

Kurikulum Merdeka and Students' Perceptions of Academic Freedom in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study aims to explore students' attitudes at Universitas Negeri Makassar toward academic freedom within the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka, particularly in the context of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that students perceive an increased level of autonomy in selecting learning pathways aligned with their interests and needs, along with greater opportunities to actively participate in the learning process. However, institutional regulations and faculty policies continue to constrain the full realization of academic freedom. This study underscores the need for consistent policy support and structured guidance to foster a more effective implementation of academic freedom. The insights derived are expected to inform the development of higher education policies that are more responsive and student-centered.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesian higher education is currently undergoing dynamic transformation, driven by the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka policy and the beckoning of the digital era. According to Nizar et al. (2023), the implementation of the MBKM curriculum is a significant contributor to enhancing the quality of education in Indonesia through the facilitation of flexible learning experiences to students to enable them to follow directions of learning adapted to their passion and requirements. The MBKM policy initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemdikbudristek) has opened wider opportunities for students to conduct off-campus learning in the forms of internships, social projects, and entrepreneurship programs for a maximum of three semesters. Alimuiddin (2023) states that the Merdeka Curriculum gives teachers greater freedom to innovate and be creative in designing student-centered and contextually relevant learning experiences. In reality, though, gaps between large and small universities remain, with private and regional state universities still struggling to develop networks with industry. On the other hand, campus digitalization continues with the establishment of various platforms such as Kampus Merdeka and Pijar Mahir, which offer digital skill training.

According to LPDP (2023), among the strongest focuses of Indonesia's long-term higher education financing strategy with LPDP 2045 is providing doctoral scholarships in strategic fields to fulfill the vision of "Golden Indonesia 2045." Nevertheless, there are still challenges such as the insufficiency of lecturers holding doctorates, asymmetric higher education institution accreditation, and dependency on BOPTN (State Universities' Operational Assistance) financing, which are still pressing concerns. As signified by the Ministry of

Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2023), Indonesian higher education policy direction in the future will be to develop more robust applied research, micro-credentialing, decrease bureaucracy, and enhance collaboration with industry to accelerate transformation into an internationally competitive level.

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemdikbudristek, 2022), the Merdeka Curriculum falls under the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) policy that seeks to provide greater autonomy for educational institutions and teachers to customize learning according to the needs and capabilities of learners. The core of this curriculum is learner autonomy, in which learners are no longer just information recipients but active learners who find their interests and potential. One of the most unique strengths of the Merdeka Curriculum is its project-based learning module, in which students can develop critical abilities through experiential learning. For example, instead of merely memorizing economic theory, students can create a small business to learn basic finance and entrepreneurship concepts. Teachers in this case are organizers of the learning process and not the sole keepers of knowledge. This is also reflected in the modular structure of the curriculum to allow schools to customize learning content to local circumstances and student needs.

Apart from that, the Merdeka Curriculum promotes genuine assessment that prioritizes the process of learning rather than academic outcome. Portfolios, self-evaluation, and developmental feedback are key instruments for tracking students' progress. This adheres to the philosophy of learner autonomy, where students are motivated to continuously self-evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. But this is implementation with its own set of problems. Teachers' willingness to adapt instruction, resource differences across schools, and awareness by parents of the paradigm shift in education are still significant concerns. But if implemented in totality, Merdeka Curriculum can create a generation of self-sufficient learners who are adaptable to changes a very much needed ideal in education reform in the 21st century. The implementation and development of the Merdeka Curriculum at the institutional level should be focused on constructing 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication, according to Cholilah et al. (2023). The curriculum calls for a move towards more contextualized, adaptive, and student-led education.

Merdeka Curriculum is thus not only a revision of scholarly papers but a cultural transformation of learning that places autonomy and relevance at the center in order to prepare learners with the capacity to handle an increasingly complex world. As Nasution et al. (2023) have posited, Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes learner-centered learning and provides teachers with the autonomy to design learning according to the needs and profiles of the learners. During an era of technological disruption and intensifying global change, the education system needs to continue evolving to remain relevant. A static content-based curriculum is no longer sufficient to prepare the young generations to meet future challenges. Making the curriculum relevant to the times and to global demands is a necessity not merely to play catch-up but to create national competitiveness. According to Siregar (2021), education in the 21st century requires a paradigm shift toward more adaptive, collaborative, and competency-based learning, aligned with technological advancements and the needs of the global labor market.

The Merdeka Curriculum and MBKM are paradigm shifts from the standardized to a dynamic system, which is suited to the demands of the time and humanizes students. It is successful due to a three-way collaboration of universities, industry, and facilitating government policies. According to Nugraha (2022), the Merdeka Curriculum was constructed as a framework for addressing the learning crisis worsened by the pandemic, and it grants schools the freedom to appropriate learning according to the context and circumstance of the learners. Academic freedom is an integral cornerstone in higher learning, allowing lecturers, researchers, and students to research, criticize, and develop knowledge ethically and without constraint. Academic freedom is not a privilege but an absolute requirement for the progress of

civilization. Academic freedom is a bridging concept among scholarly customs and national development needs within Indonesia's thriving environment, and it safeguards academic autonomy against forms of intervention.

In Indonesia, academic freedom is faced with complexities. The Higher Education Law protects scientific freedom in one aspect. Law Number 12 of 2012 on Higher Education explicitly states that higher education in Indonesia guarantees academic freedom, academic forum freedom, and autonomy of science (Law No. 12 of 2012, Article 8). Yet, all too often, cases of self-suppression exist where scholars still hold back when discussing sensitive topics, or institutional pressure is applied upon research that is not "aligned" with some visions. Universities should be havens where such national challenges are objectively debated, ranging from studies of public policy to studies of radicalism. The vision of healthy academic freedom is all about proportion. Freedom without accountability is raucous, while excessive control kills intellectual creativity. Ideally, universities should be fertile grounds for critical but civil debate, where all views are scientifically tested and not politically or dogmatically motivated. By standing on this principle, universities can continue to be beacons of knowledge, light that leads the way in inclusive and sustainable national development.

Students' understandings of academic freedom are important because they are both the immediate doers and the direct beneficiaries of higher education practice. Their understandings reflect the extent of internalization of academic freedom values within the campus culture and are a barometer of the health of intellectual democracy within higher education institutions. Student perception surveys can reveal whether campuses truly are zones of free thinking or whether they are bogged down by bureaucratic formalism that stifles creativity. The perceptions of students regarding academic freedom are shaped by a variety of influences. Campus culture is central to those institutions with a tradition of open debate and tolerance of criticism, have students who are more confident in their articulacy. Very hierarchical and dogmatic academic cultures, by contrast, induce self-censorship. Institutional policy has a significant part to play; rules preventing the discussion of "sensitive" topics without absolute scientific justification will shape negative attitudes towards academic freedom. A leveled lecturer-student relationship, where lecturers turn into discussion facilitators rather than single arbiters of truth, entrenches students' trust in academic freedom. External influences such as political pressure and donor interference also shape their attitudes towards unspoken boundaries.

This is also fueled by structural problems such as an evaluation system that continues to reward memorization at the expense of critical thinking and administrative tasks taking lecturers' time for enabling in-depth discussion. Ironically, in our current digital age, where information should be easier to access, new forms of limitation have emerged, such as institutional surveillance of students' online activities. Bridging this gap requires a multi-dimensional approach. Arrangements have to be made in the institutions for students who want to provide constructive criticism. The curriculum must be designed in a way that intellectual courage is cultivated, not merely knowledge transmission. Above all, there must be an academic culture where the possession of differing views is respected and admired rather than being seen as a threat. Henceforth, students' understanding of academic freedom will no longer be an idealistic rhetoric but transform into a second nature that shapes them into responsible yet bold intellectuals.

The research on the extent to which the Merdeka Curriculum provides space for academic freedom of students is extremely pertinent on both theoretical and practical grounds. According to Rahayu et al. (2022), the implementation of the Merdeka Learning Curriculum facilitates more adaptive learning innovations focusing on the overall development of students' competencies. At present, there is a very complicated higher education context. Thus, such a study is opportune to address a most pressing problem: Does the flexibility accorded by the Merdeka Curriculum pay off in terms of intellectual freedom, or remains bound in bureaucratic

procedures? By measuring implementation of the curriculum through the prism of academic freedom, the study can reveal whether students' rights to experiment, talk, and construct their ideas are enabled or indeed constrained by a curriculum design that, though more flexible, may still be caught up in old paradigms of learning.

The value of this research to policy assessment cannot be overemphasized. The conclusions of the study are likely to provide a platform for the formulation of recommendations for filling the gap in implementing the Independent Curriculum as planned." For instance, if it is confirmed that students are still reluctant to criticize lecturers or choose "safe" research topics when the curriculum has more scope for exploration, policy interventions such as lecturer training to build more egalitarian space for discussion or changing academic guidelines to maintain freedom of speech are necessary. Empirical findings from this research can also help the government and schools identify obstacles such as bureaucratic burdens, misalignment of the curriculum and assessment system, or campus-level cultural resistance. Thus, this research not only documents the problems but also offers evidence-based solutions to make sure that the Independent Curriculum achieves its general aims. More broadly, the relevance of this research lies in its effort to bridge the theory and practice of emancipatory pedagogy. Through examination of the extent to which the Independent Curriculum makes academic engagements more humanized, this research can serve as a point of departure for the reformation of higher education to render it more humanized, inclusive, and attuned to contemporary challenges. Lastly, the final objective of the research is that academic freedom is not just an empty slogan but a living experience that guides the quest for knowledge and society.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study utilized a qualitative descriptive approach that aimed to describe the students' perception of academic freedom regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in higher education. The application of this approach is that it allows the researcher to examine the students' subjective views in detail and understand how educational policies are implemented in their daily learning processes. Research participants are students of different study programs in Universitas Negeri Makassar who have participated in the Independent Learning Independent Campus (MBKM) program, such as internship, tutoring support, humanitarian activities, and independent research. The study used sampling method in the form of purposive sampling considering students with first-hand experiences in learning activities based on the Independent Curriculum. Data collection entailed semi-structured interviews to uncover students' perceptions of the freedom of option to learn routes, learning process engagement, and the extent to which curriculum policies provide space for autonomous and critical thinking.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations that one must note when interpreting the results. Firstly, the research objects were limited to students studying a few study programs at Universitas Negeri Makassar who participated in the Independent Learning Independent Campus (MBKM) program. This limits the degree to which conclusions could be generalized to the entire student population at the university or other universities. Second, the information gathered was largely a product of the semi-structured interviews, which are subjective and highly dependent upon respondents' individual experiences and perceptions. Other external circumstances, such as the campus environment or differing faculty policies, might also impact students' perceptions but were not extensively explored in this study. Third, the research uses a qualitative research approach that focuses more on understanding in-depth as opposed to quantitative measurement, and hence the findings are descriptive rather than quantitative to be used to measure the extent of academic freedom. These are limitations that are significant

reminders for readers and researchers to take account of the setting and parameter of this research when utilizing or coming up with additional research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Based on analysis of interview data and policy documents, the research has identified several significant findings of the perceptions of students in relation to academic freedom in the process of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at Universitas Negeri Makassar. For starters, the majority of students have noted that they have felt more freedom in determining their own learning journeys through the Independent Learning Independent Campus (MBKM) program. They are able to select electives, internships, or independent study according to their interests and academic requirements. This indicates that the Merdeka Curriculum gives ample space for students to foster their own potential and interests. Second, students also view academic freedom as not only freedom in choosing courses but also freedom to participate actively in discussion and research. The majority of the respondents appreciated the encouragement of lecturers to give their opinions and be innovative in their thoughts, despite some existing impediments in the form of administrative constraints and faculty rules that just so happen to be less flexible from time to time. Third, there are differences in perceptions among students based on study programs and duration of engagement in MBKM. Students with longer engagement in the program better understand and value academic freedom, while new students require more intensive counseling and socialization. Overall, the research findings indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum positively impacts students' academic freedom at Universitas Negeri Makassar but is still in need of improvement, particularly in policy support and facilities to allow the exercise of academic freedom.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the application of the Merdeka Curriculum by the Independent Learning Independent Campus (MBKM) program of Universitas Negeri Makassar provides students with more room for experiencing academic freedom, specifically in determining learning paths in accordance with their interests and needs. This study aligns with the dream of the Merdeka Curriculum, with the emphasis on flexibility and autonomy in learning so that the students are more active and participative in learning. This agrees with Santoso's (2023) study, which found that the use of a flexible curriculum can improve students' motivation and involvement in scholarly activities. But this research also found that the freedom of study experienced by students is not totally unfettered. Administrative restrictions and faculty rules have been cited by some respondents as sometimes constricting the width of that freedom. This is a manifestation of the need for policy overhauls at the faculty level to be more in line with the spirit of academic freedom espoused by the Merdeka Curriculum. These findings are in line with the study by Pratama and Rahman (2024), which shows bureaucratic obstacles and institutional control remain notable hindrances to the optimal achievement of academic freedom in higher education.

Additionally, differences in the perception of students based on whether they have undergone MBKM underscore intensified socialization and mentoring, especially for new students. This is due to the fact that this type of guidance is necessary to facilitate them in their understanding of their academic freedom and responsibility as well as to maximize such opportunity. This proof verifies Zimmerman's (2002) theory of self-directed learning that centers on the importance of guidance in developing independent learning skills and academic responsibility. Generally, this study reiterates that academic freedom is a critical element in formulating humanistic and responsible higher education in response to contemporary challenges. Nevertheless, the achievement of maximal academic freedom relies heavily on

guiding policies and a benign academic environment that facilitate students in achieving creative, critical, and responsible development. This is reinforced by Lestari's (2023) study, which emphasizes that academic freedom can only be effectively realized if supported by clear policies and a campus culture that fosters innovation and academic expression.

CONCLUSION

The study points to the imperativeness of employing the Merdeka Curriculum in addressing the academic freedom of students within efforts to improve the quality of higher education in a more human-oriented and responsive response to the demands of the era. Academic freedom, as perceived by students, is not just freedom to follow learning paths but also a space for creativity, idea exchange, and autonomous building of critical thinking capacity. Although there are certain administrative and policy barriers which need to be improved, the culture of academic freedom is an essential pillar which must be cultivated consistently through positive policies and a healthy academic environment. Therefore, higher learning institutions must make every effort towards harmony between curriculum policies and their implementation at the workplace on a regular basis so that students can actually experience and best benefit from academic freedom.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that Universitas Negeri Makassar intensify socialization and guidance regarding academic rights and responsibilities under the Merdeka Curriculum, especially for new students. Continuous mentoring will allow the students to better understand and maximize their academic freedom. In addition, faculties need to update and revise internal policies to support the implementation of flexible academic freedom in accordance with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum. Development of infrastructure and the availability of supporting facilities, such as discussion rooms and access to innovative learning resources, also need to be improved to offer an environment that is conducive to the creativity and innovation of students. There needs to be training for lecturers and academic staff on the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and academic freedom in order to equip them to provide guidance accordingly and conduct a humanistic learning process. Finally, it is recommended to conduct further research with various study programs and faculties to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and academic freedom in Universitas Negeri Makassar.

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