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Management of Educational Policy Reform in Indonesia's Digital Era: A Systematic Review of MBKM and Merdeka Curriculum

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan meninjau secara sistematis literatur mengenai implementasi kebijakan Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) dan Kurikulum Merdeka di Indonesia. Kajian dilakukan dengan metode Systematic Literature Review (SLR) menggunakan protokol PRISMA. Dari tahap identifikasi diperoleh 26 artikel, 18 artikel diseleksi, 9 artikel memenuhi kriteria kelayakan, dan 5 artikel dianalisis lebih lanjut. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa kebijakan MBKM di perguruan tinggi memberi ruang fleksibilitas melalui kegiatan magang, penelitian, dan proyek sosial, yang berkontribusi pada penguatan keterampilan abad ke-21 mahasiswa. Sementara itu, Kurikulum Merdeka di sekolah dasar dan menengah menekankan otonomi guru serta penguatan literasi digital, namun masih menghadapi tantangan berupa kesenjangan digital dan keterbatasan kesiapan pedagogis. Secara umum, mahasiswa dan guru memiliki persepsi positif terhadap kebijakan ini, meskipun implementasi masih terhambat oleh keterbatasan infrastruktur, minimnya sosialisasi, serta kesenjangan antara sekolah perkotaan dan pedesaan. Sintesis temuan menegaskan bahwa keberhasilan kebijakan sangat ditentukan oleh konsistensi antara desain kebijakan, kapasitas kelembagaan, dukungan sosial, serta strategi afirmatif bagi wilayah tertinggal. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan perlunya kebijakan multi-level yang memperkuat dukungan infrastruktur, pelatihan guru, kepemimpinan akademik, dan sistem penjaminan mutu agar tujuan SDG 4: Quality Education dapat tercapai.

ABSTRACT

This study systematically reviews the implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) and the Merdeka Curriculum. Using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method guided by the PRISMA protocol, 25 articles were identified, 18 were screened, 9 met the eligibility criteria, and 5 were analyzed in depth. The review shows that MBKM in higher education opens up greater flexibility through internships, research, and community projects, which significantly contribute to strengthening students' 21st-century skills. At the primary and secondary levels, the Merdeka Curriculum highlights teacher autonomy and the integration of digital literacy, but its implementation is still challenged by the digital divide and uneven pedagogical readiness. Both students and teachers generally perceive these policies positively, although their effectiveness is often constrained by limited infrastructure, insufficient socialization, and disparities between urban and rural schools. The synthesis emphasizes that the success of these reforms depends on the alignment of policy design, institutional capacity, social support, and targeted strategies for disadvantaged regions. The study recommends multi-level policy efforts that enhance infrastructure, strengthen teacher training, promote academic leadership, and ensure quality assurance to support the achievement of SDG 4: Quality Education.



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INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a crucial instrument in preparing generations capable of facing the complexity of 21st-century challenges, ranging from digital technology development, economic globalization, to socio-cultural dynamics (Pare & Sihotang, 2023). Educational policy plays a highly strategic role in creating an educational system that is responsive to societal development and needs (Sumarsono et al, 2025). In Indonesia, educational policy has undergone significant transformation through the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program and the Merdeka Curriculum. Both

policies mark a paradigm shift from a uniform approach (*one-size-fits-all*) toward more flexible, adaptive, and student-centered learning (Putri, 2023).

The MBKM program launched in 2020 is directed toward higher education by providing students with the flexibility to take courses outside their study program, participate in internships, research, student exchanges, and social projects (Alfikalia et al., 2022). Its main objective is to strengthen soft skills and hard skills relevant to the working world and prepare graduates who are adaptive to change (Putri et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the Merdeka Curriculum implemented in primary and secondary education emphasizes teacher flexibility in designing learning, character development through the Pancasila Student Profile, as well as strengthening literacy and numeracy (Fadillah & Wahyudin, 2024).

Various previous studies demonstrate the positive potential of implementing these policies. MBKM has proven capable of enhancing student competencies and expanding collaboration networks with industry (Firdausia, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum is considered capable of promoting creativity and 21st-century skills (Hanipah, 2023). Student perceptions also tend to be positive, particularly in religious-based study programs, as the Merdeka Belajar policy provides space for academic freedom (Efendy et al., 2025). Additionally, bibliometric research shows that publications regarding MBKM in Scopus journals have increased rapidly since 2021, indicating growing academic attention toward this policy (Usman & Hartati, 2024).

However, several studies also highlight various implementation barriers, such as limited digital infrastructure, readiness of lecturers and teachers, disparities between urban and rural schools, and lack of quality assurance mechanisms (Baharuddin, & Burhan, 2025). Zahroh, et al (2025) found that teacher resistance to curriculum change also became a significant inhibiting factor. Other studies show that teacher acceptance of the Merdeka Curriculum is greatly influenced by perceptions of long-term benefits and effective policy communication (Rahayuningsih & Hanif, 2024). Although there has been extensive research on MBKM and the Merdeka Curriculum, the results remain fragmented and limited to specific contexts or institutions (Damayanti, D. P., 2025). There has not yet been a comprehensive synthesis that integrates various findings to identify general patterns, supporting and inhibiting factors, and policy implications as a whole (Kahar, et al, 2025). Thus, there remains a research gap in the form of a need to systematically review existing literature to provide a complete picture of how these policies are designed, implemented, and perceived at various educational levels (Vhalery, et al., 2022).

Based on this background, this research aims to conduct a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of articles discussing MBKM and Merdeka Curriculum policies in the period 2020–2025. This article contributes by: (1) presenting a synthesis of current research findings regarding policy implementation, (2) identifying determinant factors of success and barriers faced, and (3) offering policy implications that can strengthen the quality of education in Indonesia. Thus, this article is expected to provide theoretical contributions to educational policy studies as well as practical input for government, educators, and other stakeholders.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to synthesize research findings related to the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) and Merdeka Curriculum educational policies in Indonesia. The SLR process is structured based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, which include the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

The first stage is identification, which involves searching for articles through the Scopus database as the primary source. The keywords used include *Indonesian education policy*, *Merdeka Belajar*, *Merdeka Curriculum*, *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM)*. The publication range is limited to the period 2020–2025 to ensure the currency of research.

The second stage is screening, with inclusion criteria: (a) articles discussing MBKM or Merdeka Curriculum policies, (b) using empirical data or relevant theoretical reviews, (c) available in full text, and (d) published in reputable or Scopus-indexed journals. Articles in the form of opinions, editorials, or those not relevant to the context of formal education policy in Indonesia were excluded.

The third stage is eligibility, where abstracts, methods, and results of articles are reviewed to ensure topic relevance and methodological quality. Articles focusing on non-formal education or foreign policies were excluded.

The final stage is inclusion, which yielded five main articles that met the research criteria,

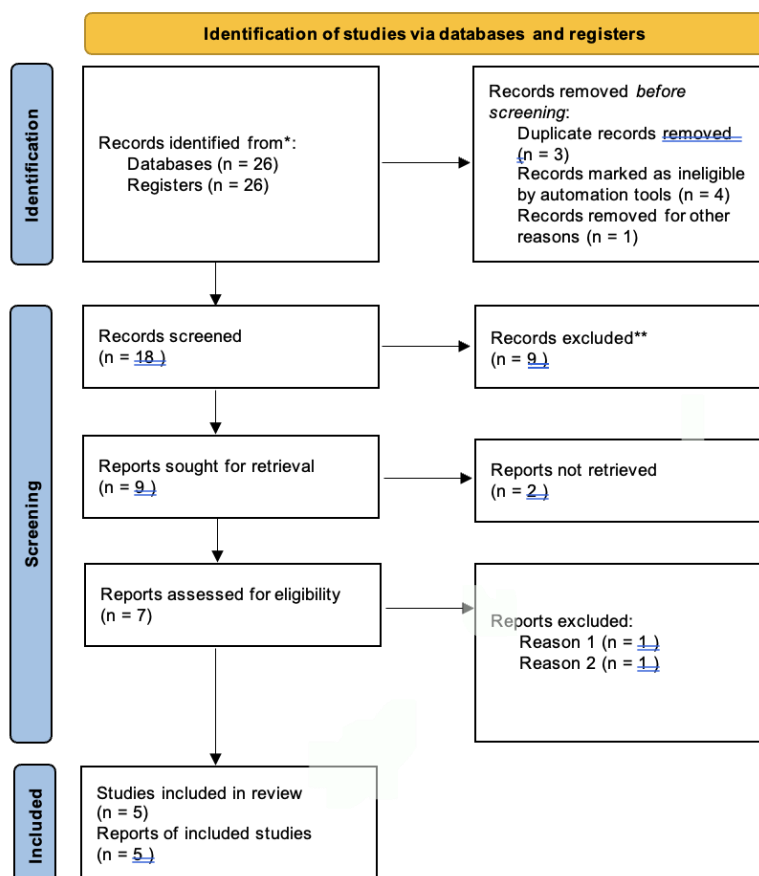
namely: (1) Wahyuningrat et al. (2025), (2) Gunarso et al. (2023), (3) Saa (2024), (4) Efendy et al. (2025), and (5) Baharuddin & Burhan (2024). These articles were then analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, by grouping research findings into main themes: policy implementation effectiveness, determinant factors of participation, curriculum adaptation to the digital era, student perceptions, and urban–rural gaps in implementation.

Table 1. Article Selection Process Summary

Selection Process	Number of Articles	Description
Identification	26	Articles from Scopus, using keywords: <i>Indonesian educational policy, Merdeka Belajar, Merdeka Curriculum, Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM)</i>
Screening	18	Duplicates & non-relevant articles excluded. Articles with Indonesian author affiliation
Eligibility	9	Abstract & full-text review
	7	
Inclusion	5	Articles analyzed in this SLR

The article search and selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA Flow Diagram, starting from the number of articles identified, screened, evaluated for eligibility, until obtaining the articles analyzed in this SLR.

Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review Flow Diagram



Following the systematic selection process illustrated in Figure 1, the five included articles are compared in Table 2 based on their focus, methodology, and main results.

Table 2. Main Articles

No.	Source (Year)	Objective/Focus	Method	Key Findings
1	Wahyuningrat et al., 2025	Assess MBKM effectiveness at UNSOED	Qualitative: interviews, observation, FGD, documents; Miles & Huberman	Effective implementation, but constrained by funding & QA
2	Gunarso et al., 2023	Identify determinant factors of MBKM participation	Kuantitatif: survei online Quantitative: online survey (150 items), PLS-SEM	Dominant factor: social influence; financial not significant
3	Saa, 2024	Examine Merdeka Curriculum adaptation to digital/global era	Qualitative: literature review + case study (interview, observation)	Teacher flexibility increased; infrastructure & HR constraints
4	Efendy et al., 2025	Explore PAI student perceptions of Merdeka Belajar	Quantitative: descriptive Likert survey	Students positive; barriers: facilities & lecturer readiness
5	Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025	Analyze differences in urban–rural teacher perspectives on reform	Qualitative: interviews & FGD; thematic analysis	Urban teachers more prepared; rural teachers limited access & training

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic review of five selected articles shows that Indonesian education policy marks an important phase in Indonesia's educational reform, while revealing various implementation challenges in the field (Wahyuningrat et al., 2025). One common thread that emerges is the high expectations for this policy to produce graduates who are competitive in the digital and global era (Putri, 2025). However, implementation success heavily depends on institutional, social, and infrastructure availability factors (Hermansyah et al, 2025).

1. MBKM Effectiveness in Higher Education

Curriculum is essentially part of a long-term education plan, as in a broad context it regulates how the learning process in formal education is implemented (Sumarsono, 2025). Studies show that MBKM is considered quite effective in improving student quality through more flexible learning activities, including internships, research, social projects, and student exchanges. A study by Wahyuningrat et al. (2025) found faculty compliance rates with guidelines reaching more than 90%, with positive impacts on improving soft skills such as leadership and communication. This aligns with Kahar (2025), who emphasizes that integrating MBKM into the curriculum enriches student experiences while expanding professional networks. Muzakki (2023) also affirms that MBKM increases curriculum relevance to work needs. Nevertheless, funding limitations, unintegrated information systems, and varying readiness among faculties create implementation disparities. This condition is consistent with the analysis by Budaya (2025), which shows that local institutional capacity often becomes the main inhibiting factor. University leadership support proves crucial, as emphasized by Risamasu and Sembiring (2024), because only with strong leadership can policies move from regulation to actual implementation.

2. Student Participation and Social Factors

Factors determining student involvement are not merely material in nature, but are more influenced by policy legitimacy, social support, and program relevance to career goals. Research by Gunarso et al. (2023) shows that social norms and peer influence more strongly encourage students to participate in MBKM programs compared to financial incentives. This aligns with Self-Determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) and findings by Riofita et al. (2024) which emphasize that students are more committed when programs align with their professional aspirations. The role of supervising lecturers is also crucial, as intensive guidance increases student confidence to participate in off-campus programs (Aulia, 2024). This emphasis on social support is consistent with Mariyono, D. (2024), who affirms that student-centered learning will succeed if the academic environment provides collective legitimacy. A study by Indrawan et al. (2019) noted that learning flexibility increases student motivation, although implementation among faculties still varies.

3. Merdeka Curriculum Implementation in Schools

The Merdeka Curriculum provides space for teachers to design more flexible learning. Saa (2024) notes that this policy contributes to strengthening digital literacy, creativity, and 21st-century skills. However, the main obstacle lies in the digital divide between urban and rural schools. Schools in cities are relatively more ready to adapt, while schools in disadvantaged areas still face limitations in technological facilities and teachers' pedagogical competencies. This finding is consistent with Aranda's (2024) report which affirms that the digital gap becomes the main barrier to educational reform in developing countries. Research by Sari et al (2024) shows that teachers who receive continuous ICT training are more successful in integrating technology into the classroom. Zainuddin et al. (2024) and Hunaepi et al. (2024) found that teacher resistance to change is still quite high, especially in secondary schools, while Hikmawati (2025) shows that implementation in elementary schools varies greatly, influenced by local factors and institutional support.

4. Student Perceptions of Merdeka Belajar Policy

In general, students accept this policy well. Research by Efendy et al. (2025) shows that Islamic Education students view Merdeka Belajar as an opportunity to expand competencies. Junaedi (2025) adds that clear information and socialization from the campus contribute greatly to increasing student acceptance. Bisri (2023) found that limited campus facilities and lecturer readiness often reduce implementation effectiveness. This view is reinforced by Yulastri et al (2025), who emphasize that the social legitimacy of policy only has a real impact if supported by a conducive learning environment. Baharudin et al. (2024) affirm that positive student perceptions are closely related to MBKM's relevance to workplace needs.

5. Urban–Rural Gaps and Equity Challenges

Almost all research underlines significant gaps. Teachers in urban areas are generally more prepared because they have access to training and institutional support, while rural teachers must struggle with technological limitations and minimal professional development (Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025). Fuadi (2021) emphasizes the importance of local government intervention to reduce implementation disparities. Hasballah (2024) adds that community support and school facilities affect teacher readiness in disadvantaged areas. Indriaty (2025) notes that without affirmative policies, regional disparities will widen national education quality gaps.

Results Synthesis:

The following synthesis integrates key findings from the reviewed studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of how MBKM and Merdeka Curriculum policies are being implemented and perceived across different educational contexts.

1. MBKM Effectiveness and Student Participation

MBKM policy in higher education has proven to provide more flexible learning space through internships, research, social projects, and student exchanges. This program helps students develop 21st-century skills while expanding networks with the working world. However, its effectiveness heavily depends on university leadership and institutional readiness. Funding limitations, unintegrated information systems, and differences in readiness among faculties remain major challenges. From the student side, participation is more influenced by social norms, academic environment support, and program relevance to career goals compared to financial incentives.

2. Merdeka Curriculum Implementation and Student Perceptions

At the primary and secondary education levels, the Merdeka Curriculum provides space for teachers to more freely design learning and emphasizes digital literacy. Nevertheless, its implementation is not yet equitable due to digital gaps, technological limitations, and resistance from some teachers to change. In higher education, the Merdeka Belajar policy is fairly well received by students. They see it as an opportunity to expand competencies and increase competitiveness, although limited campus facilities and lecturer readiness still hinder its effectiveness. Positive social acceptance can only have a real impact when supported by a conducive learning environment.

3. Urban–Rural Gaps and Equity Implications.

The most prominent issue in policy implementation is the gap between urban and rural schools. Teachers in cities are generally more prepared because they are supported by access to training and adequate facilities, while teachers in disadvantaged areas still face technological limitations and minimal professional development opportunities. This condition has the potential to widen educational quality inequality if there is no decisive intervention. Therefore, equitable education quality requires affirmative strategies that strengthen local capacity, community support, and regional policies that are more responsive to real needs in the field.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) and Merdeka Curriculum policies fundamentally bring new directions for educational reform in Indonesia. MBKM provides space for students to learn more flexibly through internships, research, and social projects, which has proven to enrich learning experiences and strengthen 21st-century skills. Meanwhile, the Merdeka Curriculum in primary and secondary schools provides opportunities for teachers to be more creative and adaptive, while fostering digital literacy among students. However, field implementation still faces major challenges, ranging from funding and infrastructure limitations, human resource readiness, to evident gaps between urban and rural schools.

Although students and teachers generally welcome this policy positively, its effectiveness heavily depends on concrete support from various parties. Central and regional governments, universities, schools, and communities need to work together to strengthen infrastructure, provide relevant training, and ensure affirmative policies for disadvantaged areas. With comprehensive support, MBKM and the Merdeka Curriculum will not merely become policy jargon, but can truly become concrete steps to improve national education quality and support the achievement of SDG 4: Quality Education.

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