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Merdeka Belajar: the Real Learning Needs of Students, Teachers, and Institutions Related to Demands for Independent Learning Innovation

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify real learning needs to meet the requirements of the 'Merdeka Belajar' [Freedom of Learning] concept initiated by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture. This survey revealed the urgent needs of students, teachers, and institutions regarding implementing the 'Freedom of Learning' concept, as indicated by the responses of 1,935 teachers and students from various secondary schools in DKI Jakarta who completed self-designed questionnaires. These needs included freedom from formalities, adequate infrastructure, evaluation assessment systems aligned with the principle of free education, and full support from all stakeholders, particularly local government. The "Freedom of Learning" implications for government policies are also discussed.

Keywords: education formalities, educational policy, educational infrastructure, freedom of learning, independent learning innovation, merdeka belajar

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1. Introduction

At the very least, the 'Merdeka Belajar' [Freedom of Learning] concept proposed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemdikbudristek), Republic of Indonesia, has made Indonesian education more innovative. This concept reveals a horizon for Indonesian education that can dismantle the existing educational paradigm, namely formal education. According to Sisk (2014), education must begin with changing the mind, whereas inner transformation must begin with opening up and even welcoming the inevitable creative bursts available to everyone. Kemdikbudristek is a response to the long-standing phenomenon of the learning crisis experienced by the Indonesian people. In addition, learning outcomes have not improved over the past fifteen to twenty years, and regional achievement disparities exist (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). Not coincidentally, the COVID-19 pandemic has created opportunities for these ideas to be implemented in Indonesia's national education system, which was initially designed to address the learning gaps caused by the pandemic. Seventy-seven years ago, if independence was associated with the birth of the Indonesian nation, the principles of independence should have been incorporated into the education system. When the Indonesian people experienced a happy moment and were safely delivered to the

front door of independence, Indonesia should have begun to exercise its independence in education. According to Oleksiyenko and Jackson (2021), what has happened to freedom of speech, teaching, and learning across diverse subject positions and educational cultures is mainly unknown. Several factors, most notably an unhealthy political factor, appear to have prevented the realization of educational freedom up to this point. It is addressed in the findings section.

Initiated in December 2019, the 'Freedom of Learning' concept intends to support the 'world-class education' plan in 2025 (Kemendikbud, 2020). Although optimism is necessary to achieve this goal, the government and educational institutions must not ignore empirical evidence about obstacles and difficulties. They initiated the condition of the code of ethics for teacher professionalism eight (8) years ago, which continues to be a perennial issue. McKenzie et al. (2014) reported that 10% of Indonesian teachers are frequently absent from school, and 13% are in school but do not live and teach in the classroom, resulting in an approximate 19% teacher omission rate. Then, numerous evaluations of Indonesia's educational performance indicate there is still a substantial distance to travel before 2025 (Rosser, 2018). Rosser notes that the World Bank (2020) reports that most Indonesian students do not meet national learning objectives. Two (2) of the six (6) recommendations made by the World Bank are that the government should prioritize the principle of learning for all and assess and close the learning gap. It is why UNICEF-UNESCO contends that 12,3 years of school-ing in Indonesia is equivalent to only 7,9 years of study (UNICEF-UNESCO, 2021). In other words, the time spent in school is substantial, but the knowledge and skills

gained are negligible or equivalent to a loss of 4.4 years of learning time.

In recent years, the education system in Indonesia has undergone significant transformations, particularly in terms of access to education. However, Rossen et al. (2021) report that the improvement has little effect on learning outcomes. The achievement of minimal learning outcomes can be influenced by several factors, including the dominant focus of learning activities in the classroom, mainly if the amount is excessive and students are not as committed to learning. Karim (2021) and Madhakomala et al. (2022) found that the Indonesian government should take into account several essential factors regarding the education system's problems, including the problem of a large number of students in one class, the low quality of school facilities and infrastructure as well as access to better education, unbalanced education output, the low quality and behavior of teachers, students' moral behavior, and tolerance for ethnicity, religion, race, and an individual's sexual orientation. Therefore, it is not surprising that Sukasni and Efendy (2017) and Sukmayadi and Yahya (2020) believe that education in Indonesia has not fully provided hope for the community through its values and benefits, as evidenced by the low quality of graduates, the lack of relevance of education in terms of the substance of community needs, and education's actual use as a tool for the politicization of local government apparatus, rapid curriculum changes, and unsatisfactory outcomes of teacher training. However, the state of education in Indonesia is still quite precarious, so the awareness of each Indonesian individual towards enhancing education is a different factor to consider. This educational requirement is equivalent to the understanding that the Indonesian

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nation's independence has been humbly acknowledged. However, de facto colonialism has not been eliminated, so the independence principle cannot be realized. With this condition, the Ministry of Education and Culture opened more horizons by initiating the concept of 'Freedom of Learning,' which is a process of transforming education that aims to create human resources who have soft skills and characters following the Pancasila student profile and create more enjoyable learning for students and teachers without must be based on the achievement of specific scores or grades.

However, since its inception in February 2022, its implementation appears to have encountered several pressing challenges that the government must address immediately. From the results of interviews with teachers and school principals, the constraints referred to refer to the problem of understanding the principle of 'Freedom of Learning' among teachers and students, not yet maximal involvement of all stakeholders, hasty implementation, the need for a short adaptation time, and inadequate support capacity in the education unit. Some principals did not respond to interviews. We assume this attitude may contain political elements or pressure issues related to loyalty. Applying the 'Freedom of Learning' concept still leads to an unclear path. We believe there is an urgent need for teachers, students, and institutions related to implementing the concept of 'Freedom of Learning.' Thus, we think that these obstacles must be immediately followed up in the hope that they can become policy inputs for the government as policymakers. The government is expected to have education policy management skills because the decisions are for all education actors and the Indonesian people. According to Gunarathne et al. (2021), a lack of understanding of a holistic approach to skills development appropriate for different institutional and sociocultural management can lead to fragmented educational strategies that do not produce the expected results through educational programs. Therefore, Pant and Baroudi (2008) recommend recognizing the significance of incorporating aspects of superior human skills into a curriculum. It is essential for sustainable development in the education sector. Also worthy of consideration are the government's capabilities to integrate education management and sustainable development (Yadav & Prakash, 2022).

2. Method

This quantitative survey focused on authentic learning requirements to satisfy the 'Freedom of Learning' concept's requirements. We surveyed the entire DKI Jakarta population, which consisted of 1,935 respondents, including 503 teachers/principals and 1,432 students. The survey instrument utilized questionnaires with five Likert scales and three (3) student assessment indicators, and four (4) teacher/school principal assessment indicators. The questionnaire was then disseminated via Google Forms (https://forms.gle/L9GBJV8arFTwvwsA9 link for student questionnaires) and (https://forms.gle/BwUfyhDtWi6vpebA8 link for teacher questionnaires). In addition, descriptive analysis was performed on the survey data using Google Services in Google Forms to determine the proportion of established indicators. The percentage for each indicator is then used to identify the needs of students, teachers, and institutions' needs regarding applying the 'Freedom of Learning' concept using descriptive analysis techniques.

3. Result and Discussion

According to the survey's percentage data, students, teachers, and institutions have pressing needs. Regarding comprehension, both students and teachers have a solid grasp of the principle of independence in learning. This understanding is demonstrated by the average percentage of 67.62% or approximately 346 individuals out of 503 teacher respondents (see Figure 1) and the average percentage of 68.86% or approximately 986 individuals out of a total of 1432 student respondents (see Figure 2).
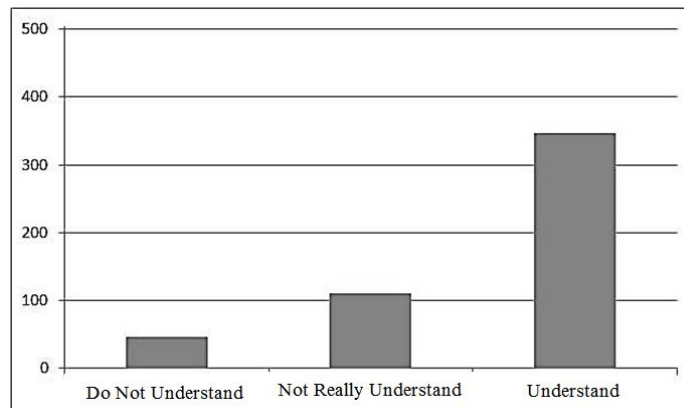
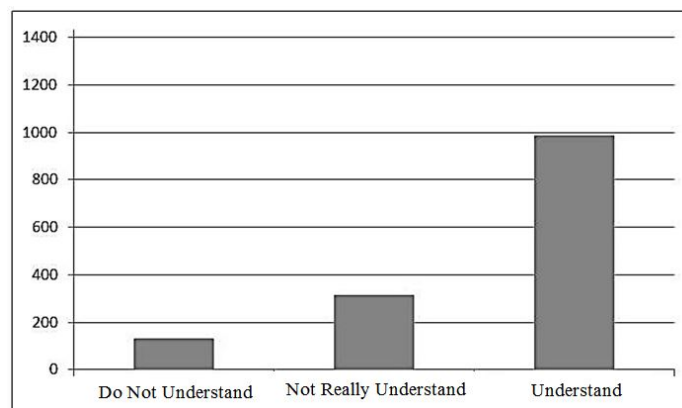**Figure 1. Percentage of Teachers and Principals' Understanding**

Figure 2. Percentage of Students' Understanding

Most students recognize that independence in learning can have positive effects on their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. It is evident from the most significant percentage among the eight (8) other statements, namely 41.2% or 590 student respondents who selected Strongly Agree, whereas respondents who selected Agree numbered 531 or approximately 37.5%. See Figure 3.
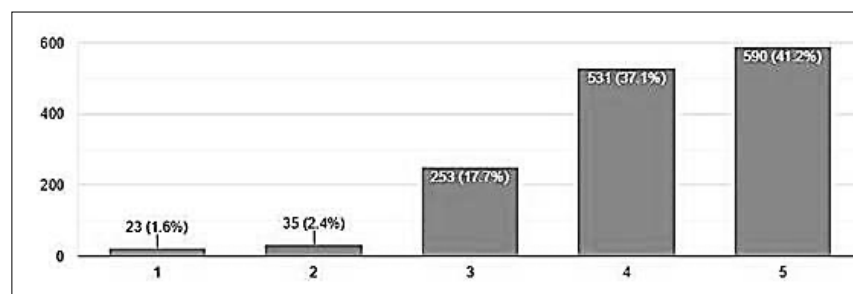

Figure 3. Percentage of Students on Future Impact of 'Freedom of Learning'

It implies that students need attention to their physical, mental, and spiritual development through a free way of learning, as it cannot be denied that from the beginning, most students want to be free from the presence of the teacher and have greater control over the teacher, their learning, and there is a universal desire to escape the boredom and constraints they feel in the classroom (Lai, 1999). Freedom of learning satisfies learning needs because it will continue to provide a secure environment for young people to learn about their human rights and acquire the necessary skills (Soltis, 2015; Sulistyanto et al, 2022). In addition, according to Janke (2022), need satisfaction plays a crucial role in developing learning goal orientation. The freedom of learning should not merely be a theoretical issue, as in Turkey. Nonetheless, it has evolved into a global, local, and institutional concept (Ertem, 2021). Therefore, regardless of how well students and teachers understand the concept of 'Freedom of Learning,' if they are not given true independence, the 'Freedom of Learning' principle will only be conceptual. In addition, immediate requirements must be met to implement the concept of 'Freedom of Learning' within a reasonable timeframe.

a. The Need for Freedom from Formality

Etymologically, formality is interpreted as an 'agreed arrangement' intended to regulate all aspects of a specific domain. Formality is a central component of the formal education process, which emphasizes settings, conditions, and prerequisites over learning itself. Formality is obligatory for all who enter, as everyone must adhere to a predetermined arrangement. Formality can limit students' and teachers' freedom to learn and express themselves to discover their potential and competence. According to Soltis (2015), educational freedom will empower disadvantaged youth groups in educational institutions for decades.

Almeida (2014), on the other hand, demonstrates that while freedom of expression does not affect social identification, it positively affects the learning process. According to our survey results, formality (scale 4 + 5 = 54.7%) and the supervision system (scale 4 + 5 = 56.3%) have become barriers to implementing the 'Freedom of Learning' concept. Please refer to Figures 4 and 5.
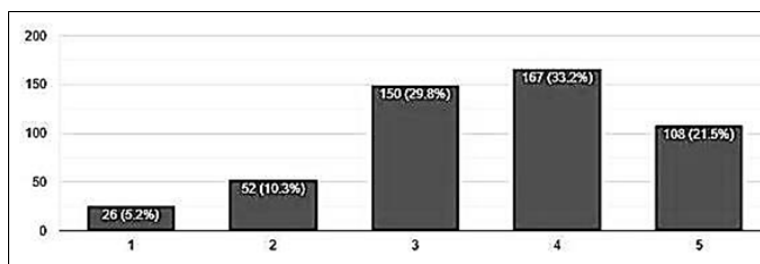

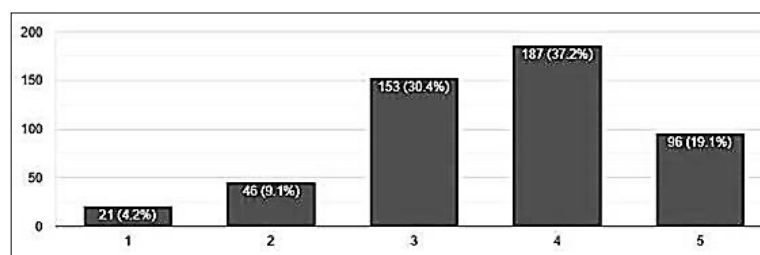**Figure 4. Percentage of Teacher's Formality**

Figure 5. Percentage of Teachers on Formal Supervision

In contrast, 67.8 percent of students (on a scale of 4 + 5) agree that the formal learning process in school is only one way to acquire knowledge and skills. See Figure 6.
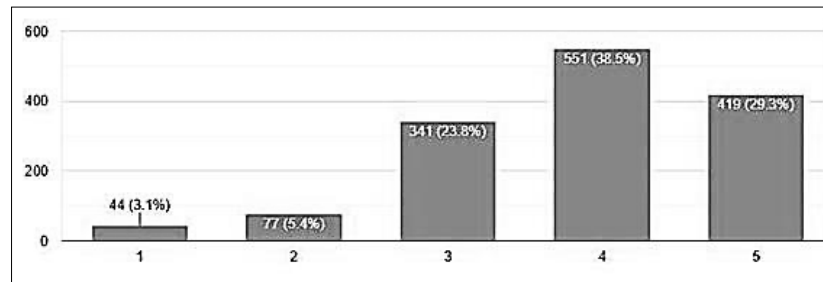

Figure 6. Percentage of Students in Formal Education

The formal learning process is an activity that is primarily initiated and encouraged by the teacher rather than emerging from the students' interests for their own self-determined goals (Greenhow & Lewin, 2015). In contrast, learners can control their learning and decide what, how, when, where, and especially with whom to learn at all times (Coll & Engel, 2014). They have an independent understanding of what and how to study without being prompted by an academic environment. According to Lai (1999), the relative freedom of learning, such as in the field as a learning environment, can make students more proactive, improve educator-student relationships, and enable them to view things from new angles. Janke (2022) demonstrates that students' feelings of autonomy and competence during the first semester can predict an increase in learning goal orientation over time and the goal orientation's flexibility.

Similarly, teachers hope to be liberated from formalities so that their performance can be evaluated according to their expectations. Therefore, national policies and teacher pedagogical values on how 'freedom' is managed and opportunities for students to act independently should be applied to learning activities, according to Mart and Waite (2021). Freedom in this context refers to normative freedom, which implies that this freedom adheres to the sociocultural values of the learning community (Thambu et al, 2021). According to Houlden and Veletsianos (2021), normative freedom must be questioned and historically supported for education to be flexible and better serve students. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge that the freedom of learning is closely tied to the sociocultural norms prevalent in the learning community and that the freedom to learn of both students and teachers is facilitated and constrained by a structured and social context (Buckler, 2020).

Students and teachers anticipate a combination of informal and formal supervision. A familial relationship distinguishes informal supervision between the supervisor and the supervised individual. This pattern is essential, at the very least, to reduce conflict caused by work carried into the home; it can also improve psychological well-being (Şahin et al., 2021), and it can serve as an essential and valuable practice for students to develop their professional competence (Coren & Farber, 2019). For a combined pattern of formal and informal supervision, informal supervision should only be implemented as an organizational resource that assists supervisors in

performing their duties (Jimmieson et al., 2021) or as a supervision-relevant process of "informal enculturation" and socialization of students into a community of practice through social and academic networks (Wang & Byram, 2019). The most significant professional growth experiences, according to Aseltine et al. (2006), occur informally, as opposed to formal supervision, in which a person is asked to make statements about an individual's performance and value to the organization at a particular time. Following this, Eley and Jennings (2005) state that the working relationship between supervisors and students at the start of the research program should ideally be informal and mutually respectful. Therefore, we mean by 'independence from formality' that institutions act and behave formally concerning their professional relationship with the state, but institutions act and behave informally about the entire series of learning processes. Do not attempt to formalize learning because the majority of the most significant learning that occurs for individuals and groups in societies around the globe does not occur in formal settings (Singh, 2015).

b. Need for Adequate Facilities and Infrastructures

The following specific requirement relates to facilities and infrastructure, which serve as a "home for discovering and solving academic problems." Figure 7 demonstrates that 77.3% (scale 4 + 5), or approximately 1107 student respondents believe that institutions should provide the infrastructure to support their learning freedom.
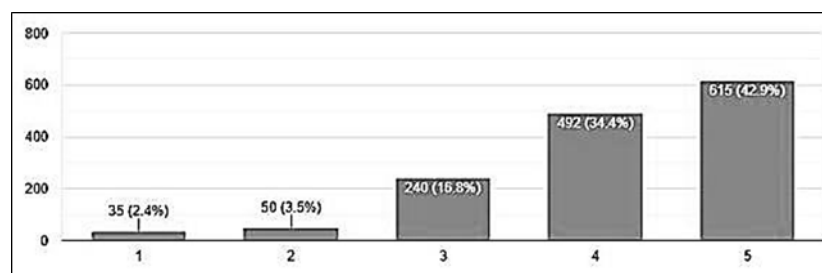

Figure 7. Percentage of Students in Facilities and Infrastructures

Figure 8 displays that 42.23 percent (scale of 4 + 5) of approximately 604 respondents stated that they had not had a pleasant learning experience.
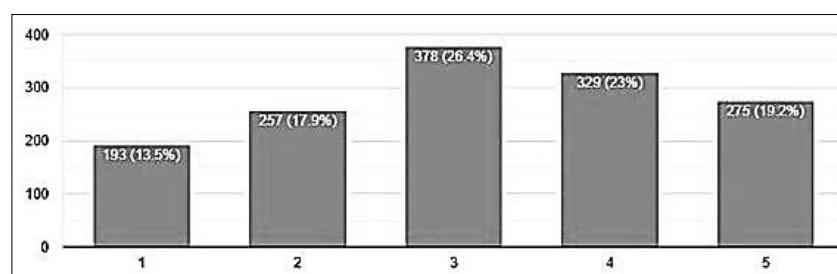

Figure 8. Percentage of Students on Learning Experience

The majority of the education infrastructure in Indonesia, particularly in the regions, is highly inadequate. Due to insufficient infrastructure, the house where students should have been able to discover and resolve academic issues has vanished.

The population of DKI Jakarta, a metropolitan and cosmopolitan city, provided the survey data. One can imagine the condition of the districts' educational infrastructure. It is indeed difficult for Indonesia to achieve parity in the development of educational infrastructure due to its vast size, but this is no excuse for not achieving adequate infrastructure development and long-term benefit. According to Mittner et al. (in Skjerven & Fordham, 2022, Eds.), rebuilding infrastructure is the key to finding long-term solutions contributing to change.

In addition, Lustyantie and Arung (2019) recommend constructing not only infrastructure but also superstructure, endostructure, and exostructure to achieve 21st-century learning because "learning facilities assist students in acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills (McManus & Sieler, 1998). Students will never have a pleasant learning environment if the school's buildings and administrative management systems are in poor condition. With adequate infrastructure, institutions can accurately identify and comprehend students' knowledge and skill requirements (see Figure 9) so that the knowledge they acquire is stored in their brains and applied in the real world (see Figure 10).
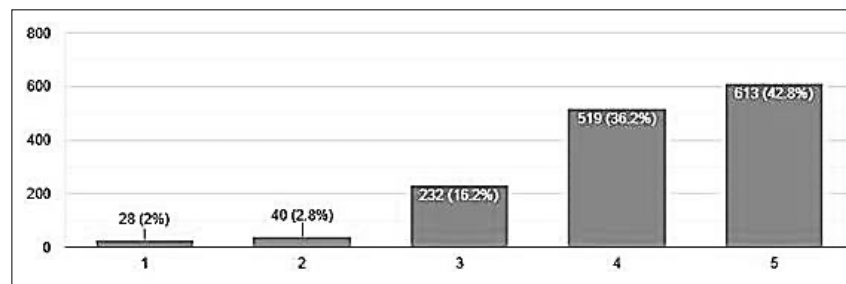

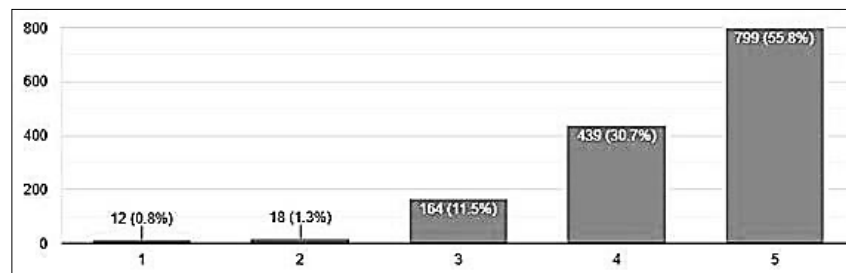Figure 9. Percentage of Students on Knowledge and Skills Needs through Institutions

Figure 10. Percentage of Students on Real Knowledge and Skills Application

Approximately 1132 respondents, or 79% (scale 4 + 5), agree that the institution should be able to identify and comprehend the knowledge and skills required by students. This number is slightly higher than the 70% found in a survey of the educational infrastructure needs of institutional leaders in the three regions of Telangana (Nagaraju, 2022). In contrast, 86.5% (scale of 4 + 5), or approximately 1238 respondents, indicated that students wished to apply their acquired knowledge and skills. This result demonstrates the critical importance of these two issues. Nessipbayeva and Egger's (2015) findings also demonstrate the significance of learning infrastructure so that educators and teachers can provide students with more successful learning experiences and boost their confidence in their learning abilities. Lauzon (2013) identifies adequate

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infrastructure as a component of the lifelong learning infrastructure, allowing students and educators to engage directly with the principles of lifelong learning. Due to the close relationship between educational infrastructure and the principles of lifelong learning, educational infrastructure can be helpful when the principles of lifelong learning are placed in appropriate social and economic contexts (Carr et al., 2018). Infrastructure, in addition to educators, can serve as a functional and philosophical consultant for students' knowledge and skills. Infrastructure can serve as a philosophical consultant for students by providing a location to collaborate to solve academic problems, so long as they remain within the infrastructure area.

c. The Need for an Evaluation and Assessment System Based on the Principle of 'Freedom of Learning'

The institution's assessment and evaluation system has a significant impact on the professionalism of educators in determining the learning achievement of students. The professionalism of educators in providing assessments, which is associated with the principle of 'Freedom of Learning,' is not consistent with the principle of 'learning' itself, which is dynamic. Our survey results indicate that 61.6% (scale 4 + 5), or approximately 883 student respondents, still believe that the achievement of their learning outcomes is based on their grades or test scores (see Figure 11).
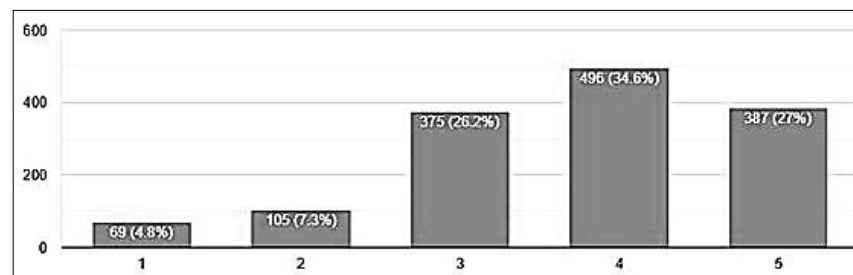

Figure 11. Percentage of Students on Teacher's Assessment of Their Learning Outcomes

Thus, 65.6% (scale of 4 + 5), or approximately 940 students, agree that the institution should not determine their graduation based solely on the results of exams or tests (see Figure 12).

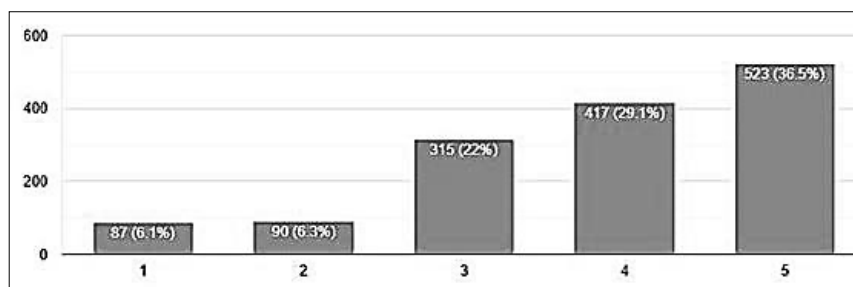

Figure 12. Percentage of Students on Determination of Graduation Based on Test Results

Such assessment practices are inextricable from the formality principle applied by most institutions today, which determines student learning outcomes or

graduation based solely on the test's value or score. Regarding formality, we have proposed that institutions should not formalize learning and related activities. Accordingly, Colley and Jarvis (2007) recommend recognizing the significance of teachers' informal practices in formal retention and student achievement and enhancing teachers' awareness as assessors of inequalities that informal and formal characteristics of an assessment practice may reinforce. In this case, students have a greater understanding of their learning needs, experiential learning activities, and level of achievement, and they should be permitted to provide honest evaluations.

To improve their learning through self-assessment, however, it is recommended that students adopt standard attitudes and behaviors toward assessment (Yang et al., 2022). Educators/teachers, on the other hand, act as assessment teammates with students and allow them to participate in the assessment process. Schellekens et al. (2021) demonstrate that students' active participation in the assessment will become evident when the assessment process provides them with opportunities to develop skills in assessing themselves and their peers, opportunities initiated by the teacher during the learning process. Regardless of the form of evaluation and assessment (assessment task), the results should not be used as the sole criterion for determining student learning achievement, much less graduation. Due to the dynamic nature of 'learning' and the continuous nature of assessment, the purpose of evaluation and assessment is limited to obtaining data on learning achievement at that moment (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Such attitudes and professional conduct on the part of educators concerning assessment indicate that they have been unable to give students complete control over their learning methods. The survey results indicate that 43.4% (scale 4 + 5), or approximately 622 student respondents (see Figure 13), agree that educators have not given students complete control over their learning methods.
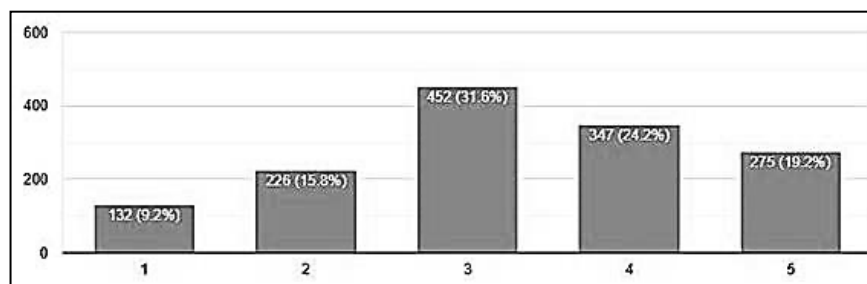

Figure 13. Percentage of Students on Freedom in Learning

Therefore, these assessment tasks should only be used as data material for students and teachers to engage in the following ongoing learning activities. Fazel and Ali (2022) argue that assessment tasks must be conducive to productive learning to develop and deepen student learning. Therefore, educators' professional competence must also be considered concerning assessment. Conducive refers to a situation in which something positive can occur, not just learning pressure due to the issue of assessment results. The professional competence of educators has a positive effect not only on student achievement (Vries et al., 2022) and the assessment process, which incidentally reveals student learning

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achievement but also on student learning achievement itself.

d. Needs for Full Support from Local Government

Our survey results indicate that 81.7% (scale 4 + 5), or approximately 411 respondents agree that educational institutions require full support from local governments per the Regional Autonomy Law to realize the concept of 'Freedom of Learning' (see Figure 14). Local governments are busier addressing political issues and group interests than constructing a more respectable regional education system. In addition to the government's poor management of public education institutions, Rosser (2018) identifies politics and power as the root cause of Indonesia's lack of quality education and learning outcomes (Figure 15). From the old order regime to the new order regime and the reform phase, which led to a wave of multicultural education movement from assimilation to multiculturalism, this political issue has existed for a long time during political movements and phases (Jayadi et al., 2022). There is no exception in the case of Indonesian vocational education, which existed before the country's independence but received attention only after reformation (Suharno et al., 2020) due to political issues.
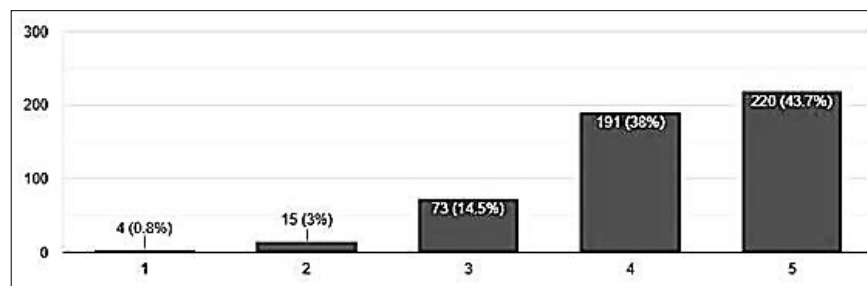

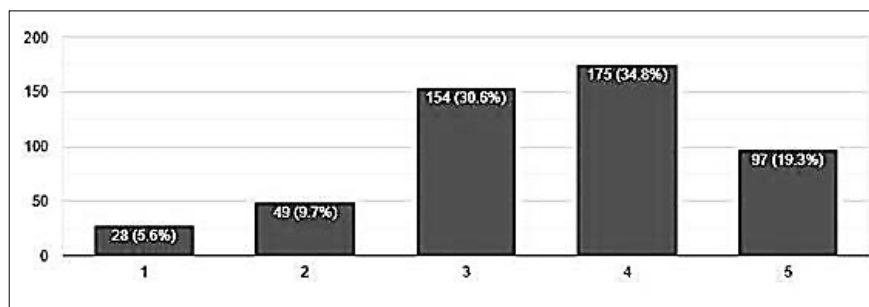Figure 14. Percentage of Teachers on Support Needs from Local Government

Figure 15. Percentage of Teachers on Political Issues and Educational Conditions

If the concept of 'Freedom of Learning' is to be realized, educational institutions need the support of all stakeholders, particularly local governments. Local governments can support the realization of 'Freedom of Learning' in various ways. For instance, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and India are internationalizing their higher education. The Malaysian government has instituted a policy that focuses primarily on increasing the number of incoming students to increase export revenue, i.e., the tendency to focus on international students as an additional source of income. However, the government's internationalization goal is the primary objective (Tham, 2013). The Singaporean government has designed, implemented, reviewed, and adapted the

international curriculum to promote student values and attributes, such as intercultural awareness and engagement, competitive advantage, and global citizenship (Daquila, 2013). In its education, the Thai government incorporates global economic trends and domestic socioeconomic forces, and it demonstrates quantitative growth in educational programs that serve only specific demographic groups (Lavankura, 2013). In the meantime, the Indian government is addressing the issue of the impact of a disproportionately high teacher-student ratio on educational outcomes and teacher professionalism, particularly in low-income areas (Sarin, 2015). Governments are servants, so they must be willing to serve by mobilizing all resources for welfare and education (Hazra & Aranzazu, 2022) and maintaining good relations with their citizens by providing excellent education services. Such is the democratic principle for comprehending the Chinese nation's relational perspective. So long as the government is effective, it is democratic (Zhang, 2015).

4. Conclusion

Both student and teacher respondents cited independence from the formalities of the learning process and the need for facilities and infrastructure as two of the government's most pressing concerns. While the other two needs are general, they are no less important than the first. However, applying the 'Freedom of Learning' concept can only be realized if the proper and urgent needs are fully met. The concept is applied on a national scale, so it is also national, i.e., it is applied by all Indonesian educational institutions and all schools deemed ready by the Ministry of Education. At least ninety percent are met for each region in Indonesia.

The implication is that the institution still requires a standard independent curriculum as a clear guide so that the Ministry of Education does not only provide operational guidelines so that the institution is not confused when compiling it according to their institution's needs. Next, the institution hopes that the implementation of the 'Freedom of Learning' concept will not be limited to schools that are deemed ready, as this would appear to be discriminatory and give the impression that the government, through the Ministry of Education, does not wish to achieve an equal distribution of readiness in all educational institutions on the Indonesian territory.

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