

Perceptions and Participation: Examining Student Engagement in the Implementation of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) Internship Policy in Makassar

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Abstract

This study examines the extent to which student perceptions shape their participation in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) internship policy in Makassar, a national higher education reform designed to strengthen work readiness through experiential learning. The research aims to assess the relationship between students' perceptions of policy content, information access, institutional support, and resource availability and their engagement in MBKM internship activities, while also identifying the most influential perceptual factors. Employing a quantitative correlational design, the study involved active university students who had participated in at least one MBKM program, using two instruments: a four-dimensional perception scale derived from policy implementation theory and the Student Engagement Measure covering behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Pearson correlation analysis reveals a positive and statistically significant association between student perceptions and engagement ($p = 0.038$), although the weak correlation indicates that perception contributes to but does not fully determine participation. These findings suggest that institutional readiness, motivation, accessibility, and prior experience also shape student involvement. The novelty of this study lies in its socio-political lens on MBKM implementation, its empirical linkage between policy perception and engagement, and its integration of policy implementation and student engagement theories. The study contributes to higher education governance and experiential-learning scholarship by demonstrating that policy reception among students is essential for reform effectiveness.

Keywords: Education Governance, Experiential Learning, Internship Policy, MBKM, Policy Perception

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INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) initiative was introduced as a policy designed to advance substantial transformation in Indonesian higher education. One of its most prominent components is the internship program, which allows students to engage directly in professional environments (Afdhal, 2023a; Febriadi et al., 2025). The policy is grounded in the assumption that practical experience will enhance graduates' work readiness, accelerate their adjustment to industry needs, and reduce the gap between theoretical knowledge and workplace realities. However, implementation across several

higher education institutions, including those in Makassar, shows that student participation in MBKM internships has not consistently aligned with these expectations (Hasim et al., 2023; Santosa & Pratama, 2025). Many students still lack clear understanding of MBKM, how it operates, what benefits it offers, and how institutional support can facilitate their access to the program. This situation highlights a disconnect between policy design and students' acceptance as primary actors in its implementation (M. Aditya et al., 2023; Lathif et al., 2022).

This issue is critical because the effectiveness of an education policy is shaped not only by the strength of its normative design but also by how students interpret and internalize it (Bryan & Clegg, 2019). Empirical findings demonstrate that students' perceptions frequently determine whether they choose to participate actively or disengage. In the context of MBKM, students who perceive the policy as transparent, beneficial, and institutionally supported tend to exhibit stronger motivation to join internship programs. Conversely, ambiguous information, limited access to resources, or insufficient institutional support may weaken participation. This condition is evident in numerous institutions in Makassar, where fluctuating levels of student involvement suggest that positive perceptions have yet to be firmly established (Miftahurrahmi & Nurhabibah, 2022; Soselisa et al., 2024). Understanding how student perceptions are linked to their participation is therefore essential for ensuring the effective realization of this national experiential learning policy.

Although student perceptions in educational policy implementation have been widely examined, previous studies often adopt different areas of focus. Several studies underscore that policy comprehension serves as a prerequisite for engagement. For instance, research by Afdhal (2023b) and Sandfreni (2021) shows that perceptions of policy characteristics significantly influence adoption and individual readiness. Within the Indonesian higher education context, studies by N. Aditya et al. (2024) and Warat and Tuanaya (2024) reveal that MBKM implementation heavily depends on the extent to which students and lecturers understand program structures and institutional readiness. Similarly, Djakiman and Kotarumalos (2023) and Moriolkosu et al. (2025) demonstrate that exposure to adequate information and institutional mentoring increases student participation in experiential learning activities. These findings affirm that perception is not a secondary factor but an integral component of successful policy implementation.

The internship literature, particularly within experiential learning, also shows consistent evidence that perceptions shape engagement. Research by Handayani and Damayanti (2022) and Hattu and Telussa (2024) proposes an engagement framework comprising behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, each strongly influenced by perceived relevance and benefits. Further studies (Arni, 2024; Fauziah & Afdhal, 2025; Puspitasari et al., 2025) reinforce that students participate more intensively when learning experiences align with their future aspirations and are supported institutionally. Additional research (Hudjimartsu et al., 2021; Zahra et al., 2024; Zalili et al., 2023) highlights the role of policy transparency in shaping levels of student engagement in internships and collaborative projects.

In parallel, scholarship on higher education governance suggests that nationally mandated policies often face challenges at the local implementation level. Research by Rochana et al. (2021) and Salamah et al. (2023) asserts that policy acceptance among implementing actors determines its effectiveness, and even well-designed policies may lose momentum without such acceptance. Complementary findings by Afdhal (2025), Ponoharjo et al. (2022), and Simatupang and Yuhertiana (2021) reveal that MBKM implementation frequently hinges on students' perceptions of institutional support and program accessibility, resulting in varied implementation across regions and institutions. These studies indicate that student perception is a critical variable that warrants deeper investigation, particularly in regional contexts like Makassar, where institutional dynamics are diverse.

Studies on policy perception further strengthen this research focus. Arjanto et al. (2022) and Zulhaji et al. (2023) argue that policy implementation is influenced by interactions between policy design, actor interpretation, and local context. When students, as the policy's primary targets, lack clear perceptions of policy objectives and mechanisms, overall effectiveness is compromised. Similar conclusions emerge from research by Fua and Wirantari (2025), Maspaitella and Afdhal (2024), and Zakiyah and Akbar (2025), who find that student perceptions of MBKM remain varied and often misaligned with policy intentions, particularly regarding program relevance and administrative demands.

Despite extensive literature, gaps remain concerning the relationship between student perceptions and engagement in MBKM internships. Existing studies on MBKM largely emphasize institutional readiness, curriculum design, or administrative challenges, while few empirically examine how policy perceptions directly relate to participation, especially in the heterogeneous higher education landscape of Makassar. Meanwhile, engagement literature frequently discusses motivational, pedagogical, and social determinants but rarely integrates policy perception as a decisive variable in experiential learning participation. Likewise, MBKM studies often address general perceptions without statistically linking them to actual student engagement.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on the relationship between policy perception and student engagement in MBKM internships, offering deeper insight into how national experiential learning policies are interpreted at the student level. The study suggests that student acceptance of a policy is not merely an auxiliary factor but may serve as an important indicator of implementation success. By integrating policy implementation theory with student engagement theory, this research provides a more comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the relationships among perception, institutional support, and real participation.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between students' perceptions of MBKM policy implementation and their level of engagement in internship programs, identify the strength of perception's influence on engagement, and determine which perception components most strongly encourage participation. The study also aims to provide empirical insight into how students in Makassar respond to experiential learning—

based national policies, while offering recommendations for universities to strengthen MBKM implementation through strategies centered on perception-building and sustained institutional support.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research methodology was designed to address the study's primary objective: understanding how students' perceptions relate to their level of engagement in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy in higher education institutions in Makassar. To examine this relationship objectively and measurably, the study employed a quantitative approach with a correlational design. This design is appropriate for assessing the direction and strength of relationships between variables statistically, without manipulating them, thereby revealing naturally occurring association patterns (Pyo et al., 2023; Wutich et al., 2024).

Makassar was selected as the research site because it is one of the largest higher education hubs in eastern Indonesia, characterized by institutional diversity and varied levels of MBKM implementation. Such diversity offers opportunities to capture rich empirical insights into how students interpret a standardized national policy within different institutional contexts. Additionally, several universities in Makassar have implemented MBKM since its early national rollout, ensuring that students possess direct experiential exposure relevant to this study.

The research population consisted of active university students across various institutions in Makassar. Given the large and indeterminate population size, purposive sampling was used to identify respondents who met two criteria: they must be active students and have participated in at least one MBKM program, specifically the internship program. Students who met these criteria were considered to possess adequate experience and understanding to evaluate MBKM implementation within their respective institutions. This selection process yielded respondents with direct exposure to MBKM and actual engagement in internship activities.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. This method was selected for its efficiency in reaching students across multiple institutions and for facilitating systematic data processing. The digital format is also appropriate for higher education research, as students are accustomed to online platforms and responses can be gathered without geographical barriers. The perception instrument was adapted from policy implementation theory and consisted of four dimensions: policy content, policy information, institutional support, and resources or capacities provided for implementation (Bianchi et al., 2021; Müller, 2022). These dimensions were deemed representative of students' evaluative perspectives on MBKM implementation in their institutional environment.

Student engagement was measured using the Student Engagement Measure developed by Bowden et al. (2021) and Kassab et al. (2022), which includes 19 items capturing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement. This instrument is widely

used and validated in higher education research, making it suitable for assessing engagement.

Data analysis was conducted using Pearson's correlation test through SPSS version 25.0 to determine the strength and direction of the linear relationship between students' perceptions and their engagement levels. This analysis provided empirical evidence of how positive perceptions are associated with higher levels of engagement. To ensure data reliability, triangulation was performed by examining item consistency within instruments, reviewing response distribution patterns, and corroborating statistical findings with field observations collected during respondent selection. These triangulation steps ensured that the analyzed data accurately reflected students' experiences rather than random or inconsistent responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Research Findings

The general overview of the findings provides an initial foundation for understanding how students in Makassar interpret the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy, particularly the internship program, and how these perceptions are reflected in their engagement throughout the internship activities. The respondents, active students from various universities in Makassar who had participated in at least one MBKM program, represented diverse profiles in terms of faculty affiliation, semester, and organizational experience. This diversity suggests that the reception of MBKM is not homogeneous but shaped by students' academic and social backgrounds. Several descriptive tendencies emerged that serve as the basis for deeper analysis.

Overall, student perceptions of MBKM were measured using four dimensions grounded in policy implementation frameworks: policy content, access to information, institutional support, and availability of resources. The descriptive results show that students' perceptions generally fall within the moderate-to-positive range. Students appear to understand the core components of the policy, perceive the flow of information as relatively clear, and recognize efforts by their institutions to provide support, although such support is not yet consistently distributed. Resource availability, including campus facilities, internship vacancy information, and administrative readiness, was found to be the most fluctuating dimension. While some students reported that their institutions provide formal information channels, access to intensive consultation is still perceived as insufficient.

Table 1 Average Scores of Student Perceptions of MBKM Dimensions

MBKM Perception Dimension	Mean Score (1–5)	General Category
Policy Content	3.87	Moderate–Positive
Access to Information	3.75	Moderate–Positive
Institutional Support	3.61	Moderate
Availability of Resources	3.42	Moderate (Fluctuating)

Source: Research data analysis, 2025

The table indicates that the strongest positive perception lies in the policy content dimension. Students generally understand the aims of MBKM, the structural components of the internship activities, and the policy's connection to work readiness. This finding aligns with the views of Pradnyani and Prabawati (2025) and Sutarni et al. (2021), who argue that policy clarity forms the cognitive foundation shaping how target groups respond to a policy. When policies are perceived as clear, students are more capable of positioning themselves as active participants in implementation. However, policy clarity alone does not guarantee high engagement, especially when supporting factors are weak.

The second aspect analyzed is student engagement, assessed across three primary dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The descriptive results show that behavioral engagement, attendance, task participation, and professional interaction, was relatively high. Many students reported that internships offered opportunities for self-actualization, motivating them to take active roles. Emotional engagement was more varied. While some students reported enthusiasm and emotional attachment to their internship activities, others felt limited emotional resonance because internship tasks did not fully align with their interests or academic fields. Cognitive engagement was moderate, suggesting a focus on task completion rather than deep exploration or reflection.

Table 2 Patterns of Student Engagement in MBKM Internships

Engagement Dimension	Main Tendency
Behavioral Engagement	High
Emotional Engagement	Moderate–Varied
Cognitive Engagement	Moderate

Source: Research data analysis, 2025

These patterns show that the three engagement dimensions do not move uniformly. High behavioral engagement tends to be driven by requirements and professional expectations, whereas emotional and cognitive engagement appear more influenced by individual preferences, internship environments, and the perceived relevance of experiences to students' career goals.

Correlation Between Policy Perception and Student Engagement

When students' perceptions of the MBKM policy were examined in relation to their engagement levels using Pearson's correlation test, the results revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship ($p = .038$), although the strength of the correlation was weak. This finding is noteworthy for several reasons. On the one hand, it validates that perceptions indeed play a role in shaping how deeply students engage in internship activities. Students who understand the policy well, feel supported, and have access to adequate information tend to be more active during their internships. On the other hand, the weak correlation also signals that perception is not the sole determinant. External factors, such as institutional readiness, mentoring quality, internship placement diversity, financial needs,

and intrinsic motivation, also exert significant influence.

As noted by Samudro and Enggarani (2025) and Septian and Khomariah (2025), policy clarity is essential but insufficient on its own. These studies emphasize that responses to policy are shaped by the interaction between individual capacities and broader social contexts. Thus, perception may serve as an entry point, but not the primary driver of engagement.

Table 3 Summary of Pearson Correlation Results Between Policy Perception and Engagement

Variables	Correlation (r)	Significance (p)	General Interpretation
Policy Perception– Engagement	0.22	0.038	Positive, significant, weak correlation

Source: SPSS 25.0 data analysis, 2025

The weak but significant correlation indicates that more positive perceptions are associated with higher engagement, yet the correlation is not strong enough to account for most of the variation in engagement. This pattern is common in educational policy studies, particularly those involving policies reliant on individual willingness to participate and internalize policy values (Kassab et al., 2022; Renninger & Hidi, 2022).

A weak correlation should not be dismissed as unimportant. In behavioral policy research, such correlations often reflect the complexity of human agency, individuals respond not only to policy perceptions but also to personal motivations, environmental conditions, social norms, and institutional capacity. In this context, perception functions as a predisposing factor, opening the possibility for engagement, but not determining its depth.

Within the framework of Policy Feedback and Public Engagement (Renninger & Hidi, 2022), policies shape individuals' sense of efficacy and participation but interact with social structures such as power relations, access to opportunities, and accumulated experiences. The MBKM policy signals to students that they are encouraged to learn beyond their study program and engage in real-world professional settings. However, this signal must be reinforced by institutional support, mentoring capacity, consistent communication, and accessible internship opportunities.

The findings also indicate the central role of intrinsic motivation. Studies in educational psychology (Hapsari & Prabawati, 2025; Maryani et al., 2022) show that students with strong intrinsic learning orientations, such as a desire to acquire skills or explore professional environments, display higher engagement even when their policy perceptions are not uniformly positive. Conversely, students with low intrinsic motivation may show low engagement despite clearly understanding the policy. Thus, engagement arises from the interaction between policy perception and personal motivation.

Institutional and structural factors also shape engagement. Students with positive perceptions but limited access to relevant internship placements, financial stability, or

transportation, or those facing high academic loads, may experience lower engagement despite favorable perceptions. This illustrates that institutional conditions can amplify or restrict the translation of perception into engagement.

These findings underscore that the success of MBKM as an experiential learning policy does not rest solely on students' understanding of the policy. It depends equally on the institutional capacity to translate policy design into meaningful practice. Institutions with coherent information systems, consistent support structures, and adequate facilities are better positioned to facilitate stable and sustained student engagement. Conversely, weak coordination or limited communication contributes to unequal student experiences and fluctuating engagement levels.

Taken together, the results indicate that the implementation of experiential learning policies such as MBKM is situated at the intersection of policy design, actor perception, and institutional context. A weak but significant correlation highlights that students' perceptions serve as a necessary foundation, but not a sufficient condition, for strong engagement. Supporting elements, such as academic advising, the relevance of internship placements, and access to institutional resources, must be treated as integral components of policy implementation.

Dimensions of Policy Implementation Perception That Most Influence Student Engagement

The analysis of the MBKM policy implementation perception dimensions that most strongly influence student engagement provides important insight into how students evaluate the policy at a deeper level. Although the overall correlation results indicate a positive yet weak relationship between policy perception and student engagement, a dimension-by-dimension mapping reveals that not all perceptual components contribute equally. Among the four dimensions, policy content, access to information, institutional support, and resource availability, the findings indicate that institutional support and access to information show the strongest contributions to shaping student engagement. This pattern suggests that MBKM implementation is not merely a matter of policy clarity but is fundamentally tied to how higher education institutions organize support infrastructures and communicate policy information in ways that allow students to feel confident, prepared, and capable of participating.

Table 4 Correlation Between MBKM Perception Dimensions and Student Engagement

Perception Dimension	Correlation (r)	Interpretation
Policy Content	0.12	Very weak
Policy Information	0.19	Weak
Institutional Support	0.27	Weak-moderate
Resources	0.16	Weak

Source: Research data analysis yang diolah menggunakan SPSS 25.0, 2025

The table shows that institutional support has the highest correlation value among the four dimensions. Although still categorized as weak, the magnitude is relatively greater compared to policy content, information, and resources. This finding demonstrates that institutional support, through administrative readiness, consistent academic mentoring, and coordination between program study units and lecturers, has a more substantial influence on shaping student engagement than merely understanding the policy content. This aligns with Bowden et al. (2021), who argue that responsive educational institutions, those capable of providing concrete support, accessible mentoring, procedural flexibility, and official recognition of new learning activities, significantly enhance students' confidence in their likelihood of success when participating in nontraditional academic programs such as MBKM.

Strong institutional support is also evident in the narratives of students who described how the presence of academic supervisors, coordinated communication between program study units, and clear administrative services provided a sense of security throughout the internship process. Such a sense of security is crucial in experiential learning contexts where students must leave the predictability of classroom-based learning and enter real-world professional environments. Students who receive this support tend to be more engaged behaviorally (e.g., timely task completion), emotionally (e.g., enthusiasm and feeling supported), and cognitively (e.g., critical thinking and deeper understanding of workplace processes). Conversely, students who do not experience institutional support frequently face administrative confusion, unclear procedures, or insufficient communication, all of which hinder their engagement.

In addition to institutional support, access to policy information emerges as the second most influential dimension. Clear and accessible information regarding program objectives, internship procedures, administrative requirements, and long-term benefits strengthens students' understanding and readiness to participate. As noted by Al-Tameemi and Xue (2019) and Sulaiman et al. (2024), clarity of policy information increases individuals' confidence in their ability to complete a program. When MBKM information is delivered through clear, consistent, and multi-channel communication, such as webinars, university websites, and lecturer-led socialization, students feel more guided and less hesitant to engage actively.

By contrast, policy content shows the lowest contribution. This finding is understandable because the MBKM policy content is national in scope and relatively abstract for students. Policy formulations such as "off-campus learning" or "workforce competency strengthening" may be understood at a general level, but they do not necessarily provide concrete guidance on how students should navigate the internship process. In this sense, understanding policy content is descriptive rather than operational, which limits its ability to directly stimulate engagement, particularly in comparison with institutional support, which students experience tangibly during program implementation.

Resource availability shows a slightly higher correlation than policy content but remains lower than institutional support and information. Two explanations account for this

pattern. First, many students report that resources such as internship stipends, transportation support, work equipment, or living allowances remain limited or uneven across institutions. Second, some internship providers offer adequate facilities, while others provide minimal structural guidance. Such disparities weaken the influence of resources on student engagement relative to the more consistently experienced institutional support.

The finding that institutional support is the most influential factor has important implications for MBKM policy implementation at the institutional level. First, policy communication cannot rely solely on formal socialization but must be accompanied by the development of a comprehensive mentoring ecosystem. Institutional readiness, such as MBKM service units, supervisors who understand the dynamics of internships, and administrative systems capable of responding to student needs, significantly strengthens engagement. Second, this finding emphasizes that institutions play a vital role in bridging the gap between nationally designed policy content and students' highly contextualized on-site experiences. Third, consistent institutional support fosters student confidence, which in turn enhances their engagement during internships.

Other Factors Influencing Student Engagement

Although students' perceptions of policy implementation contribute significantly to their engagement levels, the findings show that perception is not the sole determinant. Several additional internal and external factors, identified through secondary data, respondent patterns, and theoretical insights, shape student engagement but were not directly measured in the quantitative model. Understanding these factors is essential, as student engagement is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced not only by policy perception but also by psychological conditions, structural readiness, and access to experiential learning opportunities.

One of the most significant internal factors is personal motivation. In experiential learning contexts such as MBKM, motivation plays a crucial role in determining students' readiness to participate actively. Hatala and Latuconsina (2023) emphasize that intrinsic motivation, such as the desire for self-development, self-actualization, or professional networking, shapes students' self-regulation, learning monitoring, and persistence in autonomous learning environments. Among several respondents, motivation functioned as an engagement catalyst; students with strong goal orientation were more proactive in seeking information, building relationships, and overcoming administrative challenges, even when policy-perception levels were moderate. This explains why some students exhibit high engagement despite not having the strongest perceptions of policy implementation.

Beyond internal factors, institutional readiness also emerged as a significant external factor influencing engagement. Respondents reported concerns about limited socialization, shifting administrative procedures, and inadequate technical guidance, all of which relate to universities' structural preparedness for MBKM. Literature on higher-education governance highlights that institutional responsiveness is critical to the success of nontraditional academic programs (Kilmanun & Telussa, 2025). Readiness includes clarity of information

flow, adequate academic support, and bureaucratic capacity for managing documentation and coordination with partners. When universities lack such readiness, students encounter technical barriers that reduce motivation and restrict participation, even if their initial perceptions of the program are positive. These conditions indicate that policy implementation perception does not operate in isolation but is shaped by students' lived experiences within institutional systems.

Another important factor is access to internship opportunities. Not all students have equal access to relevant internships due to disparities in information, networks, or geographical constraints. In outer regions or smaller institutions, limited industry partnerships constrain opportunities. This creates participation gaps between students with strong personal networks or urban residence and those facing higher logistical burdens. Research on experiential learning demonstrates that internship access is not merely a technical requirement but also shapes students' professional identity formation (Bowden et al., 2021). Students who expect high-quality internships but struggle to secure placements may experience frustration that lowers engagement. Thus, access must be treated as a structural determinant of engagement.

Previous academic experience also plays a role. Students accustomed to independent learning, collaborative projects, or organizational activity demonstrate higher readiness for MBKM, which requires initiative, cross-institutional communication, and adaptability. Conversely, students whose academic routines have been passive or lecturer-dependent may require longer adjustment periods and may experience anxiety when confronted with autonomous learning structures. Kassab et al. (2022) note that prior learning experiences shape students' self-efficacy; individuals with positive past experiences tend to exhibit stronger engagement in autonomous learning contexts.

Table 5 Internal and External Factors Influencing Student Engagement

Factor Category	Description	Type of Impact
Personal Motivation	Intrinsic drive for growth, experience, or career development	Increases initiative, emotional attachment, and resilience
Institutional Readiness	Availability of information, mentoring, and administrative support	Shapes procedural clarity, student comfort, and implementation continuity
Internship Access	Availability of partners, placement ease, and logistical support	Determines participation flow and satisfaction with MBKM
Prior Academic Experience	History of independent learning, organization, or collaborative work	Enhances self-efficacy, adaptability, and readiness

Source: Research data analysis, 2025

These findings demonstrate that policy implementation perception alone is insufficient as the primary determinant of student engagement, despite its statistically significant contribution. Engagement emerges from the interaction among individual

readiness, institutional structures, and access to real learning opportunities. In other words, a well-designed policy requires a mature support ecosystem, positive perceptions alone cannot produce strong engagement if students lack adequate motivation or institutional support. From a policy-implementation perspective, these conditions reflect that program success depends on alignment between institutional capacity, individual motivation, and the actual opportunities available.

Implications of the Findings for the Implementation of the MBKM Policy

The results of the data analysis reveal a significance value of 0.038, which is below the conventional α threshold of 0.05. This statistical outcome provides clear evidence of a meaningful association between students' perceptions of the implementation of the MBKM internship policy and their level of engagement in the program. The positive correlation indicates that more favorable perceptions tend to be accompanied by a stronger inclination to participate in various MBKM activities. Nonetheless, based on (Culajara, 2023; Roth, 2021) classification, the magnitude of this relationship is considered weak, implying that although perceptual factors contribute to student engagement, they do not exert a dominant influence. This finding suggests that other variables such as institutional support, program accessibility, motivational factors, and prior experiences may also play significant roles in shaping student involvement.

Student engagement itself occupies a pivotal position in the broader landscape of higher education, as it serves as a fundamental prerequisite for meaningful learning. Engagement reflects the extent to which students invest time, effort, and emotional energy in academic and co-curricular activities. According to (Dogan & Kirkgoz, 2022; Walton, 2021), meaningful learning emerges when students actively interact with learning materials, peers, instructors, and real-world contexts. Engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains strengthens students' internalization of knowledge, supports the development of higher-order thinking skills, and enhances long-term academic success. When engagement is limited or superficial, learning tends to be less impactful, resulting in weaker skill acquisition and reduced preparedness for professional challenges.

The findings of this study align with previous research indicating that students who possess a strong understanding of the MBKM framework are more prepared and willing to participate in its various programs. (Adler et al., 2024) emphasize that familiarity with MBKM principles such as flexibility, experiential learning, and cross-campus mobility helps students navigate the system more effectively. When students have adequate knowledge of program requirements, administrative procedures, and potential benefits, they are better positioned to participate actively and to derive meaningful experiences from the programs. Thus, perceptual clarity and policy literacy function as enabling factors that reduce uncertainty and encourage participation.

Interest is another key determinant of student engagement within MBKM. (Abedini et al., 2021; Pittman et al., 2021) demonstrate that students' enthusiasm toward the opportunities provided by MBKM significantly drives their level of motivation and

involvement. Interest shapes the degree of personal relevance students attribute to the program, influencing how they prioritize academic choices and allocate effort. Students who perceive MBKM activities such as internships, independent projects, student exchanges, and community engagement as aligned with their academic or career goals tend to invest more attention and energy in these opportunities. Conversely, when interest is low, participation often becomes perfunctory and lacks depth.

The overarching goals of MBKM further highlight the importance of student engagement. As (Rohiyatussakinah, 2021) argues, MBKM serves as a strategic policy aimed at reducing the gap between higher education outcomes and labor market demands. By offering students more flexible, practice-oriented, and industry-relevant learning pathways, MBKM attempts to equip graduates with competencies that are directly applicable in professional settings. Engagement plays a central role in this process; programs such as internships require active participation, problem-solving, adaptation, and communication all of which contribute to students' readiness for future careers.

Supporting evidence from (Hudjimartsu et al., 2021) shows that students increasingly recognize the value of MBKM in enhancing their employability. Many students proactively prepare themselves by seeking information, consulting academic advisors, and planning participation in specific MBKM pathways. Among the various learning options, internships emerge as the most preferred program because they offer direct exposure to real work environments. Through internships, students gain firsthand experience with workplace expectations, organizational culture, task performance, and professional collaboration. These experiences allow them to strengthen soft skills such as communication, teamwork, time management, and adaptability while applying theoretical knowledge in practical contexts. Such exposure is difficult to replicate through conventional classroom learning.

The preference for internships also reflects students' desire for experiential learning that enhances their competitiveness in the job market. Hands-on experience is increasingly viewed as a crucial component of professional preparedness, especially in fields where employers prioritize practical ability over purely academic credentials. For many students, internships serve not only as a learning platform but also as an entry point into professional networks, mentorship opportunities, and potential employment pathways.

Taken together, the findings of this study deepen the understanding of how perception, comprehension, interest, and readiness interact to shape student engagement within the MBKM policy framework. Although the correlation between student perception and engagement is categorized as weak, its statistical significance underscores the importance of developing strategies to strengthen the way students view MBKM program implementation. Enhancing communication about program benefits, increasing institutional support, improving program accessibility, and providing clear guidance may help elevate students' perceptions and, consequently, their engagement.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that students' perceptions of the MBKM policy, encompassing the clarity of policy content, accessibility of information, institutional support, and availability of resources, play a meaningful role in shaping their level of engagement in internship activities, although this influence is not determinative. The positive and statistically significant yet weak correlation suggests that perception constitutes an important initial point in the student participation process, but actual experiences, institutional readiness, internal motivation, and access to internship opportunities remain crucial complementary factors. These results further demonstrate that the success of MBKM implementation is not solely determined by policy design but is also shaped by how students interpret, trust, and experience institutional support within real educational contexts. Accordingly, this study underscores that improving policy communication, strengthening institutional support mechanisms, and expanding equitable access to internship experiences are essential prerequisites for enhancing student engagement. At the same time, these findings highlight the novelty of this research in linking the dynamics of policy perception with student participation in experiential higher education reform within regional contexts such as Makassar..

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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