

STUDENT RETENTION STRATEGY UNDER THE INDONESIAN "FREEDOM TO LEARN" POLICY: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE ONLINE LEARNING MANDATE DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

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Abstract

The implementation of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum policy, also known as the "Freedom to Learn Policy," coincides with a significant reliance on online education, mirroring the trend observed during the COVID-19 outbreak. This study aims to investigate the challenges regarding dropout rates compared to face-to-face education, necessitating the urgent development of effective student retention strategies. This study applied a qualitative approach involving 14 key informants representing various stakeholders such as teachers, parents, school principals, local governments, and school staff through semi-structured online interviews in Central Bangka Regency. Three factors influencing students' decisions to drop out are identified and analyzed employing thematic analysis. Student factors (lack of motivation, time management, lack of awareness, demographic factors such as gender, young marriage, and home area) that identify motivation issues as a primary concern, course/program factors (unstructured online learning system, difficult materials, overlapping assignments, lack of interactions, lack of teachers' skills) that the unstructured online learning system is a major concern for stakeholders, and environmental factors (family issues, technological issues, social issues, and lack of government policy). The complex interplay of these factors underlies the dropout phenomenon in online education. The results find that three key strategies should be considered to sustain the Merdeka Curriculum: strategies aimed at raising awareness and addressing individual barriers, strategies for delivering high-quality curriculum-based activities with structured support mechanisms, and strategies for directly addressing environmental and emotional barriers. Implementing these strategies will empower stakeholders to proactively tackle the challenges posed by online education within the Merdeka curriculum, fostering an environment conducive to student success and academic achievement.

Keywords: Online education, School dropout rates, Student retention strategies, Merdeka Curriculum

1. Introduction

Indonesia's Minister of Education, Nadiem Makarim, introduced the Merdeka Curriculum (Independent Curriculum) to improve the country's education system. It was launched online on February 11, 2022, but gradually implemented since 2020. Then, it aims to become the national curriculum in 2024 (Firmansyah, 2023).

This policy responds to poor results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), where 70% of Indonesian 15-year-olds scored below the minimum competency in reading and math. The curriculum addresses regional and socioeconomic disparities in education, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic's shift to online education (Merdeka Mengajar, 2023). This sudden adoption of an "emergency mode of teaching and learning" has become a common trend to address the knowledge gap resulting from lockdown measures. The pandemic has changed our lifestyle behavior and the way we study (Sarbu et al., 2021), work, and socialize in a manner never met before (Radulescu et al., 2020).

The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes flexibility and adaptability to meet each student's needs, promoting student-centered learning, technology integration, and holistic education that fosters character development, creativity, critical thinking, and academic knowledge. Much like India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which seeks to offer flexibility in subject choices and nurture critical thinking, the Merdeka Curriculum reflects a shift toward a more personalized and relevant approach to education. India's NEP 2020, for example, promotes curricular flexibility to allow students greater autonomy in their learning journey, encouraging a more interdisciplinary and skills-based education model. By focusing on developing critical thinking skills, India's reforms align closely with Merdeka's objectives to cultivate adaptable, informed, and engaged learners prepared for the challenges of a globalized world (Irawati et al., 2022; Ministry of Human Resource Development, India, 2020).

This curriculum supports a range of intra-curricular experiences, empowering teachers to select various instructional tools tailored to students' needs and interests, thereby making online education more engaging and effective (Rizaldi & Fatimah, 2022). Handayani (2023) highlights that the Independent Curriculum promotes essential 21st-century learning skills (Voogt & Pareja Roblin, 2023) and fosters character development and mental resilience in students, preparing them for global competitiveness (Dilekçi & Karatay, 2023). This skill-based, student-centered model, seen in both Indonesia and India, reflects a broader trend in educational reform across developing nations. Such reforms aim to create a more inclusive and flexible educational system that aligns with the shift toward knowledge-driven economies worldwide.

Despite the popularity and benefits of online education, it struggles with low retention rates. Researchers and educators are focused on improving student retention as digital technology and online education evolve. Challenges include limited online teaching experience, doubts about online assessments' effectiveness, inadequate home technical infrastructure, and costly or poor internet connections (Alenezi et al., 2022; Dayal, 2023; Sahito et al., 2022). These issues result in higher dropout rates for online education compared to traditional face-to-face learning. Historically, completion rate course completion rates lag behind traditional courses by about 8-14% (Xu & Jaggars, 2011, 2011b).

In Indonesia, the COVID-19 crisis negatively impacted education, leading to increased school dropout rates in 2022 across all education as shown in the figure below.

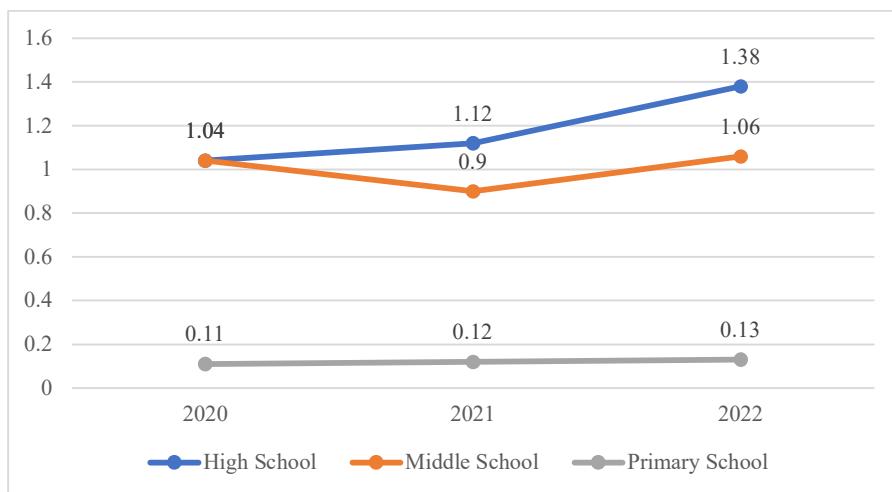


Figure 4 School Dropout Rates Based on The Level of Education
 Source: Statistic Agency of Indonesia, 2022)

Furthermore, Indonesia faces unique infrastructure and connectivity challenges. Approximately 61 million Indonesians still lack internet access, and internet availability is strikingly unequal, with only 21% of low-income communities having reliable internet access compared to 93% in higher-income regions like Java. This disparity limits the feasibility of online learning in many areas, especially in rural and low-income communities, where the Merdeka Curriculum's potential impact is hindered (Statista, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic did, however, spur rapid growth in EdTech usage across Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, leading EdTech platforms like Ruangguru and the government-supported Rumah Belajar saw user numbers rise to tens of millions in 2020. This trend mirrors the broader Southeast Asian region, where the top five educational technology apps saw installations triple, from 6 million in 2019 to 20 million in 2020 (Google, Temasek & Bain, 2020).

Despite this growth, a 2020 survey showed that 67% of Indonesian teachers struggled to operate digital tools, highlighting a significant need for teacher training and support to make online learning successful.

This study aims to understand the factors behind dropout rates in online education by presenting case studies from educational stakeholders in Central Bangka Regency, Indonesia. It investigates strategies to reduce high school dropout rates, which have risen during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal is to ensure that the Merdeka Curriculum, introduced by the Indonesian government, avoids similar issues and addresses gaps created during the pandemic. The curriculum emphasizes student freedom and flexibility, and there is optimism that it will benefit from ongoing technological advances in the education sector.

The research question that guides this study is: "What should strategies in mitigating students' decisions to drop out during the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum be?"

The figure below illustrates the study's conceptual framework, which will be used as a basis for creating the data collection tools for this study.

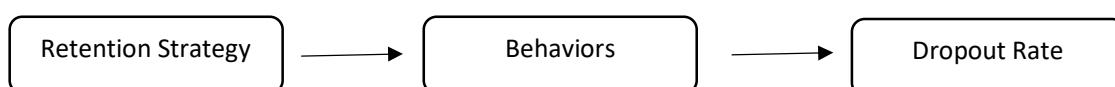


Figure 5 Illustration of the study's conceptual framework

2. Research Objectives

- 1) To Investigate challenges in online education during the COVID-19 lockdown mandate contributing to students' decisions to drop out.
- 2) To provide recommendations for student retention strategies in online education based on the findings.

3. Methods

This research project applied a qualitative approach. It was chosen as the appropriate method to achieve the goal of understanding student retention strategies in online education during the COVID-19 period. 14 key informants from education stakeholders in Central Bangka Regency (parents, teachers, school principals, school staff, and local governments) who were engaged in online education during the school years 2020-2022 participated in semi-structured online interviews. The sample selection process utilized purposive sampling strategies and was analyzed using thematic analysis. The interviews are conducted online via the Zoom application, Google Meets, or via WhatsApp phone call. Online open-ended questions using semi-structured interviews were employed. During the interview, the researcher also observed the participants regarding several things such as technology set-up, participants' interactions (how participants interact using the online platform), environmental factors that may impact the interview (background noise, interruptions, or visual distractions), verbal and non-verbal cues, technical issues during the online interview (poor audio/video quality, internet connectivity issues, or software glitches), and ethical considerations (observation, recording, and note-taking with participants' consent). Practicing reflexivity throughout the research process enables researchers to critically examine biases and assumptions, contributing to the rigor of the study. Using triangulation by integrating multiple methods or perspectives validates findings and enhances the credibility of qualitative research outcomes. These strategies collectively strengthen the validity and reliability of qualitative research, ensuring that findings are robust and trustworthy.

4. Results

a. The Challenges for School Dropout Factors

Theme	Factors
1. Student Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of Motivation - Poor Time Management Skills - Lack of Awareness - Mental Readiness - Demographics (e.g., Gender, Young Marriage, Home Area)
2. Course/Program Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unstructured Online Learning - Lack of Teachers' Skills - Difficulty Level of Materials - Overlapping Assignments - Lack of Interaction
3. Environmental Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family Issues - Social Issues - Government Support - Technological Issues

b. Recommended Effective Strategies for Student Retention

Area	Themes
1. Individual Student Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Academic Support - Student Well-being Support - Career and Future Planning - Inclusive Learning Environment - Communication and Recognition
2. Course/Program Quality and Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Digital Learning Infrastructure - Institutional Support and Services - Well-being and Emergency Support - Progress Tracking
3. Environmental and Emotional Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technological Access - Well-being and Emotional Support - Academic Policies and Communication - Crisis Management and Recognition

5. Discussion and Implications

This research investigated the challenges contributing to school dropout decisions and strategies implemented in online learning during COVID-19, categorizing these challenges into three main themes: student factors, course/program factors, and environmental factors. Corresponding strategies were divided into three themes: understanding individual challenges, providing quality course activities, and addressing environmental issues.

Student factors pose notable challenges for online learning, including low motivation, poor time management, lack of awareness, and demographic issues such as early marriage and limited internet access in rural areas. Among these, low motivation stands out as a critical factor, as research underscores its importance in online learning success (Street, 2010). To address this, schools can introduce peer mentorship programs and self-paced modules, giving students more control and fostering a stronger sense of motivation and engagement.

For the Merdeka Curriculum, policymakers could incorporate initiatives to boost student motivation through personalized learning tools that adjust difficulty based on individual progress, enhancing engagement for each learner. Additionally, providing teachers with training on student engagement techniques would help them support students in setting goals and maintaining focus, ultimately improving persistence and success in the online learning environment.

Course and program-related challenges, such as unstructured learning systems, complex materials, overlapping assignments, limited interaction, and insufficient teacher skills, also significantly contribute to dropout rates in online learning. Unstructured courses, combined with inadequate teacher preparation, can make learning overwhelming for students, as noted in studies by Okur et al. (2019) and Sorensen & Donovan (2017). Choi and Kim (2018) also indicated that insufficient student-content interaction may be a reason for dropping out. To address these issues, prioritizing professional development for teachers on online pedagogy is essential to improve their digital teaching skills. Additionally, establishing regular check-ins and feedback sessions with students can help identify their challenges, providing a more adaptive and supportive learning environment.

For the Merdeka Curriculum, policymakers could promote a more structured and flexible online learning model by mandating teacher training focused on digital literacy and

effective content delivery. National guidelines on pacing and scaffolding online courses would help to reduce overlapping assignments and improve course coherence. Further, establishing government-supported digital libraries with high-quality, accessible materials would address content-related challenges and ensure consistent resource quality across courses.

Environmental factors, including family support, technical difficulties, societal pressures, and limited government support, play a significant role in influencing dropout decisions. Addressing these issues requires ensuring students have both technical and emotional support at home. Schools can work with local governments to provide tablets or subsidized internet access to students in need, especially in rural areas, and establish community support initiatives such as study hubs or local libraries where students can access technology and receive academic support.

For the Merdeka Curriculum's successful implementation, policymakers must tackle these infrastructure challenges. This could include supporting public-private partnerships to improve internet accessibility in underserved regions, making online education more viable in rural communities. Additionally, investing in community-based mental health resources, including counseling, family support programs, and crisis intervention services, could strengthen emotional and academic support systems, addressing both the technical and personal challenges that impact student retention.

6. Suggestions

This study was conducted with certain limitations, prompting several recommendations for future research improvements. Future studies could utilize varied sampling strategies to ensure a broader representation of diverse populations, including students from low-income backgrounds, rural areas, and marginalized communities. Additionally, future research might incorporate quantitative methods, conduct in-person interviews, explore other cities, and include a wider range of demographic factors.

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