

Negotiating Mandated Curriculum Reform in Higher Education: A Sociocultural Case Study of the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT. Indonesian higher education has entered a period of substantial transformation following the introduction of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program. This national policy gives students greater flexibility to build academic and professional competencies beyond their formal study programs. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological case study design, this research examines the enactment of MBKM at Universitas Al Qolam Malang, drawing on in-depth interviews with eleven purposively selected informants, five lecturers and six students, supplemented by document analysis and thematic interpretation. The study centers on how students and lecturers perceive the program, the obstacles they encounter in practice, and their expectations regarding its long-term continuity. Findings reveal that mandated curriculum reform is not simply transmitted as a direct policy transfer from national regulation to institutional practice; rather, its realization is actively mediated through institutional readiness, interpersonal relationships among academic actors, ongoing cultural negotiations, and localized administrative arrangements. Within this mediated process, participants expressed broadly favorable views of MBKM for enhancing learning flexibility and workforce relevance. Yet, implementation was constrained by inadequate program socialization, cumbersome credit conversion procedures, delayed fund disbursement, and difficulties aligning curricula with industry expectations while sustaining meaningful learning experiences. By foregrounding these sociocultural and institutional dynamics of policy enactment within a single higher education setting a dimension largely overlooked in prior textbook- and policy-centered studies this research offers context-sensitive, evidence-based insights into how mandated reforms are locally negotiated. Sustained evaluation and institutional adjustment remain essential to optimizing MBKM's contribution to student competency development and the broader quality enhancement of Indonesian higher education.

Keywords: *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM), Curriculum Reform, Higher Education, Policy Enactment, Sociocultural Dynamics*



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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's education system has undergone numerous curriculum changes, reflecting the evolving social and cultural contexts of the nation (Amalia, 2026; Hidayat et al., 2025; Munif et al., 2026; Ramli et al., 2025). These changes, occurring as early as 1947 and most recently in 2013, underline the necessity for curricula to remain dynamic and adaptive to the demands of modern society (Hussain, 2025; Rahimi & Oh, 2024). However, frequent shifts in curricular design present challenges, particularly in implementation. The *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Freedom Curriculum), the latest iteration, emphasizes flexibility, independence, and the alignment of education with real-world and

workforce demands (Hakim & Abidin, 2024; Musdalifa et al., 2025; Rusdinal et al., 2024; Yuliana et al., 2025). Despite its innovative goals, implementing this curriculum faces hurdles, including the preparedness of educators, students, and institutions to embrace new paradigms (Ball et al., 2011; Jain et al., 2025). The diverse sociocultural landscape of Indonesia further necessitates an implementation approach sensitive to local values while maintaining global standards (Fauzan, 2025; Lestari et al., 2025; Rachmad, 2026; Rozanita et al., 2026; Sutrisno et al., 2025). Indonesia higher education sector is characterized by sociocultural diversity that requires curricula to respect and integrate local values while meeting global standards (Samsudi et al., 2024; Solehuddin et al., 2024). The Kurikulum Merdeka aims to prepare students for a dynamic and interconnected world by fostering critical thinking, adaptability, and collaborative skills. Yet this mandated change extends beyond pedagogical adjustment; it requires a reconfiguration of teaching practices, institutional policies, and social dynamics within universities.

A growing body of research demonstrates that curriculum implementation is not a neutral transfer of policy into practice but a process actively mediated by social actors and institutional context. (Fernandez et al., 2008) show that weak dialogue between curriculum designers and teachers allowed communities to reshape mandated reform in New Zealand schools. (Kennedy & Robinson, 2023) find that implementation outcomes reflect policy design, resource availability, professional development, and institutional diversity rather than practitioner compliance alone. (Sargent, 2011) identifies constrained shifts toward collaborative and inquiry-based learning in rural China, shaped by examinations, class size, and centralized materials. From a phenomenological standpoint, (Magrini, 2015) conceptualizes implementation as situational praxis, in which educators and learners jointly construct a lived curriculum rather than execute standardized prescriptions, while (Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2018; Kartiko et al., 2025) highlight moral leadership, justice, and flexibility as culturally embedded principles shaping enactment in Islamic educational institutions.

These studies collectively establish that curriculum implementation is socially mediated, yet their scope reveals an important limitation: research to date has largely examined mediation processes at the school level, within policy or textbook discourse, or in relation to discrete implementation barriers considered in isolation, rather than as an integrated institutional phenomenon in higher education. This pattern is mirrored in Indonesia specific scholarship on Kurikulum Merdeka. (Hadi et al., 2023; Ikhwan et al., 2025) characterize it as a new learning paradigm for schools; (Ningrum & Yunita, 2025) analyzes the cultural content of Merdeka curriculum textbooks; and Masita (2024) examines its alignment with multicultural education. Each contribution centers on textbook content, policy discourse, or school-level paradigms, leaving unexamined how the reform is actually negotiated and lived by academic actors within the institutional setting of higher education, where lecturers and students must jointly translate a national mandate into everyday practice.

Consequently, there remains insufficient understanding of how sociocultural mechanisms institutional readiness, interpersonal relationships, cultural negotiation, and administrative arrangement mediate the translation of a national curriculum mandate into lived institutional practice in higher education. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the mechanisms through which lecturers and students at an Indonesian university interpret, negotiate, and enact Kurikulum Merdeka, offering a sociocultural account of how mandated reform is translated into institutional practice. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions, 1. How do lecturers and students perceive and interpret the mandated implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in higher education? 2. Through what sociocultural mechanisms is the national curriculum mandate negotiated and translated into institutional practice? 3. What factors support or hinder the enactment of Kurikulum Merdeka, and what expectations do lecturers and students hold for its sustainability?

By foregrounding these mechanisms within a single higher-education institution, the study contributes context-sensitive, evidence-based insights that extend the existing literature beyond textbook- and policy-centered analysis. In doing so, it offers practical recommendations for

policymakers and institutional leaders seeking to align curriculum reform with the sociocultural realities of Indonesian universities.

METHOD

This study employed a case study approach, exploring the perceptions of faculty and students who have participated in and implemented the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) programs. Using a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2016), the researcher analyzed the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka at Universitas Al Qolam Malang. This study aimed to uncover the interactions between faculty and students in making sense of their experiences, understanding, and the challenges they faced during the implementation process of the Kurikulum Merdeka. The study concentrated on participants' perceptions, the challenges they faced, and their expectations because these three dimensions capture the sociocultural process through which a mandated curriculum reform is enacted, interpreted, and sustained at the institutional level, directly addressing the gap identified above. Fieldwork was carried out over a three-month period, from November 2024 to January 2025.

A total of 11 informants participated in the study, comprising 5 faculty members and 6 students. Sample size was determined not by a fixed numerical target but by the principle of information power (De Los Reyes et al., 2015), because the study aim was narrowly focused on a single institutional case, informants held highly specific and information-rich experience of MBKM implementation, and the analytic strategy involved in-depth thematic cross-case comparison, a relatively small purposive sample was judged sufficient to yield adequate analytic depth. Data collection proceeded iteratively, with transcripts reviewed after each interview; saturation was judged to have been reached when the final two interviews (one administrator and one student, conducted after the ninth and tenth sessions) yielded no new codes or themes relative to the existing coding framework, at which point recruitment was closed.

Informants were purposively selected to represent the distinct institutional layers through which a mandated curriculum reform is typically enacted (Etikan, 2016). Faculty informants included MBKM program administrators (2), responsible for institutional coordination and administrative arrangement of the program; a study-program head (1), representing meso-level curricular decision-making; and faculty members without administrative duties (2), representing direct pedagogical enactment in the classroom. Student informants (6) represented the recipient and lived-experience perspective of implementation. This composition was intended to allow deliberate comparison across three theoretically motivated axes of divergence: (a) between administrators and non-administrative faculty, to capture tension between top-down policy intent and bottom-up pedagogical enactment; (b) between faculty and student informants, to capture asymmetries between institutional framing of the program and students' lived experience of its administrative and academic consequences; and (c) across informants engaged in different MBKM schemes (PMM, MSIB, and KM), to ensure that findings were not confined to the dynamics of a single scheme. Eligibility was based on two criteria: (a) active and intensive involvement in at least one MBKM scheme, and (b) occupancy of a role affording direct experiential knowledge of its implementation. All informants participated voluntarily after being informed of the study's purpose, with confidentiality assured; identities are reported using codes rather than names. Table 1 presents the informants' roles, their corresponding MBKM schemes, and the specific participant codes used for data reporting.

Table 1. Participant Profiles and Assigned Codes

No.	Participant Name	Participant Code	Status	Position / Program Details
1.	Participant 1	DK2	Lecturer	Lecture coordinator program KM (MBKM Manager)
2.	Participant 2	DP1	Lecturer	Lecture coordinator program PMM (MBKM Manager)
3.	Participant 3	DM2	Lecturer	Supervisor program (DPP) MSIB 2 (Head of the study program)
4.	Participant 4	DM1	Lecturer	Supervisor program (DPP) MSIB 1 (MSIB Companion)
5.	Participant 5	DK1	Lecturer	Supervisor program KM (Companion KM)
6.	Participant 6	MM1	College student	MSIB Participant 1
7.	Participant 7	MM2	College student	MSIB Participant 2
8.	Participant 8	MK1	College student	KM Participant 1
9.	Participant 9	MK2	College student	KM Participant 2
10.	Participant 10	MP1	College student	PMM Participant 1
11.	Participant 11	MP2	College student	PMM Participant 2

Data for this study were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews and document analysis, enabling methodological triangulation across participant accounts and official policy texts (Auberelet et al., 2014). In-depth interviews were conducted with both faculty members and students to uncover their perceptions and lived experiences in implementing the MBKM programs. The interviews centered on three thematic areas: (1) faculty perceptions of the advantages and challenges of implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka; (2) student experiences during participation in the MBKM programs, including perceived benefits and encountered obstacles; and (3) evaluations from both faculty and students regarding the relevance of the MBKM programs to learning needs and labour-market demands.

The interview guide was developed by the research team through a three-stage process. First, an initial pool of questions was derived deductively from the three thematic areas above and from the objectives stated in the official MBKM policy documents. Second, the draft guide was reviewed by two experts in higher-education curriculum and qualitative methodology to establish content validity, after which ambiguous items were reworded and redundant items removed. Third, the refined guide was pilot tested with one student and one faculty member (whose data were excluded from the final analysis) to check the clarity and comprehensibility of each item. Consistent with the semi-structured approach, the guide functioned as a flexible framework rather than a fixed script: while the core questions remained stable across all participants to preserve comparability, follow-up and probing questions evolved iteratively during data collection as emerging insights such as recurring concerns over credit conversion and fund disbursement were pursued in greater depth in subsequent interviews. The full list of guiding questions is provided in the Appendix.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis with an interpretative phenomenological approach to identify key themes that emerged. The analysis process followed several stages: (1) transcription of data, (2) coding, (3) theme development, and (4) data interpretation. Transcription involved writing down the verbal interview data that had been recorded. The transcription process followed the steps recommended by Widodo (2014), which include: (1) listening to the recorded verbal data, (2) writing the oral data into a written form, (3) communicating the oral data with the intended purpose, (4) reproducing and reconstructing the oral data, and (5) ensuring that the data is valid and credible. All interview data were noted for further analysis (Miles et al., 2014). We focused on the primary data for closer analysis and interpretation. It is important to note that interview data, which may vary, reflects values, beliefs, feelings, thoughts, and narratives that have multiple interpretations (Yin, 2018). The transcription of the interviews was also carried out by reviewing the video recordings and cross-checking them with the notes made during the interviews. The

transcriptions were entered into a special table, categorized by participant and their responses to the questions posed.

Interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face in quiet, private settings on the Universitas Al Qolam campus (faculty offices and unused classrooms) at times arranged for the convenience of participants, ensuring confidentiality and minimizing external distraction. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes (mean 38 minutes). Interviews were conducted primarily in Bahasa Indonesia, the shared academic language of all participants, with occasional code-switching to local Javanese terms and to English discipline specific vocabulary (e.g., Machine Learning, Artificial Intelligence) where participants used them spontaneously. With the informed consent of every participant, all interviews were audio recorded to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim in Bahasa Indonesia; only the excerpts selected for presentation in this article were translated into English by the researchers, with the translations cross-checked against the original transcripts to preserve meaning.

Interviews were conducted a total of 16 times between November 2024 and January 2025: six sessions in November 2024, six in December 2024, and two in January 2025 until the research team judged that thematic saturation had been reached, that is, when additional interviews yielded no substantively new themes. Alongside the interviews, document analysis was conducted on the regulatory and operational texts governing the Kurikulum Merdeka, specifically: (1) the MBKM Guidebook; (2) the Teaching Campus (Kampus Mengajar/KM) Program Guidebook; (3) the Independent Student Exchange (Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka/PMM) Program Guidebook; and (4) the Certified Independent Internship (Magang dan Studi Independen Bersertifikat/MSIB) Program Guidebook. In addition, the researchers reviewed official activity and final reports from the MBKM programs to corroborate and contextualize the interview findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Findings are presented as five analytical themes generated through thematic analysis, rather than as a catalogue of responses grouped by informant type or program. Each theme cuts across students and faculty and across the PMM, MSIB, and *Kampus Mengajar* (KM) tracks, foregrounding the interpretive patterns that explain how and why the Merdeka Belajar–*Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) policy was experienced as it was, rather than merely what participants reported.

Institutional readiness shapes policy enforcement

The fidelity with which MBKM was enacted depended less on the policy text itself than on the preparedness of host institutions and partners. Enforcement, in other words, was not automatic but was filtered through institutional capacity. This is most visible where readiness was thin. As a small institution, Universitas Al Qolam initially struggled to operationalize a still evolving national scheme: Faculty DP1 recalled that "*the socialization and implementation of the program differed*" so that the first PMM cycle was "far from perfect" before it stabilized. Partner readiness proved equally decisive for the mechanics of credit recognition; Faculty DM2 identified conversion as "*the main challenge*" precisely because collaborating partners "*were not always aligned with the academic fields of the students*" and "*were not fully prepared with a syllabus that matched the students' academic needs.*" Documentary evidence corroborates this reading: while the MSIB Learning Management System was judged "more user friendly," the final report flagged untimely feedback and delayed mentor approval of student log books as persistent weaknesses. Taken together, these accounts reframe implementation gaps not as individual shortcomings but as symptoms of uneven institutional and partner readiness that mediates whether a mandated policy is enforced as intended.

Relational support mediates student agency

MBKM's promise of freedom to learn was realized only to the extent that students were relationally supported; agency was scaffolded through networks of lecturers and peers rather than exercised in isolation. Students consistently located the value of the program in relationships as much as in content. Student MP1 valued "making connections with fellow students and lecturers" while Student MM2 emphasized the accessibility of academic guidance, noting that consultation with program lecturers was easy. Across the MSIB track, students reported full support spanning project consultations, progress reports, and final reports support that enabled them to convert nearly all coursework and to sustain participation. Faculty accounts describe the developmental yield of this scaffolding: according to Faculty DK1, students "become more confident and have a broader perspective" with improved public speaking skills and stronger conflict management abilities. Read analytically, these data suggest that student autonomy under MBKM is not a property individuals bring to the program but a capacity that relational support activates and sustains.

Cultural differences create negotiation rather than simple resistance

Encounters with unfamiliar cultural and linguistic settings did not produce withdrawal or rejection; they prompted ongoing negotiation and mutual adaptation. Students framed difference as something to be worked through rather than resisted. Student MP2 described the program as an opportunity to experience new cultures and explore the environment even while acknowledging challenges in understanding the local dialect a friction that coexisted with an appreciation of better teaching methods. The linguistic barrier recurred as a temporal, not terminal, obstacle: Student MP1 and Student MP2 both reported needing "*time to understand the learning activities*" conducted in a regional dialect before adjusting. Crucially, this negotiation was reciprocal at the institutional level. Faculty DP1 observed that hosting inbound students "from outside Java" generated a two-way exchange of "academic and non-academic information" and "indirectly help promote the city of Malang". The theme thus recasts cultural difference within MBKM as a generative site of intercultural negotiation and exchange rather than a source of straightforward resistance.

Administrative infrastructures constrain curricular flexibility

The curricular flexibility MBKM promises repeatedly collided with rigid administrative infrastructures, particularly those governing credit conversion and fund disbursement. Flexibility, that is, was bounded by the very systems meant to deliver it. Credit recognition emerged as a structural bottleneck: Faculty DM2 traced conversion difficulties to partner program misalignment, while even well supported students such as Student MM2 reported that all courses were convertible "except for one course". Financial administration constrained participation still more directly. Student MP1 identified "the delay in the disbursement of MBKM funds" as the principal challenge, one that "affected daily life during the program" and Student MP2 similarly reported "financial challenges, as I was among the last students to receive the fund disbursement". Faculty perceived these as governance rather than motivational problems; Faculty DP1 urged that registration, implementation, and budgeting mechanisms be clarified in advance so that completed activities and incurred expenses are "not reversed due to 'policy changes'". These accounts locate the friction of MBKM not in reluctant actors but in administrative architectures that curtail the program's intended curricular openness.

Mandated reform becomes a lived curriculum through local adaptation

Finally, the top down MBKM mandate was not received intact but was translated into meaningful learning through situated, local adaptation becoming, in effect, a lived curriculum. Students actively converted the policy into experience by adjusting to unfamiliar rhythms and coordinating across sites. Student MM1 described gradually learning "to follow the work rhythm in the program" while Student MK2 managed dual obligations by communicating activities "to both the school and university" aligning the mandate with local teaching realities and personal interest. The KM final report renders this adaptation at the systemic level: students contributed by helping placement schools "adopt and apply technological advancements, particularly at the

elementary school level" prompting several schools to request an extended program duration. Faculty DP1's trajectory from an implementation that was initially "far from perfect" to programs that "have been running well now" captures the same dynamic of maturation through local enactment. The theme therefore reframes MBKM's success not as faithful top-down delivery but as the outcome of continuous ground-level adaptation that transforms a mandated reform into an embodied educational practice.

Discussion

The findings reported above are not merely descriptions of positive perceptions and isolated obstacles; read together, they tell a coherent analytical story about how a mandated curriculum reform becomes real inside one resource-constrained institution. This section is therefore organised as a cumulative argument rather than a restatement of results. Its central claim is that the Kurikulum Merdeka/MBKM is not implemented in any simple top-down sense but enacted interpreted, translated, and reworked through institutional and sociocultural mediation before it can be lived as curriculum by students and lecturers. Each subsection advances one step of that argument and situates it within recent international scholarship on curriculum reform, policy enactment, and student agency, while retaining the classic theoretical anchors that remain analytically useful.

From policy implementation to policy enactment

A persistent assumption in reform evaluation is that a well-designed policy, once mandated, will be "delivered" if actors comply. The evidence here contradicts that assumption. Faculty DP1's recollection that "the socialization and implementation of the program differed" and that the first PMM cycle was "far from perfect" before stabilising describes precisely what Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) call enactment: schools and universities do not passively receive policy texts but creatively interpret and translate them into practice under real material constraints. The maturation Faculty DP1 traces from an imperfect first cycle to programmes that "have been running well now" is not evidence of belated compliance but of institutional meaning-making over time. This reframing matters because it relocates the causes of success and friction away from individual "readiness to comply" and toward the interpretive work institutions perform. Recent scholarship reinforces the point that enactment is non-linear, contested, and context-bound rather than a technical roll-out (Scanlon, 2023), and that mandated national policies are frequently adopted "regardless of the need of local schools, students or communities," so that local actors must actively make them workable (Singh, 2024). Positioning our case within this literature shows that the Universitas Al Qolam Malang experience is not an idiosyncratic story of a "small campus catching up" but a concrete instance of the general phenomenon of policy enactment in higher education.

Positioning the Universitas Al Qolam Malang case within the broader literature on policy enactment suggests that its experience is not an isolated account of a small university struggling to implement a national reform, but rather illustrates a broader phenomenon in higher education: the translation of centrally mandated policies into institutional practice is mediated by local organizational capacities, professional relationships, and administrative arrangements. This pattern is evident in the initial implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program at Universitas Al Qolam Malang, where differences in program socialization and institutional preparedness initially complicated implementation. For example, lecturers reported difficulties in converting credits when partner institutions offered activities that were not fully aligned with students' academic fields, while students experienced delays in funding disbursement that affected their daily lives during program participation. At the same time, academic mentoring and interpersonal support enabled students to adapt to unfamiliar learning environments and derive benefits from cross-regional academic and cultural exchange.

These findings illustrate that the enactment of curriculum reform depends not only on the formal policy mandate but also on the capacity of institutions to coordinate administrative processes, establish effective partnerships, and support students' learning experiences. In this respect, the case

provides an empirical illustration of policy enactment in higher education, in which the outcomes of national reform emerge through the interaction between policy expectations and the institutional conditions under which they are implemented.

The Flexibility Paradox: Student Agency and Institutional Constraints

The findings of this study suggest that curricular flexibility under the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy should not be understood as an unconditional expansion of student autonomy. Rather, flexibility operates through the interaction between students' opportunities to engage in learning beyond the home institution and the institutional arrangements that make such learning academically and practically possible. In the case of Universitas Al Qolam Malang, participation in off-campus learning activities created opportunities for students to encounter new learning environments, develop interpersonal competencies, and adapt to different educational and cultural contexts. The findings on mentoring, peer relationships, and cross-regional interaction further indicate that students' capacity to benefit from these opportunities was shaped not only by individual initiative but also by the relational support available during implementation.

At the same time, the findings reveal that the exercise of student agency remained dependent on administrative and organizational conditions. Difficulties in credit conversion emerged when activities offered by partner institutions were not fully aligned with students' academic fields, while delays in funding disbursement affected students' everyday experiences during program participation (Schoots-Snijder et al., 2025). These constraints illustrate an important distinction between having the formal freedom to participate in alternative learning activities and being able to translate that freedom into a coherent and adequately supported academic experience. In this context, student autonomy was not eliminated by institutional procedures; rather, its practical realization was conditioned by the capacity of the university and its partners to coordinate academic recognition, financial support, and program implementation.

This tension can be conceptualized as a flexibility paradox: expanding the range of learning opportunities increases the need for institutional coordination and administrative responsiveness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As curricular pathways become more diverse, universities must establish reliable mechanisms for credit recognition, clarify responsibilities across institutional boundaries, and ensure that students receive timely administrative and financial support. Without these arrangements, the flexibility promised by policy may coexist with practical dependencies that students have limited power to resolve independently (Tsatsaroni & Sarakinioti, 2018). This interpretation shifts attention from the availability of flexible learning options to the institutional conditions under which those options become accessible, recognized, and educationally meaningful.

The findings therefore extend the discussion of MBKM implementation beyond the question of whether students are given greater freedom to learn. They suggest that the educational value of flexibility depends on the relationship between student agency and institutional capacity. For higher education management, this implies that the implementation of flexible curricula requires more than policy dissemination or the provision of off-campus programs (Kartiko et al., 2025). It also requires integrated academic advising, transparent credit-conversion procedures, effective partnerships, and responsive administrative and funding systems. Accordingly, the case of Universitas Al Qolam Malang illustrates how a reform designed to expand learning autonomy can produce uneven experiences when institutional arrangements do not adequately support its implementation. The central implication is that flexibility should be evaluated not only by the breadth of choices available to students, but also by the institutional capacity to ensure that these choices can be pursued without avoidable academic and administrative barriers.

Sociocultural Mediation: The Relational Conditions of Student Agency

If student agency is not exercised in isolation, an important question is what enables or constrains its realization in practice. The findings of this study suggest that student agency under the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy was mediated by a sociocultural environment comprising interpersonal relationships, academic mentoring, and encounters with

linguistic and cultural differences. Students' accounts of the value of building connections with fellow students and lecturers, alongside reports of supervisory support during the MSIB program, indicate that relationships were not merely supplementary to program participation. Rather, they formed part of the conditions through which students could navigate unfamiliar learning environments and make use of the opportunities offered by the reform. This finding can be interpreted through (Bourdieu, 1986) concept of social capital, which draws attention to the resources accessible through social relationships, and (Tinto, 2012) account of academic integration, which emphasizes the importance of students' connections with their educational environment. In the present case, these perspectives help explain why the availability of an off-campus learning opportunity does not, by itself, guarantee that students can benefit from it: the capacity to participate meaningfully is also shaped by the support and connections available to them (Alanoglu et al., 2025; Louw, 2024).

The findings further indicate that cultural and linguistic differences formed another dimension of this mediation. Students' reported difficulties in understanding or adapting to local dialects illustrate how participation in a new learning environment can initially involve barriers to communication and social adjustment. However, these experiences can also become opportunities for learning through interaction and adaptation. Similarly, the account of cross-regional student exchange provided by Faculty DP1 suggests that the benefits of mobility may extend beyond individual participants to include the host environment, including the visibility of Malang as a destination for educational exchange. These findings indicate that cultural difference was not simply a contextual feature surrounding MBKM implementation; it was part of the experience through which students and host communities encountered and negotiated the reform's opportunities.

Viewed through a sociocultural learning perspective, these patterns suggest that the educational effects of MBKM are produced not solely by the formal provisions of national policy but also through social interaction in particular institutional and cultural settings. Policy opportunities acquire practical meaning as students engage with lecturers, peers, partner institutions, and unfamiliar cultural environments. Sociocultural mediation therefore provides an interpretive link between the formal promise of curricular flexibility and students' lived learning experiences. For higher education management, this highlights the importance of treating mentoring, peer interaction, and intercultural engagement as substantive components of program implementation rather than as incidental benefits. It also suggests that evaluations of flexible learning reforms should consider not only participation and academic recognition but also the relational conditions that enable students to navigate, access, and benefit from learning opportunities. In this sense, the case of Universitas Al Qolam Malang illustrates how student agency is situated within, and partly constituted through, the sociocultural relationships and institutional contexts in which policy is enacted.

Institutional Infrastructure as a Condition for Realizing Curricular Flexibility

The sociocultural processes through which students exercise agency are themselves shaped by the institutional infrastructure supporting policy implementation (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Tsao, 2025). Although the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy expands opportunities for learning beyond the home institution (Faridah et al., 2026; Saharani & Suripatty, 2026), the findings of this study indicate that the realization of these opportunities remains contingent on the capacity of universities and partner institutions to coordinate academic recognition, provide financial support, and establish workable implementation arrangements. Three interconnected constraints emerged from the case of Universitas Al Qolam Malang: difficulties in credit recognition, uncertainty in funding arrangements, and variations in institutional and partner readiness. These constraints suggest that curricular flexibility cannot be understood solely as a pedagogical principle or a formal policy entitlement. Its practical realization depends on the administrative and organizational systems through which alternative learning experiences are incorporated into students' academic trajectories.

The first constraint concerns the alignment between off-campus learning activities and the academic requirements of students' home programmes. Faculty DM2 associated difficulties in credit conversion with misaligned syllabi from partner institutions, which in some cases resulted in students' alternative learning not translating into formally recognized academic progress. Analytically, credit conversion is more than a technical procedure; it is an institutional mechanism requiring prior coordination on learning outcomes, assessment, and academic verification. When these elements are uncoordinated, the burden of navigating institutional differences falls unfairly on students. Therefore, flexible learning pathways must be supported by transparent recognition mechanisms capable of accommodating diverse experiences without compromising academic accountability.

The second constraint concerns the relationship between financial administration and students' capacity to participate in flexible learning programmes. Students MP1 and MP2 reported that delayed funding disbursement affected their daily lives, indicating that financial uncertainty extended beyond administrative inconvenience and entered the lived experience of programme participation. Faculty DP1 also raised concerns about expenses potentially being reversed or affected by policy changes. Taken together, these accounts suggest that the implementation of off-campus learning requires financial arrangements that are not only formally established but also predictable and responsive to students' practical needs. Participation in learning activities beyond the home institution may involve additional day-to-day expenses and adjustments to students' ordinary routines. When financial support is delayed or its terms become uncertain, students may have to manage these demands while continuing to fulfil programme requirements.

This finding introduces a material dimension to the discussion of student agency. The ability to choose an off-campus programme does not necessarily mean that students possess the financial security required to participate in it without avoidable disruption. Formal access to a learning opportunity and the practical capacity to sustain participation are therefore analytically distinct. Although the available evidence does not establish that funding delays caused students to withdraw from programmes or reduced their academic achievement, it demonstrates that financial administration formed part of the conditions under which students experienced MBKM. For higher education management, this highlights the importance of transparent funding procedures, clear communication about financial entitlements, timely disbursement, and explicit arrangements for managing changes in programme expenditure. These measures are not peripheral to curriculum implementation; they help establish the conditions under which students can engage with alternative learning opportunities in a more predictable and equitable manner.

The third constraint concerns institutional and partner readiness, which shaped the extent to which the flexibility envisaged by MBKM could be accommodated in practice. The difficulties surrounding programme alignment and credit conversion suggest that the implementation of national reform requires more than the formal availability of partnerships or the existence of off-campus learning schemes. It also requires organizational preparedness, clearly defined responsibilities, and operational coordination between the institutions involved. Where partner institutions lack suitable academic documentation or where procedures for recognizing learning outcomes are insufficiently aligned, the scope of practical flexibility becomes narrower than the policy framework might suggest (Andriyani & Leksono, 2024; Hariyati & Rofiq, 2024; Kariyanto et al., 2025). In this respect, institutional readiness is not simply a preliminary condition to be assessed before programme implementation. It is an ongoing organizational capacity that must be maintained through communication, monitoring, and coordination throughout the student learning process.

These three constraints are interdependent rather than isolated. Credit recognition requires academic coordination between the home university and its partners; effective financial support depends on clear administrative responsibilities and reliable implementation procedures; and both are influenced by the readiness of the institutions responsible for delivering the programme. Weakness in one area may complicate the operation of the others. For example, an academically valuable learning opportunity may still create uncertainty for students if its credits cannot be

recognized clearly or if the associated funding arrangements are unreliable. Conversely, strong mentoring and interpersonal support may help students navigate unfamiliar learning environments, but such support cannot independently resolve structural problems in credit conversion or funding administration. The findings therefore point to a distinction between relational support, which helps students navigate programme participation, and institutional infrastructure, which determines whether the programme can operate in a sufficiently coordinated and dependable manner.

This interpretation provides a basis for engaging with the broader literature on policy enactment and the implementation of higher education reform (Rosodor & Putra, 2025). From a policy-enactment perspective, national policy does not translate directly into uniform institutional practice. Its meaning and practical consequences emerge through the organizational capacities, administrative routines, and local conditions through which institutions interpret and implement policy requirements. The experience of Universitas Al Qolam Malang illustrates this process: the opportunities associated with MBKM were mediated by the capacity to align partner activities with academic requirements, coordinate funding arrangements, and manage implementation across institutional boundaries. The case is therefore relevant not because it establishes that all Indonesian universities experience identical difficulties, but because it demonstrates how specific organizational arrangements can condition the realization of a nationally mandated reform in a particular higher education setting. Comparisons with previous MBKM studies, including (Wijayanto et al., 2025), may help establish whether similar implementation constraints have been documented in other institutional contexts (Turnpenny et al., 2008). Such comparisons should identify both convergent patterns and contextual differences rather than assume that findings from one university can automatically be generalized to others.

The central analytical implication is that the flexibility promised by MBKM cannot be evaluated independently of the institutional infrastructure that supports it. A curriculum may formally permit students to pursue learning beyond their home institution, yet the educational value of that flexibility depends partly on whether learning outcomes can be recognized, financial arrangements can be relied upon, and partner institutions can coordinate their responsibilities effectively. Accordingly, the case suggests that the implementation of flexible curricula should be assessed through both the range of learning opportunities made available and the organizational capacity to translate those opportunities into coherent academic experiences. For higher education management, this requires integrated planning between academic and administrative units, systematic coordination with partner institutions, transparent credit-conversion procedures, and predictable financial support. By foregrounding these conditions, the study extends the discussion of MBKM from the availability of curricular choice to the institutional mechanisms that make such choice practicable. Flexibility, in this sense, is not merely a characteristic of policy design; it is an organizational achievement that must be continually supported through effective governance and implementation.

Theoretical contribution

Taken together, the preceding findings suggest a theoretical contribution that extends beyond documenting the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy at Universitas Al Qolam Malang. This study proposes that mandated curriculum reform is enacted through a process of sociocultural mediation, in which institutional readiness, relational support, cultural negotiation, and administrative infrastructure interact to shape how formal policy prescriptions become lived educational experiences. Rather than treating policy implementation as a linear process in which institutional actors simply translate national directives into practice, this perspective emphasizes the organizational and sociocultural conditions through which policy acquires practical meaning. The four dimensions are analytically distinguishable but interconnected: institutional readiness shapes the capacity to organize reform; relational networks provide students with support for navigating unfamiliar learning environments; cultural negotiation influences how participants adapt to different linguistic and social contexts; and administrative infrastructure

determines whether alternative learning experiences can be recognized, funded, and coordinated effectively.

The first dimension, institutional readiness, concerns the organizational capacity required to translate policy expectations into workable educational arrangements. The experience of Universitas Al Qolam Malang indicates that the availability of an off-campus learning programme does not automatically ensure that its implementation aligns with students' academic needs or the university's existing arrangements. Difficulties in programme alignment and credit conversion illustrate how institutional preparedness influences the extent to which curricular flexibility can be accommodated. The second dimension, relational support, highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in enabling students to navigate these arrangements. Students' accounts of lecturer support, peer connections, and mentoring suggest that the benefits of policy reform are mediated partly through the social resources available to participants. The third dimension, cultural negotiation, captures the processes through which students encounter and adapt to linguistic and cultural differences during learning activities beyond their familiar environments. These encounters demonstrate that the experience of reform extends beyond academic participation to include social interaction and adaptation. The fourth dimension, administrative infrastructure, concerns the systems and procedures that sustain programme implementation, particularly credit recognition, funding arrangements, and coordination with partner institutions. The reported difficulties in credit conversion and delays in funding disbursement illustrate how administrative constraints can limit the practical realization of opportunities formally provided by policy.

These dimensions together provide a basis for interpreting the relationship between policy prescription and educational practice. The formal policy establishes opportunities and expectations, but students encounter those provisions through institutions with particular organizational capacities, social relationships, cultural contexts, and administrative arrangements. Consequently, the curriculum experienced by students cannot be reduced either to the policy document itself or to a straightforward implementation of its requirements. It emerges through the interaction between formal curricular expectations and the conditions under which students and institutional actors interpret, negotiate, and enact them. We conceptualize this outcome as the lived curriculum: the educational experience produced when policy provisions encounter the practical realities of institutional organization and everyday learning. In this formulation, the lived curriculum is not simply an incomplete version of the intended curriculum. It is the empirically observable form that curriculum reform takes as it is enacted within a particular institutional and sociocultural setting.

This interpretation extends the analytical emphasis of policy-enactment scholarship (Ball et al., 2011; Edamo, 2026; Slama & Chaker, 2026) by focusing on the contextual translation of curriculum reform within a resource-constrained higher education setting. Rather than assuming policy intentions automatically determine institutional outcomes, this proposed model shifts the focus of MBKM research from evaluating policy outcomes alone to examining the underlying mechanisms of implementation. While tracking formal adoption and student participation rates remains important, a comprehensive analysis must also evaluate whether alternative learning is academically recognized, relationally supported, culturally negotiated, and administratively predictable. By bringing policy enactment into dialogue with student agency and sociocultural learning, the findings highlight that navigating curricular flexibility relies heavily on institutional and relational resources, not just individual choice. Although grounded in a single institutional case at Universitas Al Qolam Malang, synthesizing these dimensions offers a contextually grounded explanatory framework that helps explain why the formal availability of flexible learning opportunities often coexists with highly uneven student experiences.

The practical implications follow directly from this theoretical interpretation. If the lived curriculum emerges through the interaction of institutional, relational, cultural, and administrative conditions, strengthening implementation requires more than reiterating policy mandates or expanding the number of available programmes. Universities need to establish transparent credit-recognition procedures, coordinate learning outcomes with partner institutions, provide predictable

funding arrangements, and maintain effective academic mentoring. They also need to recognize cultural and linguistic adaptation as part of students' learning experiences rather than treating it solely as an individual responsibility. These measures address the conditions through which policy opportunities become accessible and educationally meaningful. The model therefore suggests that the effectiveness of curriculum reform should be assessed not only in terms of formal adoption or programme participation, but also in terms of the institutional capacity to translate policy provisions into coherent, supported, and academically recognized learning experiences.

Ultimately, this study positions the lived curriculum as a central analytical object for understanding mandated curriculum reform. The concept directs attention to the relationship between what policy intends, what institutions are equipped to deliver, and what students actually experience. Through the case of Universitas Al Qolam Malang, the study illustrates how curricular flexibility is simultaneously enabled by institutional opportunities and conditioned by organizational constraints, social relationships, and cultural encounters. The sociocultural mediation model provides a framework for investigating these interactions and for developing more context-sensitive approaches to curriculum governance. Its central proposition is that the promise of curriculum reform is realized not by policy design alone, but through the institutional and sociocultural processes that make policy meaningful in everyday educational practice.

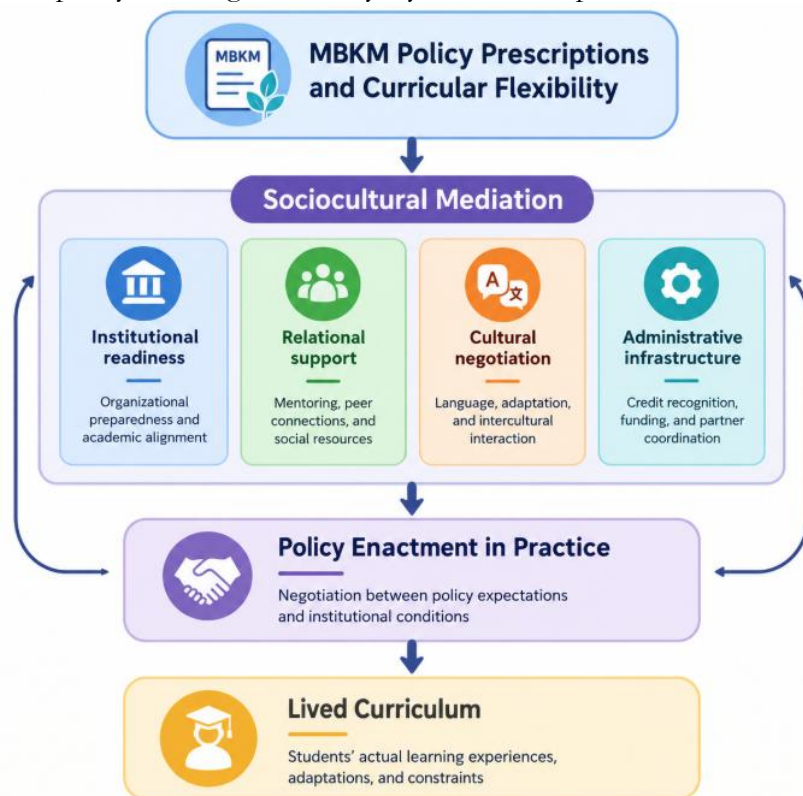


Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework of Sociocultural Mediation in MBKM Implementation

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) reform is not seamlessly translated from national policy into practice, but is instead shaped by local institutional and sociocultural realities. By introducing a sociocultural mediation framework, the findings reveal that policy enactment is governed by four interconnected dimensions: institutional readiness, relational support, cultural negotiation, and administrative infrastructure. While strong mentoring and peer networks helped students navigate unfamiliar learning environments, systemic hurdles such as delayed funding, rigid credit conversion procedures, and misaligned partner programmes

constrained the practical realization of curricular flexibility. Consequently, this study highlights the critical gap between the intended policy and the "lived curriculum," illustrating that flexible learning depends fundamentally on the organizational mechanisms that enable students to access, sustain, and gain formal academic recognition for their experiences.

Practically, realizing MBKM's full potential requires institutions to move beyond simply expanding off-campus opportunities by establishing transparent credit-conversion protocols, predictable funding arrangements, and tighter coordination between academic and administrative units. While this single-institution case provides contextually grounded insights into these dynamics, its qualitative design and purposive sampling limit broad statistical generalizability and the establishment of causal relationships. Future research should apply this sociocultural mediation framework across diverse institutional settings through comparative, longitudinal, or mixed-methods designs. Investigating how these four dimensions interact under varying resource levels and partnership structures will further clarify the conditions necessary to translate mandated curriculum reforms into coherent, accessible, and academically recognized educational realities.

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