



Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Improving Soft Skills and Absorption of Graduates Vocational School

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- This study aims to examine how the Independent Curriculum contributes to improving soft skills and the absorption of vocational high school graduates in the workforce.

Methodology- The approach employed is a descriptive qualitative method, utilizing data collection techniques that include in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation at SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Malang which has implemented the Independent Curriculum. This technique involves the principal, deputy curriculum, and subject teachers. The data analysis employs the Miles and Huberman approach, specifically focusing on data reduction, data display, and conclusions.

Findings - The study's results indicate that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in vocational schools has been accompanied by Project-Based Learning (PjBL), and the flexibility of choosing subjects significantly provides students with space to develop essential soft skills, including communication, collaboration, and creativity. In addition, active collaboration between schools and industry in curriculum development and implementation of internship programs can also increase the relevance of student competencies according to job market needs. Vocational school graduates who participated in learning based on the Independent Curriculum demonstrated a higher level of adaptability and professionalism compared to those who followed the previous curriculum.

Contribution - This study provides scientific facts about the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in improving soft skills and the absorption of vocational school graduates, so that it can be used as a reference and consideration for policies that will be taken both for the development of soft skills and the absorption of vocational school graduates.

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of education in Indonesia has experienced significant acceleration over the last decade in response to the dynamics of globalization, technological developments, and the increasingly complex needs of the global workforce. One of the government's strategic initiatives in responding to this challenge is the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which aims to create more contextual, flexible, and student-centered learning (Diana et al., 2022; Putra Wiratama et al., 2025). This curriculum is designed to foster character development, competence, and the acquisition of soft skills essential for the industrial sector and the modern workforce. The position of the curriculum in the educational process plays a strategic role, not only in developing students towards optimal physical and spiritual development, but also in serving as a benchmark for assessing a nation's educational progress (Hamdan et al., 2020; Komariah et al., 2022).

The Independent Curriculum represents a significant shift in Indonesian education, emphasizing student autonomy and the development of individual talents. This aims to foster a more interactive and adaptable educational environment, enabling individuals to explore their interests and talents (Priawasana & Subiyantoro, 2024). Through project-based and contextual learning, the Independent Curriculum provides autonomy to schools, teachers, instructors, and students to adjust learning according to needs, allowing students to engage in independent projects that are in line with their interests and talents, and to improve the skills of vocational school students both in theory and practice (Setiawan & Sofyan, 2022). Teachers are encouraged to adopt diverse teaching methods to enhance the learning experience and make it more enjoyable (Pratiwi et al., 2024).

The Independent Curriculum emphasizes the importance of a differentiated approach, experiential learning through project-based activities, and strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile (Ahdhianto et al., 2024). In the context of vocational education, especially in Vocational High Schools (SMK), the implementation of this curriculum is expected to not only improve mastery of technical competencies (hard skills) but also strengthen non-technical abilities (soft skills) such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and leadership (Tisa et al., 2024). Strengthening soft skills is considered one of the primary determinants of increasing competitiveness and graduate absorption in the ever-changing world of work (Rendy Reza Abitama et al., 2024).

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Vocational High Schools (SMK) is crucial for enhancing non-technical skills, also known as soft skills, which are essential for the successful integration of graduates into the workforce in the context of the Industrial Revolution 4.0. This curriculum offers a learner-centered approach, encouraging adaptability and critical thinking, which are essential in today's dynamic work environment (Yanti, 2024). The absorption of vocational school graduates into industry requires various competencies that are essential for practical use in the workforce or for continuing higher education. Vocational school graduates must demonstrate significant practical knowledge in their fields. Technical skills are obtained through direct experience, internships, or projects relevant to the industry (Waris, 2020; Tintingon et al., 2023).

In previous research conducted by Lince (2022), "Implementation of Independent Curriculum to Increase Learning Motivation in Vocational High Schools of Excellence Centers," it was stated that the curriculum functions as a structured framework that describes the direction of educational practices aimed at increasing student learning motivation. Similarly, the study entitled "The Role of Teachers in Maximizing Student Learning Enthusiasm in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum Program at SMK Negeri 1 Boyolali" (Widiyaningsih & Narimo, 2023) also explains that the Independent Curriculum is a means of providing educational initiatives to enhance student abilities.

This study is critical because previous research has focused on the administrative implementation aspects of the Independent Curriculum or improving cognitive learning outcomes, but is still limited in discussions related to the direct contribution of this curriculum to the development of soft skills and the absorption of vocational school graduates.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus, which directly examines the contribution of the

Independent Curriculum to the development of soft skills (communication, collaboration, creativity) as well as the absorption of vocational high school graduates into the workforce, specifically in the context of SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Malang. Most previous research still focuses on administrative implementation, learning strategies, or students' cognitive achievement. At the same time, the relationship between the curriculum and graduates' work readiness, particularly through strengthening soft skills, is rarely explored in depth. The focus on SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Malang is important because this school has a unique characteristic as a vocational institution that prepares graduates to enter the workforce directly. Therefore, the urgency of the research extends not only to the academic level but also to the practical need of the industry for skilled workers with adequate soft skills. Thus, this research makes a novel contribution by bridging the gap between curriculum policy, the educational process, and tangible outcomes, such as graduate employment.

By considering the problem characterization described previously, the author determines the research title "Implementation of Independent Curriculum in Improving Soft Skills and Absorption of Graduates of Muhammadiyah 2 Malang Vocational School" has identified the formulation of specific research problems that will be studied in this study as follows: (1) How is the Planning for the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Improving Soft Skills and Absorption of Graduates at Muhammadiyah 2 Malang Vocational School? (2) How is the Process of Implementing the Independent Curriculum in Improving Soft Skills and Absorption of Graduates at Muhammadiyah 2 Malang Vocational School? (3) How is the Evaluation of the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Improving Soft Skills and Absorption of Graduates at Muhammadiyah 2 Malang Vocational School?

This research provides a theoretical contribution by enriching the study of vocational curriculum, particularly regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in strengthening soft skills and its relationship to the absorption of vocational school graduates in the workforce, thereby broadening the perspective of curriculum theory development that focuses beyond cognitive achievement. Practically, this research is helpful for policymakers as a basis for evaluating policy curricula that are more adaptable to industry needs, and for vocational school educators as a guide in designing learning that is oriented towards developing soft skills to improve graduates' work readiness.

This research is expected to provide theoretical and practical benefits in the development of educational curriculum policies in vocational schools, as well as being used as evaluation material in improving the implementation of the Independent Curriculum to be more responsive to the dynamics of industrial and work world needs as follows: (1) This research is expected to expand the scientific knowledge in learning activities for the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in improving soft skills and Graduate Absorption, (2) This research is expected to be an inspiration and help educators to prepare the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in improving soft skills and Graduate Absorption, (3) This research is expected to provide benefits on how to learn well and foster students' enthusiasm for learning.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study aims to determine the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in improving soft skills and graduate absorption at SMK XXX Malang, about aiming to empirically determine the implementation of the Independent Curriculum on improving soft skills of SMK students and its relationship with the level of graduate absorption in the world of work, by analyzing in depth the programs implemented based on policies made by the school, planning the implementation of the Independent curriculum in improving soft skills and graduate absorption in SMK, identifying the most effective curriculum implementation strategies in the context of soft skill development and evaluating the direct relationship between the education process and industry needs.

The approach taken to the object of research is a qualitative approach, which will later be interpreted through descriptive data collected by researchers from field visits. This study does not test hypotheses or

variable relationships, but focuses on data collection through descriptions of field practices as they occur.

Subject

The researcher serves as the primary instrument in implementing this research, beginning with careful planning, collecting field data, analyzing the data obtained, and preparing a report on the analysis results. The researcher conducted in-depth observations of all phenomena that occurred in the field and interpreted the research subjects' responses, using interview guidelines, questionnaire data, physical environmental observations, and other instruments, including documentation tools and interview recording results.

The research was conducted at SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Malang, which is located on Jl. Tlogomas, Malang City, and the research was conducted during the 2024-2025 academic year, specifically in the odd semester from July to December 2024. This research was conducted by SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Malang, as the school had been categorized as an SMK PK (Center of Excellence) and had implemented the Independent Curriculum in its first stage, as mandated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. There was still little previous research conducted by other researchers at the school.

Data Collection

Researchers employed data collection techniques, including in-depth interviews, to gather information. This process began with an interview of the principal to gather general information on both school programs and policies related to independent curriculum learning. Next, interviews are conducted with teachers who meet the qualifications of research respondents, namely those who have worked for at least 5 years, including principals and deputy principals for curriculum. The interviews are conducted in a structured manner, and learning observations are made to obtain more information from field phenomena.

Data Analysis

Stages in analyzing data involve researchers collecting, processing, and analyzing data. The data is analyzed using qualitative descriptive methods, which involve collecting and then describing it, thereby obtaining a clear picture of the data source. This is achieved through both interviews and document studies.

In analyzing qualitative research data with the Miles and Huberman model, there are three stages, namely 1) data reduction, the researcher summarizes the primary data from the findings in the field, both through interviews and learning observations, and focuses on important things, ignoring discussions that are not directly related to the research objectives. The researcher selects the data obtained strictly to obtain a detailed picture and focuses only on the research objectives. In this study, the author employs interview guidelines to collect data and assess the use of the environment and its impact on the development of student character. 2) The author presents the data by interpreting data that is in the form of narrative text. This study employs codes, including informant codes, data collection technique codes, data codes, and date codes. 3) The researcher draws conclusions or verification, namely by looking for relationships between components found in the data by comparing them until conclusions can be drawn. The researcher analyzes the results of the interviews obtained to draw conclusions and answer the existing problem formulation regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in improving soft skills and the absorption of vocational high school graduates.

FINDINGS

Observation results on the product design subject learning in class XII Multimedia show that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum significantly encourages the strengthening of soft skills, including communication, collaboration, and creativity. In project-based learning, students are divided into groups to design digital design products. During the process, communication skills are seen through active discussions, conveying ideas, and open project presentations. Students can convey ideas

confidently and respond to feedback constructively. The collaborative aspect is reflected in the balanced division of roles, cooperation in task completion, and decision-making through deliberation. The creativity of students is evident in their courage to explore unique design ideas and utilize various digital techniques. The teacher acts as a facilitator who provides space for exploration and reflection, so that learning does not only focus on the result, but also on the teamwork process and the development of individual potential. This approach has proven effective in fostering 21st-century competencies needed in the creative industry.

Perfect preparation is the key to the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum. By ensuring good coordination among all parties, providing continuous training for teachers, and fostering close integration between the school curriculum and industry needs, it is hoped that graduates will not only possess technical competence but also develop strong soft skills essential for students.

"The school has established partnerships with various external parties, such as the business and industry world (DUDI), to strengthen the relevance of the curriculum to the needs of the workforce. In the preparation stage, this collaboration is realized through joint discussions and workshops, which aim to align graduate profiles with the competencies needed by the industry" (WKS/HS/05/09/2024).

Planning the implementation of an independent curriculum to improve soft skills and enhance graduate absorption in vocational schools reveals that all school stakeholders are enthusiastic about preparing for its implementation. This is demonstrated through various activities that align perceptions, communication, and collaboration for project-based learning preparation, as well as collaboration with DUDI to develop students' soft skills.

Integrating relevant digital platforms and design software so that the learning process is contextual to the world of work. During the preparation process, teachers collaborate with colleagues and industry partners to ensure that the material taught is relevant to the needs of the business and industrial worlds (DUDI).

"skills program, emphasizing the importance of the involvement of the business world and the industrial world (DUDI) in the planning stage, so that the competencies taught are in line with work needs. This teacher also highlighted the importance of project-based learning" (G/NR/05/09/2024).

To implement the Independent Curriculum, the Productive Design subject teacher in Class XII Multimedia at SMK XXX has conducted a series of structured learning preparations aimed at developing students' soft skills. Preparations begin with the preparation of teaching modules that are integrated with the learning outcomes of the Independent Curriculum, with an emphasis on strengthening the three main aspects of soft skills, communication, collaboration, and creativity.

"The Independent Curriculum through school-facilitated learning helps teachers understand that this curriculum not only focuses on academic achievement, but also on developing students' character and soft skills, such as communication skills and creativity." (G/BRG/05.09.2024)

During the learning activities, the teacher mentioned that at the beginning of the school year, he conducted an analysis of the students' needs and mapped their potential and interests in the creative industry, particularly in the field of digital product design. Based on the analysis results, the teacher designed project-based learning activities (PjBL) that encouraged students to actively discuss, work in groups, and present their design ideas openly.

"The preparation stage also involves strengthening the relationship between teachers and students. He emphasized the importance of a personal approach to understanding students' interests and talents" (G/DKS/05/09/2024)

To support communication skills, teachers prepare group presentations and reflection sessions, where students are expected to convey ideas effectively both orally and in writing. In terms of collaboration, project tasks are designed to be worked on in groups with a clear division of roles, requiring each group member to support each other and solve challenges together. Meanwhile, creativity is developed through design challenges that require students to think out of the box, create innovative visual solutions, and adapt global references to local contexts.

Through this approach, teachers hope that learning in grade XII will not only focus on the final

product, but also on the process of strengthening character and 21st-century skills, so that vocational school graduates have better competitiveness and work readiness. Overall, the preparation for implementing the Independent Curriculum is expected to enhance the relevance of education in vocational schools to the world of work and contribute to the development of individual students who are adaptable and competitive in the era of globalization.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum has had a positive impact on the development of students' soft skills, especially in the aspects of communication, collaboration, and creativity. Learning is carried out with a project-based approach (Project-Based Learning), where students are actively involved in planning, designing, and presenting multimedia design products. These projects are designed to provide space for exploring ideas, group work, and assessments based on processes and results.

"With the Independent Curriculum, I give more space for students to explore their design ideas independently and in teams. We use a project approach, for example, creating visual promotional media, which not only assesses the final result but also the process of discussion, presentation, and division of tasks in groups." (G/BRG/05/09/2024)

This demonstrates that the project approach encourages students to be more active in conveying their ideas, collaborating, and developing creative solutions to the challenges presented. Students' communication skills are honed through presentation activities and idea discussions, while collaboration is developed through heterogeneous group work that encourages tolerance and leadership. Creativity, on the other hand, grows from students' freedom in choosing media, design styles, and visual techniques.

"Their communication through product design presentation sessions. Their creativity arises from their freedom in choosing the media, design style, and tools used." (G/NR/05/09/2024)

The process of implementing the independent curriculum to enhance soft skills and improve graduate absorption has been enhanced through learning that incorporates the Independent Curriculum through student-centered approaches. The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in SMK demonstrates that this approach provides significant opportunities for improving soft skills and enhancing graduate absorption. The implementation of the Independent Curriculum allows students to be more flexible in exploring their potential through project-based learning programs, industrial internships, and life skills-based learning.

The Independent Curriculum adopts an approach that emphasizes the development of students' soft skills, including communication, collaboration, and creativity. Learning is structured around projects (Project-Based Learning), where students are assigned to groups to create multimedia designs and products based on a specific theme. In this process, students are required to actively discuss, share ideas, and present their work in front of the class or internal department forums.

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum provides more space for students to explore and express their creative ideas. In addition, communication skills improve alongside the number of presentation assignments, while collaboration is fostered through structured and directed group work. The reflection process at the end of the project also helps students recognize their potential and identify areas for personal development.

Evaluation of learning in Class XII Multimedia in the Product Design subject reveals that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum has had a positive impact, particularly in the development of students' soft skills. Productive teachers noted that project-based learning, when integrated into the curriculum, provides students with opportunities to be more active in communicating, collaborating, and expressing their creativity in real-world terms through the digital products they produce.

"Supporting the development of students' character and skills, especially communication, collaboration, and creativity. Through design projects, students become more courageous in expressing ideas, discussing in teams, and producing original work that is relevant to industry needs" (G/RW/05/09/2024).

This evaluation demonstrates that the Independent Curriculum is effective in shaping the profile of vocational school graduates who are not only technically competent but also excel in terms of the soft skills required in the workplace. It is recommended that the project-based approach and strengthening of

soft skills continue to be expanded and supported by active collaboration between schools and industry.

"Many industries appreciate our graduates because they are not rigid. They can work in teams, communicate well, and adapt quickly. They can not only design, but they can sell their ideas" (KS/LH/04/09/2024).

The learning approach employed has been successful in significantly enhancing students' soft skills. Teachers stated that students showed development in terms of courage to convey ideas, ability to work together in a team, and creativity in developing innovative design concepts, leading to increased absorption of graduates by the business world/industry. Many students have been hired as permanent employees after completing internships because they demonstrate strong soft skills, in addition to possessing qualified technical competencies.

Table 1. Document Observation Results

Document	Aspects	Findings	Description
Multimedia Teaching Module	Independent Curriculum Suitability	The teaching module already utilizes the Independent Curriculum format, incorporating project-based learning, and some activities stimulate students' creativity and collaboration.	Documents are available and actively used since the odd semester of 2024
ATP (Learning Objective Flow)	Soft Skill Integration	ATP explicitly emphasizes the importance of strengthening communication, collaboration, and creativity. Learning activities include group discussions, presentations, and reviews of multimedia project results.	Relevant to strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile
Student Project Work	Creativity & Collaboration	Students create animated videos and digital promotional designs in groups. There is a division of roles, creative ideas, and varied integration of multimedia software	Project results are exhibited at the Student Work Expo
PKL Report	Industry Engagement	90% of grade XII students have completed their internships in the multimedia and digital printing industry. Partners provide positive feedback on students' work ethics and communication skills	Several students are offered jobs after PKL
Alumni Data	Graduate Absorption	Of the 42 graduates in 2024, 28 are currently working (15 in the multimedia industry, 13 in other fields), six are pursuing further studies, 5 are entrepreneurs, and three have not been accounted for.	Data is supplemented with short alum interviews
Visual Documentation	Collaborative Activities	Photos and videos show the group discussion process, project work in the computer lab, and presentations of student project results. Teachers appear to act as facilitators.	Saved in the teacher's drive and school social media accounts
Project Assessment Rubric	Soft Skill Assessment	The rubric includes indicators of creativity (30%), cooperation (20%), communication (20%), and technical quality (30%). Teachers and peers carry out assessments.	Supports formative and summative assessment formats

DISCUSSION

The description of the discussion of this study, entitled "Implementation of the Independent

Curriculum in Improving Soft Skills and Graduate Absorption at SMK XXX, includes planning the implementation of the independent curriculum, implementing learning to implement the curriculum, and evaluating the independent curriculum in improving soft skills and graduate absorption.

In the context of planning the Independent Curriculum, the preparation stages can be analyzed based on communication factors, resources, disposition/attitude, and bureaucratic structure, from these four variables to ensure the main objective, improving soft skills and graduate absorption (Mujab et al., 2023). The planning strategy serves as the foundation for conveying the objectives, strategies, and essence of the Independent Curriculum to all stakeholders, including principals, teachers, parents, and the broader industrial world. Schools must ensure that information about this curriculum is conveyed clearly, consistently, and repeatedly through various channels, such as training sessions, seminars, and written guidelines. Formulating a curriculum requires careful planning and strategic foresight. It is essential to consider the various elements that contribute to the uniqueness of the curriculum, which distinguishes it from other educational institutions. (Anwar et al., 2023).

Resources are an important aspect in supporting the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. These resources include budget, facilities, and the competency of educators. In the preparation stage, schools need to ensure that there is an adequate budget allocation for the procurement of teacher training, preparation of learning modules, and development of supporting facilities and infrastructure, such as laboratories, technological devices, and internet access. In addition, educators must have a deep understanding of the Independent Curriculum approach, so that they can translate the concept into effective learning practices according to the interests and talents of students (Syaadah et al., 2023); (Nabila et al., 2020).

The attitude of stakeholders, specifically the Principal and Vice Principal of the Curriculum, plays a key role in ensuring the success of implementing the Independent Curriculum. At the preparation stage, it is important to build awareness and commitment between the principal and teachers regarding the benefits of this curriculum. This can be done through workshops, training, and awards for teachers who have successfully implemented the principles of the Independent Curriculum. Suppose the Principal, Vice Principal of the Curriculum, and teachers have a positive attitude when implementing this Independent Curriculum. In that case, they will tend to be more enthusiastic about implementing the policy in the school environment (Miladiah et al., 2023). The school's organizational structure, which supports the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, must be both flexible and organized. At the preparation stage, it is essential to establish a dedicated team within the school to oversee the planning process and implementation of the curriculum. The Curriculum Development Team/TPK is responsible for overcoming administrative obstacles, ensuring synchronization of curriculum policies in schools, and providing continuous supervision and evaluation (Muharnis & Fadriati, 2023).

Implementing a planned and targeted Independent Curriculum, SMK XXX strives to produce graduates who not only possess superior technical skills but also possess essential soft skills, such as communication, self-confidence, and responsibility, which are crucial in the world of work. This holistic approach is expected to increase the employment prospects of graduates in the job market, making them more competitive individuals and better equipped to face future challenges. The implementation of practical curriculum elements in Vocational High Schools (SMK) through class activities, external programs, and collaboration with the business and industry world (DUDI) is crucial for developing students' skills. This approach not only enhances the quality of education but also ensures that students are well-prepared for the workforce. The partnership between SMK and DUDI is a strategic initiative that aims to align educational outcomes with industry needs, thereby increasing the employability of graduates (Sudarsono et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2024).

Communication skills are one of the primary components in developing soft skills, which are highly valued in the workplace. For Vocational High School (SMK) students, this skill is not only important in the context of learning, but also the key to success in Field Work Practices (PKL) and post-graduation job absorption. The results of this study indicate that most vocational high school students exhibit passive communication skills, particularly in formal and professional contexts. This finding aligns with the results

of Atika et al. (2021), who state that vocational high school students tend to be less confident in conveying ideas, discussing, or making presentations in industrial work environments. The leading causes include the lack of integrated communication training in the productive curriculum and minimal experience in public speaking.

Learning that emphasizes the importance of project-based learning strategies and group work in stimulating students' courage to express their opinions. The application of collaborative learning and professional communication simulations has been shown to increase students' verbal and nonverbal activity (Habibah et al., 2022; Bagit et al., 2022). Communication skills are also closely related to aspects of digital literacy and the use of information technology. Based on a study (Marselus, 2021), the use of digital platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, and online discussion forums can indirectly improve the ability to articulate messages and active listening skills. However, the digital communication literacy of vocational high school students still faces challenges, such as limited access to devices and inadequate support for the learning environment. Additionally, interpersonal communication skills, including empathy, listening, and negotiation, have not been fully developed. In a study (Viki & Handayani, 2020), it was noted that soft skills-based training involving direct practice and feedback from the industrial world is more effective in forming adaptive, polite, and professional communication patterns.

Collaboration skills are an integral part of 21st-century skills that are essential for the digital era's workforce. For vocational high school students, this ability is crucial for completing project-based assignments, participating in fieldwork practices, and establishing connections in the industrial world. The results of this study indicate that students' collaborative skills are still in the developmental stage, characterized by low cooperation initiatives, inadequate task division, and suboptimal interpersonal communication.

This study is reinforced by Salsabila et al. (2021), who revealed that the majority of vocational high school students tend to work individually in group learning because they are not yet accustomed to team dynamics and conflict resolution. In fact, according to Budianingsih & Lailatul (2021), good collaborative practices include role sharing, collective responsibility, and the ability to receive and provide constructive feedback. In the context of productive learning, the application of the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) approach has been proven effective in increasing collaboration between students. (Taufiqur Rahman et al., 2023) found that project-based learning not only encourages students to interact and work together but also fosters leadership attitudes and a sense of responsibility for team results. This type of learning incorporates real-world challenges from the workplace, enabling students to better prepare for team dynamics in a professional setting.

Creativity is one of the important aspects in the development of soft skills in vocational high school students, especially in responding to the challenges of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, which demands innovation and original problem-solving. Based on the results of this study, the creativity of vocational high school students remains in the moderate category, characterized by the emergence of new ideas but not yet fully supported by the ability to realize them optimally. This can be attributed to a learning environment that lacks sufficient space for exploration and freedom of creative thinking.

Research (Firdaus et al., 2021) indicates that productive learning in vocational schools remains overly focused on technical procedures that are instructional in nature, resulting in students not being accustomed to developing creative approaches to problem-solving. On the other hand, the application of problem-based or project-based learning has been shown to encourage students to think critically and produce innovative solutions. Furthermore, Nurcahya & Hadijah (2020) emphasized that student creativity can develop optimally when teachers provide open-ended problems, provide freedom to choose solution methods, and encourage reflection on the creation process. Unfortunately, many vocational school teachers still use a lecture approach or routine assignments that limit students' imaginative thinking space.

The evaluation stage of the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Malang is an important step to assess the effectiveness of the program in improving soft skills and the absorption of graduates in the workforce (Nurwiyanto et al., 2022); (Nurwiyanto et al., 2022). This

evaluation aims not only to determine the success of the implementation but also to identify obstacles and provide recommendations for continuous improvement (Nurrahman et al., 2023). In this context, evaluation is carried out through various approaches, such as measuring student performance, assessing learning programs (supervision), and collecting feedback from stakeholders, including teachers, students, and business and industry partners (DUDI).

In terms of measuring student performance, evaluation focuses on the development of students' soft skills, such as communication skills, self-confidence, and responsibility. The evaluation instrument involves authentic assessments based on projects, portfolios, and observations during learning (Agustiningsih & Rahdiyanta, 2019). The system implemented at SMK XXX, students involved in project-based learning are assessed based on their contributions to the team, their ability to complete tasks creatively, and their skills in delivering work results through presentations. This evaluation provides an overview of the extent to which the Independent Curriculum has succeeded in developing interpersonal skills relevant to the needs of the workplace.

Assessment of the learning program (supervision) is also an important part of a holistic and sustainable evaluation (Fazli Abdillah et al., 2023). The principal and curriculum team at SMK XXX evaluated the effectiveness of learning methods, including project-based learning and industrial visits, in achieving curriculum objectives. This evaluation includes the suitability between the learning plan and its implementation, as well as the direct impact of learning activities on students' readiness to enter the workforce.

Graduate Absorption at SMK XXX conducted a tracer study, led by the SMK Special Job Exchange (BKK), which is responsible for Guidance and Counseling, in collaboration with the Deputy Head of Public Relations at SMK. Data were collected over 2 years, from 2023 to 2024. The number of graduates in 2023 was 56 students; data obtained showed that 19.6% continued their studies, 19.6% were entrepreneurs, and 60.7% worked according to their competencies. Meanwhile, in 2024, the number of graduates is expected to be 84 students, with data indicating that 17.9 will continue their studies, 10.7 will become entrepreneurs, and 71.4 will work according to their competencies.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which aims to improve soft skills and enhance graduate absorption, significantly contributes to the development of students' soft skills in vocational schools. Through well-planned learning and a curriculum aligned with industry needs, students are encouraged to actively participate in projects that require collaboration, effective communication, and creativity. The results of interviews, observations, and documentation indicate that students involved in project-based learning exhibit higher self-confidence in conveying ideas systematically, can work across multiple competencies, and manage tasks creatively and independently. Support from the industry also strengthens this finding, with the recognition that graduates who demonstrate excellence in soft skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and initiative, are more likely to succeed.

Conceptually and practically, this study makes an important contribution to the development of vocational education in the digital era. The integration of technology in the PjBL model has been proven to not only expand access and flexibility in learning, but also be effective in forming work characters that align with the needs of the industrial world. This study also strengthens the foundation for implementing vocational learning to enhance soft skills, making it a relevant and adaptive learning strategy for addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

Based on the results and limitations identified, several directions for further research are warranted. First, expanding the scope of research to various areas of expertise and locations of vocational schools will enable the acquisition of a more comprehensive picture. Second, applying a mixed methods approach to combine the strengths of qualitative and quantitative analysis. Third, involving industry more actively in

project design to evaluate its impact on graduates' work readiness and competitiveness. These recommendations are expected to strengthen the theoretical and practical basis in the development of digital-based vocational education policies in the future.

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