

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background of the study, research question, objective of the study, scope and limitation of the study, significance of the study, definition of key terms.

A. Background of the Study

Education plays a crucial role in shaping the quality of human resources, and curriculum serves as a vital component that guides the teaching and learning process (Richards, 2013). Education is one of the most essential aspects of human life, as it contributes not only to the development of individual potential but also to the advancement of society. In the Indonesian context, education has undergone continuous reforms in order to meet the challenges of globalization, technological development, and the demand for competitive human resources. In the 21st century, higher education is not only required to produce graduates who are academically excellent but also those who are prepared to compete globally, capable of critical thinking, and adaptive to rapid technological and social changes. In Indonesia, the development of curriculum has undergone several transformations to align with the changing needs of society, technology, and the global era. In this context, curriculum reform becomes a vital strategy to ensure that education remains relevant, meaningful, and impactful. One of the most recent and significant innovations in Indonesia's higher education system is the launch of the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM)

policy. Initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology under the leadership of Nadiem Anwar Makarim in 2020, this program aims to provide students with a more flexible, autonomous, and contextual learning experience (Kemendikbud, 2020).

MBKM offers various learning pathways outside the traditional classroom setting, including *Kampus Mengajar* (Teaching Campus), *Magang* (Internship), *Studi Independen* (Independent Study), *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* (Student Exchange), and *Proyek Kemanusiaan* (Humanitarian Project). Through this program, students are encouraged to go beyond their classrooms and gain real experiences in the world of work, research, entrepreneurship, and community service. In other words, MBKM emphasizes experiential learning and outcome-based education, which are aligned with 21st-century skills. These programs are designed to foster students' soft skills, real-world experiences, and readiness for the job market. These programs are aimed at bridging the gap between theory and practice, equipping students with practical experience, interdisciplinary knowledge, and transferable soft skills that will better prepare them for the professional world (Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi, 2021).

The idea behind MBKM is to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical application by allowing students to explore their interests beyond their major and develop competencies aligned with the future of work. This program was designed to provide greater academic freedom to students and institutions by allowing students to spend up to

three semesters outside their study program, either by studying in other departments, at different universities, or even engaging directly with industries, communities, and other real-world settings (Kemendikbudristek, 2020). In higher education, particularly in the field of English language teaching, MBKM plays a crucial role. English Department students are expected not only to master linguistic and pedagogical competence but also to develop critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration skills. Participation in MBKM activities, such as teaching assistance, internships, student exchanges, or research projects, provides students with opportunities for English department apply their theoretical knowledge into practice.

In the context of English Department students, MBKM not only provides experiential learning but also serves as a platform to enhance language learning. Through activities such as teaching assistance, internships, student exchanges, and research projects, students have opportunities to apply theoretical language knowledge in authentic contexts. These experiences support the development of communicative competence, pedagogical skills, cross-cultural understanding, and practical language use, which are essential outcomes for future language professionals.

At UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri, MBKM has been gradually introduced in the English Department. While it offers opportunities for students to enhance their academic skills, hard skills, and readiness, its implementation

also presents academic challenges. These include balancing MBKM activities with coursework, aligning program experiences with departmental expectations, and navigating credit recognition and administrative processes. In addition, limited institutional support, insufficient guidance from lecturers, and bureaucratic obstacles in credit recognition may hinder students' academic progress and overall learning outcomes (Yuliana & Draji, 2021; Ambarwati, 2022).

Unlike technical or vocational disciplines where industry collaboration is more structured, English majors often face challenges in finding suitable MBKM activities that match their academic background. This misalignment can lead to stress, academic overload, and uncertainty in navigating the program. Furthermore, decentralization of MBKM implementation across departments may cause inconsistencies in support, guidance, and recognition of student achievements.

Considering these conditions, it is important to investigate how English Department students experience MBKM, particularly their academic challenges, the skills they gain, their preparedness, and the opportunities they encounter. By understanding these academic challenges, both the institution and students can find solutions to optimize the implementation of the program. English Department students, in particular, are expected to maintain their academic responsibilities while participating in MBKM activities. While engaging in MBKM activities, students are still expected to complete core courses, academic requirements, and sometimes

even their final projects or thesis. This condition often leads to stress, academic overload, or difficulty in time management. In some cases, students experience a mismatch between MBKM program activities and the academic expectations of their departments, creating confusion and reducing the effectiveness of the program.

English Department students often struggle to find MBKM programs that align with their academic background. While some options for Teaching Campus or internships in education-related sectors, others are left unsure about which programs are suitable or how to register and prepare for them. The gap between institutional policies and student readiness poses significant challenges for effective implementation.

Furthermore, while the government provides guidelines, universities are granted the autonomy to interpret and operationalize MBKM according to their capacities. This decentralization leads to inconsistency in how the program is implemented across departments and institutions. Some faculties may actively support MBKM, while others struggle to integrate it into their academic system (Ambarwati, 2022). At UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri, there has been limited formal research exploring the perspectives and experiences of English Department students in relation to MBKM participation, making it difficult to understand the specific challenges they face and how these challenges affect their academic journey.

In addition, not all lecturers are fully supportive or aware of the mechanisms and goals of MBKM. Some lecturers still adhere to conventional academic frameworks, making it difficult for students to reconcile MBKM experiences with course requirements. This lack of alignment between faculty members and institutional policy further hampers the program's success. In some situations, students report that their participation in MBKM was not acknowledged academically, or that credit conversion was delayed or denied due to bureaucratic issues.

Although several studies have discussed curriculum innovations in primary and secondary education, more specific explanations are necessary. For instance, Annafiah (2023), in her study entitled "*The Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in English Lesson at MAN 2 Ponorogo*," examined how the Merdeka Curriculum was applied in English learning at the secondary school level. The study found that the implementation of the curriculum provided greater flexibility for teachers in designing learning activities and encouraged more student-centered approaches, which enhanced students' engagement in English language learning. Similarly, Budhi (2023), in "*The Implementation of Profil Pelajar Pancasila at SMPN 3 Kota Kediri*," explored how the values of Profil Pelajar Pancasila were integrated into classroom practices. The findings indicated that character-based education and adaptive teaching strategies played an important role in shaping students' attitudes, collaboration skills, and learning motivation in line with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

However, research focusing on academic challenges faced by university students, particularly English Department students in Islamic higher education institutions, remains limited. Most previous studies have emphasized curriculum implementation at the school level rather than examining students' academic experiences and challenges in higher education, especially in the context of *Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM). Therefore, understanding these academic challenges is crucial to optimize MBKM implementation and enhance students' academic and language learning experiences.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the academic challenges experienced by English Department students at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri in implementing *Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM). By examining students' perspectives, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how MBKM influences their academic responsibilities and language learning processes. Furthermore, the findings are intended to offer insights and practical recommendations for lecturers, program coordinators, and university administrators to ensure that MBKM effectively supports both experiential learning and students' academic and language development.

Several previous studies have discussed the implementation of MBKM from different perspectives. For example, Wahyuni (2023) focused on communication barriers experienced by students in international academic programs, while Pratama (2023) examined academic pressure and

workload during MBKM participation. In addition, Rahmawati (2022) discussed the role of peer and lecturer support in helping students adapt to MBKM activities. However, most previous studies discussed these issues separately and did not specifically examine how various academic challenges are interconnected during MBKM participation. Therefore, this study focuses on the multidimensional academic challenges experienced by English Department students and how they manage their academic responsibilities within both Internship and AECI Thailand programs.

In conclusion, while MBKM presents a promising vision for transforming higher education in Indonesia, its successful implementation requires careful planning, strong institutional support, and continuous evaluation. By investigating the academic challenges faced by English Department students, this study contributes to the improvement of MBKM practices at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri and provides insights that may be relevant for similar higher education contexts.

B. Research Question

1. What academic challenges do English Department students at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri face while participating in the MBKM program?
2. How do students manage their academic responsibilities within the MBKM program they are enrolled in?

C. The Objectives of the Study

Based on the research question above, the objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the academic challenges faced by English Department students at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri while participating in the MBKM program.
2. To examine how students manage their academic responsibilities within the MBKM program they are enrolled in.

D. Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study is designed to investigate the academic challenges encountered by English Department students at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri in relation to the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) program. The scope includes students who are actively enrolled and have either taken part in MBKM activities or studied under the MBKM-aligned curriculum, such as through internships in education-related sectors or Association of Education Cultural International (AECI) Thailand programs.

The study specifically focuses on challenges related to academic responsibilities, including balancing coursework, managing time, aligning MBKM experiences with departmental expectations, and navigating credit recognition processes. The participants are not limited to a specific year of entry or semester level; instead, the study employs a purposive selection of students who meet the core criteria—namely, direct involvement in MBKM initiatives or curricular exposure to MBKM principles. This broad selection strategy is intended to capture a wide range of student perspectives and experiences.

Data is collected using a qualitative descriptive method, primarily through in-depth interviews, and the number of participants is determined based on the point at which no new significant data emerges (data saturation).

The limitations of this study include:

1. It exclusively considers student perspectives, without incorporating insights from lecturers, MBKM coordinators, or institutional administrators.
2. Participants may have experienced different types or levels of MBKM engagement, which could result in variations in the depth and detail of responses.
3. The study is conducted only at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri, so the findings may not be generalizable to students at other universities or regions.

This scope and limitation framework ensures that the study remains focused on academic challenges, providing a clear and manageable context for exploring the experiences of English Department students in implementing MBKM.

E. Significance of the Study

1. For Students

This research aims to provide insights into the academic challenges faced by English Department students during the implementation of MBKM. This may help them develop strategies to manage

coursework and MBKM responsibilities more effectively.

2. For Lecturers and the Department

The findings of this study can serve as valuable input for lecturers and the English Department at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri to evaluate and improve the implementation strategies of MBKM, especially from the students' point of view. This may inform the development of academic guidance and credit recognition policies that better support students' academic progress during MBKM participation.

3. For Future Researchers

Serves as a reference for studies on MBKM, especially regarding academic challenges, student preparedness, and skill development. Future researchers may explore specific academic barriers in MBKM participation, or conduct comparative studies across departments or universities.

F. Definition of the Key Terms

To avoid misunderstanding of some of the terms used by researcher towards reader, these terms are defined as follow:

1. Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM)

Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) is a higher education policy launched by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology that promotes flexible and experiential learning. Through this policy, students are given opportunities to participate in various academic activities outside the regular

classroom, such as internships and international programs, to develop their academic and professional skills.

2. Academic Challenges

Academic challenges refer to difficulties or obstacles faced by students in carrying out academic activities and responsibilities during the learning process. In the context of this study, these challenges are related to students' experiences while participating in MBKM programs.

3. Academic Responsibility Management

Academic responsibility management refers to students' ability and strategies in organizing, managing, and completing their academic responsibilities effectively. It includes managing tasks, time, academic workload, and other responsibilities during participation in MBKM programs.

4. English Department Students

English Department students refer to students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri. In this study, the term specifically refers to students who have participated in MBKM programs and became the participants of the research.