

Implementing the MBKM (Independent Learning–Independent Campus) Curriculum: A Qualitative Case Study in a History Education Program in Indonesia

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

independent learning curriculum;
independent campus;
learning needs

Article history:

Received 2026-01-25

Revised 2026-03-09

Accepted 2026-03-31

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) curriculum in the History Education Study Program, Faculty of Social Sciences, Law, and Political Sciences, Yogyakarta State University. This research addresses the need to understand how curriculum reform based on student centered and experiential learning is implemented in discipline specific contexts. This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. Participants were selected using purposive sampling and consisted of lecturers and students involved in MBKM activities. Data were collected through observation, in depth interviews, and document analysis, and were analyzed using the interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that the implementation of the MBKM curriculum has generally been successful in promoting flexible and student centered learning, particularly through the adoption of project based learning and digital based instruction. However, the implementation is still in an adaptive stage, with several challenges identified, including limited student understanding of MBKM mechanisms, coordination issues, and adjustments in the academic system. This study implies that effective implementation of MBKM requires stronger institutional support, clearer communication strategies, and improved program design. The findings contribute to higher education curriculum development by highlighting the importance of aligning policy, pedagogy, and institutional readiness in implementing curriculum reform.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Global trends in curriculum reform emphasize the importance of flexibility, interdisciplinarity, and experiential learning to prepare graduates for complex and dynamic societal challenges (Aithal & Aithal, 2020; Gupta & Choubey, 2021; Panditrao & Panditrao, 2020). Internationally, higher education institutions are increasingly adopting experience-based learning models that integrate academic knowledge with real-world practice, aiming to develop both hard and soft skills, critical thinking, and adaptability (Benati

et al., 2021; Graf et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2020). In this context, Indonesia has introduced the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy as part of its curriculum reform agenda. The MBKM concept, initiated by the Minister of Education and Culture, integrates “Freedom to Learn” and “Independent Campus,” promoting freedom of thought, innovation, and broader learning opportunities beyond the classroom (Ainia, 2020; Keputusan Kemendikbudristek Nomor 032/H/KR/2024 Tentang Capaian Pembelajaran Pada Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Jenjang Pendidikan Dasar, Dan Jenjang Pendidikan Menengah Pada Kurikulum Merdeka, 2024). The policy aims to equip students with diverse competencies aligned with labor market demands, as outlined in the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 3 of 2020 concerning National Higher Education Standards (Mulyani et al., 2024; Supriati et al., 2022; Syaifuddin et al., 2025; Wahyuningrat et al., 2025).

Despite its progressive vision, the implementation of MBKM, particularly in discipline-specific contexts such as History Education, faces several challenges. These include curriculum alignment, institutional readiness, lecturer capacity in facilitating experiential learning, and the integration of off-campus learning activities into academic structures (Arifin, 2021; Moeliodihardjo, 2024). While MBKM offers various learning pathway, such as student exchange, internships, teaching assistance, research, humanitarian projects, entrepreneurship, and village development programs (Siregar et al., 2020; Al Qorin, 2022; Christanti & Sukoco, 2022) (Al Qorin, 2022; Christanti & Sukoco, 2022; Siregar et al., 2020) there remains limited empirical understanding of how these initiatives are effectively implemented and experienced within specific study programs. This gap is particularly evident in History Education, where the relevance of experiential learning to historical thinking, contextual understanding, and professional readiness requires further examination.

In the History Education Study Program, Faculty of Social, Law and Political Sciences, Yogyakarta State University, MBKM has been implemented through various curricular innovations, including the introduction of additional Graduate Learning Outcomes (CPL) courses and experiential learning opportunities starting from the sixth semester. These include courses such as Tourism Business Management and Innovation, Tourism Hospitality Management, Culture and History-Based Tourism, and Tourism Event Planning, which aim to enhance the practical relevance of historical knowledge. Learning within this program adopts a student-centered approach that emphasizes innovation, creativity, collaboration, and engagement with real-world dynamics, thereby aligning with the broader objectives of MBKM. Through well-designed independent learning programs, students are expected to develop strong hard and soft skills and gain readiness for the workforce or entrepreneurial pathways (Jainah et al., 2022; Jasri et al., 2025; Rahmawati et al., 2025).

However, there is still a research gap regarding how MBKM-based experiential learning specifically contributes to the development of competencies in History Education, as well as how students and lecturers navigate its implementation in practice. Therefore, this study is important to examine the role and effectiveness of MBKM in strengthening the quality of history education, particularly in bridging theoretical knowledge and practical application.

Based on the above background, this study aims to: (1) analyze the implementation of the MBKM curriculum in the History Education Study Program, Faculty of Social, Law and Political Sciences, Yogyakarta State University; (2) identify the challenges and opportunities in its implementation; and (3) examine its contribution to the development of students’ competencies in the context of experiential learning.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive case study design to explore in depth the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) curriculum in the History Education Study Program, Faculty of Social Sciences, Law, and Political Sciences, Yogyakarta State University. A qualitative approach was selected to enable a comprehensive understanding of processes, experiences, and contextual dynamics in MBKM implementation.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research objectives. The study involved lecturers and students of the History Education Study Program, with lecturers selected due to their roles in planning, implementing, and evaluating MBKM-based learning, and students selected as direct participants experiencing both academic and off-campus MBKM activities. The selection criteria included active involvement in MBKM programs and willingness to participate in the study.

Data were collected through multiple techniques, namely observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted to capture real conditions of learning activities and MBKM implementation within the study program. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with lecturers and students to explore their experiences, perceptions, and challenges in implementing MBKM. In addition, document analysis was undertaken to examine curriculum documents, MBKM guidelines, activity reports, and other relevant academic records, enabling data triangulation across sources.

To ensure data validity and trustworthiness, this study applied triangulation of data sources and methods, member checking to confirm the accuracy of participants' responses, and peer debriefing to minimize researcher bias. Ethical considerations were also addressed, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality, and maintaining anonymity throughout the research process.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of three stages: (1) data reduction, involving the process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying field data based on research objectives; (2) data display, where data were organized into structured narratives and thematic categories to facilitate interpretation; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, which involved developing findings through systematic interpretation and continuously verifying them to ensure credibility. The analysis process included coding, categorization, and the development of themes that reflect patterns in MBKM implementation, challenges, and student learning experiences.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 *Curriculum design and alignment with MBKM policy*

The concept of developing the Independent Learning–Independent Campus (MBKM) curriculum in the History Education Study Program departs from the need to adapt higher education to the dynamics of the development of science, technology, and the needs of the world of work. The curriculum is no longer understood only as a list of courses that students must take, but as a design of learning experiences that provide space for students to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes more broadly (Batty & Reilly, 2023). In the process of compiling, study programs usually hold various academic forums such as seminars, workshops, and socialization activities involving lecturers, study program managers, and universities. These forums are a discussion space to understand the direction of MBKM policy as well as align the curriculum with historical scientific characteristics (Dewirahmadanirwati & Agustina, 2024). To facilitate coordination, an MBKM coordinator was formed at the departmental level who is responsible for connecting study programs with faculties and universities in the curriculum planning process (Lumbanraja et al., 2025; Saepulmilah et al., 2026).

The MBKM policy provides a wider space for universities to develop a learning system that is not too bound by rigid bureaucratic procedures (Saa, 2025; Supriati et al., 2022). Lecturers have the opportunity to design more varied learning models, while students are given the flexibility to determine learning paths that suit their interests and career plans. According to Wulandari et al., (2024), the Independent Campus presents a more flexible learning approach so as to encourage the birth of an innovative learning culture and not curb student creativity. This policy direction is also in line with the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia Number 3 of 2020 concerning National Standards for Higher Education which provides opportunities for students to take part of the learning process outside the study program. The regulation opens up space for universities

to design a curriculum that is more open to various learning experiences that are relevant to the needs of the community.

Within the framework of MBKM, curriculum development not only focuses on strengthening academic materials, but also pays attention to a variety of learning experiences that can enrich student competence (Utami & Sitanggang, 2024). There are nine forms of activities that are part of the MBKM program framework, namely student exchanges, professional work practices or internships, teaching assistance in educational units, research or research, humanitarian projects, entrepreneurial activities, independent studies or projects, village building projects, and national defense training. The presence of various choices of activities shows that the learning process in higher education is not limited to the classroom. Students can broaden their academic horizons through interaction with a variety of different social and professional environments.

3.2 Learning innovations in history education based on the MBKM curriculum

In the History Education Study Program, curriculum development still places mastery of disciplines as the main foundation. The curriculum structure is usually prepared by paying attention to three important components, namely strengthening historical theory, mastering educational theory, and developing learning strategies that are relevant to the graduate profession. Historical theory provides a basis for students to understand historical methodology, historiography, and how to critically analyze historical sources. Educational theory complements these competencies with an understanding of the learning process and pedagogy. Meanwhile, learning strategies are designed to help students connect academic knowledge with the professional skills needed after graduation.

The project-based learning approach or Project Based Learning (PBL) is often used as a reference in the development of the MBKM curriculum because it is considered to be able to encourage active student involvement in the learning process (Abdul et al., 2022; Lestari et al., 2024; Nasution et al., 2025). This approach provides opportunities for students to explore certain topics through small research activities, writing scientific articles, preparing papers, and developing digital-based history learning media. Research conducted by Purwanto et al., (2025) shows that project-based learning can improve students' critical thinking skills and creativity. Other research results from Selama (2024) also confirm that PBL helps students understand the material more deeply because they are directly involved in the process of investigation and problem-solving.

The development of the MBKM curriculum also pays attention to the arrangement of study period patterns that provide flexibility for students in planning their learning process. The arrangement refers to the Rector Regulation of Yogyakarta State University Number 5 of 2020 concerning the Independent Campus study cycle in undergraduate and applied undergraduate programs. In the regulation, several patterns of study period are known such as the 5-1-2, 6-0-2, and 6-1-1 patterns. The 5-1-2 pattern depicts five semesters of learning in the study program, one semester taking courses outside the study program, and two semesters of activities outside the university. The 6-0-2 pattern provides six semesters of learning in the study program and two semesters of activities outside the study program or university. Meanwhile, the 6-1-1 pattern combines six semesters of learning in the study program with one semester of activities outside the study program and outside the university. This arrangement shows that the MBKM curriculum is designed so that students continue to obtain core competencies in their fields of study while having the opportunity to expand their learning experience.

Curriculum development within the framework of MBKM also involves various parties outside universities. Study programs usually discuss with partners such as schools, research institutions, community organizations, and government agencies to get input related to the competency needs of graduates. The involvement of external parties helps the study program see real needs in the field so that the curriculum prepared is not only academically relevant, but also in accordance with professional demands. The idea of the importance of the relationship between universities and society was once put forward by Ernest L. Boyer who emphasized that higher education should have a close relationship

with social needs. This perspective shows that curriculum development cannot be separated from the context of the society in which the university is located.

3.3 Students' Experiences and Perceptions Regarding the Implementation of the MBKM Curriculum in the History Education Program

The implementation of the Independent Learning–Independent Campus (MBKM) curriculum in the History Education Study Program was formally initiated following the ratification of the curriculum through the Rector's Decree of Yogyakarta State University Number 523/UN34/IX/2020, marking a structural shift toward a more flexible and experiential learning-oriented curriculum. The program began implementing MBKM for the 2020 cohort during the Covid-19 pandemic, which necessitated the integration of digital and online learning methods. Rather than indicating a fully established system, the findings show that this phase represents an adaptive transition in which institutional readiness, curriculum design, and pedagogical practices were continuously adjusted. This condition reflects broader patterns identified in previous studies, where early MBKM implementation requires significant adaptation, particularly in technical aspects such as credit conversion mechanisms, coordination, and student understanding (Damayanti et al., 2024; Siregar et al., 2020).

The data further reveal that the study program implemented several curriculum innovations, including restructuring course content, simplifying credit loads, and merging overlapping subjects, with Project-Based Learning (PBL) emerging as a central pedagogical approach. Analytically, PBL functions not merely as a teaching method but as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and experiential learning within the MBKM framework. This is reflected in a lecturer's statement:

“Project-based learning allows students to not only understand history conceptually but also produce meaningful outputs such as digital content and historical media.” (Interview with History Education Lecture, 2024)

This finding supports prior research indicating that PBL enhances student engagement, critical thinking, and creativity through active problem-solving processes (Basri et al., 2024; Karan & Brown, 2022). In addition, the integration of digital-based learning through courses such as Learning Media, Information Technology in History Learning, Virtual Reality, and Multimedia Animation Learning demonstrates a significant shift in the epistemological approach of history education, from text-based learning toward multimodal and interactive representations. A student highlighted this transformation by stating:

“Using digital media makes historical events easier to understand because we can visualize them, not just read texts” (Interview with History Education Student, 2024)

The students' statement aligns with findings that digital technology enhances contextual understanding of historical events (Marpelina, 2024; Seixas, 2017).



Figure 1. VR workshop held by the Labor of the History Education Study Program

The learning process in the MBKM curriculum in the History Education Study Program is structured in stages, starting with strengthening theoretical understanding such as historiography, research methods, and historical source analysis through academic assignments. The next stage focuses

on developing pedagogical competencies, particularly in designing learning media and teaching strategies, while the final stage prepares students for their final projects and entry into the workforce. In addition to classroom learning, MBKM is implemented through field activities such as Field Work Lectures (KKL) to various historical sites across regions including Jakarta, West Java, Central Java, East Java, and Bali. These activities provide direct learning experiences through observation of historical sites, museums, and cultural heritage, which are essential in enhancing students' historical understanding and interpretation skills, as supported by Nokes (2022).



Figure 2. KKL Activities for History Education Study Program Students

The implementation of various activities within the framework of the MBKM curriculum in the History Education Study Program can be seen in the following forms of learning activities.

Table 1. Implementation of Activities in the context of the implementation of the MBKM Curriculum in the History Education Study Program

No	Form of MBKM Implementation	Form of Activity	Learning Objectives
1	Project Based Learning	Creation of digital history learning media	Developing students' creativity and digital literacy
2	Learning Media Development	Historical video, animation and interactive media production	Improving students' pedagogic abilities
3	Field Work Lecture (KKL)	Visits to museums and historical sites	Strengthening contextual understanding of historical events
4	Academic Writing	Scientific articles, papers, and historiographic resumes	Train historical analysis and research skills

The implementation of the MBKM curriculum in the History Education Study Program can also be seen from the experience of students who follow the curriculum. The 2020 batch of students is the first batch to undergo the MBKM curriculum since the beginning of the lecture period. Based on the results of an interview with one of the students, at the beginning of the implementation of this curriculum, there were several dynamics because students and lecturers were still adjusting to the new learning system.

"Since we first entered college, we immediately used the MBKM curriculum. At first, there were still adjustments, especially related to several programs such as student exchanges and course conversions. But in general, this program has run quite well and provides a more diverse learning experience than before." (Interview with History Education students, 2024)

A similar view was also conveyed by other students who assessed that some MBKM programs still need more in-depth socialization so that they can be used optimally by students.

"The MBKM program actually provides many opportunities for students, but sometimes students still do not understand the details of the program mechanism such as credit transfer or student exchange."
(Interview with History Education students, 2024)

This experience shows that the implementation of the MBKM curriculum is not only related to changes in the curriculum structure, but also concerns the academic adaptation process involving lecturers, students, and study program managers. Research conducted by Isnaini et al., (2024) also shows that the success of MBKM implementation is greatly influenced by the level of students' understanding of the available programs. Students who understand the goals and mechanisms of MBKM tend to be more active in taking advantage of the various learning opportunities offered by the program.

In general, the implementation of the MBKM curriculum in the History Education Study Program has been running and shows quite positive developments. Although there are still some aspects that require evaluation, the learning experiences gained by students through various learning activities show that this curriculum provides a wider space for students to develop academic competencies and professional skills.

3.4 Institutional Challenges in Implementing the MBKM Curriculum in History Education

Early-stage socialization of the MBKM curriculum, starting from the freshman year, has failed to prevent a limited understanding among students regarding the implications of their curricular decisions. Courses outside the study program offered do not meet the student quota, so there are many cases of students lacking credits if they follow the three MBKM patterns above. As a way out, the study program offers the MBKM study program materials that are specifically provided for history education students. Not all universities are able to accommodate student exchange programs as much as other universities. Therefore, in the history education study program, semester 2 off-campus is introduced into KKN-PK and TAS activities so as to meet the perception of MBKM.

There is no harmony between all academic supervisors regarding what courses are allowed and desired by the study program to be taken by students. Although the History Education Study Program already has three Additional External Learning Outcomes (Additional CPL), in principle, there needs to be integration between all lecturers, so that students are not confused about what courses are allowed to be studied. The most common technical obstacle is the lack of students' understanding of the MBKM courses taken, so that the results of MBKM courses outside the study program taken are completely irrelevant to the additional CPL determined by the study program. In addition, most students only join their friends in taking one MBKM course outside the study program, not based on strategic considerations for their future studies.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) curriculum in the History Education Study Program demonstrates a partially successful transformation in higher education curriculum reform. The key findings show that curriculum alignment and pedagogical innovation, particularly through project based learning and digital based instruction, have enhanced student engagement and experiential learning opportunities. However, several challenges remain, especially in students' understanding of program mechanisms, coordination among stakeholders, and academic system adjustments.

This study contributes to higher education curriculum studies by providing empirical evidence that MBKM implementation is not merely a policy adoption process but a systemic transformation that requires alignment between curriculum design, pedagogy, and institutional readiness, particularly in the context of history education.

Practically, the findings imply that universities need to strengthen student guidance, improve communication regarding MBKM mechanisms, and enhance institutional coordination with external

partners to ensure more effective implementation. For policymakers, the results highlight the importance of simplifying program procedures and providing clearer operational guidelines to support institutions in implementing curriculum reforms.

This study is limited to a single study program and a relatively narrow data scope. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve multiple institutions and disciplines, apply comparative approaches, and explore the long-term impact of MBKM on graduate competencies and employability.

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