



Constructing HEIs Performance: A CDA of the 2020–2021 MBKM Policy

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Abstract

This study analyses how higher education institutions (HEIs) performance is constructed within the 2020–2021 Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy, within the context of the strengthening of neoliberal ideology in Indonesian higher education. Using Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis approach, this study examines five policy documents and elaborates on them with interviews with five MBKM student participants. NVIVO was used as a tool to facilitate in-depth analysis of the analysed aspects. The results show that the MBKM policy frames HEIs as institutions that support economic growth through discursive representations that emphasise neoliberal logic, such as efficiency, competitiveness, and industrial relevance. Terms such as "independence" and "selling point" are widely used and operated symbolically, obscuring ideological dominance and limiting the autonomy of higher education actors. Indikator Kinerja Utama (IKU) system serves as an instrument for disciplining institutions through the performative construction of HEIs through a series of indicators aligned with neoliberal values. This study emphasise that higher education policy is not neutral but rather part of a social practice shaped by the interests of state actors, industry, and international financial institutions. Therefore, evaluation of HEIs performance needs to include an ideological reading, so that higher education can be returned to a liberating socio-academic role, rather than simply serving market interests.

Keywords: *Higher education institutions performance; MBKM; critical discourse analysis; neoliberalisation; education policy*

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Introduction

This article critically discusses the construction of HEIs performance in Indonesia as an implication of the neoliberalisation of higher education. Previous studies have largely relied on positivistic approaches that focus on the technical evaluation of established performance indicators, without delving deeper into the formation of performance itself. Using Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA), this study analyses the 2020-2021 Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy document. The 2020-2021 MBKM document was chosen as a case study because its substance and practice demonstrate alignment with neoliberal values within higher education. Furthermore, during this period, COVID-19

accelerated the home-based learning process, which supported the implementation of MBKM (Sutrisno, 2023). This article examines "How is higher education performance constructed within the context of the strengthening of neoliberal ideology in Indonesian higher education?"

The MBKM policy, introduced by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud²) under Nadiem Makarim, marked a significant shift in Indonesia's higher education landscape (Alawi et al., 2022; Fuadi & Aswita, 2021).

² In 2021, Kemendikbud changed its name to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek). This change is in accordance with *Peraturan Presiden Republik Indonesia Nomor 32 Tahun 2021 tentang Perubahan Atas Peraturan Presiden Nomor 68 Tahun 2019 tentang Organisasi Kementerian Negara*.



Through a series of strategic documents on higher education, particularly the MBKM, the government constructs HEIs performance that is not merely technical but also underlies the formation of HEIs ideological values that impact the function and orientation of the HEIs itself. This study explores how performance is discursively shaped to serve particular power interests in an era of neoliberal governance.

Performance in the context of higher education refers to the institution's effectiveness in achieving its stated goals (Ball & Halwachi, 1987). HEIs performance is not solely designed to measure its performance, but also to shape the institution's orientation to align with the interests of those in power, given that education is a fundamental instrument of power (OECD,

2019; Apple, 2013). Therefore, this research related to the analysis of power exercised by the regime.

Buku Panduan Indikator Kinerja Utama Perguruan Tinggi Negeri 2020 (IKU) demonstrates how Indonesian HEIs are increasingly oriented toward market interests. As stated in the introduction to the document, the IKU is established as a measuring tool for the implementation of the MBKM policy, as well as a performance contract between PTN and Kemendikbudristek. While MBKM promotes learning aligned with student interests, it also emphasise linkages with industry through credit-convertible programs (Simatupang & Yuhertiana, 2021). By tying funding to IKU achievement, the government indirectly compels HEIs to align with industrial



objectives, reflecting a deeper shift in policy discourse and strategy toward market-driven education.

As Olssen and Peters (2005) argue, MBKM reflects neoliberal educational policy through its work-based learning model, shifting HEIs toward vocational goals. Aligned with Harvey (2005), it functions as state intervention to sustain capital relations. Rizvi (2007) and Gormley (2018) add that corporate universities aim to align education with neoliberalism by producing adaptable, market-ready workers and universities as corporate entities tasked with workforce development, precisely how MBKM positions students.

This shift toward the "corporate university" model contains numerous problems, both paradigmatically and empirically (Susilo, 2021).

MBKM equates relevance with industry responsiveness, potentially narrowing HEIs educational mission. While improving employability is important, MBKM's focus on technical skills, coupled with the depoliticisation of students due to its emphasis on individual responsibility, neglects the importance of developing broader critical thinking and intellectual capacities (Airlangga, 2024; Irwansyah, 2024; Sihalo, 2024). Bughin (2018) highlights that future employment will prioritise critical thinking and leadership over purely technical skills areas.

Understanding MBKM requires attention not only to the document and its language, but also to the actors behind the policy, particularly Nadiem Makarim as the main policymaker, as



well as the socio-political regime during its formulation. Fairclough's CDA provides the framework to analyse discourse along three levels: text, discursive practice, and social practice (Fairclough, 2000; Handford, 2012). It emphasise how language functions as a political tool for achieving hegemonic objectives.

A critical tension lies in the discrepancy between MBKM's discursive claims and its empirical implementation. This is what Fairclough drew attention to in his book, *New Labour, New Language?*, which explains, in the context of Tony Blair's leadership, that policy objectives were conveyed through language that was at odds with the empirical reality of their implementation, thus creating a misalignment between discourse and outcomes (Fairclough, 2000).

Through CDA, this mismatch can be dissected to reveal the deepest layers of a policy's objectives.

Given the scarcity of critical studies on HEIs performance construction, this research fills a vital gap. Performance construction significantly shapes the future orientation of HEIs, either enabling critical, democratic education or entrenching market dependency. As we enter the 2024–2029 transition period, no other policy has substantially replaced the MBKM. Therefore, this study remains relevant today and urges a reassessment of the HEIs performance paradigm that aligns with the Tridharma values of HEIs and efforts to realise equitable and inclusive education.

The article is structured into five sections. The first

introduces the research background, question, and framework. The second outlines the methodology, highlighting Fairclough's CDA. The third presents findings through CDA's three dimensions. The fourth offers analysis and discussion in the context of neoliberal hegemony. The final section draws conclusions and theoretical reflections.

Construction of HEIs performance

HEIs performance refers to the ability of institutions to achieve predetermined goals through appropriate measurements. This measurement uses indicators as a guide to assess the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of HEIs (Ball & Halwachi, 1987; Sizer et al., 1992). Others define performance as the output

of HEIs in fulfilling their core missions, teaching, research, and social contribution, known in Indonesia as the Tridharma Perguruan Tinggi (Elton, 2004; Molas-Gallart & Martínez, 2007).

However, performance does not exist in a vacuum. The OECD (2019) emphasise that performance is socially constructed based on stakeholder interests, which makes these indicators constantly evolving. Social construction, as explained by Potter (1996) and Liebrucks (2001), involves the formation of knowledge and reality through discourse and interactions influenced by social, cultural, and historical contexts. Language plays a central role in this process. However, this is not limited to words, but encompasses broader aspects of communication and social



interaction (Liebrucks, 2001; Romainioli & McNamee, 2021).

Adopting the social construction process expressed by Berger and Luckmann (1966), the construction of PT performance itself involves three main stages, namely discourse formulation by authorities, institutionalisation via policies, and internalisation by HEIs. This is a hegemonic process shaped by power relations (Fairclough, 2013), where knowledge and power are intertwined (Foucault, 1980), and education becomes a tool of power (Apple, 2013). In the UK, language and policy justify neoliberal reforms (Mulder, 2011). Yet in Indonesia, research remains positivistic (Indriati et al., 2023; Sudaryo, 2015; Yoesdiarti et al., 2022), neglecting discursive power dynamics. Therefore, this

study uses CDA to dismantle the social constructions that have been built through an analysis of three dimensions. These three dimensions are not limited to texts, but encompass broader practices. This dismantling is possible by tracing the processes of social construction that occur.

Neoliberalisation and its implications for higher education

David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a political-economic ideology promoting individual freedom and entrepreneurialism within a framework emphasising private property, free markets, and minimal state intervention, even in sectors like education. Laruffa (2024) critiques this idea of "minimisation," arguing instead that neoliberalism redefines the state's role. Neoliberalism's rise traces



back to the 1970s economic crisis, where critiques from Hayek and Friedman challenged Keynesianism, prompting a shift toward deregulation and privatisation under leaders like Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s (Harvey, 2005; Davies & Bansel, 2007). This ideology, which has taken various forms, has spread globally with the help of global institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

World Bank and IMF promoted neoliberalism via policies like the Washington Consensus, mandating deregulation, trade liberalisation, and reduced social spending as conditions for financial assistance (Saad-Filho & Johnston, 2005). These institutions became not only funders but global knowledge producers (Davies

& Bansel, 2007; Klees, 2020). Klees (2020) critiquing their monopolisation of global educational narratives.

This expansion restructured state-private-society relations, marketising education and health sectors (Lakes & Carter, 2011). Public education, once seen as a common good, was reframed under privatisation logic (Davies & Bansel, 2007). In education, neoliberalism manifests as “new managerialism,” emphasising efficiency, accountability, and quantifiable outcomes (Apple, 2001). HEIs performance shifted to align with productivity and market relevance, transforming universities into corporations (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Giroux, 2014).

Consequently, universities now prioritise economically measurable outcomes over



critical thinking or civic responsibility. Students are reframed as consumers, and universities as knowledge vendors (Ball, 2012; Zhang, 2024). Ball (2012) highlights the emergence of "performativity", namely performance targets shaping institutional and academic behavior to fit market logics. Shore and Wright (2017) notes this shift marginalises research and teaching, emphasising profit motives.

Neoliberalism also reshaped academic research, shifting focus from curiosity-driven to market-driven studies due to funding pressures (Münch, 2014). This trend erodes academic values and causes epistemological crises in HEIs (Morley, 2024; Doidge et al., 2020). Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg (2017) and Lynch (2014) observed this global turn toward

consumerism in education. Brown (2015) and Connell (2019) explain that neoliberal rationality has infiltrated curriculum standardisation and institutional flexibility to benefit industry. Practices like auditing, rankings, and benchmarking further blur lines between HEIs and corporations (Shore & Wright, 2017).

Such mechanisms prepare flexible workforces for global market demands (Harvey, 2005). Levidow (2002) argues that HEIs become client-serving institutions³, stifling critical thought and civic engagement (Susilo, 2021; Wong, 2021). Lakes (2011) notes this learning environment replaces civic education with market-

³ The term "client-serving institutions" refers to universities that prioritise the needs of industry and consumers. In this case, through neoliberalisation in education, education is transformed into a commodity, with students and industry as consumers (Levidow, 2002).



aligned individualism and entrepreneurial values.

In Indonesia, the influence of global neoliberalism is evident in HEIs performance construction (Susilo, 2021). Airlangga (2024) identifies a post-reform shift toward market-driven education, especially with Law No. 12 of 2012, passed under World Bank loan conditions requiring reforms. The enactment of this regulation became a chain of neoliberalisation that began with the signing of the first letter of Intent (LoI) between the Indonesian Government and the IMF on October 31, 1997. In this LoI, the IMF required privatisation and deregulation as prerequisites for a US\$9.1 billion loan (IMF, 1997). Interestingly, according to Rosser (2016), the neoliberalisation process in Indonesia was hampered

and strongly influenced by domestic political forces. This requires further analysis by examining the discourse aspect in more depth to clearly understand how the neoliberalisation process in higher education in Indonesia.

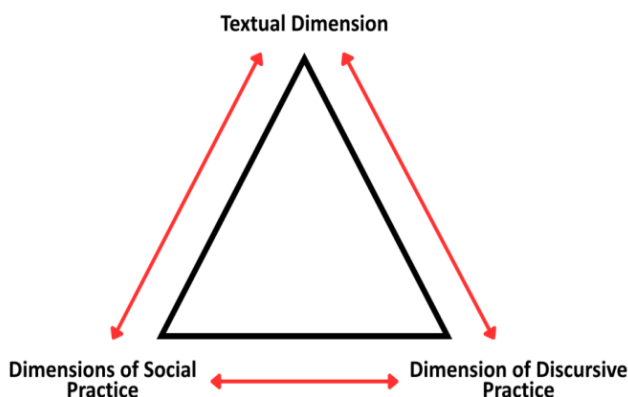
This neoliberalisation continued with the emergence of IKU document, which emphasise market-oriented performance indicators like graduate employability, industry partnerships, and non-government revenue. Gaus (2016) critiques these indicators for sidelining humanistic aspects of teaching and research in favor of quantifiable outcomes. This evolution signals the rise of corporate universities, market-embedded, yet autonomous from state control (Barry et al., 1996).

Theoretical approach and operationalisation

This study employs Fairclough's (2013) CDA framework, comprising text, discursive practice, and social practice, to analyse how MBKM policy discourse reshapes HEI performance within a neoliberal context. This approach enables the identification of ideologies and power relations embedded in education policy (Mulderigg, 2011). To operationalise the framework,

the researcher developed a matrix detailing analytical aspects, focal points, and key guiding questions derived from Fairclough's three dimensions and adapted to the study's hypothesis regarding neoliberal tendencies in the policy. Importantly, these dimensions are not linear but dialectical, each influencing and shaping the others (Fairclough, 2013). The dialectical relationship across dimensions is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Relationship between dimensions



Dimension 1: textual analysis

Analysis Aspects	Focus of Analysis	Operational Questions
Vocabulary	Choice of words and terms used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What keywords are dominant in the text? • How are key concepts defined?
Metaphor	Use of figures of speech (How the subject is represented)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What metaphor is used to describe HEIs? • How is higher education conceptualised?
Grammar	Sentence structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does sentence structure form power relations? • Who is positioned as an active/passive actor? • What modalities are used?
Cohesion	The relationship between sentences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are ideas connected and organised? • How is the argument constructed?



Dimension 2: analysis of discursive practices

Analysis Aspects	Focus of Analysis	Operational Questions
Text Production	Text creation process	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who produced the text?• How does the background of policy makers influence discourse?• What is the institutional context of text production?
Text Distribution	Spread of discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How is the text distributed?• Who is the target audience?• What media is used?
Text Consumption	Reception of discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How is the text interpreted?• How did universities, lecturers, and students respond?

Dimension 3: analysis of social practices

Analysis Aspects	Focus of Analysis	Operational Questions
Ideological Context	Dominant ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What ideology underlies the discourse? • What values are promoted? • How is neoliberalism articulated?
Power Relations	Power relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What power relations are formed/maintained? • How does the power operate through the performance indicators outlined in the document?
Historical Context	Development of discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the development of the discourse on HEIs performance? • How does it compare with previous policies? • How does it relate to global trends?



This qualitative research adopts a critical paradigm using Norman Fairclough's (2013) CDA to examine the construction of performance in Indonesian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) within the context of the MBKM policy. MBKM serves as a case study illustrating the growing influence of neoliberal discourse in Indonesian higher education. The primary objective is to analyse how HEIs' performance is discursively constructed in alignment with neoliberal ideology.

The study analyses five key MBKM policy documents issued between 2020 and 2021, years in which foundational policies were introduced. These five documents are fundamental documents related to MBKM policy and form part of a series of documents

published at the beginning of MBKM implementation. These documents were selected for their discursive significance and influence on higher education transformation. The researcher views these five documents as an appropriate entry point for examining the discourse constructed within MBKM policy. Referring to Mayr and Machin (2023), who stated that texts or documents are often selected based on analytical interests, where researcher typically observe prevailing ideologies. CDA often prioritises in-depth elaboration over generalisation, resulting in analyses often selecting only a small number of texts within the documents (Mayr & Machin, 2023).

The documents analysed originate from authoritative institutions central to education policymaking

in Indonesia. Following Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the analysis examines textual features, discursive practices (text production and consumption), and social practices that link discourse to wider socio-political structures (Handford, 2012; Fairclough, 2013). CDA is appropriate here because it exposes embedded power relations that generate "social wrongs" within policy discourse.

NVivo was used to assist the analysis of the five documents. Beyond close reading, the researcher identified the dominance of neoliberal terminology through a deductive coding process. Neoliberalism in higher education typically involves industry alignment, performativity, competitive logic, and the framing

of students as human resources. Based on these characteristics, the researcher identified relevant keywords signalling neoliberal discourse in MBKM policies and constructed a query coding matrix that considered the contextual use of these terms across the documents.

To enhance validity and minimise researcher bias, this study employed data source triangulation by analysing diverse primary, strategic, and technical documents (Creswell, 2021). Methodological triangulation was also conducted through online interviews with five MBKM student participants from different academic clusters between 6–15 June 2025. These interviews aimed to verify gaps between policy narratives and actual implementation, thereby strengthening the analysis.



All informants provided consent. Nevertheless, the researcher acknowledges limitations due to the small sample size and the exclusive involvement of UGM students. Accordingly, the interview findings function as supplementary data used primarily to illustrate how discourse manifests in broader practice.

Table 1. Documents studied

Document List	Document Name
Document 1	Permenristekdikti No. 13 Tahun 2015 ⁴
Document 2	Rencana Strategis Dikti Tahun 2020-2024 ⁵
Document 3	Buku Panduan Indikator Kinerja Utama Perguruan Tinggi Negeri (2020) ⁶
Document 4	Buku Panduan MBKM 2020 ⁷
Document 5	Buku Panduan MSIB 2021 ⁸

4 The document was published on May 8, 2015.

5 The original name of the document is Permendikbud Nomor 22 Tahun 2020 tentang Rencana Strategis Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan (Renstra Kemdikbud) Tahun 2020-2024. It was published on June 3, 2020.

6 The original name of the document is Keputusan Nomor 754/P/2020. It was published on August 5, 2020.

7 The document was published on April 28, 2020.

8 The document was published on May 25, 2021.

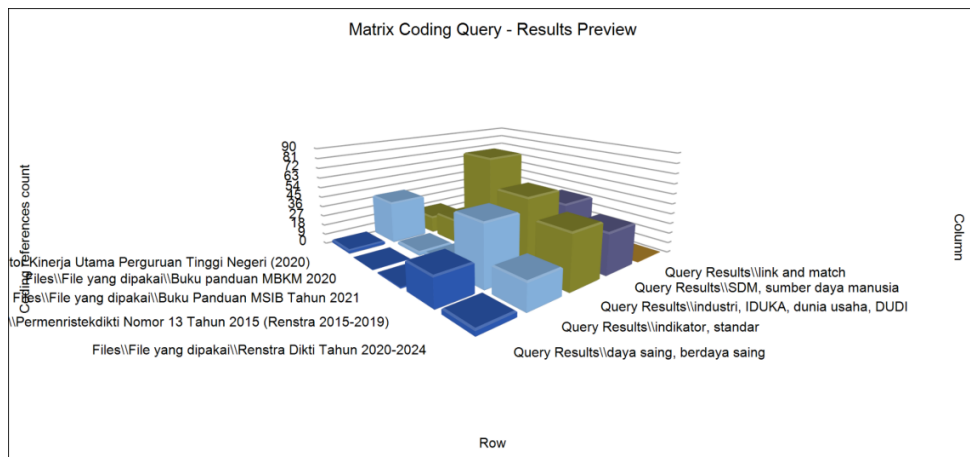
Result

Higher education policy document: the discourse chain of HEIs performance construction

The analysis was conducted using Norman Fairclough's (2013) CDA, presented in sequence from textual dimensions, discursive practices, and social

practices. In the process, the researcher used NVIVO as a tool to facilitate in-depth analysis of the analysed aspects, the matrix is shown in figure 2. This analysis of the findings aims to reveal how policy documents represent the interests of policy makers in building and maintaining power relations ideologically (Taylor, 2004).

Figure 2. Matrix coding query





a. Dimension 1: textual analysis findings

Textual analysis examines linguistic features, namely vocabulary, metaphors, grammar, and cohesion in policy documents. According to Fairclough (2013), CDA reveals how language constructs social reality, reinforces ideology, and maintains power structures. In this context, the textual dimension serves to highlight how the industrialisation of education is institutionalised through discourse.

There are three findings in this textual dimension. First, a fundamental shift is evident, with HEIs being redefined from a knowledge institution to a supporting entity within industry. Document 1 emphasises contributions to research related to industry and economic development, while Documents 2 to 5

underscore the responsibility of HEIs in producing human resources aligned with industrial demands. Second, there is a simplification of the important role of HEIs by reframing it as a process of economic production, consistent with the logic of performativity. Third, the metaphors used demonstrate policymakers' efforts to link HEIs to the industrial sector. Overall, the findings in the textual dimension confirm that neoliberal discourse is embedded in the linguistic structure of this policy.

• Vocabulary

Across all five documents, industry-oriented terminology dominates. In Document 1, the terms “industry” and “business world” appear 64 times, illustrating this through statements like:



"And the industry is asking the Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education to provide production equipment with the latest technology... skilled human resources, support for increasing productivity, and risk sharing." (Page 10)

This quote positions HEIs as suppliers of labor and technology for the industrial sector. Similarly, Document 2 includes the terms "industry" and "DU/DI" 48 times, and "HR" 37 times:

"Liberating educational programs... to become industry-relevant programs." (Page 12)

"Building hard-working human resources... supported by global

industry and talent collaboration." (Page 20)

Document 3 frequently mentions "indicator" and "standard," reinforcing the performativity paradigm. Documents 4 and 5 stress the concept of "link and match", such as:

"Link and match not only with the industrial world and the world of work but also with the rapidly changing future." (Document 4, Page 2)

"Key Performance Indicators are aimed at increasing the relevance of Higher Education to IDUKA (Industry, Business World and World of Work)." (Document 5, Page 4).

This vocabulary reflects the systemic alignment of



higher education institutions with industry needs.

- **Metaphor**

The findings of the cohesion section indicate a shift in the meaning of Tridharma in document 2 from the definition of Law No. 12 of 2012, "education, research, and community service" to "...carrying out the Tridharma of HEIs, namely as a research university, teaching university, or vocational university." (Page 23). This indicates an effort to change the orientation of HEIs. In document 3, this change in orientation is explained through the following metaphor:

*"...universities will
accelerate the
transformation of
higher education so
that it becomes a*

*catalyst for economic
transformation that wins
the global battle in the
digital era..." (Page 5)*

*"The 'Gold Standard'
target is the target for
each Key Performance
Indicator... regulated by
a separate regulation,
decree, circular or
guideline." (Page 35)*

The metaphor of "winning the global battle" shows the dominance of the logic of competition which is in line with the concept of *new managerialism* in higher education (Apple, 2001). Meanwhile, the "gold standard" emphasises indicator-based performativity (Ball, 2012). Document 5 displays the commodification of students through metaphors such as, "...increase 'selling value' and expand the market." (Page



15) and "...quality talents, ready to be picked..." (Page 9). The terms "selling value" and "ready to be picked" mark the commodification of students who are made into *human capital* and transactional relations between HEIs and industry.

The consistent use of metaphors that point to neoliberal ideology in document 2 and its derivatives, namely documents 3 and 5, demonstrates a pattern of internalisation of neoliberalism in higher education documents. However, it must be acknowledged that the terms used in each document are not always the same, although they share a similar orientation, emphasising the relevance of HEIs to industry, logic of performativity, and students as human resources.

• Grammar

Grammatical constructions reflect power hierarchies. Document 1 positions the DPR as an authoritative agent, *"The House of Representatives (DPR) demands that the Kemenristekdikti prepare the technology needed by industry and society."* (Page 10). This construction positions the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education as a passive subject fulfilling industry demands. In Document 3, causal logic is used to rationalise the policy's impact:

"Finally, by establishing eight Key Performance Indicators, universities will accelerate the transformation of higher education, thereby becoming



catalysts for economic transformation that win the global battle in the digital era." (Page 5)

Here, IKU are framed as both drivers and success metrics, referring to economic impact. Document 5 uses the imperative modality, *"The campus must also stop focusing on academic and internal campus issues alone."* (Page 9). The phrase "must stop" indicates the pressure to change the orientation of PT from academic to industrial needs.

- **Cohesion**

The cohesion findings show a linear argument that strengthens the relationship between higher education and the economy. In document 1, there is the sentence, *"...national competitiveness is the contribution of science*

and technology and higher education to the economy..." (Page 21). This frame "competitiveness" solely in economic terms, neglecting social values. Document 3 reinforces this linear, performative logic, *"...eight Key Performance Indicators... to be a catalyst for economic transformation that wins the global battle..."* (Page 5). The cohesion findings confirm that HEIs role is discursively aligned with market-driven goals.

b. Dimension 2: findings of the analysis of discursive practices

This dimension analyses the processes behind the production, distribution, and consumption of policy texts, situating them within broader power structures. This dimension reveals that

the internalisation of neoliberal values in higher education policy is the result of deliberate institutional processes, rather than emerging spontaneously.

There are three main findings. First, the production of the texts in these five documents is rooted in Law No. 12 of 2012, which was shaped by the influence of the World Bank and the IMF in directing higher education towards market and global competitiveness. Second, the distribution of Documents 4 and 5 was facilitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which catalysed the digitalisation of learning and program outreach. Third, in terms of consumption, these texts received mixed reactions, ranging from criticism of their neoliberal tendencies to confusion and concern over their implementation.

These findings confirm that neoliberal logic is deeply embedded in MBKM.

• Text production

The MBKM policy reflects a corporate-oriented perspective, strongly influenced by Nadiem Makarim's background as CEO of Gojek (Sukataman et al., 2023). His public remarks from 2019–2023 consistently emphasise HEI–industry alignment:

"Second, relevance is crucial. The President always emphasise the importance of a link and match between industry and educational institutions. The skills we learn must be relevant." (Prabowo, 2019).

"The stronger the collaboration between



the world of education and the world of business, the more relevant our education will be to real-world needs." (Pebrianto, 2022).

"We've managed to find incentives that ultimately work. How to attract industry to invest in HEIs." (Habibah, 2023a).

These statements also demonstrate that the MBKM policy aligns with President Joko Widodo's directive to Nadiem Makarim at the beginning of his term in 2019 to consistently establish linkages and match between industry and educational institutions (Prabowo, 2019). Furthermore, all five documents cite Law No. 12 of 2012 as their legal basis. According to Airlangga (2024),

this law is a requirement related to a World Bank loan project through Bappenas, which aims to reform higher education. Document 1 reinforces this by portraying Bappenas as the guiding actor in linking higher education to economic development.

- **Text distribution**

The MBKM policy was launched in January 2020, followed by the publication of its guidebook in April. Coinciding with the pandemic, the shift to online learning allowed rapid digital dissemination. The "Merdeka Belajar" YouTube series produced by the Kemendikbudristek, comprising 26 episodes, targeted HEIs, lecturers, and students (Kemendikbud, 2020). As of the writing of this research, the 26 episodes have reached

3,773,400 viewers. Additionally, the official website kampusmerdeka.kemdikbud.go.id served as a centralised information hub for MBKM programs.

• Text consumption

The entire document, particularly those related to the MBKM, has drawn mixed responses from various parties. Hatmanto et al. (2023) found that most of the 12 lecturers surveyed viewed the MBKM as imbued with neoliberal ideology. Some supported the program as long as it promoted students' moral values and integrity. The Rector of Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB), Prof. Reini Wirahadikusumah, supported the spirit of independent learning but criticised the IKU for being too focused on learning, even though universities are also

responsible for research and community service.

Interviews with Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) students revealed dissatisfaction with the implementation of the MBKM. AYS stated, *"The campus is not there to fulfill students' rights. The campus only requires it without facilitating it."* (Interview with AYS, UGM agro-cluster student, 6 June 2025). While students generally appreciated the program, they emphasised the need to maintain on-campus lectures to maintain the academic experience. RB observed, *"Students end up busy with external matters outside of campus, whether internships or other types of MBKM."* (Interview with RB, UGM social sciences cluster student, 6 June 2025). Meanwhile, RA criticised the ideological shift, stating, *"I criticise the*

Tridharma of HEIs because the campus' orientation has shifted to follow market needs. Students are being molded into laborers." (Interview with RA, UGM agro-cluster student, 15 June 2025).

c. Dimension 3: findings of social practice analysis

The analysis of social practices situates discourse within broader ideological and historical power structures. Referring to Fairclough (2013) and Munfarida (2014), social practices are dialectical, not only reflecting but also shaping reality. This section is crucial for uncovering the ideological and political underpinnings of the construction of HEIs performance, which operates as a contested arena of power.

There are three main findings. Ideologically, neoliberalism is hegemonised and normalised as inevitable;

in terms of power, industry and Kemendikbudristek dominate, while higher education is subordinated and students are most impacted. Historically, neoliberal influence in Indonesian higher education policy has long and evolving roots. Together, these findings confirm that social practices surrounding HEIs performance are grounded in and reproduce neoliberal logic.

• Ideological context

These five documents reinforce neoliberal hegemony in Indonesian higher education. Globalisation is framed as a justification for reform, where transformation is directed toward global competition and economic integration. Document 5 explicitly positions the transformation of higher education as essential to

the role of the economy in the context of globalisation. Harvey (2005) views globalisation as a tool for spreading neoliberal discourse.

Document 3 exemplifies what Ball (2012) calls performativity, a view that academic practices are shaped by market logic through quantifiable indicators. IKU, which serves as the MBKM success metric, prioritises alignment with industry. One of the IKU principles is, *"Increasing the relevance of higher education to the needs of industry, the business world, and the world of work."* This emphasis indicates a profound ideological shift in which neoliberalism is not questioned but viewed as a rational and necessary evolution. These documents normalise market logic in higher education,

transforming the meaning of the Tridharma while disciplining institutions through performance-based control.

• Power relations

The MBKM documents portray universities as entities that must adapt to industry demands. Document 3 emphasises that university quality is measured based on industry relevance. Document 1, through its grammatical structure, reveals top-down control by institutions such as the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI), Kemenkeu, and Bappenas. This demonstrates the unequal power relations between institutions and illustrates that higher education policy is influenced by agendas outside the Tridharma of Higher Education.



A prominent mechanism is a performance-linked funding model through three schemes: competitive funds, matching funds, and IKU incentives (Kemendikbud, 2020). The competitive funds offer up to IDR 500 billion to universities that meet industry-aligned indicators, encourage partnerships with global technology companies, and categorise universities into leagues. Matching funds provide up to IDR 250 billion to universities that collaborate with industry on Tridharma-based innovation. IKU incentives offer additional resources solely tied to indicator achievement.

These mechanisms indicate that the promise of "independence" in the MBKM policy is constrained by industry-oriented benchmarks. The notion of

"collaboration" is equated with intercampus "competition", which reinforces market values and uses student participation in the MBKM program as an indicator of success.

Interviews with students confirm this. Universities employ two main approaches: some departments require MBKM, while others provide incentives in the form of academic stipends. However, both leave students with little choice. One student noted, *"The department requires (participating in MBKM), but it is not facilitated and instead makes it difficult."* (Interview with AA, UGM social sciences cluster student, 4 June 2025). These reflect the pressure on students to meet institutional metrics, often without adequate support.

• Historical context

All five documents derive from Law No. 12 of 2012; itself a requirement of a World Bank loan project aimed at higher education reform. Neoliberal policies in education have existed since the post-New Order era, particularly following IMF and World Bank loan conditions mandating structural adjustments (Airlangga, 2024). This was reflected in the first Letter of Intent (LoI) between the Indonesian Government and the IMF on October 31, 1997. In this LoI, the IMF required structural adjustment, privatization, and deregulation as prerequisites for a US\$9.1 billion loan (IMF, 1997). The WTO's classification of education as a tradable service further accelerated liberalisation (Gaus, 2019).

As a WTO member since 1995, Indonesia introduced Badan Hukum Milik Negara (BHMN) status through Peraturan Pemerintah Nomor 61 Tahun 1999 tentang Penetapan Perguruan Tinggi Negeri sebagai Badan Hukum, reducing state funding and increasing tuition. This law evolved into Law No. 9/2009 on Badan Hukum Pendidikan (BHP), later replaced by Law No. 12/2012, which formalised market orientation in HEI governance (Gaus, 2019). Since then, market logic has become embedded in policy, culminating in the MBKM program launched in 2020, which institutionalised neoliberal discourse in learning processes. Neoliberal social practices thus continue in Indonesian higher education and continue to develop to this day.



Analysis and discussion

Through Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, textual, discursive practices, and social practices, this study reveals the hegemony of neoliberalism in higher education, evident in policy documents shaping HEIs performance. These findings affirm that constructing performance serves to massify neoliberal values. This analysis further explores such findings.

Overall, the five examined policy documents demonstrate an intentional shift in HEIs performance toward market-oriented goals. Traditionally, the Tridharma of HEIs emphasised *education, research, and community service*. However, current documents reorient this mission by redefining institutional identity as a

research university, teaching university, or vocational university. This redefinition is implemented through the MBKM policy, which prioritises strengthening university-industry relations. The emphasis is on producing graduates aligned with industrial needs and promoting HEIs' economic contributions. This marks a paradigmatic shift from academic integrity to market responsiveness in shaping institutional goals and higher education performance.

Commodification of higher education: idealism and pragmatism

HEIs performance, once rooted in social and academic values, has been reduced to quantifiable outcomes due to ongoing reconstruction processes.



This transformation, driven by neoliberal discourse, shifts HEIs toward pragmatic and economic goals, as seen in the MBKM policy and the development of IKU. In this neoliberal framework, education becomes an investment rather than a right, and HEIs transition from spaces of critical inquiry to institutions that produce labor tailored to industrial needs.

This transformation is discursively constructed using industrial metaphors and terminology. Phrases such as “link and match,” “ready to be picked,” “catalyst for economic transformation,” and “selling point” shape rather than simply describe reality (Fairclough, 2000). The repeated use of such linguistic features in official documents normalises market logic within higher education.

Furthermore, in practice, the government disciplines HEIs by introducing IKU. IKU serve as a tool to measure and encourage the transformation of higher education into economic drivers. According to Ball (2012), IKU which embodies performativity, is an essential form of neoliberal governance that will result in compliance and productivity without depth. Through this mechanism, the state substitutes active guidance with comparative evaluation. Ball (2012) and Ozga (2008) refer to this phenomenon as the “terrors of performativity” and “regime of numbers,” in which institutions are forced to meet externally imposed targets, undermining intrinsic academic values.

Consequently, HEIs prioritise quantitative achievements over educational quality. They are reoriented



into capitalist production units, where performance indicators act as disciplinary tools. Institutions meeting IKU targets receive financial incentives, while others are deprived of support. HEIs performance thus becomes a function of external policy compliance, rather than a reflection of academic substance and societal contribution.

Policy language representation for industrial interests

The construction of HEIs performance through policy documents is inseparable from the broader configuration of power. These policies reflect not only the interests of national policymakers but also the influence of global discourses and institutional powers like the World Bank and WTO.

Nadiem Makarim's corporate background and consistent public statements regarding strengthening education's relationship with industry signal a clear neoliberal orientation in shaping higher education.

This neoliberal logic commodifies education into an economic service (Gaus, 2016), positioning students as ready-to-use market products and HEIs as service providers. Mechanisms such as internship-to-credit conversion and performance indicators assessing "product quality" illustrate this shift. Commodification is reinforced through ambiguous yet reality-shaping language, including positive terms like "learning freedom," "freedom," and "answering the challenges of HEIs." Although framed as autonomy, these terms accompany obligations

for HEIs to meet industry-aligned indicators.

In its dissemination, the government consistently promotes “independence” to present HEIs as globally competitive (Atsnan, 2020; Habibah, 2023b; Kemendikbud, 2020). Metaphors such as “link and match” and “ready to work” attempt to construct a new social reality, reflecting how language actively shapes socio-political relations (Romaioli & McNamee, 2021). As Harvey (2005) and Laruffa (2024) argue, such rhetoric ultimately obscures neoliberal efforts to minimise and redefine the state’s role in higher education.

At the level of social practice, this articulation of “independence” reveals neoliberal hegemony, positioning HEIs not as spaces of critical knowledge,

but as industrial suppliers. The term acts as symbolic subjugation (Bourdieu, 1991), evident in student interviews. One student noted, *“If we want to be comfortable, we have to be willing to be pressured,”* reflecting an internalisation of systemic pressure as personal responsibility (Interview with AYS, UGM agricultural cluster students, 6 June 2025).

Ultimately, the policy demonstrates that language is a political instrument. As Fairclough (2000) notes, it is used by power-holders to secure compliance. In the MBKM policy, this occurs through repeated textual and practical strategies emphasising industry alignment. Failure to read policy as interest-laden discourse risks steering HEIs and students toward compliance that distances higher education



from its critical and emancipatory mission.

Internalisation of neoliberal values in higher education: from critical reasoning to economist reasoning

The MBKM policy presents a dilemma in Indonesian higher education. While policy makers frame it as transformative, it simultaneously positions HEIs to serve industrial interests through indicators embedded with neoliberal values. From Fairclough's (2013) CDA perspective, this reflects ideological hegemony in which neoliberal norms are naturalised through policy language.

This tension emerges as intrinsic academic values, such as freedom, autonomy, and social commitment, are replaced by market relevance and global competitiveness

through IKUs. This shift exemplifies Ball's (2012) "terror of performativity," where universities pursue measurable targets rather than value-based goals. Consequently, universities lose autonomy and critical function, transforming students into job-ready workers and HEIs into producers, aligning with IKUs' portrayal of universities as "catalysts for economic transformation" and Rizvi's (2007) view of education as a commodity valued for economic output.

Although some academics perceive the MBKM performance framework as beneficial, as reflected in student remarks that it "*Helps to increase competitiveness*" (Interview with AYS, UGM agro cluster student, 7 June 2025), "*Helping participants to understand the dynamics of*

the world of work." (Interview with AF, UGM science and technology cluster student, 15 June 2025), and a lecturer's view that it enables inviting industry professionals to motivate students (Hatmanto et al., 2023), a key question persists: does this structure genuinely address systemic problems, or does it distance universities from their civilising role by failing to sustain critical academic spaces? Within existing power relations, students remain the most disadvantaged actors in the chain extending from global institutional interests to HEIs.

Returning to the Tridharma of HEIs, teaching, research, and service, universities are expected to foster civilisational advancement. Yet, as one participant reflected, *"Students end up being busy with external activities outside of campus,*

whether it's internships or other types of MBKM." (Interview with RB, UGM social studies student, 8 June 2025). This shows how MBKM distances students from campus academic life, replacing critical engagement with pragmatic, industry-oriented routines.

This shift weakens the cultivation of critical thinking and fosters increasingly individualistic orientations. Consistent with Susilo (2021), such individualisation reflects systemic state efforts to depoliticise the academic community. Thus, critical reflection is needed to reimagine HEIs not as market servants but as emancipatory spaces advancing public interest and critical thought. Reform requires evaluating success beyond economic indicators to include social justice and humanity, enabling higher education to contribute



to sustainable national progress.

This challenge is not merely technical but deeply ideological and political. Fairclough (2000) argues that those affected by this need to assess it as a political issue. This is where critical discourse analysis can play a role in helping explain the problems that exist for those affected who are unaware of the reasons why they feel powerless. Ultimately, this is a democratic concern requiring collaboration among the state, HEIs, and civil society to resist the performance trap and rebuild an equitable, sustainable, public-oriented higher education system.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates how the MBKM policy serves as a discursive tool that reinforces neoliberal ideology, reconstructing the

performance of Indonesian HEIs based on market logic, industry relevance, and performative metrics. Using Fairclough's CDA, this article reveals that policy documents strategically use terms such as "independence" and "catalyst" to normalise this shift, so that commodifying education, reducing academic autonomy, and subordinating HEIs' social mission to economic utility, thus minimising and redefining the role of the state. This article contributes to a critical analysis that reveals the vested interests of those in power to internalise values inconsistent with the Tridharma of HEIs.

However, this article also has several limitations. This study's focus on a single policy case, MBKM, limits the generalisability of its conclusions across educational contexts.

Furthermore, while interviews with student participants provide valuable grassroots insights, the small sample size (N=5) from a single university limits the empirical scope of the discourse consumption analysis. Therefore, future research should utilise larger and more diverse samples to examine the varying interpretations and impacts of these policies across different types of HEIs and stakeholder groups.

Based on this research, we propose two targeted directions for future research. First, it is necessary to explore the short- and long-term impacts of the neoliberal regime on educational quality, academic freedom, and graduate contributions. Second, researchers should

engage in the constructive task of designing and proposing alternative performance frameworks rooted in the public interest and the intrinsic values of the Tridharma, thus providing a concrete countermodel to the current market-oriented paradigm. For academics and practitioners, this article underscores the need to integrate CDA into education policy evaluation so that evaluations can address often-obscured interests. For the government, this article calls for a serious rethink to ensure that HEIs remain spaces for fostering critical reasoning, social awareness, and the advancement of civilisation.



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Appendix

Matrix coding query

	Minister of Research, Technology and Higher Education Regulation Number 13 of 2015 (2015-2019 Strategic Plan)	Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020- 2024
competitiveness, competitiveness	26	6
indicators, standards	54	24
industry, IDUKA, business world, DUDI	64	48
HR, human resources	50	37
link and match	0	0



Matrix coding query

	Key Performance Indicators Guidebook for State Universities (2020)	MBKM 2020 guidebook	MSIB Handbook Year 2021
competitiveness, competitiveness	4	0	1
indicators, standards	39	4	7
industry, IDUKA, business world, DUDI	16	22	88
HR, human resources	3	2	1
link and match	0	2	2