The Implementation of the Link and Match Program Between Vocational High Schools and the Business-Industrial Sectors

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history
Received July 31, 2025
Revisied August 14, 2025
Accepted August15, 2025

Keywords: Islamic Education Management, Multiculturalism, Religious Moderation

ABSTRACT

Learning in Vocational High Schools aims to produce graduates who are job-ready with skills relevant to their vocational fields. However, there remains a mismatch between graduates' competencies and labor market demands, exacerbated by limited practical facilities and weak synergy between schools and the business and industrial sectors (DUDI). The revitalization program for vocational schools through the *link and match* approach was launched to address this issue by emphasizing curriculum alignment and intensive collaboration with industry. This study aims to examine the implementation of the *link and match* program at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih, Bantul, Yogyakarta. A qualitative approach was employed, with data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings indicate that the implementation of *link and match* at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih has been systematically carried out through industry-based curriculum alignment, industrial work practice, training for vocational teachers, Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with industry partners, and competency-based skill assessments. The program has succeeded in enhancing graduates' competencies and competitiveness, although it faces challenges such as limited internship quotas, differing industry standards, and inadequate practical facilities. Strong collaboration among schools, industries, and the government is essential for success, with recommendations including improved facilities and strengthened partnerships to optimize the program's effectiveness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocational High Schools (*Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan* or SMK) should be the primary choice within the secondary education system, as their main objective is to produce graduates who are ready to enter the industrial and business sectors (Maulina & Yoenanto, 2022). The establishment of vocational education is indeed focused on developing competencies in specific vocational fields to ensure students are prepared for the workforce. The vision of vocational schools is to prepare excellent human resources who can immediately work in positions aligned with their chosen vocational fields (Husein, 2019). Therefore, SMK graduates are expected to possess professionalism, discipline, competence, reliability, and high productivity, which are cultivated throughout their

education in line with the school's fundamental goals. The ideal SMK graduates are those who are job-ready and able to work directly in various occupational sectors (Cahyanti, 2018).

However, in practice, vocational education today still falls short in producing job-ready graduates, deviating from the original objectives of SMK development (Lisdiantini et al., 2022). Many vocational school graduates do not immediately enter the workforce; some continue their studies at universities, while others remain unemployed (Putranto, 2017). The high unemployment rate among SMK graduates has become a major issue, as it reflects a decline in educational quality—resulting in more unemployed graduates than those who successfully gain employment. Two primary factors contribute to this unemployment. First, the competencies of SMK graduates are often still below the skill levels required by the job market, particularly in commercial industries and other business sectors. Second, the training provided in schools has not yet fully aligned with the evolving demands of the workforce, while job opportunities that can absorb SMK graduates remain very limited (Mukhlason et al., 2020)

The mismatch between vocational education and the needs of the industrial world remains a longstanding issue that is difficult to resolve. Most vocational schools are still unable to produce graduates who are adaptive to the demands of the labor market. This is primarily due to the lack of adequate practical facilities, such as workshops or training laboratories, as well as weak collaboration between vocational schools and the business or industrial sectors. Pholphirul (2017) stated that this mismatch reflects the inefficiency of vocational education institutions in responding to the evolving demands of the job market. Research by Hanafi (2012) and Muhson (2012) also indicated that vocational education is often inflexible in adapting its curriculum to the needs of industry. To address this issue, the *link and match* program between vocational schools and the business or industrial sectors must be effectively implemented. The government has identified five key aspects to be prioritized in the implementation of this program to ensure that SMK graduates possess relevant competencies and are well-prepared to enter the workforce.

The Vocational School Revitalization Program aims to strengthen the synergy between vocational schools and the business and industrial sectors (DUDI) through a *link and match* approach. Labor market demand theory emphasizes that aligning education with industry needs is a key factor in producing competent and job-ready graduates. Based on this approach, the educational paradigm in vocational schools has shifted from being *supply-driven* to *demand-driven*, meaning that curricula and learning cultures are now tailored to meet labor market demands. This strategy aligns with human capital theory, which posits that investment in relevant education and training enhances individual productivity and adds value in the labor market. Thus, the goal of this revitalization is to produce a workforce that not only possesses technical skills but also demonstrates character and a strong work ethic that meet industry expectations.

So far, the *link and match* between vocational education and the business and industrial sectors (DUDI) remains a subject of scholarly discourse. At least three main areas of study underpin this discourse: policy implementation, program effectiveness, and the development of collaboration models. In terms of policy implementation, studies by Cahyanti (2018) and Disas (2018) indicate that *link and match* has improved the relevance of graduates' skills to labor market needs, although challenges in curriculum alignment persist. Regarding program effectiveness, Lisdiantini et al. (2022) reveal that internship programs play a vital role in synchronizing students' skills with industry demands, while Maulina and Yoenanto (2022) emphasize the need for intensive collaboration with industry in curriculum planning to enhance graduates' competitiveness. Meanwhile, studies on collaboration model development by Sukardi and Hargiyarto (2007) highlight the strategic role of the Special Job Exchange (*Bursa Kerja Khusus* or BKK) in facilitating graduate employment, whereas Putranto (2017) proposes a market-driven partnership model that has been proven to significantly improve graduate employability. Husein (2019) adds that the success of the *link and match* approach depends on the sustainability of the synergy between schools and industry, as well as the flexibility to respond to changing labor market needs. These studies affirm that *link and match* is an integral strategy in vocational education. However, this study differs from previous research by specifically focusing on the implementation of the *link and match* program with the business and industrial sectors at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih.

Based on the gaps identified in previous studies, the researcher argues that this study aims to examine the extent to which the *link and match* program is implemented with the business and industrial sectors at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih, as well as to identify the supporting and inhibiting factors. The selection of the research site was based on a preliminary observation conducted on November 28, 2023, which indicated that SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih has established extensive partnerships with the business and industrial sectors and organizes a *Career Day* event that supports students' career development. However, challenges remain, particularly in terms of strengthening industry involvement, aligning the curriculum with industry needs, and improving the availability of practical facilities that meet labor market standards. The choice of SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih, located at Jalan Kawijo 11, Pengasih, Kulon Progo, Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY), is highly relevant to addressing this research gap. This location was chosen because the school maintains strong collaborations with industry, has a stable and increasing student enrollment, and holds *Career Day* as an annual event designed to provide students with access to information regarding employment opportunities and higher education pathways. This study is deemed important considering the potential and challenges present at the selected site.

In addition, collaboration between vocational schools and the industrial sector has not yet been fully optimized. A more intensive and integrated partnership is needed to create synergy between the curriculum taught in vocational schools and the demands of the business and industrial sectors. This

alignment is crucial to ensure that vocational school graduates not only master theoretical knowledge but also possess practical skills relevant to the job market. Without effective collaboration, SMK graduates will face greater difficulties in entering the workforce, which may contribute to the high unemployment rate among vocational school alumni. Therefore, it is essential to examine and implement policies that bring vocational education closer to the needs of the industrial sector, so that graduates are better prepared and more competent in facing real-world challenges. Based on the aforementioned considerations, the author is interested in exploring the topic of *link and match* program implementation with the business and industrial sectors as the focus of this study, with SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih as the research site. The findings of this study will be presented in the form of a thesis entitled *"The Implementation of the Link and Match Program with the Business and Industrial Sectors at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih*".

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach, which, according to Corbin and Strauss (2015), is a form of research in which the researcher collects and analyzes data as part of the research process by directly engaging as a participant alongside informants who provide the data. Moleong (2017) defines qualitative research as a research procedure that generates descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behavior. The qualitative approach focuses on natural settings in a holistic manner, positioning the researcher as the primary instrument, and applying inductive data analysis.

Data sources refer to the origins of the data collected and obtained by the researcher. To answer the research questions, one or more data sources may be required, depending on the necessity and adequacy of the data to address the research objectives. These data sources will determine the types of data collected, whether primary or secondary (Murni, 2017). In this study, the primary data sources include questionnaires and interviews conducted with research subjects at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih. Secondary data in this research consist of observations, documentation, and data obtained from credible journal sources.

Data collection in this study was conducted through interviews, observations, and documentation. Interviews were used when the researcher aimed to identify issues requiring further investigation or to gather more detailed information from respondents (Sugiyono, 2015). In this study, both unstructured and structured interviews were conducted. The interview subjects included the Principal, the Vice Principal for Curriculum, the Head of the Special Job Exchange (*Bursa Kerja Khusus*), and vocational teachers in the Fashion Design Department. The interview guidelines were developed based on an outline related to the research problem formulation. Prior to the interviews, the researcher provided the respondents with a list of questions to allow them to prepare relevant documents related to the topics discussed. In the observation technique, the researcher employed

non-participant observation using structured instruments, in which the researcher did not directly engage in the activities but observed the implementation of the *link and match* program between the vocational school and the business and industrial sectors. The observation guidelines were developed based on the structured interviews. The data analysis technique used in this study is a qualitative inductive method, which involves four steps: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Curriculum Alignment with the Needs of the Business and Industrial Sectors

One form of collaboration between SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih and the business and industrial sectors is through the *Prakerin* (Industrial Work Practice) program. This program supports the implementation of an industry-based curriculum, which is designed from the planning stage. In this process, a working team consisting of the head of the *Prakerin* working group and the head of the study program first conducts a field survey. The survey results are then discussed in joint meetings to determine various preparations for students who will undertake *Prakerin*. The implementation of an industry-based curriculum at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih is a strategic step toward developing students' potential in accordance with industry needs. The skills required by stakeholders must continue to evolve, posing a challenge for vocational schools—including SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih—to adapt to the dynamic demands of the labor market. One of the planning efforts in implementing this curriculum is optimizing the *Prakerin* program. Thorough planning is essential to ensure an effective process, based on concrete condition analysis and a well-structured mechanism. Based on an interview with the Principal of SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih regarding the school's collaboration with the business and industrial sectors, he explained:

> The planning process for the industrial work practice begins with a coordination meeting involving the Vice Principal for Public Relations as the coordinator, along with the *Prakerin* working team consisting of the head of the *Prakerin* team, the head of the study program, and supervising teachers. This meeting aims to prepare the *Prakerin* program in alignment with the academic calendar and the working team's agenda. In implementation, SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih carries out the *Prakerin* program for a duration of three to six months, divided into two periods, with each period consisting of two waves. (*Interview, Principal of SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih, January 17, 2025*).

In its effort to implement an industry-based curriculum, SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih has designed various strategies tailored to the needs of the business and industrial sectors (DUDI). These planned efforts include: (1) drafting a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with industry partners, (2) mapping industrial work practice locations (*Prakerin*), (3) conducting site surveys and student placements, (4) strengthening student competencies through productive subject practice, (5) mapping students according to their skills, (6) preparing a Budget Plan (RAB), (7) preparing administrative needs such as ID cards, referral letters, and journals, (8) mentoring students for mental readiness and motivation in facing the workforce, (9) collaborating with industry for training or coaching sessions,

(10) planning for supervision and mentoring during the *Prakerin*, and (11) designing a student assessment system that includes both technical competencies and non-technical aspects such as work discipline, responsibility, innovation, and teamwork.

3.2 Implementation of Curriculum Adjustment to Meet the Needs of the Business and Industrial Sectors

One of the challenges in developing an industry-based curriculum at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih is how to adequately prepare students to face the realities of the professional world. Not all students possess the mental readiness and sufficient skills to adapt to the culture of industrial work, which is characterized by high levels of discipline, fast-paced environments, and strict performance targets. This presents a significant challenge for the school in shaping students' character and work ethic before they enter the workforce. In addition, each industry has its own policies, procedures, and operational standards, requiring schools to continuously update and adjust their curriculum to remain relevant and aligned with the evolving dynamics and demands of the labor market. These challenges necessitate the implementation of adaptive learning strategies, the provision of non-technical training such as soft skills, and the strengthening of sustainable partnerships with industry stakeholders. As stated by the Vice Principal for Curriculum:

> Our biggest challenge is preparing students for the realities of the professional world. Not all of them are ready for the industrial work culture, which demands high discipline and strict work targets. Moreover, every industry has different policies, so we must constantly adjust our curriculum to stay relevant. (*Interview with the Vice Principal for Curriculum, January 17, 2025*).

Some industries, such as the hospitality and fashion sectors, have already imposed limitations on internship quotas. This situation compels the school to seek alternative internship placements. As stated by the Head of the Career Counseling and Job Placement Unit (BKK):

> Some hotels and fashion industries have limited internship quotas, so we have to look for alternative suitable places." (*Interview with the Head of BKK, January 2025*).

Another challenge lies in ensuring alignment between student competencies and the available internship sites. Although the industry-based curriculum has significantly contributed to expanding students' access to the job market through *Prakerin* placements, in reality, not all industry partners fully match the competencies taught at school. Some internship sites are considered to fall short of the required standards in terms of facilities, the scope of work, or the offered areas of expertise. This misalignment may hinder the achievement of learning objectives and limit the full development of students' skills. Therefore, prior to the implementation of the *Prakerin*, the school—through its working group—conducts direct surveys of businesses and industries (DUDI) to assess their readiness and ensure that selected internship locations are truly relevant and supportive of the students' competency achievements. As explained by one of the teachers:

> The industry-based curriculum has greatly contributed to providing internship placements for students, but not all of them meet the required standards. Some are still not aligned with the competencies the students have learned at school. That is why, before the internships are carried

out, the school conducts field surveys to assess the situation and ensure that students will not face difficulties during *Prakerin*." (*Interview with Vice Principal for Curriculum, January 2025*).

3.3 Implementation of Productive Teacher Training to Align Teaching with Business and Industry Needs

Productive teacher training at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih serves as a key effort to enhance the quality of instruction in accordance with the needs of the business and industrial sectors (DUDI). Teachers are given opportunities to participate in training programs conducted both within the school and in relevant industries. The aim of this training is to equip teachers with a deeper understanding of the latest developments in the industrial world so they can impart relevant and up-to-date skills to students. In addition to attending external training, teachers also regularly engage in in-house training activities organized at the school. These include workshops, seminars, and knowledge-sharing sessions, especially between teachers who have gained direct industrial experience and their colleagues. The principal emphasized that school-based training is crucial to ensure all teachers have access to curriculum updates and the latest technological advancements:

> We regularly conduct training sessions at school by inviting practitioners from industry so that teachers can gain firsthand insights into industry needs. Furthermore, teachers who have participated in external training are required to share their knowledge with colleagues to ensure the benefits of the training are widely disseminated throughout the school environment. (*Interview with the Principal, January 2025*)

Productive teachers are also provided with opportunities to undergo hands-on training directly in industrial settings, such as hotels or partner companies with which the school has established cooperation. This allows teachers to experience industry workflows and technologies firsthand. Through this experience, they are better able to adapt their teaching methods to align with industry standards. he Vice Principal for Curriculum also affirmed that productive teacher training is part of the school's strategy to ensure the effective implementation of the industry-based curriculum. According to him, such training not only helps teachers improve their technical competencies but also strengthens their understanding of the continuously evolving nature of industrial work patterns:

> We continuously encourage our productive teachers to participate in training both in industry and at school. This is essential for them to understand the changing needs of the industry and to adapt their teaching methods accordingly. In this way, the curriculum we implement can truly reflect the standards of the business and industrial sectors. (*Interview with the Vice Principal for Curriculum, January 2025*)

3.4 Organization of the Industrial Work Practice Program

The implementation of the industrial work practice program (*Prakerin*) at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih has become an integral part of its vocational education strategy, aimed at equipping students with real-world work experience. Each year, more than 250 students from various departments participate in *Prakerin* across more than 100 partner companies, spanning sectors such as industry, hospitality, fashion design, and others. As stated in an interview with the principal of SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih:

ISSN 2776-5224

> The implementation of the *Prakerin* program is designed to be flexible, based on agreements between the school and the business and industrial sectors (DUDI). We adjust the schedule to ensure students gain maximum e Each year, there are two *Prakerin* periods, each lasting three months, ensuring that students are truly prepared to enter the workforce. (*Interview with the Principal, January 2025*)

Before *Prakerin* begins, the school maps and selects relevant DUDI partners in alignment with the students' fields of study. This process involves analyzing industry demands and matching them with student competencies. Additionally, the school updates its database of partner companies, including a review of existing Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), to ensure alignment with current work standards and training requirements. According to an interview with the Vice Principal for Curriculum:

> In organizing the *Prakerin* program, we ensure that the learning materials taught in school align with industry needs. Therefore, before students are sent to DUDI, they are equipped with both technical skills and essential soft skills. We also conduct joint evaluations with industry partners to ensure that the curriculum remains relevant and up to date. (*Interview with the Vice Principal for Curriculum, January 2025*).

The link and match curriculum program is a vocational education policy strategy designed to enhance the alignment between the competencies of vocational high school (SMK) graduates and the demands of the workforce, business sector, and industry (DUDI). Through this program, the SMK curriculum is developed based on the actual needs of industry, involving schools, industry partners, and the government in a collaborative process. The primary objective is to ensure that graduates possess both technical and non-technical skills that meet industry standards, thereby making them better prepared to enter the workforce (Yulianto et al., 2025). This program comprises several key components, including curriculum alignment, industrial work practice, teacher training, and the development of industry-based learning facilities such as the Teaching Factory (Islami, 2021). Effective implementation of the link and match program is believed to improve the competitiveness of SMK graduates and strengthen the quality of vocational education in Indonesia (Sutono & Par, 2020).

The implementation of the link and match program at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih is carried out systematically through various strategic steps, including curriculum alignment, the execution of industrial work practice (prakerin), the enhancement of teacher competencies through industry-based training, and competency assessments involving assessors from the industrial sector. Collaboration with various local and national industry partners is also a key element in supporting the alignment between school-based learning and industry needs. This program is designed to ensure that graduates not only master the technical aspects of their respective fields of expertise but also possess a strong work ethic and the ability to adapt to real-world work environments.

Curriculum alignment is the process of adjusting the content, objectives, and learning methods within educational institutions to meet the competency demands and the evolving needs of the labor xperience without disrupting the learning process at school. In the context of vocational education, this alignment aims to produce graduates with both technical and non-technical skills that comply with industry standards, enabling them to immediately adapt to workplace environments (Puspita et al., 2024). This process is crucial, as the gap between the education system and the labor market is often cited as a major factor contributing to the low absorption rate of vocational school graduates in the job market (Wardoyo et al., 2020).

At SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih, curriculum alignment is carried out in a structured and collaborative manner. The school develops an industry-based curriculum by involving various stakeholders, including the principal, vice principals, heads of study programs, vocational subject teachers, and industry partners. The curriculum is designed to be in sync with the needs of the business and industrial sectors (DUDI), covering aspects such as the formulation of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), mapping of internship locations (Prakerin), student training, and the development of competency-based assessment systems. Furthermore, the learning strategies apply project-based learning, problem-based learning, and discovery learning approaches, while also integrating industrial work culture into classroom instruction. The internship program (Prakerin) is scheduled using a block system in Grade XI, ensuring it does not disrupt the delivery of general academic subjects. These findings reinforce the results of the study by Khotimah and Abdan (2025), which stated that the involvement of industry in the design of vocational school curricula directly increases the relevance and effectiveness of learning. A similar conclusion was also emphasized by Maryam et al. (2025), who found that active collaboration between schools and the business-industrial sector (DUDI) in curriculum planning can produce graduates who meet the needs of the labor market. Therefore, the curriculum alignment model implemented at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih reflects a good practice that is both relevant and adaptive to current industrial developments.

Industrial Work Practice (Prakerin) is a part of the *link and match* program aimed at providing students with direct work experience in the business and industrial sectors. Through Prakerin, students can develop both technical competencies and soft skills aligned with real-world work standards, while also building mental preparedness and professionalism (Putranto, 2017). At SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih, the implementation of Prakerin is carried out systematically. Each year, more than 250 students are placed in over 100 pre-mapped industry partners. The process includes soft skills and technical training, student placement, and regular evaluation by supervising teachers. In addition, industry partners are required to appoint internal mentors who understand vocational students' competencies. Post-Prakerin reflections are conducted through evaluation seminars. Findings show that approximately 80% of students feel Prakerin enhanced their understanding of the professional world, and around 60% received job offers from their internship placements. These

findings align with Eliyani (2018), who stated that the Prakerin program enhances students' job readiness and opens direct employment opportunities. This is further supported by Iktarastiwi (2025), who demonstrated that Prakerin is effective in bridging the gap between the education system and industry, especially when supported by active industry mentors.

The implementation of the *link and match* program at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih is carried out comprehensively through five interrelated key aspects. First, curriculum alignment with the needs of the business and industrial sectors is conducted in a structured and collaborative manner to ensure that students' competencies meet industry standards. Second, training for vocational (productive) teachers is provided both internally and externally to ensure that teaching remains relevant to field practices. Third, the implementation of industrial work practice (*Prakerin*) offers students real-world experience, supported by professional and well-structured industry partners. Fourth, the establishment of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with industry stakeholders strengthens collaboration in various programs such as internships, training, and curriculum alignment. Fifth, the implementation of the Skills Competency Test (*Uji Kompetensi Keahlian*, UKK) serves as a benchmark for students' job readiness, ensuring that graduates possess industry-recognized certifications and are competitive in the labor market. Overall, these five aspects reflect SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih's strong commitment to producing competent graduates aligned with labor market demands.

4. CONCLUSION

The *link and match* program implemented at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih has been carried out systematically to prepare graduates for entering the workforce. Key elements of this program include curriculum alignment with industry needs, the implementation of internship programs, competency certification, and teacher training. The collaboration with the business and industrial sectors (DUDI), particularly in the fields of Hospitality and Fashion Design, enables students to gain practical experience aligned with labor market demands and provides opportunities for employment after graduation. SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih continues to strengthen the relevance of its programs in response to the rapid developments in industry. One necessary step for further development is expanding partnerships with more industry players and integrating the latest technologies into the curriculum and training activities. These efforts are expected to help address existing challenges, broaden students' opportunities, and prepare them for the increasingly technology-driven workforce. Through ongoing evaluation and improvement, the *link and match* program at SMK Negeri 1 Pengasih is expected to remain relevant and produce graduates who are not only technically competent but also adaptable to the dynamic changes of the industrial world.

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