience-based reforms.

Based on the identified gaps, this study addresses the central research problem: how is MBKM operationalized as an integrated institutional system within an Islamic higher education study program, and what governance mechanisms enable its sustainable implementation? The preliminary argument of this study posits that effective MBKM realization depends not merely on regulatory compliance but on the strategic alignment of leadership vision, stakeholder collaboration, curriculum restructuring, and internal quality assurance systems. When these components function cohesively, MBKM can transform academic culture from content-driven instruction toward experiential and outcomes-based learning. Conversely, fragmented governance weakens policy impact and limits professional relevance. By empirically demonstrating this systemic relationship, the study contributes both theoretically – through the development of a process-oriented implementation framework – and practically – by offering evidence-based guidance for higher education institutions seeking meaningful and sustainable MBKM transformation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to obtain an in-depth and contextualized understanding of the implementation of Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) at the program level. A case study approach was selected because it enables the exploration of institutional processes, stakeholder interactions, and curriculum transformation practices within their real-life setting, particularly when boundaries between policy and practice are complex and intertwined. The research was conducted in the Arabic Language Education Program at Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin State Islamic University, Banten. This location was purposively chosen due to its active engagement in MBKM implementation and its strategic position as an Islamic higher education institution that integrates national policy mandates with religious-academic characteristics. Examining this setting allowed the researchers to analyze how MBKM is operationalized within a specific institutional culture, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of governance, leadership commitment, and curriculum adaptation processes.

Data were collected using three complementary techniques to ensure depth and triangulation: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on key stakeholders directly involved in MBKM implementation, including the Dean of the Faculty of Education, the Head of the

Arabic Language Education Program, and the Head of the University's Quality Assurance Unit. To enrich the data and capture broader experiential perspectives, snowball sampling was subsequently applied to identify additional informants. Interviews explored institutional strategies, curriculum redesign, partnership development, and internal quality assurance mechanisms. Observations were conducted to examine MBKM-related academic activities and coordination practices, while document analysis covered curriculum guidelines, program profiles, partnership agreements, and internal policy documents, enabling comprehensive cross-source validation.

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, consisting of data condensation (reduction), data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the condensation stage, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence were systematically coded and categorized to identify emerging themes and significant patterns. The data were then organized into visual and narrative displays to facilitate interpretation and to clarify relationships among leadership, curriculum transformation, stakeholder collaboration, and quality assurance mechanisms. Finally, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified through iterative comparison across data sources, analytical memo writing, and triangulation procedures. This iterative analytical process strengthened the credibility, consistency, and interpretive rigor of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings indicate that the implementation of the Independent Learning–Independent Campus (MBKM) curriculum in the Arabic Language Education Program at Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin State Islamic University, Banten, was institutionally initiated and progressively embedded through coordinated governance mechanisms. Rather than operating as an isolated program-level initiative, MBKM implementation emerged as a university-wide effort involving leadership structures, faculty units, study programs, and external partners. Analysis of interview, observation, and document data revealed five interrelated institutional strategies that shaped implementation.

Strong leadership commitment provided the structural foundation for MBKM adoption, as evidenced by rector-level regulations, the establishment of an MBKM management unit, and formal policy alignment across faculties. Second, stakeholder engagement was optimized by coordinating university leaders, faculty administrators, program heads, lecturers, students, and external partners, enabling shared ownership of the curriculum transformation. Third, curriculum reformulation was undertaken to align learning outcomes with

MBKM principles and outcomes-based education, informed by tracking study results and responsive to technological developments. Fourth, partnership development progresses through systematic identification of potential partners, a formal engagement process, and mutual commitment agreements. Finally, internal quality assurance mechanisms are institutionalized through policies, manuals, and MBKM-specific quality standards to ensure consistent implementation. These strategies are operationalized through three interrelated managerial phases: planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

Planning Phase: Curriculum Redesign and Institutional Alignment

The planning phase emphasized institutional readiness and curriculum restructuring. This phase involved national seminars, internal coordination meetings, and structured curriculum reviews. Curriculum redesign was conducted through focus group discussions followed by faculty- and university-level workshops, resulting in a revised MBKM-oriented curriculum framework. The final alignment process refined learning outcomes, course structure, and academic language before formal approval by university authorities. MBKM courses were positioned as electives starting in the fifth semester, while students in previous semesters continued under the regular curriculum.

Implementation Phase: Experiential Learning Pathway

The implementation phase operationalizes MBKM through various experiential learning programs. These include student exchange initiatives with partner institutions, lecturer exchange programs to strengthen academic collaboration, and integrative teaching practices that combine school-based learning with community service activities. MBKM participation is structured into three semesters: one semester of cross-program study at the home institution and two semesters of external learning experiences, totaling 60 academic credits. These activities aim to enhance students' professional competencies while expanding academic networks for both students and lecturers.

Monitoring and Evaluation Phase

Monitoring and evaluation were conducted internally by the study program, focusing primarily on student participation patterns, interdisciplinary learning preferences, and involvement in exchange programs. Initial evaluation findings highlighted variations in student interest in external learning options, underscoring the need for ongoing academic guidance and administrative support to optimize MBKM participation.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that the implementation of MBKM in the Arabic Language Education Program at Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin State Islamic University, Banten, is best conceptualized as a systemic institutional transformation rather than a discrete curricular adjustment. The findings reveal that leadership commitment, stakeholder engagement, curriculum redesign, partnership development, and internal quality assurance function as interdependent components within a coherent governance ecosystem. This systemic alignment confirms that national curriculum reform requires organizational coherence across strategic and operational levels to translate policy intentions into sustainable practices (Alvunger & Wahlström, 2021; Salonen-Hakomäki & Soini, 2023). In this case, rector-level regulations and the establishment of an MBKM management structure provided institutional legitimacy and coordination capacity, reinforcing arguments that top-level leadership plays a catalytic role in complex educational change (Bisson et al., 2022; Rajnath, 2024; Yadav et al., 2024). Strong executive leadership enabled cross-unit collaboration and reduced fragmentation, shifting MBKM from compliance-driven adoption toward embedded organizational reform.

Stakeholder engagement further emerged as a decisive factor shaping implementation effectiveness. The active participation of faculty leaders, program heads, lecturers, students, and external partners fostered shared ownership and collective accountability for curriculum transformation (Culver et al., 2023). This participatory configuration operationalized experiential learning through structured pathways such as student exchanges, collaborative teaching, and community-based engagements. These findings extend prior MBKM studies that primarily emphasize policy discourse by empirically demonstrating how collaborative governance mechanisms translate national reform into program-level practice. The results suggest that institutional reform becomes sustainable when internal actors and external partners are integrated into a mutually reinforcing network rather than positioned as peripheral contributors.

Curriculum redesign constitutes the pedagogical core of this transformation. Through iterative focus group discussions, workshops, and alignment reviews, outcomes-based education principles were contextualized within the disciplinary logic of Arabic language education (Pujiharsono et al., 2023; Supriyoko et al., 2022). The decision to position MBKM activities as elective pathways beginning in the fifth semester reflects an adaptive sequencing strategy that balances curricular stability with innovation. This phased integration

enables students to transition gradually from classroom-based instruction to cross-institutional and professional learning environments, thereby strengthening applied competencies without weakening foundational knowledge. Such structuring illustrates how experiential reform requires deliberate curricular architecture rather than additive program expansion.

Partnership development and internal quality assurance mechanisms reinforce the sustainability of this model. Systematic partner identification and formal collaboration agreements expanded learning spaces and enhanced students' access to professional exposure. Nevertheless, variability in student participation indicates that opportunity availability alone does not guarantee engagement, highlighting the importance of mentoring systems and administrative facilitation. Distinctively, MBKM-specific quality policies, manuals, and standards were embedded from the outset, ensuring procedural clarity and continuous monitoring. These findings challenge fragmented approaches reported in earlier studies and underscore that quality assurance should function as an integral driver of reform rather than a post hoc control mechanism. By integrating monitoring with curriculum innovation, the program strengthened institutional accountability and reform continuity.

Collectively, these findings advance a process-based institutional perspective on MBKM by conceptualizing it as an interconnected governance framework linking leadership alignment, collaborative stakeholder structures, curriculum innovation, partnership networks, and quality assurance integration. Theoretically, this study extends outcomes-based education discourse by demonstrating how experiential learning reforms become institutionalized through organizational mediation, particularly within Islamic higher education. Practically, it suggests that policymakers should prioritize institutional readiness—through leadership development, participatory curriculum design, structured MBKM pathways, and integrated quality systems—over mere regulatory compliance. While the single-case qualitative design limits generalizability and does not assess long-term impacts on employability, the study provides a grounded analytical model that future comparative and mixed-methods research can test across disciplines and institutional contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the implementation of MBKM in the Arabic Language Education Program at Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin State Islamic University, Banten, represents a systemic institutional transformation rather than a technical curriculum adjustment. The most important insight derived from this

research is that sustainable experiential learning reform depends on governance alignment and the integration of leadership commitment, stakeholder collaboration, outcomes-based curriculum redesign, partnership networks, and internal quality assurance. When these elements operate cohesively, national policy mandates can be translated into meaningful program-level practices rather than remaining symbolic compliance. The key lesson is that MBKM effectiveness is not determined solely by regulatory adoption, but by the institution's capacity to embed reform within its organizational culture, decision-making structures, and quality systems.

In terms of scholarly contribution, this study strengthens the theoretical discourse on outcomes-based and experiential education by proposing a process-based institutional framework that conceptualizes MBKM as an interconnected governance ecosystem. It advances existing literature by empirically linking leadership alignment, collaborative governance, curriculum innovation, partnership development, and quality assurance into a unified implementation model, particularly within the context of Islamic higher education. Nevertheless, the single-case qualitative design limits the generalizability of findings, and the study focuses primarily on implementation processes rather than long-term impacts on student competencies or graduate employability. Future research should employ comparative multi-site and mixed-methods designs to evaluate longitudinal outcomes, examine variations across disciplines and institutional types, and explore students' motivational dynamics within experiential learning pathways.

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