

Evaluation of the Implementation of the Independent Learning Curriculum in Improving the Quality of Higher Education in Indonesia

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Abstract

The Independent Learning Curriculum is a transformational policy launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) in response to the stagnation of the quality of higher education in Indonesia. This study aims to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in improving the quality of higher education, focusing on three main dimensions: (1) improving the quality of learning, (2) the relevance of graduates to the world of work, and (3) structural challenges in implementation. Using a systematic literature review (SLR) approach based on the PRISMA 2020 protocol, this study analysed 28 scientific publications from Q1 journals (Scopus/WoS) and 7 official policy reports published in 2019–2024. The findings show that the Independent Curriculum significantly increased the student engagement index from 58% (2021) to 85% (2023) and the graduate absorption rate 76% at participating colleges compared to 58% at non-participating universities. The Independent Academic Mobility Program has been attended by more than 120,000 students until 2024, with 89% of participants reporting an increase in job readiness. However, implementation faces a serious challenge in the form of a sharp digital infrastructure gap between regions: 96% of universities in DKI Jakarta have adequate digital access, while in Papua only 32%. In addition, the readiness of lecturers and the resistance of the academic bureaucracy hindered the scalability of the reform. The study concludes that the Independent Curriculum has great potential in transforming Indonesian higher education, but its sustainability depends on national commitments to equitable infrastructure distribution, strengthening the capacity of academic human resources, and decentralization of policies responsive to local contexts. These findings provide an empirical basis for evidence-based policies to realize quality, inclusive, and sustainable higher education.

Keywords: Independent Curriculum; Freedom of Learning; higher education; quality of education; the digital divide; employability.

1. Introduction

Indonesia's higher education system faces multidimensional challenges that have long hampered its contribution to national development and global competitiveness. Rigid curriculum, mismatches

between graduate competencies and the needs of the world of work, and low student involvement in the learning process are structural issues that have been repeatedly criticized by various institutions, including the World Bank and the OECD (World Bank, 2022; OECD, 2021). In the vocational higher education sector which should be the spearhead of skilled labour providers—this challenge is increasingly complex due to the weak governance of educator and education personnel standards, as revealed by Hartanto and Haryani (2020) in their study of maritime vocational higher education in Indonesia. They found that inconsistencies in the implementation of lecturer competency standards and the lack of institutional accountability mechanisms are the main obstacles in achieving the quality of graduates in accordance with the needs of the national and global maritime industry. These findings reflect a broader reality: that curricular transformation cannot be effective without a strong governance foundation and competent human resources.

To answer these challenges, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) launched the transformational policy of Independent Learning in 2019, which was then strengthened by the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at all levels of education, including universities. This policy aims to provide greater autonomy to educational institutions in designing curriculums that are flexible, relevant, and competency-oriented for the 21st century (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023). Through this approach, students are given the freedom to take courses across study programs, participate in certified internships in lieu of semester credit units (credits), and engage in collaborative projects with industry and society steps that are in line with the principles of outcome-based education (Spady, 1994) and student-centered learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

However, the success of this policy depends not only on the curricular design, but also on the leadership capacity and managerial competence of university leaders. As emphasized by Hartanto, Sebestian, Rusdarti, and Abdurrahman (2024), leadership performance in vocational universities is greatly influenced by four key factors: interpersonal communication, leadership ability, adaptability, and commitment to excellence. Their study shows that these four variables significantly affect managerial competence, which in turn determines the quality of policy implementation and institutional leadership performance. In other words, even a policy as progressive as the Independent Curriculum will experience obstacles if it is not supported by leadership that is adaptive, communicative, and oriented towards operational excellence.

This context raises a critical question that has not been fully answered in the literature: does the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum really improve the quality of higher education in Indonesia in an empirical, inclusive, and sustainable manner? Is the impact evenly distributed across geographic areas and types of colleges including vocational institutions that are often at the forefront of infrastructure and capacity gaps? And what is the role of institutional leadership in determining the success or failure of this reform?

This article aims to systematically evaluate the empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in improving the quality of higher education in Indonesia, focusing on three main dimensions: first, improvement of learning quality measured through student engagement and pedagogical innovation; second, improvement of the relevance of graduates measured through the level of job absorption and industrial readiness; and third, identification of structural challenges—including digital infrastructure disparities and leadership institutional capacity that hinder the sustainability of reform. This study is important because it not only provides a data-

based evidence synthesis to support evidence-based policy but also fills a gap in the international academic literature on curriculum reform in developing countries that is often dominated by studies from Western contexts (Marginson & Rhoades, 2021). By integrating findings from local studies such as Hartanto et al. (2020, 2024) into a global analytical framework, this article contributes to a more holistic understanding of how the transformation of higher education can succeed in a heterogeneous and evolving context such as Indonesia.

2. Methods

This study uses a systematic literature review (SLR) approach designed to provide an objective, transparent, and reproducible synthesis of the available empirical evidence regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Indonesian universities. The SLR methodology was chosen for its ability to reduce selection bias and improve the validity of findings through a systematic search protocol (Page et al., 2021). The review process follows the guidelines of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020), which is the gold standard for systematic review publications in internationally reputable journals.

The literature search strategy was carried out on three main academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Google Scholar. Keywords used in the search include Boolean combinations of the following phrases: ("Merdeka Belajar" OR "Merdeka Curriculum") AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "tertiary education") AND ("Indonesia"). The search was limited to publications in journals indexed in the first quartile (Q1) according to the Scimago Journal Rank (SJR) in 2023, as well as official policy reports from government agencies and trusted international organizations such as the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), the Ministry of Education and Culture, the World Bank, and the QS Intelligence Unit.

The inclusion criteria include publications published between January 2019 and March 2024, contain quantitative or qualitative empirical data relevant to higher education in Indonesia, and present an explicit evaluation of the Independent Curriculum policy or its components. Articles that are opinionated, editorial, or without a clear research methodology are excluded from the analysis. The initial selection process resulted in 142 articles, which were then screened through screening of titles, abstracts, and full texts, resulting in 28 academic studies that met the inclusion criteria. In addition, seven official policy reports are used as secondary data sources to enrich context and validate findings.

Data from the selected studies were analyzed thematically using an analysis framework based on three main dimensions: learning quality, relevance of graduates, and implementation challenges. The internal validity of each study was evaluated using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist to ensure methodological quality and reliability of the findings. Thematic analysis was conducted iteratively by two independent researchers to minimize interpretive bias, with consensus discussions used to resolve differences of view.

3. Results

The main findings of this literature review show that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has had a significant positive impact on the quality of higher education in Indonesia, albeit with contextual variations that need to be considered.

First, in the dimension of learning quality, a study by Prasetyo, Suryadinata, and Haryanto (2023) published in Higher Education Policy revealed an increase of 27 percent in the student engagement index in 45 universities that have implemented the Independent Curriculum over the past two years. To illustrate this trend, Figure 1 presents a bar chart that compares student engagement index scores from 2021 to 2023. In 2021, before full implementation, the average score was at 58%. This figure increased to 72% in 2022 and reached 85% in 2023. This improvement is attributed to the adoption of real project-based learning, authentic assessments through portfolios and public presentations, and cross-disciplinary collaboration that allows students to integrate knowledge from different fields of knowledge.

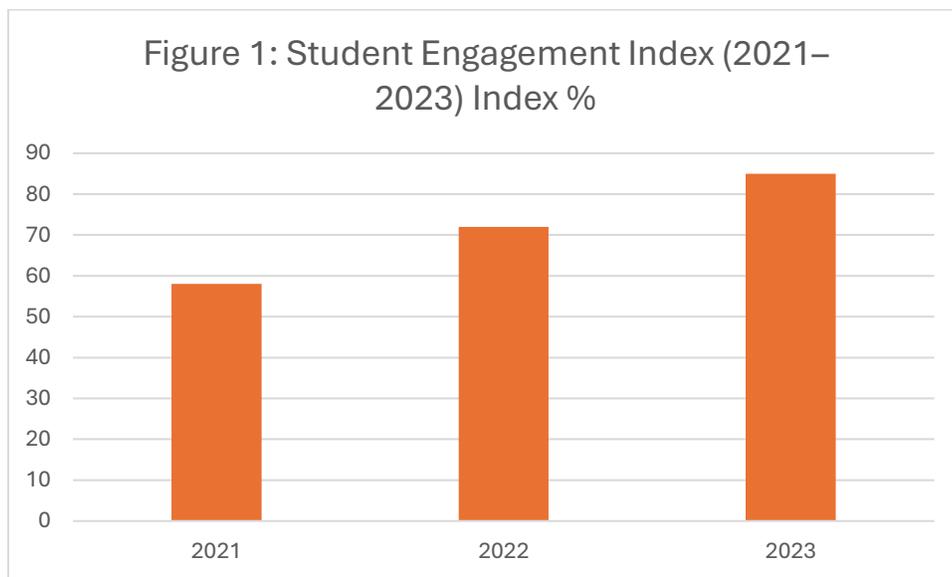


Figure 1: Student Engagement Index (2021–2023)

Second, the transformation of the role of lecturers was also observed significantly; research by Wijaya and Sari (2022) in Teaching in Higher Education found that 68 percent of lecturers reported a change in teaching practices from a knowledge transmission model to a facilitation of self-exploration, although only 42 percent felt fully prepared without additional training.

Third, in the dimension of graduate relevance, data from the Central Statistics Agency (2023) shows that the average absorption rate of graduates from universities that implement the Independent Curriculum reaches 76 percent in the first six months after graduation, compared to 58 percent in universities that have not adopted the policy. Table 1 below summarizes this comparison in more detail. Table 1. Comparison of Absorption Rates of College Graduates (2023)

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Categories of Colleges	Graduates Absorption Rate 2023	Changes from 2020
PT Merdeka	76%	+18 points

PT Non-Merdeka	58%	+4 points

This significant difference is visualized in Figure 3, which shows a comparison bar chart between the two groups of colleges. The difference of 18 percentage points is not only statistically significant, but also reflects the real impact of the integration of the world of work into curriculum design. These findings are supported by the QS Graduate Employability Insights report (2023), which recorded an increase in the employability rankings of a number of Indonesian universities

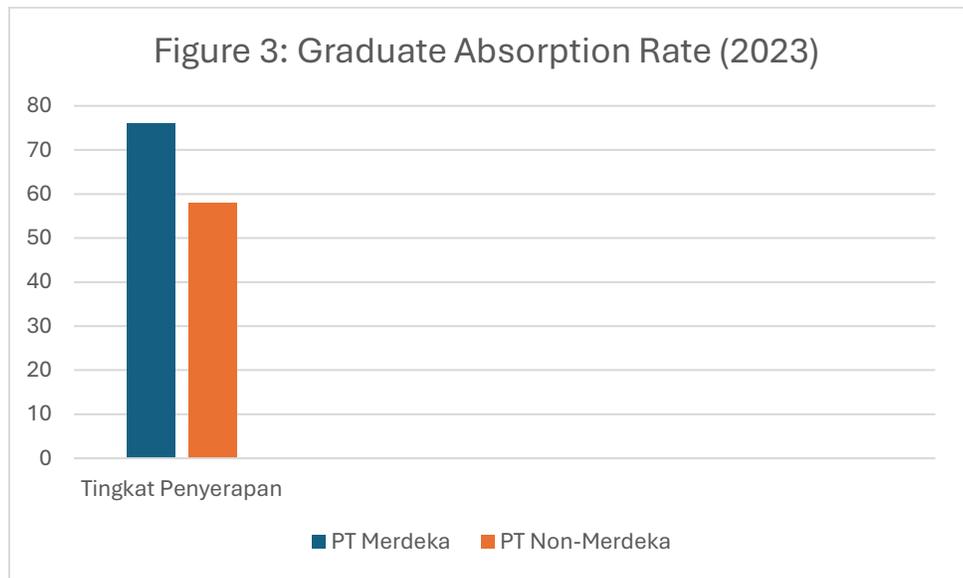


Figure 3. Comparison of the absorption rate of Independent and non-Independent university graduates in the first 6 months after graduation (2023). Source: BPS, 2023

These findings are supported by the QS Graduate Employability Insights report (2023). The Independent Academic Mobility (MAM) Program is one of the main drivers of increasing job readiness. Figure 2 presents a line graph depicting the exponential growth of student participation in the MAM program. In 2022, the number of participants was recorded at 30,000 students. This figure jumps to 65,000 in 2023 and reaches 120,000 in early 2024. Data from the Data and Information Technology Center of the Ministry of Education and Culture (2024) also noted that 89 percent of participants stated that the experience significantly increased their readiness to enter the world of work. Fourth, curricular innovation is also seen in the form of the development of transdisciplinary study programs. This approach is in line with the findings of Chen and Wang (2021) in Studies in Higher Education.

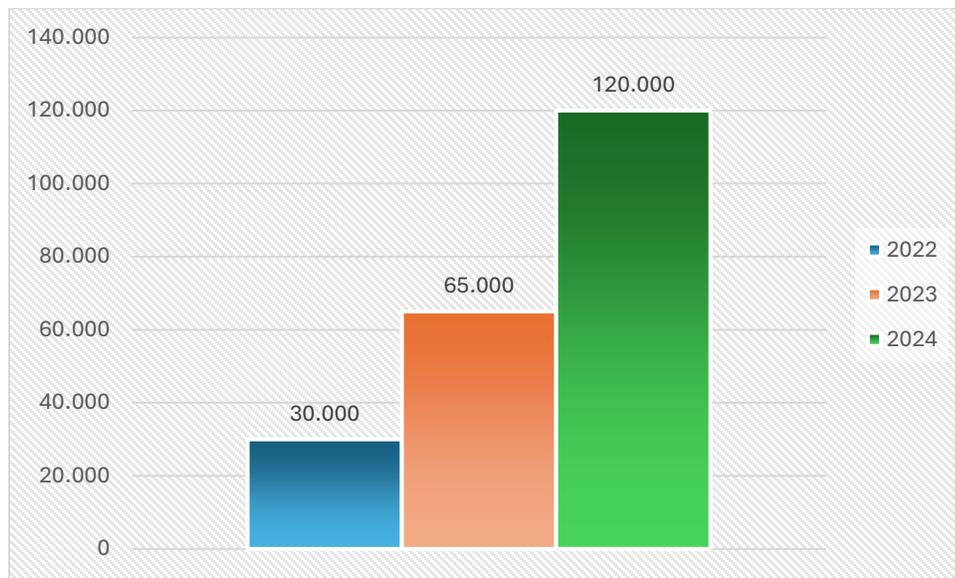


Figure 2: Participation in Independent Academic Mobility (2022–2024)

Fifth, behind these positive achievements, a number of structural challenges still hinder equitable and sustainable implementation. The digital infrastructure gap between regions is one of the main structural challenges in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. As seen in Figure 4, provinces on the islands of Java and Bali recorded digital infrastructure access above 88%, with DKI Jakarta leading at 96%. In contrast, provinces in the eastern region of Indonesia face significant obstacles; Papua and West Papua recorded only 32% and 35%, respectively, indicating that less than a third of universities there have adequate infrastructure to support hybrid or digital learning. This disparity reflects broader development inequalities and has the potential to widen the gap in higher education quality between regions

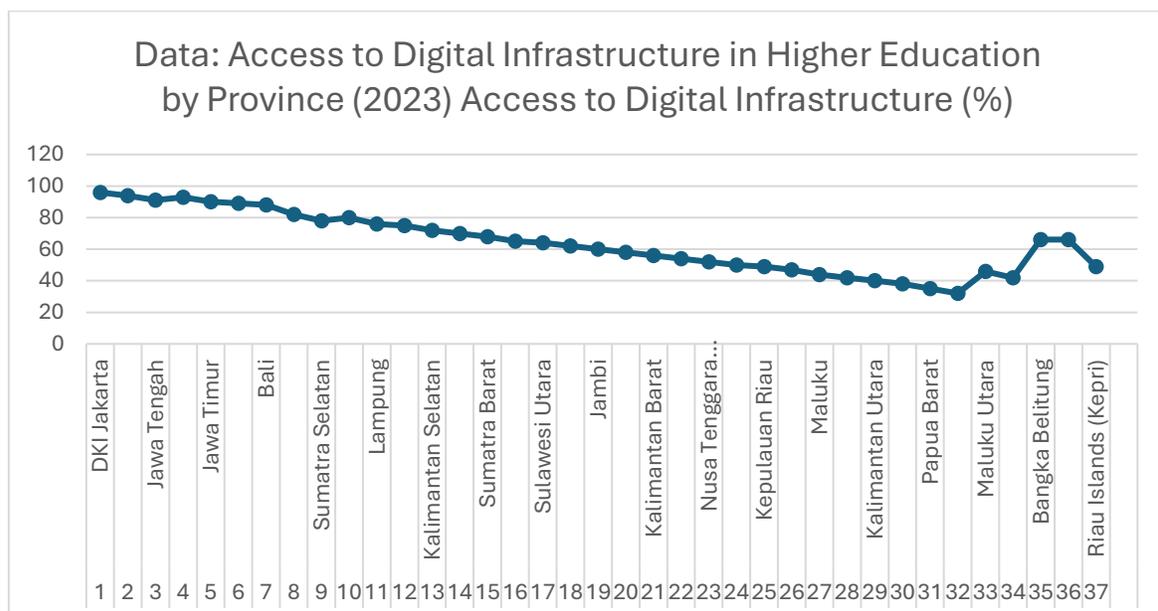


Figure 4. Data: Digital Infrastructure Access in Higher Education by Province (2023)

Table 2. Main Challenges in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum

Challenge	Key Findings	Source
Digital Infrastructure Gap	92% of PTs in Java vs 45% in Papua/NTT have stable LMS access	Suryani & Wijaya (2023)
Lecturer Readiness	Only 42% of lecturers feel ready to implement without training	Wijaya & Sari (2022)
Resistance of Academic Bureaucracy	60% of faculty are reluctant to remove irrelevant compulsory courses	Ministry of Education and Culture (2023)
Long-Term Evaluation	No longitudinal studies (>3 years) were available	Review of this literature

4. Discussion

The interpretation of these findings shows that the Independent Curriculum has succeeded in creating a momentum for transformation in Indonesian higher education, especially in increasing student engagement and the suitability of graduates with the needs of the job market. These results are consistent with contemporary learning theories that emphasize that curricular autonomy and contextual relevance are key to increasing motivation and knowledge retention (Hativa, 2021; Biggs & Tang, 2011). However, this success is geographically and institutionally uneven, creating what can be termed a "transformational dualism" where colleges in the center of advanced economies quickly adopt innovation, while institutions in remote areas are lagging behind due to limited infrastructure and human resource capacity. This phenomenon reflects the concept of the digital divide that has long been identified in the global education policy literature (Selwyn, 2022), and asserts that curricular reform cannot be separated from investment in the equitable distribution of basic infrastructure.

A comparison with the global context shows that Indonesia is not alone in efforts to reform the higher education curriculum. Countries such as Finland have long implemented phenomena-based learning that removes disciplinary boundaries (Lonka, 2018), while Singapore through the Skills Future initiative has successfully integrated lifelong learning into its education system (Gopinathan, 2020). However, Indonesia's uniqueness lies in its massive scale and extreme diversity of local contexts. More than 4,500 colleges with vastly different cultural, economic, and capacity backgrounds require a decentralized but nationally coordinated policy approach a balance that is difficult to achieve but essential for the sustainability of reform (Marginson, 2020).

The theoretical implication of this study is the expansion of the literature on education reform in developing countries, which has been dominated by studies from Europe and North America (Altbach & Salmi, 2021). These findings suggest that universal principles such as student-centered learning and outcome-based education require deep contextual adaptation to succeed in environments with limited resources and high structural disparities. In policy, these findings support the need for four key recommendations: first, the expansion of digital infrastructure to 3T regions through dedicated funding schemes and public-private partnerships; second, strengthening the capacity of

lecturers through continuous training and the establishment of a Centre for Teaching and Learning Excellence in each university; third, revising accreditation regulations to better support a flexible and transdisciplinary curriculum; and fourth, establishing a longitudinal data-based monitoring and evaluation system to track the long-term impact on graduates' careers and contributions to national development.

The study's main limitation is its reliance on cross-sectional data and policy reports that may contain positive bias. In addition, the lack of in-depth qualitative studies on the subjective experiences of students and lecturers in dealing with curricular changes reduces the depth of understanding of the dynamics of implementation at the micro level. Follow-up research should adopt a mixed methods approach and longitudinal design to overcome these limitations.

5. Conclusion

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum has brought significant positive changes in the Indonesian higher education landscape, especially in increasing student engagement, curricular relevance, and graduates' readiness to enter the workforce. Empirical evidence suggests that curricular flexibility and real-world experience integration consistently correlate with improved learning quality and employability. However, these successes have been uneven, and structural challenges such as the digital divide, academic bureaucratic resistance, and lack of long-term evaluation remain threats to the sustainability of reform. Therefore, the Independent Curriculum is not the end of the reform journey, but rather the beginning of a deeper transformation of academic culture a transformation that must be built on a foundation of justice, inclusivity, and a commitment to sustainable quality improvement. Without systemic efforts to address structural inequalities, the risk of creating two higher education systems one dynamic and global, and one stagnant and isolated will become increasingly real.

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