



Challenges and Strategies of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka Policy at State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Kalimantan

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Abstract

Background: The Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy is not easy to implement at universities, including State Islamic Higher Education Institutions. Therefore, this study aims to examine the challenges and strategies for implementing the MBKM policy at State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Kalimantan.

Objective: This study aims to identify and analyze the challenges encountered in implementing the MBKM policy at PTKINs in Kalimantan.

Methods: Qualitative and quantitative techniques were used to explore the perspectives of study subjects regarding the challenges and strategies of the MBKM policy.

Results: The challenges for implementing the MBKM policy include the absence of a guidebook issued by the State Islamic Higher Education Institutions as a foundation for implementation, the lack of adequate support, insufficient campus facilities and infrastructure, and the implementation of regulations requiring a considerably large budget. The implementation of the MBKM policy requires acquiring a guidebook issued by the State Islamic Higher Education Institutions based on the MBKM guidebook issued by the Ministry of Religion as a foundation for implementation, and formulating a curriculum in accordance with the requirements of the MBKM policy.

Conclusion: MBKM implementation at PTKINs in Kalimantan is impeded by institutional, resource, and communication barriers that are distinct from those faced by general state universities. The study contributes an empirically grounded challenge-strategy framework specific to Islamic higher education governance in Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are now placing a very high emphasis on the absorption of graduates into the workforce (Okolie et al., 2019). This focus is primarily due to the rapid development of science and technology in the 21st century, which has brought about swift changes in various aspects of life. These changes include the nature of jobs and ways of working, the loss of many types of jobs, and the emergence of various new types of employment. Higher education institutions must respond quickly and precisely to these dynamic changes, including those under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The transformation of learning is implemented by universities as a response to equip and prepare graduates to become a generation that is excellent, responsive, and ready to face the challenges of the times (Aristyasari et al., 2023; Krishnapatria, 2021; Rajaram, 2021; Tobondo, 2024).

The response of State Universities in preparing students to face changes and meet the rapidly evolving demands of the era is to develop student competencies (Petrychenko et al., 2023; Rafiq-uz-Zaman, 2022). The demand for higher education institutions is to design and implement creative and innovative learning processes so that learning outcomes covering aspects of knowledge, attitudes, and skills can be achieved optimally and in a relevant manner (Asbari & Novitasari, 2024). Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka (Freedom to Learn – Independent Campus) is a policy expected to be the answer to these demands.

Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka is a policy launched by the Minister of Education and Culture, which has now become the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Iskandar et al., 2024). The Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka policy is regulated in the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation Number 3 of 2020 concerning National Higher Education Standards. This policy aims to encourage students to master various disciplines useful for entering the workforce, as it provides students with the opportunity to choose the courses they will take. Students have the opportunity for one semester to undertake learning outside their study program within the same university, and for a maximum of two semesters to undertake learning in the same study program at a different university or learning outside the university (Hersusetiyati & Chandra, 2022; Weda et al., 2023).

Learning opportunities through real-world experiences and dynamics are expected to provide challenges and opportunities for students to develop capacity, creativity, personality, and independence in seeking and discovering knowledge (Lucas & Spencer, 2020). Other abilities that students can achieve include social interaction skills, solving real problems, collaboration, self-management, and working under targets and performance demands (Trianung et al., 2024; Wibisono & Umiyati, 2023). This policy program also opens broad opportunities for students to enhance and enrich their competencies in the real world according to their aspirations and passions.

However, the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka policy program is certainly not easy for universities, including for State Islamic Higher Education Institutions that have different backgrounds compared to general State Universities. State Islamic Higher Education Institutions are spread throughout Indonesia, including in the Kalimantan region. Kalimantan is an area known for its Islamic kingdoms and religious diversity, yet with a large Muslim population. Islamic Higher Education Institutions are also faced with a major challenge amid current global developments: can they produce graduates who possess strong spiritual and religious competencies while excelling in modern intellectual pursuits?

There are three reasons why the distinctive institutional character of PTKINs warrants serious academic study. First, PTKINs are regulated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, not the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology—thus creating a dual regulatory environment in which MBKM policy must be adapted through Islamic education governance schemes and accreditation standards that differ from those governing general PTN. Second, PTKINs face an inherent tension between the labor-market orientation of MBKM policy and their institutional mission to produce graduates with deep religious erudition—a form of trade-off that general universities do not face in the same way. Third, PTKINs in Kalimantan are geographically and institutionally distinct: their regional characteristics—including a particular industry structure, geographic conditions, and collaborative ecosystems—mean that implementation barriers manifest across multiple dimensions, shaping which strategies are feasible and effective.

This rather radical shift in the higher education system raises a number of implementation challenges at campuses with unique characteristics. State Islamic Higher Education Institutions also aspire to produce a generation that is mature in both religious and general knowledge and capable of competing in the era of globalization (Dian et al., 2023; Sudirman et al., 2025). Strategic approaches must also be formulated to address these challenges so that this visionary policy can be implemented in accordance with its intended targets. Research on this matter is therefore essential.

The objectives of this study are to better understand the challenges experienced as well as the strategies implemented in the Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka policy at State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Kalimantan. In particular, this study answers the following three research questions: (RQ1) What are the major challenges faced by PTKINs in Kalimantan in

implementing the MBKM policy? (RQ2) What solutions have these institutions developed in response to those challenges? (RQ3) How do such challenges and strategies provide a productive avenue for analysis through Edwards III's policy implementation framework to offer actionable direction on PTKIN governance and Ministry of Religious Affairs policy design?

Most existing studies investigating MBKM implementation focus on public universities (PTN) or private institutions (PTS) within Java—contexts that benefit from closer industrial partnership ecosystems, higher infrastructure readiness, and alignment with the regulatory framework in accordance with Kemendikbudristek directives (Arifin & Muslim, 2020). Little if any academic research has examined the implementation of MBKM at PTKINs outside Java, where differences in institutional capacity, regional economies, and dual-ministerial governance regimes can create significantly different implementation conditions. This study fills an empirical and contextual gap by presenting the first multi-site analysis of MBKM challenges, strategies, and stakeholder perspectives from three PTKINs in Kalimantan, as reported by 409 respondents across four institutional roles.

This study is theoretically rooted in Edwards III's (1980) framework on policy implementation, which identifies four determinants of successful implementation: communication (the clarity and dissemination of policy directives), resources (the availability of human, financial, and material resources), disposition (that is, the commitment and understanding of the implementers), and bureaucratic structure (the degree to which organizational coordination and standard operating procedures are formalized). This framework offers analytical traction when categorizing the barriers and strategies identified, enabling the analysis to serve not merely as description but as a theoretically grounded diagnosis of why MBKM faces structural resistance in the PTKIN context.

METHOD

In this study, we used a concurrent mixed-methods design Creswell (2023), specifically combining quantitative descriptive survey data and qualitative thematic analysis within an overall integrated analytical framework. The quantitative part—structured questionnaire data analyzed by descriptive frequency statistics—represented the distribution of MBKM knowledge levels and challenge perceptions across institutional roles. The qualitative portion (thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses and institutional documentation) offered the nuance required to identify contextual constraints and strategies that could not be identified using numeric frequencies alone. This design was suitable for evaluation research, as stakeholder perceptions had systematic variation based on institutional role, and it sought to simultaneously describe and explain implementation dynamics.

A qualitative and quantitative approach was used to explore research subjects' opinions on the challenges and strategies of the Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka (Freedom to Learn – Independent Campus) policy. In qualitative research, research subjects could provide opinions openly. The subjects of this research were lecturers, students, study program team representatives, and faculty team representatives from State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Kalimantan, specifically in Banjarmasin, Palangka Raya, and Samarinda. Meanwhile, the object of this research was the challenges and strategies of the Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka policy.

The data collection techniques used were questionnaires and documentation. The sampling technique employed was snowball sampling. The researcher distributed research instruments to lecturers, students, study program team representatives, and faculty team representatives. Data analysis was carried out using the following steps: 1) the researcher performed data condensation on the obtained data, 2) presented the data, and 3) described and verified conclusions.

This research was conducted at State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Kalimantan, specifically in Banjarmasin, Palangka Raya, and Samarinda. The research was carried out from July to October 2021. The research respondents consisted of 409 individuals, including lecturers, students, study program representatives, and faculty representatives. The researcher distributed a questionnaire link to respondents to assess respondent profiles, level of knowledge regarding the Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka policy, and the challenges and strategies of the Merdeka

Belajar – Kampus Merdeka policy. The results of the respondents' questionnaire answers were then analyzed quantitatively and explained qualitatively to obtain research conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

1. Respondent Profile Overview

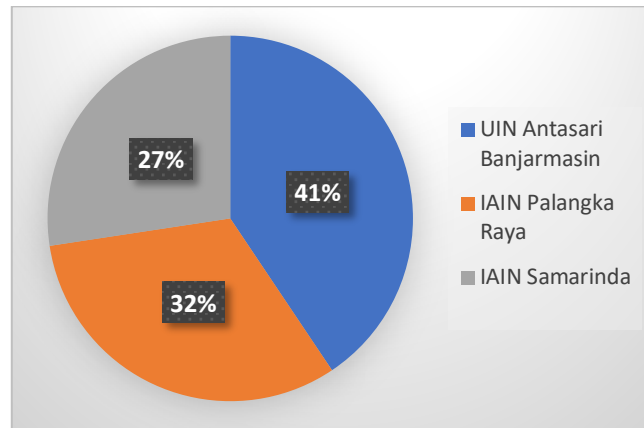


Figure 1. Percentage of Research Respondents

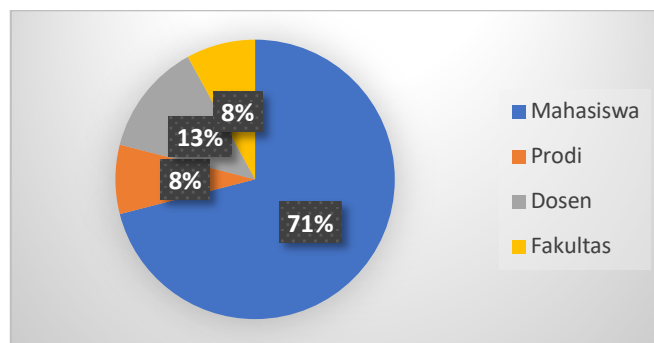


Figure 2. Research Respondent Status

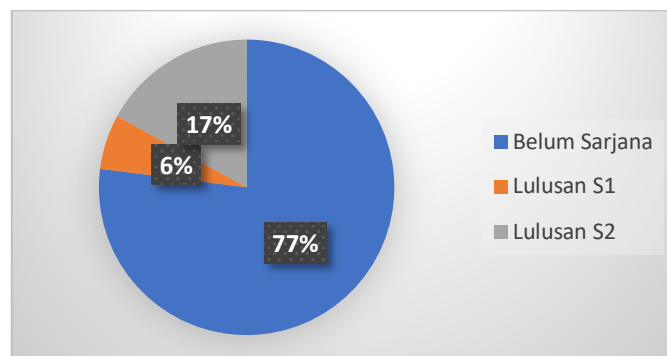
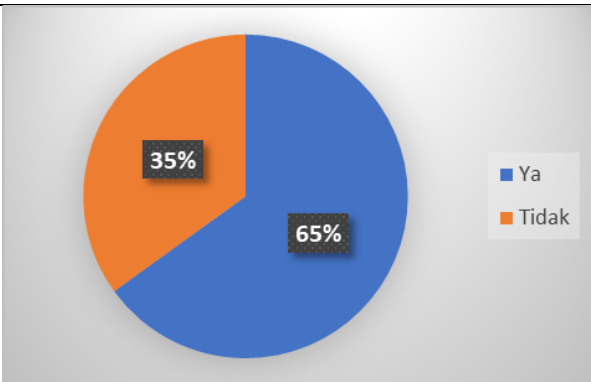
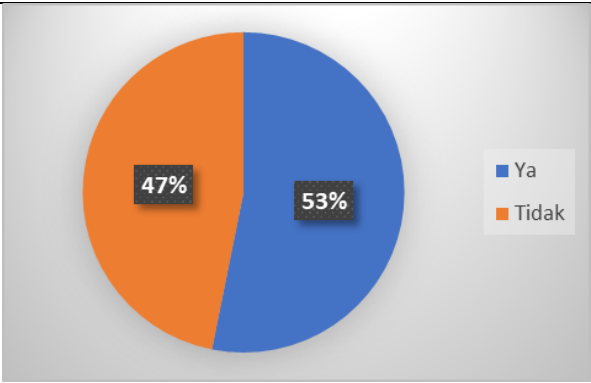
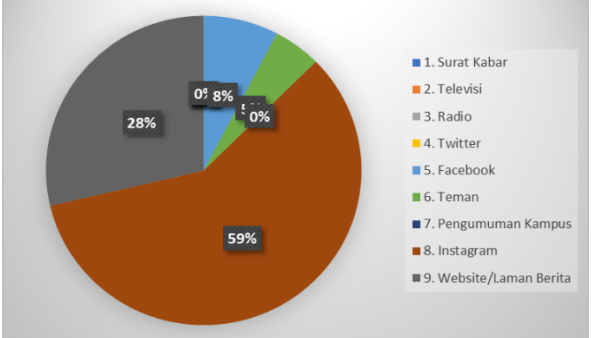
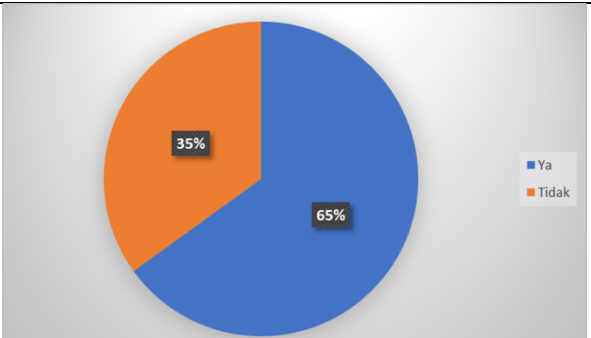


Figure 3. Educational Background of Research Respondents

2. Overview of Knowledge Regarding the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka Policy

Table 1. Knowledge Study of the "Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka" (MBKM) Policy

Table 1. Knowledge Study of the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) Policy		
Respondents	Study Area	Data Obtained
Total: 409	Having adequate knowledge regarding the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (Independent Learning-Independent Campus) policy.	
	Having sufficient information about the MBKM policy.	
	Information sources accessed to learn about the MBKM policy.	
	Understanding that the implementation of the Kampus Merdeka policy is important for higher education institutions.	

Respondents	Study Area	Data Obtained
	Understanding that the MBKM policy can contribute positively to improving the learning process in higher education.	A pie chart with a blue section representing 'Ya' at 63% and an orange section representing 'Tidak' at 37%. A legend on the right shows a blue square for 'Ya' and an orange square for 'Tidak'.
	Knowing the 4 main policy programs of Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka.	A pie chart with a blue section representing 'Ya' at 52% and an orange section representing 'Tidak' at 48%. A legend on the right shows a blue square for 'Ya' and an orange square for 'Tidak'.
	Knowing the 8 learning rights programs outside the study program within the MBKM policy.	A pie chart with a blue section representing 'Ya' at 52% and an orange section representing 'Tidak' at 48%. A legend on the right shows a blue square for 'Ya' and an orange square for 'Tidak'.

3. Overview of Challenges and Strategies for the MBKM Policy

Table 2. Study of Challenges and Strategies for the MBKM Policy Based on Respondent Feedback

Respondents	Study / Roles	Challenges	Strategies
Lecturers	a) Providing briefing for students before internships.	a) Absence of MBKM implementation guidebooks from the Study Program.	a) Participating in adequate MBKM socialization activities.
	b) Providing guidance and assignments during internships; supervisors act as mentors.	b) Lack of socialization/assistance regarding MBKM in Islamic Higher Education (PTKI).	b) Understanding the implementation guidelines to be issued by the Faculty/Study Program.
		c) No detailed explanation of	

Respondents	Study / Roles	Challenges	Strategies
	c) Conducting evaluation and assessment of internship results with supervisors.	lecturer duties in the MBKM policy. d) Lack of self-development platforms for lecturers to support MBKM. e) Lack of platforms for lecturers to serve as MBKM supervisors.	c) Attending seminars related to MBKM implementation in both Islamic and State Universities.
Students	a) Planning with Academic Advisors to determine courses/programs outside the study program. b) Registering for participation in learning programs or activities outside the study program. c) Completing requirements and following selection processes for external activities. d) Participating in external programs according to academic guidelines and MBKM regulations.	a) Absence of MBKM implementation guidebooks from the Faculty and Study Program. b) Lack of socialization/assistance for students regarding MBKM implementation. c) Unavailability of course offers/learning programs outside the study program. d) Lack of available learning programs outside the current study program.	a) Attending seminars related to MBKM implementation. b) Studying the MBKM implementation guidelines to be issued by the Faculty/Study Program. c) Waiting for MBKM implementation to join offered programs.
Study Program (Prodi)	a) Adjusting the curriculum to align with MBKM policy implementation. b) Facilitating students taking cross-program courses within the university.	a) Absence of MBKM implementation guidebooks from the Faculty. b) Inadequate socialization/assistance regarding MBKM policy in PTKI.	a) Attending seminars related to MBKM implementation. b) Studying the MBKM guidelines to be issued by the Faculty. c) Organizing seminars with MBKM experts

Respondents	Study / Roles	Challenges	Strategies
	c) Offering courses for external students and setting requirements.	c) Lack of assistance in curriculum mapping for MBKM. d) Lack of assistance regarding cross-program learning within the university.	for guidance. d) Formulating a curriculum that meets MBKM needs with other study programs in the same scientific field.
	d) Managing credit equivalence and transfers for external learning activities.		
	e) Designing online learning as an alternative to fulfill credit requirements.		
Faculty	a) Preparing faculty-level courses available for students from other study programs.	a) Absence of MBKM implementation guidebooks from the State Islamic Higher Education (PTKIN) authorities.	a) Creating MBKM implementation guidelines based on university regulations.
	b) Preparing documents for follow-up cooperation (MoU/MoA) with relevant partners.	b) Inadequate socialization/assistance regarding MBKM policy in PTKI.	b) Conducting seminars/assistance sessions regarding MBKM implementation. c) Executing MoUs/MoAs to establish partnerships with relevant stakeholders.

Discussions

Mapping the four identified MBKM implementation challenges against framework reveals a coherent pattern of institutional deficit that explains why the policy has not yet translated into operational reality in these PTKINs. Communication deficit: There is no MBKM-specific guidebook from PTKIN and limited socialization, which corresponds to Edwards III's first determinant. Implementation actors need clear operational commands, but fail when policy directives are not transmitted in a specific and detailed way at the level of faculties, study programs, and students. As detailed in the next section, this communication failure is further exacerbated by how MBKM directives from Kemendikbudristek are only indirectly applicable to PTKINs and then enacted only via Kemenag channels—and at the time of this inquiry, Kemenag's work on a framework for how institutions subject to their purview would implement any aspect of their guidelines covering higher education had just begun.

Resource shortage: Shortage of campus facilities, infrastructure limits, and funding constraints align with Edwards III's resource determinant. As regional institutions with smaller endowments and fewer direct industry partnerships, PTKINs in Kalimantan face wider resource gaps in the off-campus learning components (e.g., student exchange, internship, community service) that MBKM is designed to facilitate.

This result is Mudhofar (2025) observation that technological readiness is one of the bottlenecks in MBKM implementation. Disposition dimension: In this study, the relatively positive

disposition of implementers—65% were determined and had adequate knowledge of the MBKM policy, and 53% were aware of the eight learning programs available to undertake—functions as a facilitating factor and is what distinguishes our context from active resistance.

This actually indicates that it is not a lack of goodwill by implementers but rather system deficiencies in communication and resource availability acting as basic barriers. Bureaucratic structure: The strategies respondents attached to their responses—writing a guidebook for conducting these investigations, executing MoUs, reformulating curriculum—are exactly those structural interventions that Edwards III points out are required to overcome coordination failure. The emergence of these strategies as organic to institutional actors confirms the appropriateness of the Edwards III framework both analytically and contextually.

The Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (Freedom to Learn–Independent Campus) policy is a policy issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology that provides opportunities for students to hone their abilities according to their talents and interests by directly engaging in the workforce as preparation for future careers. The Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka policy is interpreted as a form of granting autonomous freedom to educational institutions, freedom from convoluted bureaucracy, and freedom for students to choose desired programs. The main objective to be achieved is the creation of a culture within educational institutions that is autonomous, non-bureaucratic, and the establishment of an innovative learning system based on student interests and the demands of the modern world.

In reality, the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka policy cannot be immediately implemented in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions due to various challenges. These challenges can be seen based on the research findings from respondents, namely: the absence of a guidebook issued by the State Islamic Higher Education Institutions as a basis for implementation; the lack of adequate socialization and assistance; inadequate campus facilities and infrastructure; and the complexities of policy implementation. Furthermore, when considering its execution, it certainly requires a substantial budget. This is supported by research conducted by Arifin (2020) on the challenges of implementing the "Merdeka Belajar, Kampus Merdeka" policy. These challenges form a crucial foundation for the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka policy.

These findings are in line with and go further than previous research on barriers to MBKM implementation. Arifin (2020), who investigated private Islamic HEIs (PTIS) in Java, also identified similar challenges, including lack of awareness and uncertainty about implementation, but did not focus on the distinct dual-ministry governance challenge that PTKINs face with Kemenag. A study conducted in Bengkulu also encountered issues of curriculum alignment; however, it was limited to a single institution and therefore did not reveal the cross-institutional patterns addressed in this fourth multi-site study in Kalimantan.

Roberts (2015) Investigated implications for curriculum management, but due to the institutional breadth and lack of geographic and governance specificity differ from this research. Taken together, these comparisons affirm that the barriers identified in this study are not idiosyncratically constrained to individual institutions but are representative of systemic challenges to PTKIN implementation that can only be met through policy-level solutions.

However, the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka policy can be carried out through various visionary strategies by the universities. This is supported by the findings of the research study based on the strategies prepared by the respondents. This implementation can also be supported by research results indicating that 65% of the total respondents possess adequate knowledge regarding the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka policy, and 53% are aware of sufficient information about the policy, with around 59% obtaining this information from Instagram.

This is reinforced by the large number of student respondents; in this digital era, everyone can easily access information from various platforms, including Instagram. Instagram is a platform easily accessible to anyone, especially young people. The information features in the form of posts presented by Instagram are easier to understand because they are systematically arranged and can consist of photos and videos, and with digital filters, they make users interested in reading every post, including information about Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka.

The importance of implementing the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka policy is affirmed

by 65% of respondents. This policy has various contributions to improving learning through the programs it offers. The four main programs within the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka policy are: 1) Opening of New Study Programs: this policy is directed so that proposed study programs align with the demands of the region, industry, and the workforce in general. This policy is expected to reduce the potential for graduates from study programs not being absorbed into the workforce, thereby adding to the unemployment potential in Indonesia; 2) Higher Education Accreditation, which is the government's effort to standardize the quality of universities and study programs. This accreditation indirectly requires universities and study programs to continuously and structurally develop their quality, especially in the aspects of the tri dharma of higher education (education, research, and community service); 3) State Universities with Legal Entity Status: this policy is expected to motivate state universities to continuously develop their potential; 4) Students' Right to Learn for 3 Semesters Outside Their Study Program: this policy is appreciated by various groups because it is considered capable of providing opportunities for students to develop their knowledge and experience in the courses they desire.

In addition to knowledge about the four main programs in the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka policy, 52% of respondents also have knowledge about the eight learning programs outside the study program within the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka policy, namely: 1) Student Exchange; 2) Internship/Work Practice; 3) Teaching Assistance in Educational Units; 4) Research; 5) Humanitarian Projects; 6) Entrepreneurial Activities; 7) Independent Study/Projects; and 8) Village Development/Thematic Community Service Program.

This policy can actually be implemented once the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka policy guidebook has been issued by the State Islamic Higher Education Institutions, based on the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka Guidebook published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as a foundation for implementation. This would allow the faculty and its constituent parts, including study programs, lecturers, and students, to adapt in its implementation, provided that facilities and infrastructure are adequate. The Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka policy holds great hope for State Islamic Higher Education Institutions to be able to develop rapidly and enhance institutional quality. University autonomy has long been an aspiration voiced by State Islamic Higher Education Institutions. The convoluted bureaucratization faced by State Islamic Higher Education Institutions is expected to be resolved with this policy.

CONCLUSION

The results show that the MBKM policy optimizes institutional autonomy, bureaucratic inflexibility, and student-oriented and innovative learning in line with demands. Nonetheless, the implementation in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Kalimantan is faced with some challenges: there are no guidelines for implementing institution-specific initiatives; limited policy socialization and assistance; insufficient facilities and infrastructure; and a significant financial burden. These matters need strategic approaches including the creation of higher education MBKM guidebooks in accordance with national provisions, conducting co-designing among study programs for curriculum changes, strengthening socialization through organization-based training workshops and seminars, and expanding partnerships through formal institutional cooperation (MoU). These findings answer the research question by identifying barriers and offering recommendations for effective MBKM policy implementation.

Theoretically, this study contributes to higher education policy implementation literature by dissecting the interplay of institutional readiness, resource capacity, and stakeholder engagement in relation to the MBKM framework. Practically speaking, it offers pragmatic routes for policymakers and universities to boost implementation success through structured frameworks, capacity building, and strategic partnerships. One of the limitations of this study is its localized context, which may not be generalizable to all regions. Future studies are advised to diversify the scope to different geospatial areas and other comparative perspectives, in addition to evaluating MBKM outcomes through quantitative methods of evaluation for a more objective assessment of long-term impact.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Wiwik Agustinaningsih contributed to the conceptualization of the research, data collection, and initial drafting of the manuscript. Sitti Rahmasari was responsible for research supervision, data analysis, validation of findings, and critical revision of the manuscript. Both authors collaboratively developed the research design, interpreted the results, and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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