The strategy used by the English Study Program *MBKM* Team to improve the soft skills of students participating in the MBKM program

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Abstract

In the increasingly rapid development of the times, the development of hard skills and soft skills competencies plays an important role for every student in preparing themselves for the changing times. The purpose of this study is to investigate the strategies used by the PBI MBKM Team to improve the soft skills of students participating in the MBKM program in English Study Program, FKIP, UKI Toraja. This study applies qualitative methods. The subjects of this study are people who are able to become informants to provide information in accordance with the objectives of this study. The informants in this study were the MBKM Team and students who were participating in MBKM program in the English Language Education Study Program UKI Toraja. In accordance with the purpose of this study, the data were collected through observation and interviews. The data analyzed through transcription and coding analysis, while the interview results will be analyzed using thematic analysis. The result of this study confirms that the strategies used by the MBKM Team to improve the soft skills of students participating in the MBKM program are apply active learning, assign group tasks, hold seminars or workshops, provide mentorship, increased digital literacy, and provide constructive feedback.

Keywords: *Strategy, Students' Soft Skills, Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka Program*

Introduction

The Collaborative Learning Approach is implemented in the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM)* Program at this time. The Minister of Education and Culture who launched this program in learning. In the *MBKM* Program there are eight types of activities that can be carried out by students such as student exchanges, work practices / internships, teaching assistance, research or research, humanitarian projects, entrepreneurial activities, independent studies or projects, building villages or thematic Social Services. In the *MBKM* guide issued by the Higher Education in 2020, the purpose of the *MBKM* program is to develop and improve the competence of hard skills and soft skills of graduates so that they are able and ready to compete and have the qualities needed in accordance with the times, can also prepare graduates who are superior and have a leader spirit and have a good personality. In the increasingly rapid development of the times, the development of hard skills and soft skills competencies plays an important role for every student in preparing themselves for the changing times. It is also recommended by the National Educational Association (Urban, 2020) which states that it is very important to prepare every child from the basic education level to become a student.

The MBKM program, which became a program of the Ministry of Education and Culture starting in 2020, has been implemented in the PBI UKI Toraja Study Program. MBKM activities carried out are from internships, student exchanges, research, humanitarian projects, teaching assistance, entrepreneurship and thematic Social Services. MBKM activities carried out in the English Program Study UKI Toraja Study Program are aligned with the objectives of the National MBKM and are guided by the Learning Achievements of Graduates of the UKI Toraja English Language Education Study Program, namely the development of student soft skills.

Several previous studies related to the MBKM program and student soft skills were carried out by several researchers. Based on data from PoP applications and visualization using VOSviewer on research on soft skills and the MBKM Program, it can be seen that research in these fields varies greatly. Agus and Aisah (2021) researching the implementation of the MBKM program, Alawi, Sumpena, and Supiana (2022) investigating MBKM during the COVID-19 pandemic, AN and Yanti (2022) researching MBKM collaborative learning, Andari and Windasari (2021) investigating MBKM student exchanges. Related soft skills, Fuad, Suyoto, Ario, and Rahmawati (2022) analyze students' interest in the MBKM program for the sake of improving soft skills, Werdiningsih and Setiawan (2022) reviewing lecturers' perceptions related to students' soft and hard skills in the MBKM program. The following visualization using VOSviewer on research on soft skills and the MBKM Program:
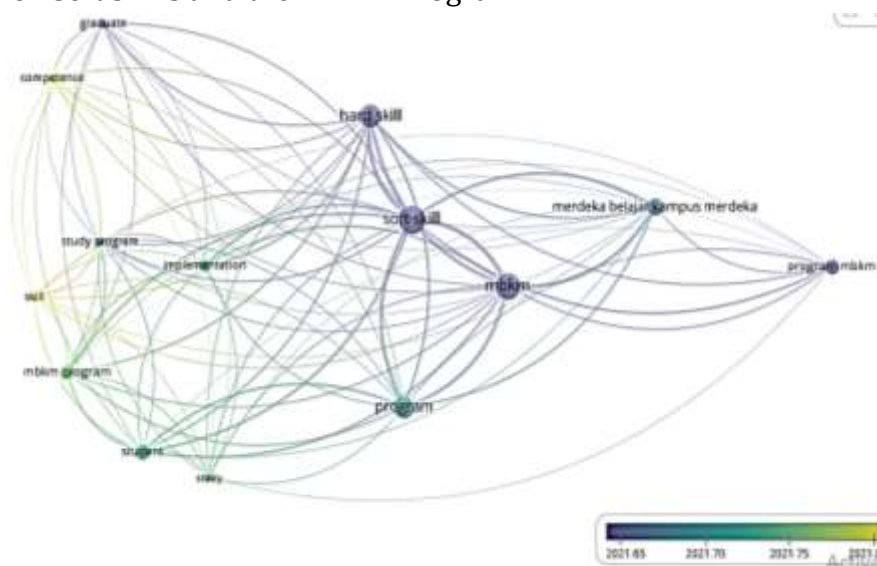

Figure 1: Visualization using VOSviewer on research on soft skills and MBKM Program

English Language Education Study Program, FKIP, UKI Toraja currently has and temporarily implements several MBKM programs. These programs are teaching assistance in units, internships in various industries, student exchanges, and studies which in this case are supported by Google. One thing that is a point of concern is related to the quality of students participating in the MBKM program. From the beginning of preparation (selection of participants) many things were emphasized related to their competence. However, on the one hand, the soft-skills aspect does support the MBKM program. From the ongoing interim evaluation, partners (units) have quite mixed feedback. Some are satisfied with student competence and some do expect students to have abilities beyond academic qualifications, namely soft skills. From this description,

the purpose of this study is to investigate the strategies used by the PBI MBKM Team to improve the soft skills of students participating in the MBKM program in English Study Program, FKIP, UKI Toraja.

Method

This study applies qualitative methods. In qualitative research, Klassen, Creswell, Plano Clark, Smith, and Meissner (2012) that researchers will take data from research sources by preparing instruments for data collection. Selection of research subjects, carried out using sample selection with purposive sampling. In accordance with John W Creswell (2014) Researchers deliberately choose research subjects to find out the phenomenon that is the focus of research. The measure on which the selection of subjects and research sites is based is the research subject's rich understanding of the information needed. The subjects of this study are people who are able to become informants to provide information in accordance with the objectives of this study. The informants in this study were the MBKM Team and students who were participating in MBKM program in the English Language Education Study Program UKI Toraja.

In accordance with the purpose of this study, the data were collected through observation and interviews. Researchers applied direct observation. Dawson (2002) revealing that direct observation is carried out by observing research subjects directly in certain situations using the help of technology, namely video recorders and in this direct observation researchers act as non-participant observers. Next, the interview, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) states that interviews are a way to exchange understanding between two or more people about a material or material, listen to the concentration of human relations to produce understanding and center on the social situation of research data sources. The interview is a flexible tool for data collection, allowing multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, oral and listening. The data analyzed through transcription and coding analysis (J. W. Creswell & Clark, 2010), While the interview results will be analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

The strategy used by the PBI MBKM Team to improve the soft skills of students participating in the MBKM program, English Study Program, FKIP, UKI Toraja

Before the implementation of MBKM activities, the strategies used by the PBI MBKM Team to improve the soft skills of students participating in the MBKM program, English Study Program, FKIP, UKI Toraja such as:

Apply active learning

Based on observations, researchers observed that the MBKM Team of English Study Program, FKIP, UKI Toraja implements active learning that encourages students to actively participate in class. The observation data was confirmed through interviews with MBKM Team Members. In active learning, students are invited to discuss, ask questions, and debate so that they can improve communication and problem-solving skills. In addition, presentation activities are also often carried out in lectures to increase student confidence and the ability to express their opinions.

The following is an excerpt of an interview with one of the MBKM Team members of the English Language Education Study Program, FKIP, UKI Toraja:

> "I apply several active learning strategies, such as group discussions, group assignments, case studies, simulations, and so on. In group discussions, students are given topics that must be discussed with their groups. In group assignments, students are given tasks that must be completed together in groups. While in case

studies, students are given real cases that must be solved with their groups. In the simulation, students act as actors in a situation created by the lecturer."

Active learning is a powerful technique that involves selecting a small set of data points from a larger dataset, labeling them, and using them to train a machine learning model. The goal is to select the most informative data points to improve the model's performance while reducing the amount of labeled data required.

Assign group tasks

Based on observations, researchers observed that the MBKM Team of PBI English Study Program, FKIP, UKI Toraja provided group assignments involving students to collaborate and work together. Group assignments can help students develop cooperation, leadership, and problem-solving skills.
The data is in accordance with the results of the interview as follows:

"Group assignments are one way to improve students' soft skills. In the world of work, the ability to work in a team is a very important skill. By assigning group assignments, students can learn to communicate, lead, work together, make decisions, and respect the opinions of others."

Assigning group tasks can have several benefits in different settings, including: Improved collaboration and communication: Working in a group can improve collaboration and communication among team members. Group members can share ideas, divide tasks, and help each other to achieve a common goal. Diverse perspectives: When people work in a group, they bring different perspectives, experiences, and skills. This can lead to more creative and innovative solutions to complex problems. Enhanced learning: Group tasks can be an effective way to enhance learning. Members can learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses, share knowledge, and develop new skills. Increased motivation: Group tasks can increase motivation and engagement, especially when members have a shared sense of purpose and responsibility. Greater efficiency: Assigning group tasks can lead to greater efficiency, as tasks can be divided and executed in parallel. This can save time and resources while achieving the desired outcome.

Hold seminars or workshops

In collecting observation data, the MBKM Team carried out a program, namely seminars. The MBKM team holds seminars or workshops that invite speakers from outside or alumni who have been successful in their fields. Seminars and workshops can help students to network, learn from the experiences of others, and develop communication skills. This was also conveyed by the MBKM Team in the following interview excerpts:

"I think the best way is to invite experts or practitioners who have experience in the field. In addition, it is also important to create a clear and well-structured agenda, so that participants can understand the purpose of the seminar or workshop. In addition, it is also important to choose the right learning method, such as group discussions, simulations, or case studies."

Seminars and workshops can provide numerous benefits for students. Here are some of the most important benefits: seminars and workshops offer students an opportunity to learn from experts in various fields, such as academics, professionals, or industry leaders. This learning experience can help students develop new skills, acquire knowledge, and gain insights into their chosen field. Next, seminars and workshops allow students to interact with experts in their field, giving them the opportunity to ask questions, clarify doubts, and get advice on their career path. Such interactions can also provide networking

opportunities that can be valuable for future job opportunities. Then, Seminars and workshops can help students develop soft skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and time management. These skills are important for success in any career and can also be beneficial in their personal lives. Another one, many seminars and workshops include hands-on activities, allowing students to practice their newly acquired skills and gain practical experience. This can help students to gain confidence in their abilities and increase their chances of success in their chosen field. In addition, seminars and workshops can provide students with access to the latest trends and advancements in their field of study. This can help students to stay up-to-date with the latest industry practices and prepare them for future job opportunities.

Provide mentorship

The MBKM team also carried out one activity that had very significant benefits for MBKM participants, namely mentorship. The MBKM team provides mentorship for students in need. Students are invited to discuss and interact with entrepreneurs or experienced professionals to improve their skills and insights. Mentorship can help students develop interpersonal skills, self-development, and overcoming problems. The following is the explanation of the MBKM Team regarding mentorship:

> "Mentorship can provide experience and knowledge that is useful in developing soft skills, such as communication skills, cooperation, leadership, and so on. By having a mentor, students can gain views and perspectives that are different from those they get from lecturers or classmates. In addition, mentorship can also provide the support and motivation students need in facing academic or non-academic challenges."

Mentorship can help students to develop their communication and interpersonal skills, as well as learn how to work effectively with others. Next, mentors can provide students with insights into their chosen field of study and offer advice on career paths, job opportunities, and networking. In addition, when students have a mentor who believes in their potential and encourages them to succeed, it can boost their motivation and confidence, leading to greater academic achievement.

Increased digital literacy

Another thing that is no less important that is needed by MBKM participants implemented by the Team is the digital literacy improvement program. Through this activity, lecturers carry out activities that help students to improve information and communication technology skills. With these data, the researchers wanted to know more about how the implementation of the program through interviews such as the following:

> "We have several programs to improve students' digital literacy and soft skills in the MBKM program. One of them is by providing training in skills in the use of digital technology such as data processing, data analysis, and the use of certain applications. In addition, we also often provide assignments in the form of projects or research involving the use of digital technology and teamwork. In the process, students will be invited to develop soft skills such as communication and critical thinking skills."

With the rise of digital technology, it's becoming increasingly important for students to be able to communicate effectively using digital tools. Increased digital literacy can help students to communicate more efficiently and effectively with their peers, mentors, and professors. Digital literacy can also help students to collaborate more effectively with their peers, both within their home institutions and with those they encounter during

their exchange programs. This can lead to the development of new ideas and approaches to problem-solving.

Provide constructive feedback

In the implementation of the soft skill development program for MBKM participants, the team intensively provided constructive feedback. The team provides constructive feedback on every assignment students do. Constructive feedback can help students improve and develop their abilities. As conveyed by the following MBKM Team:

> " I usually give constructive feedback to students by approaching them in a friendly and open way. I provide specific feedback and focus on their actions that can improve their soft skills."

providing constructive feedback for students participating in exchange programs can be a valuable tool for enhancing their academic and personal growth, building positive relationships, and preparing them for success in the future.

Discussion

Based on the results of the research in the previous section, below are discussed research findings related to the strategies used by the PBI MBKM Team to improve the soft skills of students participating in the MBKM program English Study Program, FKIP, UKI Toraja:

The strategy used by the PBI MBKM Team to improve the soft skills of students participating in the MBKM program, English Study Program, FKIP, UKI Toraja

In this study, the strategies used by the English Study Program MBKM Team to improve the soft skills of students participating in the MBKM program, English Study Program, FKIP, UKI Toraja are apply active learning, assign group tasks, hold seminars or workshops, provide mentorship, increased digital literacy, and provide constructive feedback.

Soft skills are skills related to a person's attitude, personality, and social interaction. These skills are essential in the work environment and everyday life. There are many strategies that can be used to improve students' soft skills, including project-based learning, interpersonal skills training, collaborative learning, and experiential learning.

Project-based learning is a learning strategy that involves students in practical experience in completing projects related to the topic being studied. Research has shown that project-based learning can improve students' soft skills such as critical thinking skills, teamwork, and creativity (Boss & Krauss, 2022; Guidera & Stevens, 2011; Hmelo-Silver & Pfeffer, 2004; Made, Ambiyar, Riyanda, Sagala, & Adi, 2022).

Interpersonal skills training can also improve students' soft skills. The training involves teaching about skills such as active listening, public speaking, and teamwork. Research shows that interpersonal skills training can improve students' ability to work in teams, communicate well, and lead (Anderson et al., 2012; Bate & Tsakas, 2022; Kiewra, 2002; Serrano-Pintado, Escolar-Llamazares, & Delgado-Sánchez-Mateos, 2022).

Collaborative learning is a learning strategy that involves students in cooperation and sharing knowledge with classmates. Research shows that collaborative learning can improve social skills such as teamwork, communication skills, and social support

(Dillenbourg, Baker, Blaye, & O'malley, 1996; Kirschner, Paas, & Kirschner, 2011; Li, Zheng, Zhang, & Li, 2022; Nakata, Nitta, & Tsuda, 2022).

Experiential learning is a learning strategy that engages students in direct experience in real-world situations. Research shows that experiential learning can improve skills such as interpersonal skills, critical thinking, and adaptability skills (Helle & Säljö, 2012; Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Savani, Morris, Fincher, Lu, & Kaufman, 2022; Zhang, Zhou, & Stodolska, 2022).

Conclusion

Based on the result previously, it can be concluded that the strategies used by the English Study Program MBKM Team to improve the soft skills of students participating in the MBKM program, English Study Program, FKIP, UKI Toraja are apply active learning, assign group tasks, hold seminars or workshops, provide mentorship, increased digital literacy, and provide constructive feedback. This study is only limited to strategies used by the English Study Program MBKM Team to improve the soft skills of students, thus the researchers recommend future research to elaborate on the impact of implementing these strategies.

Acknowledgment

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