Probing the Impacts of MBKM Programs on Students' Soft and Hard Skills

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ABSTRACT

Both soft skills and hard skills are vital to competence graduates' competence in developing their potential according to their respective interests and skills. In line with these demands, this research aimed at exploring the impact of implementing MBKM on the improvement of soft skills and hard skills of Teuku Umar University students. The object studied are aspects of soft skills including communication skills, responsibility, honesty, fairness, ability to work together, adaptation, tolerance, respect for others, decision-making abilities and problem-solving abilities. Meanwhile, the components of the hard skills studied were foreign language skills, IT skills, reasoning skills, problem-solving skills, collaboration skills, understanding skills and creative thinking skills. The subjects of this study were Teuku Umar University students who had taken the MBKM program. The data were analyzed descriptively by using the percentage of each aspect of soft skills and hard skills. It was found that after joining the MBKM Program, first: students' soft skills regarding the ability to communicate, responsibility, honest attitude, ability to use technology, to adapt, to be fair, to have cooperative and tolerant attitude, attitude, o respect others, and to make decisions increased up to 98%. Second, regarding the hard skills such as the ability to understand, the ability to reason, problem-solving skills, the ability to connect with other people, the ability to think creatively, the increased is reaching 96.6%. It is concluded that after joining the MBKM programs, the students' softskills excel as expected.

Keywords: *Communication Skills; Hard Skills; MBKM Programs; Merdeka Belajar; Soft skills.*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of *Merdeka Belajar* (learning freedom) allows students to choose the courses they wish to take; this makes freedom become pivotal for the learning process. Tohir, (2020) Either teachers or students, basically are unable to proceed with the learning if they are in discomfort or over-controlled Saleh, (2020). To meet this learning needs, the Indonesian government promote MBKM *(Merdeka Belajar Kampus Mengajar)* programs that are targeted at students to develop their creative spirits, teamwork skills, work readiness, and to free them in their learning process Siregar et al., (2020). The *Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM)* policy is in

accordance with the Permendikbud No. 3 of 2020 Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture for National Higher Education Standards. This policy intends to motivate students to acquire a variety of practical knowledge so they can enter the workforce Arifin et al., (2020). Additionally, this policy aims to increase graduates' competence, both soft and hard skills, so that they are better prepared and relevant of the future needs Junaidi et al., (2020). Additionally, this policy aims to increase graduates' soft and hard skills competence so that they are better prepared and relevant for future needs.

To be more specific, the MBKM program gives educational institutions in higher education freedom from complicated bureaucracy, so that students are given the widest possible freedom to choose their preferred field according to their passion. The MBKM policy can be the answer to the problems that often arise among the graduates who often experience distance and irrelevance from the application of their knowledge they studied in the university Hidayatullah, (2021); Anshori, (2021). Additionally, the MBKM program can address the challenges of changing demands and needs of the business world and the industrial sector in order to produce a new format for link and match between the education sector, business sector, and industrial sector Disas, (2018).

Since the trends of soft skills are pivotal parts in MBK programs, the defintion needs to be provided in concern to the terms of soft skills and hard skills Rasli, (2020). A person's ability to be friendly, optimistic, ability to get along with others, language abilities, personal habits, and personality qualities are collectively referred to as having *soft skills*; while hard skills, which are formally necessary in life, are complemented by soft skills Ibourk & El Aynaoui, (2023). Soft skills are character attributes that improve interpersonal relationships, job performance, and career possibilities Ibrahim et al., (2017). The term of soft skills refers to personality and emotional intelligence-related aptitudes, skills, traits, attitudes, behaviors, and characters that have developed into routines (Mahasneh & Thabet, 2015; Rahayu & Devi Anna, (2013); Vyas & Chauhan, 2013). Furthermore, thinking skills have cognitive components connected to non-academic skills as well as soft skill features Rosdiana, R., & Ismail, (2017). It is also added that there are seven soft skills identified and considered important to develop in students in higher education, including; communication skills, thinking skills and problem-solving, the strength of team work, life-long learning and information management, entrepreneurial skills, ethics, morals and professionalism, and leadership skills.

The term of hard skills refers to technical knowledge and skills in a particular field related to a process, tool, or technique. These abilities are usually obtained through formal education or from readings Sukhoo, (2005). Skills included in hard skills are computer operating skills, financial knowledge and skills, foreign language skills, and product assembly skills. In learning activities, hard skills are learning outcomes belonging to the cognitive and psychomotor domains obtained from the process of understanding, memorizing and deepening material from learning models carried out in class Apiola & Tedre, (2013). According to Sudiana (2010) hard skills are

more oriented towards developing intelligence quotient (IQ). So, it can be concluded that hard skills are the ability to master technological knowledge and technical skills in developing an intelligence quotient related to their fields (Delita, Elfayetti, & Sidauruk, 2016; Sudaryanto et al., 2020).

It is undeniable that both skills are vital to be embraced by students to make them achieve their academic goal and future career goal. Soft skills are just as crucial in the workplace of today as are cognitive skills Seetha, (2014). Students in the Independent Learning Program at the Merdeka Campus are expected to be able to handle the challenges of the technology age, which offers several chances for students to keep growing and developing both on and off campus. The MBKM program's objectives include training students' independence in knowledge construction through field dynamics and encouraging students to innovate and be creative Sulistiyani et al., (2022). Students are taught how to apply science and technology to the workplace, solve actual problems, interact with others, collaborate, and manage themselves. Students' hard skills and soft skills can be strengthened if they adhere closely to the MBKM program from start to finish. Hard skills are an individual's capacity to master science, technology, and technical abilities relevant to their field of endeavor Giri, I. M. A., & Nova, (2021); While personality, emotional intelligence, and social skills are related to soft skills Rahmawanti & Nurzaelani, (2022).

The niche identified in this study is finding the fact that Teuku Umar University has implemented the MBKM programs—namely by implementing MBKM in the campus environment in order to produce graduates who are in accordance with the needs of the 4.0 revolution era. So far, Teuku Umar University has implemented MBKM programs such as internships, building villages/thematic work lectures, and teaching assistance in education units. With the implementation of MBKM at Teuku Umar University, it is expected that this campus can be better in facing the challenges of the times towards a quality and reputable campus.

Thus, this study was conducted to determine whether student participation in various MBKM programs can improve students' hard skills and soft skills. This study is considered significant because, practically, an assessment is always needed along the way of every program carried out.

Previous studies have shown various findings. Rahmawanti and Nurzaelani have conducted research on the application of MBKM in enhancing students' hard skills and soft abilities. The results showed that there was an increase in students' soft skills with the highest indicator: creativity by 97.3%; and there was an increase in student hard skills with the highest indicator, namely creative and innovative thinking by 96%. Sari et al., (2021) also examined the attitudes of students of the English Literature Study Program at the Indonesian Computer University towards the implementation of MKBK. The finding showed that students' competence increased gradually after joining the program—especially regarding basic life skills such as adaptive attitude, emotional maturity, and communication skills, which are soft skills that are developed. Meanwhile, hard skills are marked by an increase in language performance skills, digital skills, and digital engineering abilities. Non-cognitive competencies such as

social communication strengthen when language student performance increases, both in reality and digital spaces. Last to mention, it is a study by Kusumaningrum et al., (2022). They found that the MBKM program can improve students' ability to use technology, writing, and research skills, to use foreign languages, to teach, to operate various electronic devices, and to use various software.

From the previous literature, it is learned that there are still minimun data of detailed elements of soft skills and hard skills that are being explored. In addition, such study has not been conducted yet to students at Teuku Umar University, Meulaboh, Aceh Province. This is thus seen as the novelty offered in this study to meet the theoretical and practical significance under the discipline of teaching-leaning and pedagogy. It is important to keep in mind that the MBKM program is designed by the government to support and assist universities in improving the students' soft and hard skills. In detail, the elements of soft skills are communication skills, responsibility, honesty, fairness, ability to work together, adaptation, tolerance, and respect for others (Schulz, 2008). Meanwhile, the elements for hard skills are foreign language skills, IT skills, reasoning skills, problem-solving skills, collaboration skills, understanding skills and creative thinking skills Asbari et al., (2020).

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method. (Hasbalnikistan et al., 2020) according to Moleong qualitative research is research that intends to understand phenomena about what is experienced by research subjects such as behavior, perception, motivation, actions and others holistically and by means of description in the form of words and language, in a particular context natural and by utilizing various natural methods. This descriptive qualitative research using survey method is aimed at students within the scope of Teuku Umar University who have participated in various MBKM programs Procedurally, the object of this research was Teuku Umar University students who have participated in the MBKM program. There were 30 students involved altogether; they are from various faculties such as Faculty of Fisheries and Marine Sciences, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Faculty of Agriculture, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Health and Society. The location of the research was carried out at Teuku Umar University. Among the participants, 17 of them joined Internship/Practice program; 4 of them joined Student Exchange Program; 2 of them took Village Building Program; 7 of them chose Research Program; 1 one them joined Humanity Project; 2 of them joined Entrepreneurship Program; and 1 of them chose to be active in Independent Study/Project. Then, the instrument used was a questionnaire. (Hasbalnikistan et al., 2020) According to Sugiyono questionnaire is a data collection technique by giving a set of questions or written statements to respondents to answer them. Questionnaires were distributed to students who took MBKM programs.

The sample used is random sampling, from each MBKM program that is followed was randomly selected as much as 10% of the total number who followed the program by distributing questionnaires to them. Procedurally, the object of this

research was Teuku Umar University students who have participated in the MBKM program.

Later, the data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed and stated in the form of a percentage. The results of the previous tests were compared with the results they obtained after using. The data obtained in the form of qualitative descriptive analysis based on soft skills components, namely communication skills, responsibility, honesty, fairness, ability to work together, adaptation, tolerance, respect for others, decision-making abilities and problem-solving abilities. Hard skills components include foreign language skills, IT skills, reasoning skills, problem-solving skills, collaboration skills, understanding skills and creative thinking skills. The questionnaire uses a Likert scale with a point range of 1 to 4 where 1 represents 'not increasing, 2 represents 'increasing enough, 3 represents 'increasing ', and 4 represents 'majorly increasing'. The questionnaire statements are as shown below. Then the data was analyzed by percentage using the formula suggested by Arikunto, (2006) which is $P = F/N$ (P= Percentage, F= Frequency, and N= Number of respondents).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After the data collection was completed, the data were later analyzed for both soft skills and hard skills. The results are shown below.
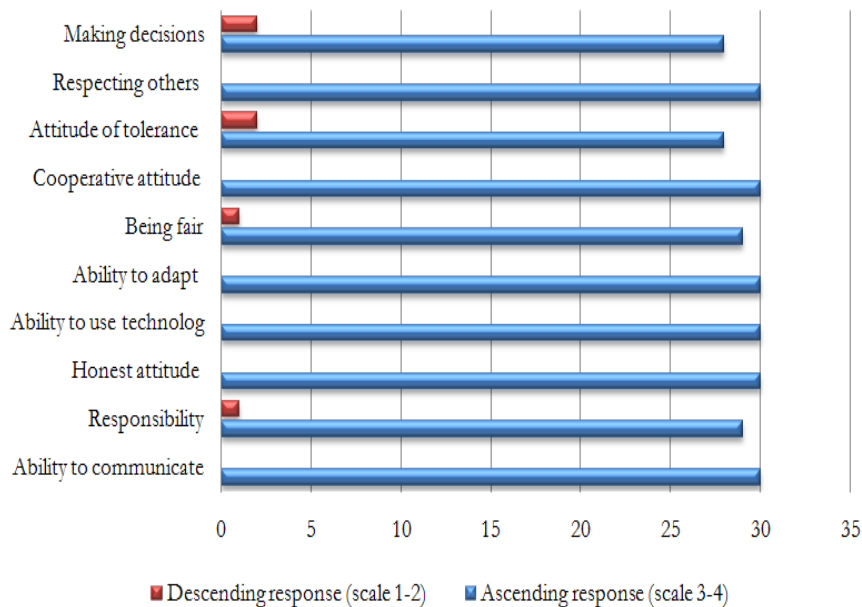

Figure 1. Result on Soft Skills

The figure above shows quite a large cover of information about the data regarding soft skills. From the information about the increase in the students' ability to communicate, it can be seen in the first chart that 15 students agreed that this ability majorly increased, and 15 other students stated that they definitely increased this soft skill. Regarding responsibility, 15 students agreed that they increased this ability, 13 students stated that this ability majorly increased, and only one student admitted that it slightly increased. Later, the attitude of being honest also increased after they joined

the MBKM Programs, as seen in row 3 on the table above. There were 24 students who definitely agreed, and 6 students majorly agreed. Later, about their ability to use technology, 13 students stated that it definitely increased, 15 students admitted that it majorly increases, and only 2 students stated that it slightly increased (See row 4). Having their ability to adapt was also admitted by 19 students, and other 11 students agreed that this ability majorly enhanced. MBKM programs also promote students' state of being fair. There are 14 students who definitely agreed on this, 15 students majorly agreed, and one student slightly agreed.

In addition, regarding the traits of cooperative attitude, there are 21 students who considered that their skill is increased definitely, and nine other students agreed that they majorly enhanced this skill. Next,the students' attitude of tolerance also definitely increased as admitted by 23 students who have joined MBKM Programs. There are additionally 5 students who majorly agreed on this, and the other two slightly agreed. Later, 24 students managed to increased their ability in respecting others after joining MBKM Programs, while 6 other majorly increased this ability. Last, the soft skill of making decisions also defnitely increased to 13students, majorly increased to 15 student, slightly increase in one student, and no increase at all for one student.

Briefly, it is clearly seen that there is a major advancement in students' soft skills after they joined the MBKM Programs. Regarding the ability to communicate, all students increased; in responsibility, 29 students increased; in honest attitude, ability to use technology, have the ability to adapt, cooperative attitude, and respecting others, all students increased. Meanwhile in ability of being fair, 29 students increased; attitude of tolerance and making decisions, 28 students increased.

Then, the recapitulation of advancement in hard skills is as shown in the following graph.
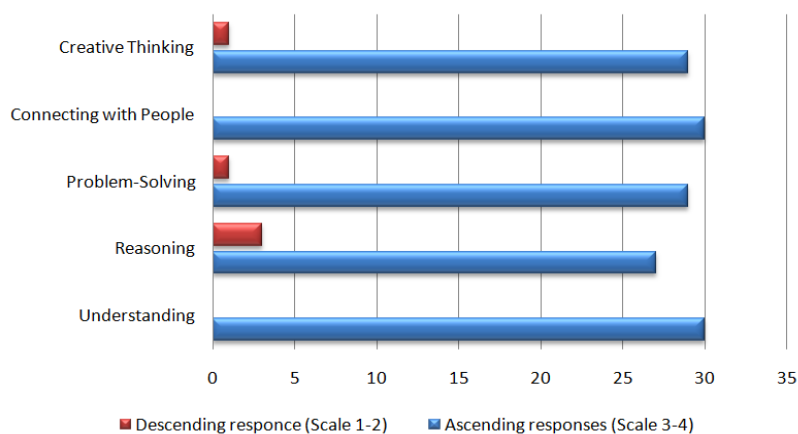

Figure 2. Result on Hard Skills

The figure above provides information about the results of students' hard skill advancement after they joined te MBKM Programs. Regarding the hard skill, students' ability to understand also increased. It? can be seen that all students increased their understanding, 19 of them majorly increased and 11 of them definitely increased. The next hard skill in the ability to reason. This ability is important when critical thinking is performed. There are 3 students who admitted that their ability in reasoning increased

slightly, 17 students agreed that their ability in reasoning increased majorly, and 10 of them agreed that their ability in reasoning increased definitely. Then, it is problem-solving skills which slightly increased for 1 student, majorly increased for 22 students, and definitely increased for 7 students. Next, it is the ability to connect with other people. Basically, all students have this ability increased after joining MBKM Programs. From the chart, it can be seen that 15 of them majorly increased their ability to connect with other people, and 15 other definitely increased this ability. The last ability being studied on the behalf of hard skill is the ability to think creatively. There are 9 students who agreed that their ability to think creatively definitely increased, 19 students who agreed that their ability to think creatively majorly increased, and the other 2 were convinced that their creative thinking ability only increased slightly.

Thence, it is learned that after joining MBKM Program, students soft skills regarding the skills of ability to communicate, responsibility, honest attitude, ability to use technology, have the ability to adapt, being fair, cooperative attitude, attitude of tolerance, respecting others, and making decisions increased up to 98%. In addition, regarding the hard skills such as the ability to understand, the ability to reason, problem-solving skills, the ability to connect with other people, the ability to think creatively, the increased is reaching 96.6%.

As a wrapping points to discuss, this study has initially emphasized a research question on finding out the potential advancement on students' soft skills and hard skill after joining the MBKM programs at Universitas Teuku Umar. Thence, the primary purpose of this study is to find out and describe in detail the advancements that have been found after the data analysis. This study is certainly significant because it is important to consider and re-deliberate the program's values after it is hosted to students. It is vital to evaluate the growing characters that have been targeted as one of other MKBM goals. This can later be beneficial to not only the students but also to lecturers, educational stakeholders, and society in general.

Regarding the procedures, the samples were students from all department at Universitas Teuku Umar, Meulaboh. There were 30 students involved; they are 19 students from the Faculty of Fisheries and Marine Sciences; 3 students from Faculty of Social and Political Sciences; 4 students from Faculty of Agriculture; 1 student from Faculty of Engineering 1; 2 students from Faculty of Economics; and 1 student from Faculty of Health and Society. Among the participants, 17 of them joined Internship/Practice program; 4 of them joined Student Exchange Program; 2 of them took Village Building Program; 7 of them chose Research Program; 1 one them joined Humanity Project; 2 of them joined Entrepreneurship Program; and 1 of them chose to be active in Independent Study/Project. They were later asked to answer several questions contained in the questionnaire regarding their personal measurement on a particular skill advancement. There are ten soft skills (ability to communicate, responsibility, honest attitude, ability to use technology, have the ability to adapt, being fair, cooperative attitude, attitude of tolerance, respecting others, and making decisions) and five hard skills (the ability to understand, the ability to reason, problem-

solving skills, the ability to connect with other people, the ability to think creatively) being researched in this study.

As the finding concerns toward soft skills, this is in line with the results found by Sari et al., that students' attitude increased after thethey? joined the MBKM Programs. To be more specific, in this research, there are ten soft skill traits being developed namely ability to communicate, responsibility, honest attitude, ability to use technology, have the ability to adapt, being fair, cooperative attitude, attitude of tolerance, respecting others, and making decisions. It is found that when they are in the program, they have to make open communication with other people, hence cooperative attitude, being adaptable, respecting others and so on are also necessary traits when co-working with other people Sukhoo, (2005). Indeed, communication skills in regards of agrarin areas are important for university students in agrarian areas for several reasons. Agricultural work often involves teamwork, whether it is on a farm, in a research project, or within agricultural organizations. Effective communication is crucial for coordinating efforts,and practices are constantly evolving. Effective communication skills enable students to stay updated with the latest research findings, agricultural techniques, and market trends by attending seminars, conferences, and workshops. In addition, agrarian areas often involve working with local communities and farmers. Good communication skills are essential for conveying information about best practices, new technologies, and sustainable farming methods to these stakeholders. Agricultural students may need to advocate for sustainable farming practices or lobby for policies that benefit the agricultural sector. Strong communication skills are crucial for conveying their ideas and concerns to policymakers and the wider public. Thence, building relationships with peers, professors, industry professionals, and potential employers is vital in any field, including in agrarian regions such as Meulaboh. Effective communication facilitates networking opportunities that can lead to internships, job offers, and career advancement. Also, agricultural students may aspire to leadership roles in their field, such as managing a farm or leading an agricultural organization. Effective communication is a fundamental leadership skill, as it enables them to inspire and guide others. Innutshell, communication skills are essential for university students in agrarian areas because they enhance collaboration, knowledge sharing, community engagement, advocacy, networking, problem-solving, research, and leadership abilities—all of which are vital for success in agriculture and related fields.

Besides, regarding the increase in hard skills, as Sudaryanto et al. (2020) has stated that many students in Indonesian have not possessed adequate hard skills. Hence, the government's decision to host the MBKM Program is a decent decision because the hard skills increased. As it is shown in the Figure 2 that students' ability to understand, to reason, to solve problems, to connect with other people, and to perform creative thinking also increased after they joined the MBKM programs. The process of creative thinking is a series that cannot be parted. This happens at once. So, when a student engaged one skill during their interaction, other skills would also be activated. During interaction in MBKM Program, students needed to reason, for example.

Reasoning means to gather information and develop a relationship between it and other pieces of information requires reason. Reasoning is the process of finding a solution to a problem. Ten this leads to the skill of problem-solving. Reasoning is the development of the meaning and content of ideas through operating symbols creating propositions so that the propositions stand in serial sequence constituting argument or discussion. Reasoning is the capacity of the mind to draw conclusions and ascertain what is good and true. This is a process in a chain, a process involving the whole mental exercise or a mental ability to draw conclusions from premises about all scientific data in order to argue, check, consider, and support with logic Downey & Crummy, (2022).

Additionally, it was seen that the MBKM Programs have awakened the hard skills which are vital for the future careers of university students. In a rapidly changing job market, the ability to understand new information and adapt to evolving circumstances is crucial. Students who can quickly grasp new concepts and technologies will have a competitive edge. Hence, problem-solving skills are universally valuable Husada, (2007). Regardless of the field, professionals encounter challenges that require creative solutions. Students who can analyze problems and develop innovative approaches are highly sought after. However, the work must be done in collaboration. The workplace is increasingly collaborative. The capacity to work effectively with diverse teams, understand different perspectives, and communicate clearly is essential for project success and career advancement. Later, it is understood that creativity always fuels innovation. Businesses and organizations are continually seeking new ideas, products, and services. Students who can think creatively contribute to a company's growth and competitiveness. Effective communication is a cornerstone of professional success. Whether it is presenting ideas, persuading stakeholders, or resolving conflicts, strong communication skills are invaluable. Undeniably, building a professional network is essential for career growth. Students who can connect with others, whether through internships, conferences, or online platforms, open up opportunities for mentorship, job referrals, and collaborations Tabatabaei & Bagheri, (2013). Leadership roles often require a combination of all these skills. Leaders must understand their team's needs, solve complex issues, communicate a compelling vision, and encourage creative thinking among their members. For those considering entrepreneurship, these skills are foundational. Understanding market needs, solving problems with innovative solutions, and connecting with customers and investors are critical for entrepreneurial success. All in all, these skills are not only vital for career success but also for personal development and adaptability in an ever-changing world. They are transferable across various industries and professions, making them indispensable assets for university students preparing for their future careers Lynch, (2013).

CONCLUSION

As the result has shown, after joining the MBKM Programs (Internship/Practice program, Student Exchange Program, Village Building Program, Research Program,

Humanity Project, Entrepreneurship Program; and Independent Study/Project), students' soft skills regarding the skills of ability to communicate, responsibility, honest attitude, the ability to use technology,the ability to adapt, being fair, cooperative attitude. Besides, their hard skills, such as the ability to understand, the ability to reason, problem-solving skills, the ability to connect with other people, and the ability to think creatively, increased by 96.6%. However, this study has some limitations because it only involved a small group of samples.Thus, larger samples are recommended for future research.

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