

Research Article

The Implementation of Internship Policy in Strengthening Vocational Students' Skills and Competence to Meet the Demands of the Labor Market

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Abstract: This study aims to identify the implementation of soft skills and hard skills, explore strategies for developing hard skills, and analyze entrepreneurial independence among vocational students. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews and observations, then analyzed descriptively through data reduction, presentation, and verification. The results show that soft skills are internalized through workplace culture programs emphasizing ethics, communication, and adaptability, supported by mentoring and reflection activities. Hard skills are applied in alignment with industry needs through curriculum synchronization, hands-on practice, and skill-based projects, ensuring professional competence. Development of hard skills is strengthened through internships, external training, and peer teaching, with success assessed from product quality, innovation, and relevance to market demand. Entrepreneurial independence is fostered through motivation, alumni inspiration, and the Teaching Factory program that integrates learning with real business experiences. Internships also help students interact directly with customers and handle business challenges, while sustainability is maintained through product management and freelance opportunities. Overall, the implementation of internship-based learning effectively enhances vocational students' technical and non-technical competencies, enabling them to adapt, innovate, and compete in the dynamic job market.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Independence; Hard Skills; Internship Program; Soft Skills; Vocational Students.

1. Introduction

The upper secondary education level in Indonesia is divided into two main types: Senior High Schools (SMA) and Vocational High Schools (SMK). Unlike SMA, which focuses on academic learning, SMK provides vocational education that emphasizes practical skills and specialized competencies across various industrial sectors. Vocational education at SMK lasts for three years and aims to prepare graduates who are job-ready, competent, and adaptive to the evolving demands of the industrial and professional world. From the first year of study (Grade X), SMK students receive systematic and structured guidance to develop relevant competencies in their chosen vocational field. This approach ensures that upon graduation, students are equipped not only with theoretical understanding but also with practical and applicable skills aligned with industry needs. This is consistent with the Graduate Competency Standards (Standar Kompetensi Lulusan or SKL) as stipulated in Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation No. 5 of 2022, which defines the minimum criteria for graduates in three dimensions: attitude, skills, and knowledge. These standards represent the holistic outcomes expected from SMK graduates through comprehensive learning processes. The main focus of the SKL for vocational schools is to nurture graduates who are faithful, pious, and noble in character, while also instilling Pancasila-based values that guide moral and social conduct. Furthermore, the SKL encourages the development of professional competence and economic independence, enabling graduates to work in formal sectors or pursue entrepreneurship. Vocational competencies are developed through three main areas: technical abilities (hard skills), non-

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technical abilities (soft skills), and entrepreneurial competencies, all of which are structured according to certification schemes and the national occupation map within the Indonesian National Qualification Framework (KKNI). According to Wikan Sakarinto (2022), Director General of Vocational Education at the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, SMK graduates are expected to possess clear and measurable competencies. The focus of vocational education should shift from “what I have learned” to “what I can do.” This statement emphasizes the importance of practical capabilities and real-world productivity, moving beyond theoretical knowledge toward demonstrable skills that meet industrial standards.

To achieve this goal, the SMK curriculum is designed based on a project-based learning approach, enabling students to engage in real-world problem solving, teamwork, and product creation. Through this method, graduates are expected to not only master theoretical knowledge but also gain hands-on experience directly applicable to workplace settings. However, challenges still persist within the vocational education landscape. Based on data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS, 2024), SMK graduates remain the largest contributors to the open unemployment rate in Indonesia. This indicates a significant gap between the competencies acquired during school and the skills required by the job market. Therefore, the implementation of the Internship (Praktik Kerja Lapangan/PKL) Policy plays a crucial role as a practical strategy to enhance students’ vocational competencies and ensure they are better prepared to face the demands and dynamics of the modern workforce.

Table 1. Number of Open Unemployment by Education Level.

Education Level	Open Unemployment Rate by Education Level (2024)
No Schooling / Incomplete or Completed Primary School	2.32%
Junior High School	4.11%
General Senior High School	7.05%
Vocational Senior High School	9.01%
Diploma I/II/III	4.83%
University	5.25%

Based on Table 1, it can be seen that the comparison of open unemployment rates by education level shows that vocational high school (SMK) graduates contribute the highest rate of unemployment at 9.01%, surpassing all other educational levels. This phenomenon presents a contradiction within Indonesia’s educational system, considering that SMKs are designed to prepare students to be ready for employment upon graduation. Hence, this issue calls for collective attention, given the complex and diverse social conditions of society.

To address this problem, vocational education in Indonesia has long implemented Industrial Work Practice (Praktik Kerja Lapangan – PKL). According to Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 50 of 2020, PKL is a learning activity for students of Vocational High Schools (SMK), Vocational Islamic Senior High Schools (MAK), Special High Schools (SMALB), and Training Institutions (LKP) that involves direct work practice within industries for a specific period, in accordance with the curriculum and labor market needs. Research by Ilmu et al. (2024) shows that PKL has proven effective in training students to maintain professional attitudes and workplace etiquette (96%), enhance responsibility and work competence (95%), and foster loyalty, diligence, and perseverance (94%). However, Budianto et al. (2024) highlight that in practice, students still face several challenges during PKL implementation. These include insufficient coordination between schools and industries, limited mentoring capacity, and a lack of supportive environments for student learning. During PKL, students are expected to develop various attitudes, knowledge, and skills based on their respective vocational competencies. These competencies are particularly crucial for students from economically disadvantaged families who rely on SMK education as a pathway to immediate employment. Based on the researcher’s observation, this condition aligns with the situation in Banyuwangi, where many parents prefer to send their children to SMK rather than SMA, hoping that they will be job-ready and able to contribute to the family’s income. This is supported by the latest education data (as of May 12, 2025) from the official portal of the Ministry of Education and Culture’s basic and secondary education database (<https://data.dikdasmen.go.id/data-induk/pd/050000?kab-kot=kab>), showing a higher number of SMK students compared to SMA students in Banyuwangi.

The implementation of Industrial Work Practice (PKL) at SMKN 1 Banyuwangi faces several significant challenges. Students often experience idle periods during their internship due to the absence of assignments from workplace instructors. In many cases, the tasks assigned are not aligned with the students' vocational competencies because of company confidentiality policies. Moreover, the types of work provided are frequently limited to administrative duties—such as photocopying, filing, and handling correspondence—without engaging students in activities that develop their specific technical skills. Another issue lies in the insufficient supervision and guidance provided by workplace mentors, which limits students' opportunities for professional growth.

According to Yulistiana (2023), PKL is an integral component of the learning process in vocational education (SMK/MAK) within the Merdeka Curriculum. The Guidelines for PKL as a Subject are intended to serve as a reference for improving the quality of SMK/MAK graduates and for strengthening collaboration with industry partners to ensure that PKL experiences make meaningful contributions to students, schools, the workforce, and society at large.

However, these expectations are not always realized in practice. Nasichah et al. (2024) found that PKL does not consistently improve all students' vocational competencies, as a considerable number of participants showed no significant skill enhancement after completing the program. Similarly, Suryani et al. (2025) reported that many students failed to develop their professional competencies due to individual factors, such as the lack of a strong work ethic or difficulty adapting to workplace culture.

From these findings, it can be inferred that effective PKL implementation requires comprehensive management and preparation by schools to achieve optimal results. This includes providing pre-placement orientations on workplace culture, adaptation strategies, and professional discipline.

The evidence suggests that PKL does not automatically guarantee an increase in students' vocational competence. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the implementation of PKL in vocational schools in Banyuwangi, with a specific focus on SMKN 1 Banyuwangi. What makes this research distinct from previous studies is its analytical framework, which refers to Decree of the Director General of Vocational Education (SK KaBSKAP) No. 033/H/KR/2022 concerning Learning Elements and Outcomes in the PKL Subject—a perspective not yet explored in earlier research.

This study is particularly relevant in the socio-economic context of Banyuwangi, where many parents expect their children to quickly enter the workforce to support the family's income. Ultimately, this research aims to analyze the implementation of PKL in enhancing students' vocational competencies at SMKN 1 Banyuwangi, assess students' competency outcomes after completing PKL, and identify internal and external factors that support or hinder the success of the program.

2. Materials and Method

Hasan (2024) stated that *Praktik Kerja Lapangan* (PKL), or Field Work Practice, is one of the learning methods conducted outside the classroom that aims to provide students with practical experiences in professional settings. PKL serves as a bridge between the theoretical knowledge acquired in school and its application in real-world contexts. This concept aligns with Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning, which emphasizes learning through reflection on direct experience.

Using a qualitative approach, this study seeks to understand the complexities of PKL implementation among students at SMKN 1 Banyuwangi from the perspectives of those directly involved in the process. A case study design was chosen to provide rich, contextual insights into the phenomenon being examined. The implementation process refers to the Decree of the Head of the Agency for Education Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment (KaBSKAP) No. 033/H/KR/2022 issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, which outlines the elements and learning outcomes of the PKL subject.

Participants in this study were selected purposively, considering variations in their experiences and backgrounds to capture a diverse range of perspectives. They included the Head of Department, PKL Subject Teachers, Industry Instructors or Business Owners, and PKL Students.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observations, guided by a thematic framework developed from relevant theoretical foundations. The data were analyzed systematically using a thematic analysis approach, enabling the identification of common patterns, specific challenges, and emerging opportunities in the implementation of PKL.

Through this approach, the researcher gained a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of PKL implementation at SMKN 1 Banyuwangi and its implications for enhancing students' professional competence.

3. Results and Discussion

The presentation of research data on the implementation of Field Work Practice (PKL) in improving students' vocational competencies to face the challenges of the workforce at SMKN 1 Banyuwangi, as described above, consists of four main aspects: soft skills internalization, hard skills application, hard skills enhancement and development, and entrepreneurial independence. The following section presents a detailed discussion of each aspect.

The implementation of PKL at SMKN 1 Banyuwangi has generally been carried out effectively under the coordination of the Public Relations and Industry Partnership Division (Humas/Hubin), managed by the Vice Principal for Public Relations in collaboration with the Vice Principal for Curriculum Affairs. This division of tasks is stipulated in the Principal's Decree concerning additional duties for teachers and education personnel.

3.1. Soft Skills Internalization

The strategy for internalizing soft skills includes:

- (1) Organizing **pre-internship training programs** on work culture covering work ethics, effective communication, and adaptability to workplace environments before students begin their internships.
- (2) **Integrating character values** into all PKL activities, both within the school and at the workplace.
- (3) Conducting **regular mentoring sessions** by industry instructors and PKL subject teachers to strengthen students' soft skills continuously.

The implementation of soft skills internalization begins with initial orientation sessions conducted by industry partners to provide foundational knowledge and professional attitudes. Weekly and monthly reflection sessions are then held with workplace instructors to evaluate and enhance students' ongoing competency development. Students are also encouraged to develop their soft skills independently by observing and modeling workplace culture under the guidance of their supervisors, enabling effective and contextual soft skills acquisition aligned with industry demands.

Monitoring and assessment are conducted through daily PKL journals, where each completed task is verified by mentors through signatures. Periodically, both industry supervisors and school mentors carry out evaluations to ensure student progress. Additionally, students assess their own soft skills by gauging customer satisfaction after service interactions. The success of soft skills internalization is reflected when customers not only inquire but proceed to place orders or make purchases.

3.2. Hard Skills Application

The strategy for applying hard skills involves aligning student competencies with industry needs through curriculum synchronization between the school and industry partners at the beginning of each academic year. Students are given opportunities to practice directly using real industrial tools and technologies under the guidance of professional instructors, ensuring they gain authentic, industry-relevant experiences.

Hard skills are applied through a learning by doing approach in real work environments, allowing students to understand and master competencies more quickly. Students undergo rotations across divisions to explore various technical skills and develop a comprehensive understanding of workplace operations. They also engage in real projects in their areas of expertise with close supervision from experienced industry instructors, ensuring that theoretical knowledge is effectively translated into practical performance.

Monitoring and assessment of hard skills are conducted through portfolio evaluations of completed work to provide comprehensive insights into each student's skill development. Industry supervisors evaluate students' performance by observing attitudes, skills, and achievements in real settings, ensuring the assessment reflects their professional competency levels.

3.3. Hard Skills Enhancement and Development

The enhancement and development of hard skills during PKL focus on active learning and student empowerment. One key strategy is assigning students full responsibility for organizing real events or tasks independently—such as managing workshops or serving customers without direct supervision. This method not only applies their technical knowledge but also fosters independence and problem-solving abilities.

Students also have opportunities to attend additional external training and even serve as trainers in specific sessions, deepening mastery and confidence in their hard skills. The PKL process is structured so that students' progress is measurable and gradual, starting from simple production targets (e.g., producing one product in three days) and increasing as competence improves.

Throughout the internship, students are actively involved in production and customer service, enabling them to practice technical accuracy, creativity, and responsiveness to market demands. Continuous supervision and evaluation by PKL mentors ensure that learning outcomes are effectively achieved.

Assessment focuses not only on quantity but also on quality and innovation, including product design relevance, customer satisfaction, and adaptability to challenges. Continuous evaluation allows refinement of learning strategies and the setting of new targets, ensuring optimal hard skills development.

3.4. Entrepreneurial Independence

The strategy for developing entrepreneurial independence begins with identifying and stimulating students' business interests based on their personal passions. Teachers link these interests to potential business opportunities and introduce successful alumni entrepreneurs as role models and guest speakers to inspire and motivate students toward entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurial independence is practiced through internal PKL programs in the school's Teaching Factory (Tefa), where students create products and manage simulated business environments. During external PKL placements, students are entrusted to interact directly with customers and solve real-world problems independently, fostering creativity and accountability.

Continuous monitoring and assessment are conducted during and after PKL. Teachers and industry mentors observe students' performance in handling customer service and problem-solving. After the internship, students maintain industry connections by selling their products, receiving royalties as appreciation for their work. They may also receive freelance project offers from their PKL partners, allowing them to sustain entrepreneurial practice and financial independence.

Through these mechanisms, students' entrepreneurial independence and responsibility continue to grow, ensuring they are equipped with practical business experience and adaptive mindsets aligned with the demands of the modern workforce.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study on the implementation of **Field Work Practice (PKL)** at SMKN 1 Banyuwangi reveal that the program has been effectively executed in enhancing students' vocational competencies and preparing them to meet the demands of the modern workforce. The implementation process encompasses four major dimensions: soft skills internalization, hard skills application, hard skills enhancement and development, and entrepreneurial independence.

4.1. Soft Skills Internalization

Soft skills are systematically developed through a structured work-culture orientation program that includes work ethics, communication, and adaptability training as preparation for professional engagement. Character education is fully integrated into both in-school and workplace PKL activities. Regular mentoring sessions conducted by instructors and PKL teachers reinforce students' soft skill competencies. Weekly and monthly reflection sessions with workplace mentors enable continuous evaluation and self-improvement. Additionally, students cultivate personal growth by observing and modeling workplace culture under supervision. The monitoring of soft skill progress is conducted through daily PKL journals, periodic evaluations by industry supervisors and teachers, and self-assessment based on customer satisfaction. The effectiveness of soft skills internalization is reflected in sustained customer interactions, which demonstrate professional behavior and communication.

4.2. Hard Skills Application

Hard skills implementation is carried out by aligning students' competencies with industry needs through **curriculum synchronization** between schools and industry partners at the start of each academic year. Students are given direct practice opportunities using industrial tools and technologies under the supervision of professional instructors. The **learning by doing** approach is emphasized to enable students to apply theoretical knowledge in real work settings. During PKL, students rotate across different divisions to broaden their understanding and are involved in projects that match their area of expertise. Performance monitoring is conducted through daily portfolio evaluations and workplace observations by industry supervisors to ensure that students' competencies align with professional industry standards.

4.3. Hard Skills Enhancement and Development

The improvement and development of students' technical skills during PKL are achieved through strategies designed to maximize hands-on learning and independent practice. One key approach is assigning students full responsibility for managing specific activities or events—such as workshops or customer service—without external intervention. Students are also encouraged to participate in external training programs during PKL and, in some cases, serve as facilitators in these sessions to strengthen their expertise. Progress in hard skills is monitored through quantitative and qualitative evaluations of the students' work output. At the beginning of the internship, production targets are modest—such as one product every three days—but gradually increase as proficiency improves. Product quality is assessed based on design innovation, market relevance, and customer appeal, while the diversity of products tailored to customer preferences serves as an indicator of comprehensive technical skill development.

4.4. Entrepreneurial Independence

The development of entrepreneurial independence begins with teachers identifying and stimulating students' business interests, linking them to relevant entrepreneurial opportunities. Teachers further motivate students by introducing successful alumni entrepreneurs who serve as role models and guest speakers. Within the school, entrepreneurial learning is implemented through **internal PKL programs** conducted in the **Teaching Factory (Tefa)** aligned with each student's major. During external PKL placements, students are entrusted to engage directly with customers and handle service challenges independently, fostering problem-solving abilities and professional responsibility. Upon completion of PKL, students maintain ties with their internship companies through the continued sale of their products in the market under a **royalty system**. Additionally, students may receive **freelance projects** from their PKL partners, allowing them to practice entrepreneurship and sustain economic independence after the internship period.

In conclusion, the effective management and structured implementation of PKL at SMKN 1 Banyuwangi have proven to enhance students' technical competencies, strengthen their soft skills, and cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets—ultimately preparing them to adapt and compete successfully in the dynamic landscape of the modern workforce.

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