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Implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka* Curriculum in Improving the Readiness of Makassar State University Students to Enter the World of Work and Industry

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Abstract

This study investigates the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) curriculum at Makassar State University and evaluates its effectiveness in enhancing students' career readiness. Employing a qualitative descriptive exploratory approach within a case study framework, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. Findings demonstrate that the eight MBKM programs—Student Exchange, Internship, Teaching Practice, Research, Humanitarian Project, Entrepreneurship, Independent Study, and Thematic Community Service—have significantly bridged the gap between academic learning and real-world professional demands. The MBKM initiatives have enhanced the relevance of academic content and contributed to the development of essential 21st-century soft skills, including adaptability, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, leadership, and empathy. Collaborative engagement with external partners such as industries, schools, and civil society organizations has further enriched student learning experiences.

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Overall, the MBKM curriculum plays a pivotal role in producing graduates who are creative, innovative, adaptive, and competitive in the global workforce. However, the study also identifies several implementation challenges, including curriculum integration, coordination with external partners, assessment mechanisms, and resource constraints. Based on these findings, the study recommends strengthening the evaluation of student learning outcomes, expanding institutional networks, improving the development of soft skills, and optimizing lecturer and mentor support to ensure the program's sustainability and long-term impact.

Keywords: Curriculum; *Merdeka Belajar*; Career Readiness; Higher Education; Experiential Learning

INTRODUCTION

Rapid global changes due to technological advancements, digitalization, and the industrial revolution 4.0 have fundamentally altered the needs and competency patterns of the world of work. Higher education in the modern era faces the major challenge of producing graduates who not only possess theoretical knowledge but also practical skills that match industry demands (Azelia & Azzahra, 2024). In this context, the higher education system can no longer be solely oriented towards cognitive aspects but must integrate adaptive, creative, collaborative, and innovative abilities. This paradigm shift demands a transformation towards a more dynamic and flexible curriculum to answer the needs of the times.

In response to these challenges, the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Education and Culture launched the Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka policy in 2020. This policy aims to strengthen the relevance of higher education to the world of work through learning experiences outside the campus, such as internships in industry, applied research, community-based projects, and entrepreneurial activities (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2020). MBKM is expected to be an instrument for transforming the higher education system towards an outcome-based education (OBE) model, namely producing graduates who are competent, independent, and ready to contribute in various professional sectors.

The curriculum is the core of the education system, serving as a guide in the learning process. A good curriculum not only delivers theoretical knowledge but also provides space

for students to develop applicative abilities according to the needs of the world of work. The MBKM-based curriculum is designed to integrate theory and practice more integratively, so that students gain contextual learning experiences that reflect the realities of the industrial world. Prensky (2001) emphasizes that 21st-century learning requires students not only to be consumers of knowledge but also producers of knowledge who are able to create, innovate, and solve problems creatively. Through activities such as internships, industrial projects, collaborative research, and entrepreneurial activities, students can develop the hard skills and soft skills needed to compete in the professional world (Azelia & Azzahra, 2024).

In addition to providing practical experience, the MBKM policy also encourages the development of student character and social competencies. Students are required to collaborate across disciplines and build partnerships with various parties such as the business world, government institutions, and the community. This process not only strengthens technical and professional abilities but also builds work ethic, leadership, social responsibility, as well as communication and project management skills which are key to success in the world of work (Sukardi & Hafizd, 2024). Thus, MBKM plays a strategic role in creating a collaborative and globally adaptive higher education ecosystem.

Makassar State University, as one of the state universities in Indonesia, has a strong commitment to implementing the MBKM-based curriculum as a strategy for strengthening the quality of highly competitive graduates. Through various programs such as internships, student exchanges, research, humanitarian projects, entrepreneurship, independent study, and thematic community service, Makassar State University strives to prepare students to face the dynamics of the industrial world directly. Based on data from the MBKM Management Office of Makassar State University, student participation rates in MBKM programs have continued to increase year by year, indicating student enthusiasm and awareness of the importance of contextual learning experiences for their career readiness.

The implementation of the MBKM curriculum in higher education, including at Makassar State University, is not without challenges. One of them is the readiness of lecturers and institutions to adapt to experience-based learning methods, as well as limitations in collaboration between the university and the industrial world in providing relevant and sustainable learning containers (Marwiji et al., 2023; Siregar et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is still a gap between the competencies produced by educational institutions and the real needs of the world of work, both in terms of technical skills and soft skills. These challenges

demand continuous evaluation and adaptive strategies so that the implementation of MBKM truly has an impact on improving students' career readiness.

Student career readiness is an important indicator of the success of higher education. Sarah et al. (2021) assert that career readiness includes not only mastery of knowledge but also critical thinking skills, communication skills, creativity, and social proficiency. Therefore, the implementation of the MBKM-based curriculum, which emphasizes contextual and participatory learning, is believed to be a solution in bridging the gap between the world of education and the world of industry. MBKM not only expands students' learning horizons but also fosters a professional mindset oriented towards independence and innovation.

This study aims to examine in depth the implementation of the MBKM curriculum at Makassar State University as an effort to improve students' readiness to enter the world of work and industry. Through this research, it is hoped that an overview of the effectiveness of the MBKM program in improving student competencies can be obtained, the implementation challenges faced by the institution can be identified, and strategies for strengthening a more adaptive and work-oriented curriculum can be formulated. The results of this study are expected to be an important contribution to the development of higher education policy in Indonesia, particularly in ensuring that university graduates are able to compete at the national and global levels with superior skills, experience, and character.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative methodology with a descriptive–exploratory design. The approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of how the *Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) curriculum is implemented at Makassar State University and how it contributes to enhancing students' readiness to enter the professional and industrial sectors. Consistent with Moleong's (2017) perspective, qualitative research seeks to comprehend phenomena experienced by participants holistically through detailed descriptions within their natural contexts. Therefore, this research aims to explore the perspectives, experiences, and challenges encountered by students, lecturers, and industry partners in the process of implementing the MBKM program at Makassar State University. The research design adopts a qualitative case study focusing on the implementation dynamics of the MBKM initiative at the university. As noted by Yin (2018), a case study enables a comprehensive investigation of an event or policy within its real-life context. Through this

design, the study examines the relationship among policy formulation, practical implementation, and the resulting impact of the MBKM curriculum on students' career readiness. The main focus lies on how the curriculum is applied, the extent of students' preparedness for the industrial world, as well as the challenges and opportunities arising throughout the implementation process.

Makassar State University was purposively chosen as the research site since it represents one of the higher education institutions actively executing the MBKM policy across multiple academic programs. The study utilizes both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and field observations involving students, lecturers, and representatives from industry partners. Secondary data were drawn from official university documents, reports on MBKM activities, and policy manuals issued by the Ministry of Education. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis to ensure the collection of accurate and comprehensive information related to the implementation of the MBKM program at Makassar State University. The analysis process followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes four sequential stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. To maintain the credibility of findings, this study applied triangulation of sources and methods by cross-checking information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation among different informants. In addition, *member checking* was conducted with participants to confirm that the researcher's interpretations accurately represented the field realities. Through this systematic process, the research aims to provide a credible and comprehensive depiction of the effectiveness of the MBKM curriculum implementation in improving the career readiness of students at Makassar State University in response to the evolving demands of the workforce and industry.

RESULTS

Higher education institutions in Indonesia are currently confronted with increasingly complex demands in producing graduates who are not only strong in academic knowledge but also equipped with practical abilities relevant to the needs of the professional world. To respond to this challenge, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) introduced the *Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) initiative in

2020 as a strategic policy aimed at narrowing the gap between higher education and industry. The program promotes a more flexible curriculum design, greater autonomy for students in determining their learning pathways, and broader opportunities to gain meaningful experiences beyond traditional classroom settings.

Makassar State University, as one of the state universities in Indonesia, has endeavored to implement a curriculum based on Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka in accordance with this national policy. The implementation of MBKM at Makassar State University is aimed not only at enriching students' academic insights but also at enhancing their readiness to face competition in the industrial world, which demands adaptive, collaborative, and innovative competencies. Through various program forms such as internships, student exchanges, research, and humanitarian projects, Makassar State University seeks to integrate practical experiences with the achievement of graduate learning outcomes.

The implementation of the MBKM-based curriculum at Makassar State University is an important strategy for improving students' career readiness. Through the flagship programs of MBKM, students are given the opportunity to develop their potential not only in the academic realm but also in the world of professional practice, social engagement, and entrepreneurship. The research data was obtained through interviews with lecturers, students, and industry partners, which were then analyzed with reference to the eight main components of MBKM:

Student Exchange

The Student Exchange program at Makassar State University has proven to have a positive impact on improving the quality of learning and students' learning experiences. Through credit recognition, students can attend classes at other universities without losing academic progress in their home study program. The research results show that the Merdeka Student Exchange enriches the learning process through the synchronization of curricula across universities and strengthens more dynamic and contextual classroom interactions. This finding aligns with Biggs and Tang (2011), who assert that effective learning occurs when students are actively engaged in diverse and challenging learning experiences.

In addition to academic benefits, the Merdeka Student Exchange also contributes significantly to the development of students' soft skills, particularly in terms of adaptation, communication, teamwork, and building social networks across cultures. Students learn to

adapt to new environments and collaborate with individuals from different backgrounds, which trains their interpersonal and leadership abilities. This supports the view of Spencer & Spencer (1993) that non-technical skills are a key factor in career readiness for the modern workforce. Furthermore, cross-regional interaction also strengthens students' cultural literacy and national identity, consistent with Tilaar's (2004) idea that education should foster multicultural awareness and the spirit of diversity.

Internship

The internship initiative under the Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka program at Makassar State University serves as an essential link between academic education and professional practice, aligning with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning framework, who emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs when theory is integrated with real-world experience. The research results indicate that internships help students apply theories learned in the classroom to field practice, understand business processes and work culture, and earn course credit recognition as part of their learning outcomes. Through this direct experience, students are able to internalize the values of professionalism and understand the relevance of their academics to the needs of the industry. This aligns with Beard & Wilson (2006), who assert that direct experience strengthens conceptual understanding and simultaneously shapes professional identity.

The internship program also strengthens students' soft skills, such as self-confidence, work ethic, communication, teamwork, and time management. This finding supports Yorke's (2004) view that employability is not solely determined by mastery of theory but also by the attainment of skills and personal attributes that enhance work readiness. The internship experience provides students with the opportunity to adapt to a professional environment, understand work ethic, and build social networks relevant to their future careers. Consistent with this, Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth (2004) emphasize that employability encompasses career identity, personal adaptability, and social capital, all of which develop through real work experiences like internships.

Teaching Assistantship in Educational Units

The Teaching Assistantship in Educational Units program within the Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka framework is designed to provide students with direct experience in the learning process at schools. Research results at Makassar State University show that this activity has a significant impact on improving academic competencies, developing soft

skills, and contributing to partner schools. Students not only assist teachers in instruction but also learn to manage classrooms, prepare learning tools, and implement innovative pedagogical strategies. This aligns with Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy, which is an individual's belief in their capability to execute tasks. Direct experience (mastery experience) in the classroom makes students more confident, especially after seeing their success in delivering material. This process strengthens their self-efficacy as prospective resilient educators ready to face field challenges.

In addition to building self-confidence, this program also serves as a medium for integrating theory and practice, as emphasized by supervising lecturers who noted that students participating in this program are more professionally prepared. This reinforces the view that the Teaching Assistant role acts as a bridge between the academic world and real practice in schools. Through direct involvement, students understand the relevance of the educational theories they have learned and hone their pedagogical, communication, and classroom management skills. This approach is consistent with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning concept, which stresses that effective learning occurs when theory is tested in real contexts through direct experience.

Research

Research activities within the Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka program provide significant academic benefits for students. Through direct involvement in research, students not only understand theory but also apply it in the field, making learning contextual and meaningful. This aligns with Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which asserts that knowledge is acquired through direct experience that reflects the application of theory. In addition to improving the quality of scientific work, students are also encouraged to think critically, analytically, and systematically, from the problem formulation stage to the preparation of the research report. As emphasized by Boyer (1990) in the concept of the Scholarship of Discovery, research in higher education not only enriches scientific insight but also strengthens the university's role as a producer of knowledge beneficial to society.

Research within Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka plays a major role in developing students' soft skills. Through collaboration with lecturers and research partners, students learn to build effective communication, teamwork, and good time management. This supports the findings of Robbins and Judge (2019) that non-technical skills such as communication and time management are keys to success in the modern world of work. The

Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka program also trains students in problem-solving and adaptability, skills emphasized by Trilling and Fadel (2009) as part of 21st-century competencies. Thus, research activities not only shape intellectual abilities but also professional character ready to face social and industrial challenges.

Humanitarian Projects

Humanitarian Project activities within the Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka program provide tangible academic benefits by connecting classroom learning theory with social practice in the field. Students act as agents of change who apply academic knowledge to solve community problems, such as in empowerment, education, and health. This aligns with the Experiential Learning theories of Kolb (2014) and Dewey (2007), who assert that effective learning stems from concrete experience followed by reflection and practical application. Through these direct experiences, students not only understand theory more deeply but also produce works and solutions relevant to society. This finding is reinforced by Bringle & Clayton (2012), who state that service learning can integrate theory with practice and foster social awareness and academic responsibility.

Humanitarian projects contribute significantly to the development of students' soft skills, such as communication, empathy, leadership, and time management. The mentoring process by lecturers shows a significant increase from initial awkwardness to confidence when interacting with the community. This is consistent with the opinion of Robles (2012) that soft skills such as integrity, teamwork, and effective communication are key factors for professional success. This finding is also supported by Suarta et al. (2017), who affirm that community service-based activities can strengthen students' work readiness by enhancing social empathy and leadership. Thus, humanitarian projects not only build academic abilities but also prepare students to become adaptive and character-driven individuals ready to face the modern world of work.

The role of partners in humanitarian projects proves to be very important as a link between the academic world and the real needs of the community. Partners provide facilities, resources, and field support that enrich the student experience. This aligns with the views of Bringle and Hatcher (2009) and Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki (2011) that collaboration between education and the community can enhance students' social skills and self-confidence. In the context of program sustainability, managers emphasize the importance of maintaining partner commitment and alignment between academic agendas and community

needs. Tapia (2010) adds that the success of service learning depends on equal and sustainable partnerships between universities and the community. Therefore, humanitarian projects within Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka not only function as service activities but also as a collaborative learning strategy that shapes graduates to be character-driven, empathetic, and ready to face social challenges professionally.

Entrepreneurship Activities

Entrepreneurship activities within the Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka program play a crucial role in integrating business theory with real-world practice. Through this program, students gain direct experience in designing, managing, and marketing products or services, while also learning to face business risks. These experiences build resilient mental attitudes and self-confidence in entrepreneurship, as explained by Bygrave & Zacharakis (2011) that entrepreneurship is a dynamic process involving idea creation and the courage to face risk. This aligns with Kuratko (2016), who emphasizes the importance of experience-based learning, and Sarasvathy (2008), who asserts that entrepreneurship does not depend on large capital but on the ability to adapt and manage resources effectively. Thus, the MBKM entrepreneurship activities strengthen academic competencies while also fostering a resilient and innovative entrepreneurial mindset.

From the perspective of supervising lecturers, this activity is a strategic means for developing students' soft skills, such as leadership, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Through direct practice, students can test management, marketing, and finance theories in a real context. The role of partners is also very important in providing mentoring, market access, and business networks that broaden students' insights. This supports Kolb's (2014) Experiential Learning Theory that meaningful learning occurs through direct experience. Neck & Greene (2011) add that entrepreneurship is a practical method that must be learned through a process of trial and error, while Nabi et al. (2017) found that partner involvement can increase students' confidence and business skills. Nevertheless, challenges such as limited capital and experience remain part of the learning process, as suggested by Gibb (2002), which in fact shapes the mental resilience of an entrepreneur.

Independent Study

Independent Study within the Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka program provides broad opportunities for students to develop their potential independently according to their interests, talents, and career goals. This activity allows students to explore topics not covered

in the formal curriculum, such as technology, entrepreneurship, arts, or scientific research, thus bridging academic theory and professional practice. Students are trained in independence, responsibility, discipline, and time management, which supports their readiness to face the global world of work. These findings align with Knowles' (2015) view on andragogy, Candy's (2002) on self-directed learning, and Kuh's (2008) on high-impact educational practices, all of which emphasize the importance of experience-based learning, independence, and relevance to personal needs.

From the student's perspective, Independent Study activities expand practical skills and increase self-confidence. One student shared their experience in delving into educational technology-based application development, which, although not covered in compulsory courses, provided significant learning experience. Students learned to create study plans, search for references, and interact with external mentors, despite facing time management challenges. This shows that self-directed learning shapes an adaptive, creative, and competitive character for the world of work, as explained by Knowles (2015), Candy (2002), Kuh (2008), and Susanti et al. (2021).

Supervising lecturers emphasize the importance of guidance to keep students on a directed learning path. Mentoring helps students improve their applicative abilities, creativity, and mastery of theory in real practice, whether in research, technology, or entrepreneurship. This aligns with the principles of Knowles' (2015) andragogy, Candy's (2002) self-directed learning, and Kuh's (2008) high-impact educational practices, which emphasize the relevance of learning experiences, practical application, and soft skills development.

From the program management's perspective, Independent Study is seen as strategic for preparing adaptive and innovative graduates. Students gain academic benefits along with soft skills, such as independence, creativity, and the courage to take initiative. Partners contribute significantly by providing modules, mentor guidance, and opportunities for collaboration in real projects. However, challenges exist regarding quality parity with regular learning and appropriate evaluation mechanisms. This view aligns with Kuh (2008), who emphasizes the importance of partner involvement to enhance academic and professional competencies, Jackson (2015) on the development of soft skills through industry engagement, and Billett (2011) on the challenges of evaluating work-based education.

Analysis of the research results confirms four main components. First, academic benefits, which include exploring topics of interest, deepening knowledge, and career

relevance, so that students not only learn theory but also prepare for the professional world. Second, soft skills development, including independence, discipline, critical thinking, and time management, which fosters personal responsibility and adaptability. Third, partner contribution, in the form of providing materials, mentor guidance, and collaborative projects, making the activities more applicative and relevant to the needs of industry and society. Fourth, implementation challenges, including evaluation difficulties, student readiness, time allocation, and limited access to resources, which demand good mentoring strategies and management for independent study to run optimally.

Thematic Community Service

Research results show that Thematic Community Service in the Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka program is a form of community service focused on specific issues, making student activities more directed and impactful. This program allows students to apply knowledge gained in the classroom to real-world contexts, such as health outreach, educational literacy, or simple infrastructure development, thus not only benefiting the community but also enriching the student learning experience. This activity trains leadership, cross-disciplinary collaboration, communication, and the ability to understand social dynamics and appreciate local wisdom, shaping students into caring, adaptive, and solution-oriented agents of change. This view aligns with Kolb's (2014) Experiential Learning Theory, Bringle & Hatcher's (2009) service learning, Astin et al.'s (2000) emphasis on strengthening empathy and leadership, and Pretty's (1995) participatory development.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of the Student Exchange program at Makassar State University still faces challenges, such as curriculum adjustments between universities, administrative obstacles in grade conversion, and weak mechanisms for monitoring the program's sustainability. These challenges highlight the importance of coordination and collaborative governance among educational actors, as suggested by Ansell and Gash (2008) in the theory of collaborative governance, which states that policy success depends on communication, trust, and shared commitment. Overall, the Student Exchange program is a tangible manifestation of the implementation of Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka, preparing Makassar State University students to become adaptive, competitive, and globally

competitive graduates, as emphasized by Kolb (1984) that direct experience is the fundamental foundation of meaningful learning.

The success of the internship program is inseparable from the support of industry partners who contribute to mentoring future workforce and knowledge exchange. The synergy between the campus, industry, and government reflects the Triple Helix model (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000), where innovation and human resource development depend on the collaboration of these three actors. Nevertheless, challenges such as limited quotas, curriculum adjustments, and administrative obstacles remain issues that need to be addressed. Makassar State University continues to expand its cooperation network and strengthen program governance to make the implementation of internships more effective. Thus, the Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka internship at Makassar State University not only builds students' technical and social competencies but also affirms the role of higher education as a catalyst connecting knowledge with the modern world of work.

From the program management's perspective, the Teaching Assistantship program not only benefits students but also provides advantages for partner schools facing a shortage of teaching staff. Students help address resource limitations, introduce learning innovations, and adapt to conditions of limited facilities. This situation illustrates the importance of adaptive competency as explained by Darling-Hammond (2006), that professional teachers must be able to adjust learning strategies to the context and constraints in the field. Therefore, this program not only hones technical abilities but also builds flexibility, creativity, and resilience in prospective educators.

The presence of research partners is an important factor in strengthening the relevance and quality of student research. Partners provide access to data, facilities, and practical insights that bridge academic theory with the needs of industry and society. This view is consistent with the Triple Helix model by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000), which emphasizes the importance of synergy between universities, industry, and the government to create sustainable innovation. Nevertheless, this research also found a number of challenges, such as time coordination between students, lecturers, and partners; limited facilities; and difficulties in understanding research methodology. Tynjälä (2008) affirms that the integration of academic learning and work practice often creates a double burden for students, making intensive guidance and effective communication between the campus and

partners key to the successful implementation of Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka research

The MBKM entrepreneurship activities are directed at producing graduates who are not only ready to work but also capable of creating jobs. This program instills the courage to try, fail, and rise again, as explained by Drucker (2007) that the core of entrepreneurship is creating opportunities and added value. Neck & Greene (2011) and Kuratko (2016) emphasize the importance of forming an innovative and adaptative entrepreneurial mindset in response to rapid changes in the business world. Although facing challenges such as limited financial support and business sustainability post-program, this activity has proven its effectiveness in preparing students to become creative, resilient, and competitive young entrepreneurs at the national and global levels. Therefore, the MBKM entrepreneurship activities serve as a holistic learning platform encompassing academic benefits, character development, collaborative support, and a sustainable experience-based learning strategy.

Thus, Independent Study within MBKM serves as a contextual and applicative learning platform that strengthens academic competencies, soft skills development, and graduate readiness to face global challenges. The program's success highly depends on the quality of mentoring, partner contributions, and an effective evaluation system, making this activity an important strategy for producing adaptive, creative, and competitive graduates in the professional era.

From the student's perspective, direct learning experience in the community. One student stated that this activity taught adaptation, communication, and designing contextual solutions according to community needs, although challenges such as encouraging active community participation arose. This shows that students' real involvement enhances social understanding, empathy, and leadership abilities, consistent with the principles of Kolb's (2014) experiential learning, Bringle & Hatcher's (2009) service learning, and the findings of Astin et al. (2000).

Supervising lecturers emphasize the importance of guidance so that students can integrate academic knowledge with community practice. Mentoring aids the development of leadership, teamwork, social empathy, and the ability to dialogue and build trust. This approach aligns with Bringle & Hatcher (2009) and Astin et al. (2000), who emphasize academic integration and character development, and Billett (2011) regarding the challenges of practice-based education, including student readiness and program evaluation.

Program managers highlight Thematic Community Service as a bridge between academia and the community with a focus on specific issues, such as the environment, local economic empowerment, or literacy. The thematic model makes student contributions more focused, encouraging innovation and sustainable collaboration, although challenges remain, such as program sustainability post-service, alignment of community needs with program plans, and budget limitations. This view is supported by Astuti (2016), who emphasizes experiential learning, and Kolb (2015) on meaningful learning through the experience cycle.

Analysis of the research results indicates four main components. First, academic benefits, including the application of knowledge in the community, integration of theory and practice, and contextual learning that strengthens the relevance of academics to real community needs. Second, soft skills development, including communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving, which are essential for work readiness and social life. Third, partner contribution, such as support from village governments, local organizations, as well as facilities and logistics, ensuring student programs are directed and applicative. Fourth, implementation challenges, including time constraints, partner coordination, limited resources, and cultural adjustment, which demand mental preparedness, creativity, and high adaptability.

Thus, Thematic Community Service within Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka serves as a contextual learning vehicle that strengthens academic competencies, soft skills development, and student readiness to face societal complexities. The program's success depends on active student involvement, partner support, and an appropriate evaluation system, making this activity an effective strategy in shaping students into caring, solution-oriented, and adaptive individuals in the professional era.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and analysis, it can be inferred that the application of the *Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) curriculum at Makassar State University has generally driven a significant transformation in the learning process. The eight activity types under MBKM—namely Student Exchange, Internship, Teaching Assistantship, Research, Humanitarian Projects, Entrepreneurship, Independent Study, and Thematic Community Service—have shown considerable effectiveness in improving the relevance of academic programs. These activities serve as a bridge connecting classroom theories with real-life

applications across industries, schools, and communities, resulting in learning experiences that are more authentic and meaningful, in line with the principles of *Experiential Learning* and *Outcome-Based Education*. In addition, MBKM fosters holistic student development by strengthening both technical competence and essential 21st-century soft skills, including adaptability, communication, teamwork, critical thinking, leadership, and empathy—competencies that support future employability and professional readiness. The program also reinforces collaborative networks through active partnerships with industries, educational institutions, community organizations, and government agencies, reflecting the essence of the *Triple Helix* collaboration model. This synergy ensures that students' learning experiences remain relevant to real-world demands.Furthermore, students' direct engagement in MBKM activities contributes to shaping graduate characteristics that are creative, innovative, solution-oriented, adaptive, and globally competitive, while also nurturing social responsibility and entrepreneurial mindsets. However, despite these achievements, the implementation process continues to encounter several challenges, including curriculum alignment, partner coordination, effective evaluation mechanisms, resource adequacy, and long-term program sustainability.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that Makassar State University strengthen comprehensive evaluation mechanisms to measure student learning outcomes in every form of MBKM activity and optimize collaboration with partners by expanding networks and improving coordination to ensure programs run smoothly and sustainably. Enhancing student readiness is also necessary through initial preparation regarding soft skills, time management, and adaptation to real-world challenges in the field. Program sustainability strategies, particularly for entrepreneurship and Thematic Community Service activities, need to be reinforced so that the positive impact on society and student development is continuously maintained. The Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka curriculum should be continually updated according to the dynamics of industry and societal needs to remain relevant, and guidance from lecturers and mentors should be intensified, especially in independent study, research, and entrepreneurial projects, to ensure students gain optimal and well-directed learning experiences.

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