



THE ROLE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY IN IMPROVING LANGUAGE COMPETENCE AND COMPETITIVENESS OF VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

Vocational education plays a pivotal role in enhancing the competitiveness of Vocational High School (SMK) graduates in the face of global demands. This study explores the role and effectiveness of vocational education policies in improving language competence and graduate employability at SMKN 1 Telagasari. Employing a case study approach, the findings reveal that policies encouraging collaboration between schools and industry, along with the adoption of competency-based curricula, significantly support the development of both technical skills and language-related soft skills. The results show a marked improvement in graduate employability following the implementation of these policies. However, the study also identifies challenges such as regional disparities in vocational education quality and limited funding and infrastructure. Strengthening policy support and increasing resource allocation are essential to improving vocational education outcomes at a national level.

Keywords: *Vocational Education, Language Competence, Education Policy, Graduate Competitiveness, Employability Skills.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocational education has emerged as a strategic avenue for enhancing Indonesia's human resources, with a particular emphasis on preparing students for global employment demands. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek, 2022), approximately 40% of vocational high school (SMK) graduates entered the workforce within six months post-graduation. This figure remains below that of neighboring ASEAN countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, which boast absorption rates exceeding 60%. Despite some improvements, this gap underscores the urgent need for adaptive policy responses. As highlighted by Wulandari (2021), aligning the vocational curriculum with industry needs can increase job readiness by 25%, reinforcing the

urgency of synchronizing education and labor market demands (Iskandar, 2019; Handayani, 2021; Borotoding et al., 2021).

Data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2023) reveal that the unemployment rate for vocational school graduates is 9.8%, surpassing the 7.3% rate of general high school graduates. This indicates a persistent mismatch between graduate competencies and labor market expectations (Darmawan, 2020). Sari and Hidayat (2022) suggest that the poor implementation of vocational policies at the school level is a key contributing factor. Supporting this, Purwanti, Suriansyah, and Bachri (2025) argue that educational outcomes should reflect student character development, signifying that vocational education reforms must also instill positive attitudes and identities as indicators of quality (Hayati et al., 2024).

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Teachers are central to improving educational quality, with their professionalism grounded in expertise, dedication, and instructional skill. Research by Agusta et al. (2024), Celia et al. (2024), and Halimatussa'diyah et al. (2024) shows that teachers with strong perceptions of supervision as a coaching tool tend to demonstrate better instructional performance. As such, enhancing teacher capacity through ongoing training and mentoring must be prioritized in vocational education reforms to produce more competitive graduates (Adriyani & Darmiyati, 2024; Fawwaz, 2024; Jaya et al., 2025).

Nugroho et al. (2020) emphasize the significant impact of government support in providing practical facilities and professional development for vocational school teachers. Their findings reveal that 70% of vocational schools receiving adequate support show improved learning outcomes and graduate employment rates. Nonetheless, disparities persist in remote regions where such support is limited. Researchers such as Adriyani and Darmiyati (2024), and Ramadhani et al. (2024), affirm the crucial role of teachers, thereby advocating for equitable access to teacher development opportunities. The unequal distribution of School Operational Assistance (BOS) funds among provinces exacerbates disparities in vocational education quality (Kusuma, 2020; Veto Mortini et al., 2023; Fadilah et al., 2023).

Forging strong collaborations between vocational schools and industry is key to enhancing the employability and competence of graduates. Dewi and Prasetyo (2021) report that vocational schools engaged in industry partnerships through internships, joint curriculum design, and technical training have employment absorption rates of up to 65%. Effective school leadership plays a critical role in building such partnerships. According to Cinantya et al. (2024), Halimatussa'diyah et al. (2024), and Purwanti et al. (2024), leadership involves

motivating and mobilizing stakeholders, which is essential in achieving educational objectives.

Soft skills development must be a focal point of vocational education policy. Ramadhani (2022) found that vocational graduates with strong communication abilities, teamwork, and work ethics are more desirable to employers. However, integrating soft skills into the curriculum remains limited, primarily due to a lack of adequately trained teachers. As noted by Purwanti, Suriansyah, et al. (2024), professional commitment is shaped by reciprocal relationships between individuals and their institutions. Therefore, training teachers in soft skills education is a strategic necessity to prepare students for professional conduct in the workplace (Mulyani, 2021; Carter, 2023; López-Morales et al., 2023).

Digital transformation is another essential element in strengthening vocational education. World Bank data (2021) show that digital tools significantly improve student preparedness for Industry 4.0. Nonetheless, only about 55% of vocational schools have sufficient access to digital infrastructure (Hidayat et al., 2023). Leveraging technology enables students to acquire current skills that align with evolving industry demands. Irma et al. (2023) and Rizka Amalia et al. (2023) underscore the importance of nurturing creativity and digital literacy from early education, principles that are equally applicable to vocational schools.

Setiawan (2020) call attention to the need for equitable quality in vocational education across Indonesia's diverse regions. Gaps in competence between urban and rural vocational graduates are still considerable. Therefore, vocational education policies must focus on enhancing infrastructure, teacher training, and access to educational resources. Purwanti et al. (2023) stress that educators significantly influence students by modeling positive behaviors and communicating

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effectively, regardless of geographical context. In conclusion, addressing implementation challenges such as infrastructure, teacher competency, and industry alignment requires strong school leadership. As Nashar et al. (2024) emphasize, visionary leaders are essential for cultivating an environment conducive to educational excellence. With consistent policy execution and leadership, vocational education in Indonesia can produce graduates who are both globally competitive and holistically prepared.

This study aims to (1) analyze the role of vocational education policy in enhancing language competence particularly English language skills among vocational high school students; (2) evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of vocational education policy in improving the graduates' competitiveness in the labor market; and (3) identify the supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of vocational education policy, especially in relation to language skill development and graduate work readiness. These objectives are intended to contribute to the formulation of strategies for improving the quality of vocational education policy in Indonesia.

2. METHODS

This study employed a case study approach to assess the role and effectiveness of vocational education policies in improving language competence and enhancing the overall competitiveness of vocational high school graduates, with a specific focus on SMKN 1 Telagasari. Data were gathered from two primary sources: secondary data, which comprised school records, reports from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, and statistics from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS); and primary data, obtained through in-depth interviews with school principals, vocational teachers, students, and industry stakeholders

involved in the implementation of vocational education policies. Participants were selected purposively, focusing on individuals with direct experience and active involvement in vocational education. In total, 20 respondents participated, including 5 members of school leadership or management, 10 vocational teachers, and 5 students engaged in internship programs. Data collection techniques included open-ended interviews and direct observation of classroom and internship activities (Susanto et al., 2023; Sugiyono, 2021). Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes that reveal the factors influencing policy effectiveness and its impact on students' language proficiency and job readiness (Neuman, 2019; Anufia, 2019). To ensure data validity, triangulation was applied by comparing insights across multiple data sources, while reliability was maintained by consistently applying standardized interview protocols (Odzemir-Yilmazer & Kabadayi, 2024).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Role of Vocational Education Policy in Enhancing Language Competence

The vocational education policy at SMKN 1 Pulaulaut Barat strategically contributes to the improvement of students' language competence, especially in the context of workplace communication. Although the main emphasis is on technical skills, the integration of soft skills training including communication, teamwork, and professionalism plays a crucial role in shaping students' language use in real-world situations. Active learning models, including project-based and problem-based learning approaches, require students to engage in collaborative discussions, presentations, and workplace simulations, which strengthen both oral and written communication skills in Bahasa Indonesia and English. According to

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Supriyadi (2022), employers in the service sector value communication and adaptability as top soft skills, which are directly connected to language competence. Additionally, research by Ningsih & Prabowo (2021) found that vocational students who engage in workplace-based learning (magang) often experience increased confidence in using functional English and workplace terminology. The use of instructional materials in bilingual formats and participation in English clubs or speaking forums further supports the development of communicative competence. This is aligned with the vocational education goals as outlined in Peraturan Presiden No. 68 Tahun 2022 concerning vocational revitalization, which emphasizes the importance of communication in global workforce readiness.

3.2 The Effectiveness of Policy Implementation in Increasing Graduate Competitiveness

The policy implementation at SMKN 1 Pulaulaut Barat is notably effective in boosting graduate competitiveness in multiple dimensions technical certification, employability, and entrepreneurial readiness. Evidence shows that approximately 78% of students master competencies aligned with industry needs, and over 60% receive professional certification recognized by certification bodies such as BNSP. This certification not only validates their skills but enhances trust among employers, as supported by research from Rahmawati et al. (2022), which highlighted a 30% higher employment rate among certified vocational graduates compared to non-certified peers. Internships and industrial work practices through partnerships with companies also give students real-world exposure. Wahyuni (2021) emphasizes that such link-and-match programs between vocational schools and industry partners increase employment

relevance and reduce the gap between education output and labor demand.

In addition to technical proficiency, the school's emphasis on digital learning and entrepreneurship further strengthens graduate competitiveness. Digital integration used in 58% of instruction leverages online platforms, virtual simulations, and digital modules that prepare students for Industry 4.0 and 5.0 demands. Hidayat et al. (2023) report that digital tools have improved the effectiveness of practical learning by up to 40% in vocational settings, particularly in mechatronics and service-related fields. Moreover, the inclusion of entrepreneurship programs has led many students to launch small-scale businesses after graduation, showing that the policy fosters job creation skills. According to Prasetyo & Handayani (2022), entrepreneurial initiatives embedded in vocational education increase self-efficacy and economic independence among graduates. These combined efforts make the vocational education policy a driving force in shaping not only competent but also competitive and innovative human resources.

3.3 Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Policy Implementation

Several factors support the successful implementation of the vocational education policy at SMKN 1 Pulaulaut Barat. Key among them is the collaborative curriculum development with industry, which ensures alignment between what is taught in school and the demands of the labor market. This is reinforced by direct cooperation with industrial partners, allowing students to undertake internships, apprenticeships, and project-based training. According to Nugroho & Firmansyah (2022), such collaboration fosters adaptive competence and enhances students' readiness to meet real-world challenges.

Another supporting factor is the continuous professional development of

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teachers. At SMKN 1, teachers undergo training and certification updates to ensure they are equipped with up-to-date pedagogical and technical skills. The role of teacher quality is vital, as underlined by Hartanto et al., (2019), who found that vocational teacher certification positively correlates with student performance in practical subjects. Government support through revitalization programs such as upgraded laboratories and modern equipment also facilitates better learning outcomes. The new infrastructure supports hands-on learning in line with industry practices, addressing past limitations in facilities.

However, there are inhibiting factors that must be addressed. These include unequal access to internet and technology, especially in rural or outer island areas like parts of South Kalimantan. Although digital tools are increasingly used, limited infrastructure remains a challenge. Hidayat et al. (2023) noted that poor digital connectivity in some regions reduces the effectiveness of blended learning models. Additionally, the uneven distribution of qualified teachers across schools, especially in remote areas, hinders consistent implementation of the policy nationwide. As reported by Sari & Mustofa (2022), disparities in teacher training access contribute to gaps in educational quality between urban and rural vocational schools.

Regular evaluation and monitoring, however, have become a strategic solution. At SMKN 1, the school conducts internal assessments and engages external evaluators from industrial partners to ensure that the curriculum remains responsive. This practice aligns with the principles of outcome-based education (OBE), which focuses on aligning learning outcomes with job market expectations (Wibowo & Santoso, 2021). Overall, while challenges persist, the combination of school-industry collaboration, policy support, teacher quality improvement, and digital integration positions SMKN 1

Pulaulaut Barat as a model for successful vocational education implementation.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the vocational education policy implemented at SMKN 1 Pulaulaut Barat has proven effective in enhancing the technical, linguistic, and soft skills competencies of its graduates. Through a competency-based curriculum, industry collaboration, professional certification, and integration of digital tools, students are better prepared for the workforce and demonstrate improved employability. This policy not only addresses industry needs but also promotes entrepreneurship and adaptability in graduates. The findings imply that sustained collaboration between schools and industry, alongside teacher development and infrastructure support, is essential to strengthen vocational outcomes. For future research, it is recommended to explore instructional innovations, conduct comparative regional studies, assess the long-term impact of certifications, evaluate digital readiness, and investigate the role of teachers as key agents in curriculum implementation and student competency development.

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