

Vocational Education Expansion Policy: Implications on Student Participation and Graduate Quality

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

DOI:

[10.30595/pssh.v24i.1617](https://doi.org/10.30595/pssh.v24i.1617)

Submitted:

June 14, 2025

Accepted:

July 06, 2025

Published:

July 23, 2025

Keywords:

Vocational education, Graduate Quality, Vocational school policy

ABSTRACT

Vocational education plays an important role in preparing learners to have high competence and readiness to enter the world of work. Since the enactment of Presidential Instruction Number 9 of 2016 regarding the revitalization of SMK, the government has made various improvement efforts, such as curriculum adjustments and increased collaboration with the business world and industry. However, data shows that SMK graduates still dominate the open unemployment rate in Indonesia, indicating that there are challenges in the implementation of the policy. This article aims to analyze the policy of increasing student participation in vocational education and its relationship with the quality of learning and graduate work readiness. The study is carried out with a conceptual approach and literature analysis. The results of the discussion show that the SMK Pusat Keunggulan program contributes positively to improving the quality of education, although there are still obstacles such as limited facilities, low quality of teaching, and a curriculum that is not fully adaptive to the needs of the industry. This finding confirms the need for a relevant, inclusive, and sustainable vocational education development strategy so that vocational school graduates are more ready to compete in the job market.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the launch of the SMK revitalization program in 2016, the government hopes to create harmony between education and the needs of the business world. However, until now, SMK graduates are still the biggest contributors in the Open Unemployment Rate (TPT) in Indonesia, showing that there are obstacles that need to be overcome immediately. (Wijaya & Diah Utami, 2021) Many students choose to continue their education at SMK because they want to immediately enter the world of work after graduation. With the practical skills they gained during their studies, they feel more ready to immediately adapt and face challenges in the work environment without having to wait long. (Nurmalasari et al., 2023) The SMK Pusat Keunggulan Program (SMK PK) which started in 2021 has made a positive contribution in improving the quality of graduates. Through this program, the selected vocational schools play a role as a reference center for other vocational schools in developing competencies that are relevant to the needs of the industry and the working world. (Yusuf Aditya & Kencanawaty, 2024) One of the main challenges in the education system in Indonesia is that the quality of education held is still low. Many schools are still facing obstacles related to facilities, quality of teachers, and curricula that are not in accordance with the development of the times. (Susanita & Riani, 2024) The professional ability of teachers is also very influential in improving the learning process, motivating students, and improving their overall quality.

(Mia & Sulastri, 2023)

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbud Ristek) recently released the latest data on the number of students in Indonesia. "In the odd semester of the 2023/2024 school year, the total number of students reached 53.14 million people. Interestingly, the number of SMK students is almost equal to the number of high school students, with 5,08 million students in SMK and 5,32 million in SMA (BPS, 2024). In 2040, Indonesia is predicted to have 195 million people of productive age who must be managed well. However, BPS data shows that the largest proportion of unemployment comes from vocational school graduates (9,84 percent). For that, President Jokowi instructed the overhaul of the vocational education system through Presidential Decree No. 9/2016, which focuses on the revitalization of vocational schools". The alignment of the curriculum with the needs of the industry, and the implementation of an education system that is more in line with market demand. (Rustomo & Ismuni, 2022). Vocational High School (SMK) must harmonize the competence of graduates with the demands of the industrial world, considering its role as a printer of ready-to-use labor. Therefore, the synergy between vocational education, job market, and stakeholders needs to be strengthened. Many countries are committed to ensuring that graduates of vocational education have skills that are suitable for the world of work. The conformity of the competency and curriculum of SMK with the development of the industry will reduce the gap and ensure the link and match process runs effectively. (Prasetyani, 2021) This education focuses on teaching productive subjects that are in accordance with special skills in SMK. (Suhaedin et al., 2024) Quality vocational education is important for graduates who are ready to work. TQM improves quality by focusing on satisfaction, participation, and continuous improvement. Challenges such as limited resources exist, but TQM gives efficiency and satisfaction opportunities. (Indadihayati and Hariyanto, 2023)

This article aims to analyze various policies that have been implemented in an effort to increase student participation in "vocational secondary schools (SMK) as well as the relationship with improving the quality of education and the readiness of graduates to face the world of work". This article examines the implementation of vocational revitalization programs, such as the SMK Pusat Keunggulan Program (SMK PK), as well as the challenges faced in aligning the curriculum with the needs of the industry. As well as the right school strategy to improve and improve the quality of graduates. (Ratussalimah et al., 2025) By conducting this study, it is expected to create a deeper understanding of the relationship between vocational education policies and the quality of vocational school graduates. (Arnita & Fadriati, 2022) as well as the steps taken to increase student participation and the relevance of vocational education to the industry (Ningsih et al., 2024).

1.1 Education Policy

The implementation of the vocational education expansion policy, especially through the link-and-match program (synchronization between vocational schools and the business world/industry), significantly increased student participation and graduate readiness. A study at SMK Karsa Mulya Palangka Raya showed that the evaluation of the implementation of the link-and-match program was in the "good" category according to student and teacher perceptions, including teacher readiness, student competence, facilities, and support from industry. However, although the number of vocational schools and graduates has increased, research on external efficiency in the city of Yogyakarta noted that there is still a gap between theory and practice, and the need for strong partnerships so that graduates are ready to work. (Dese et al., 2024)

Although the vocational expansion policy and link-and-match program have succeeded in expanding access and increasing student participation, the quality of graduates is still uneven. The main weakness is seen in the inequality of practical facilities and the quality of vocational teachers; many schools have not been able to implement internship-based learning and industrial practice adequately. In addition, the Yogyakarta study emphasized the importance of integrating theory and practice through strong school-industry partnerships as part of situated learning and work-based learning. Soft skills aspects—including work ethic, communication, and teamwork—are also crucial because they are the main factors of excellence for vocational school graduates in the eyes of the industrial world, and are currently still considered low in many schools. (Purwadi et al., 2024).

The Indonesian government has issued several strategic policies in the context of expanding and strengthening vocational education in order to increase student participation and the quality of vocational school graduates:

- a. Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2016 concerning Revitalization of Vocational High Schools, the government emphasizes the importance of adjusting the curriculum to the needs of the industrial world, improving the competence of vocational teachers, and developing practice facilities. The goal is to create competent, adaptive, and work-ready vocational high school graduates. This policy is the initial foundation of vocational education reform in Indonesia.
- b. The government launched the Link and Match 8+i Program which is a strengthening of the relationship between vocational schools and the business world/industrial world (DUDI). This program consists of eight main components, namely: (1) alignment of the curriculum with the industrial world, (2) teacher internships in the industrial world, (3) student internships in the workplace, (4) competency certification, (5) teachers

- from the industrial world, (6) industrial scholarships, (7) recruitment of graduates by the industrial world, (8) applied research, and the addition of the element "+i" which means direct involvement of the industrial world in the entire education process. This policy aims to accelerate the synchronization of education and the needs of the workplace, while reducing the level of mismatch between graduates and the job market.
- c. In 2021, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) introduced the Center of Excellence Vocational School Program (SMK-PK). This program is designed to make vocational schools a center for industry-based job training with project-based learning through teaching factories, digitalization of learning, and improvement of quality-based management. Selected schools receive mentoring, assistance with facilities and infrastructure, and teacher training so that they can become models for other vocational schools in their area. This program not only aims to produce skilled graduates, but also to create professional, accountable, and industry-standard vocational school governance. (Kemendikbud, 2018)

The three policies complement each other and form an integrated framework in the development of vocational education. With the revitalization, strengthening of link-and-match, and the SMK-PK program, it is hoped that SMK graduates will not only have technical skills, but also soft skills and work ethics needed in today's industrial world.

The Revitalization and Curriculum Alignment Policy in the government pays serious attention to the disparity between the competencies of vocational school graduates and the needs of the workforce. As a solution, professional human resource quality development and curriculum adjustments are carried out to be more in line with the needs of the business world and industry. This process is known as vocational education revitalization, which includes continuous updates to resources, curriculum, and expertise programs. Expertise programs that are no longer relevant will be replaced with those that are more in line with industry developments. (Aly, n.d.) "Curriculum adjustment is one aspect of the Vocational School Revitalization program as stated in Presidential Instruction Number 9 of 2016. This step aims to improve the quality of vocational school graduates to be in line with the demands of the workforce."

The task of the Ministry of Education and Culture is to prepare a roadmap for the development of vocational schools by adjusting the curriculum to align with the needs of the industrial world. In addition, the ministry must also improve teacher competence, expand cooperation with the Business World and Industry (DUDI), and encourage certification and accreditation processes. This directive emphasizes the importance of synergy between schools and the industrial world in designing the curriculum, so that it can reduce the gap between education and industrial demands, both in terms of technology, environment, and learning materials. (Suherman et al., 2022) The government has carried out various things to improve the quality of vocational education and provide opportunities for vocational school graduates to enter the workforce. (Soleh et al., 2023)

1.2 Graduate Quality and Graduate Quality

The expansion of vocational education in Indonesia aims to increase student participation and accelerate the provision of skilled workers. However, increasing the number of vocational schools does not necessarily guarantee the quality of graduates. Many vocational school graduates do not meet the standards of the world of work because the skills acquired in school are not aligned with industry needs. The Indonesian government is also aggressively expanding the network of vocational high schools (SMK) with the 70:30 policy (2005–2015) to reduce youth unemployment. This policy increased the number of vocational schools (including more than 1,200 new vocational schools in 2006–2009) to prepare graduates ready to work. However, the World Bank warns that quantitative expansion alone is not enough; the emphasis must be on improving basic skills and the quality of learning. In other words, increasing the number of vocational institutions must balance with improving quality so that graduates are truly competent.

The quality and quality of graduates are the main keys to the success of the vocational education expansion policy. Ideally, vocational high school graduates not only have technical skills according to their field of expertise but are also equipped with non-technical skills such as communication, teamwork, and discipline. Technical competencies must be relevant to current industry needs and strengthened through field work experience and professional certification. In addition, entrepreneurial skills and digital literacy are also important parts in facing the challenges of an increasingly competitive and rapidly changing world of work. Without these qualities, graduates tend to have difficulty being absorbed by industry and are even at risk of becoming skilled unemployed.

To improve the quality of vocational schools, the Ministry of Education and Culture has formed a Center of Excellence program in hundreds of schools, where vocational schools closely partner with industry: the curriculum is synchronized, students are required to do field work for at least one semester, and competencies are certified by the business world. This effort is expected to increase the relevance of graduates to industry needs and their entrepreneurial abilities. However, the success of this policy depends on the sustainability of support facilities and industry commitment. (Anggriani et al., 2025).

Improving Teacher Competence also affects school quality In the 15th episode of Merdeka Belajar, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology introduced the “Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM) as a supporting facility for the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum”. This platform offers a variety of learning tools and educational materials that can be accessed through the “Android” application or the site <https://guru.kemdikbud.go.id/> with a belajar.id account.

The use of PMM in vocational schools is an important strategy to improve the quality of learning, which needs to be optimized through intensive training for teachers so that they are able to integrate PMM features effectively. (Rahmadani & Kamaluddin, 2023) Utilization of the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM) contributes significantly to improving teacher competence, not only in improving the quality of the learning process, but also in overcoming various implementation challenges in the field. Through a comprehensive approach and continuous support, PMM is an important part of efforts to improve the quality of education in vocational schools. The use of this platform strengthens the understanding and skills of educators, while demonstrating its effectiveness in supporting a more optimal learning process. By thoroughly understanding the goals, benefits, and scope of PMM, teachers are expected to be able to utilize technology more creatively and optimally in teaching activities. (Rahmadani & Kamaluddin, 2023)

Vocational High Schools (SMK) have an important role in producing skilled workers who are ready to meet the needs of the industrial world. The curriculum implemented in SMK is focused on providing students with technical skills as well as the ability to adapt to technological advances. The success of this program is highly dependent on the competence of teachers who must integrate technology into learning. However, data shows that only 40% of non-ICT teachers in Indonesia are able to utilize advanced technology in learning, largely due to limited access to training, infrastructure, and policy support. This hampers the quality of SMK graduates who are expected to be ready to compete in the global job market. (Syarif et al., 2024) because the simple goal of SMK graduates is to be able to work. (Saskara et al., 2024)

1.3 Availability of facilities and resources

Learning facilities are an important element in supporting educational activities in schools. According to Muflihatun and Suryani (2020) in Bafadal, "facilities are not only a means, but also a support that ensures the smooth running of the learning process". Adequate facilities, both in terms of quantity and quality, play a major role in increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning and teacher performance. With the availability of supporting facilities, the educational environment becomes more optimal and helps teachers achieve better results. (Kinerja et al., 2025)

In the era of globalization and technological development, it is important to consider how the application of technology in educational facilities can improve the quality of learning. However, challenges related to costs, access, and training for educators need to be addressed to create a more comprehensive and inclusive education system. (Maila et al., 2024) One of the biggest obstacles is the limited availability of adequate resources, including facilities, equipment, budgets, and competent teaching staff. If these resources are limited or insufficient, the development of a curriculum that is in accordance with industry demands is hampered, which in turn has an impact on the quality of education provided. (Bidol, 2024)

Teachers observed an increase in student engagement, although they faced some challenges related to preparation and limited facilities. (Fatahillah et al., 2025) Facilities are means that can facilitate the use of educational equipment and infrastructure efficiently and effectively. Thus, facilities are crucial assets that are very much needed to support students' success in mastering vocational fields according to their respective majors. (Rizqy et al., 2024) educational facilities include various tools and equipment that are used directly in learning activities at school. Meanwhile, infrastructure refers to supporting facilities that are not directly involved in the learning process. Both have a crucial role in supporting teaching and learning activities, because they can help the smoothness and effectiveness of the implementation of learning.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study highlights policies to increase participation and improve the quality of vocational high school (SMK) graduates through three main aspects: curriculum, teacher competence, and facilities. Curriculum revitalization through Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2016 and the SMK Center of Excellence program aims to align education with industry needs (Rafidiyah & Kailani, 2020), but its implementation still faces challenges. On the other hand, the use of the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM) to enhance teacher competencies has not been optimal due to limited training (Rambe et al., 2023). The availability of practical facilities is also a crucial factor, but many SMKs still lack adequate resources. BPS data from 2024 shows that the number of vocational high school students has reached 5.08 million, nearly equal to that of senior high schools, yet the unemployment rate among vocational high school graduates remains high at 9.84%. This indicates that an increase in quantity has not been accompanied by an improvement in quality. Ismail (2022) emphasizes that the success of participation requires integrated policies. Schools that successfully collaborate with industry and implement project-based

learning tend to produce graduates who are better prepared for the workforce. Major challenges in the field include teacher competence, insufficient facilities, and a curriculum that is not aligned with industrial realities (Gunawan, 2006; Husein, 2019). Previous studies also emphasize the importance of synchronization between education and the workplace (Wijaya & Diah Utami, 2021; Suwandi, 2016). Additionally, teacher quality and facility availability directly impact participation and graduate quality (Agustina et al., 2024; Mardizal & Jalinus, 2023). Therefore, the government needs to strengthen cooperation with industry, improve teacher training, and provide adequate practical facilities (Raihansyah et al., 2024; Suprihartini et al., 2024). Vocational education must be responsive to industrial and technological developments through a systematic link-and-match approach (Desmayanti & Syah, 2023) and continuous policy evaluation (Mangkuwinata et al., 2025). With a comprehensive strategy, vocational schools can produce competent, adaptive, and globally competitive graduates.

The results of this study highlight the irony in vocational education in Indonesia, where an increase in the number of vocational high school students has not been accompanied by an improvement in the quality of graduates. Data shows that vocational high school graduates actually contribute to the highest national open unemployment rate, reflecting a mismatch between increased participation and structural transformation in education. The main obstacles lie in the gap between policy and its implementation, the weak alignment of the curriculum with industry needs, and the lack of support for teacher capacity building and school facilities. Using a theoretical approach based on link and match, educational revitalization, and Total Quality Management (TQM), this study explains the importance of integrating policy design, educational human resource readiness, and the availability of infrastructure that is adaptive to change. This literature review also emphasizes that increased participation will only have an impact if accompanied by comprehensive education system reform. However, this study has limitations as it does not involve field data and does not test policy implementation in different socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, further research with an empirical and comparative approach is needed to assess variations in policy implementation across regions, as well as to explore the roles of school principals, teachers, and industry partners in producing competent, resilient graduates ready to face the dynamics of the job market. Moving forward, vocational education should be directed toward a contextual, collaborative, and relevant model aligned with the needs of the workforce.

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