



Reclaiming Indonesia's higher education: From human capital to epistemic sustainability

Nadhira Asiyah Arrin^{1,*}

¹ School of Culture and Communication, Faculty of Arts, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia.

*Correspondence: nadhirasiyah@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Discussions about the global education paradigm are synonymous with freedom of competition and accountability. This contrasts with the Indonesian education paradigm, which focuses on the concept of harmony between intellectual and moral development. To achieve a balance between the two paradigms, Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) reform was launched to promote autonomy, creativity, and innovation in higher education. Yet, beneath its emancipatory discourse, MBKM remains anchored in a human-capital paradigm that measures success through employability rather than moral, ecological, and epistemic reflection. This imbalance reflects a broader crisis in modern education, where freedom is equated with market adaptability instead of ethical responsibility. **Methods:** This study employs a qualitative conceptual approach, combining critical discourse analysis of MBKM policy documents with theoretical synthesis across decolonial, ecological, and educational thought. The analysis proceeds through three interpretive stages—policy examination, literature synthesis, and theoretical engagement—to uncover the epistemological foundations and "regimes of truth" that govern the current reform. **Findings:** Three epistemic challenges are identified: epistemic reduction—the confinement of knowledge to technical and measurable forms; moral and ecological detachment—the separation of learning from ethical and environmental consciousness; and managerial autonomy—a paradoxical freedom constrained by neoliberal metrics. These tendencies perpetuate dependency on Western epistemic norms while marginalizing Indonesia's moral-cultural heritage rooted in *budi pekerti* and *pendidikan merdeka*. **Conclusion:** To transcend this industrial-epistemic paradigm, Indonesian universities must pursue epistemic sustainability—the capacity to sustain and regenerate plural ways of knowing (scientific, local, ethical, and spiritual) in balance. This paradigm repositions education as a moral and civic practice, aligning freedom (*merdeka*) with responsibility and care. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This study introduces epistemic sustainability as an integrative framework linking decolonial, ecological and educational thought, offering a pathway to operationalize the ecology of knowledge within Indonesia's educational reform.

KEYWORDS: decolonial pedagogy; ecology of knowledge; epistemic sustainability; higher education reform; human capital paradigm; merdeka belajar-kampus merdeka (MBKM) policy critique.

1. Introduction

The philosophical roots of education lie in two Latin terms: *educare* and *educere*. The former means "to train" or "to mold," signifying the transmission of knowledge and social reproduction. The latter means "to draw out" or "to lead forth," representing the awakening of human potential and creativity. Throughout history, education has oscillated between these two paradigms: *educare*, which emphasizes nurturing and cultivating human

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potential, and *educere*, which emphasizes drawing out individual capacities for adaptation and productivity (Bass & Good, 2004). An education system that overemphasizes *educare* tends to produce conformity and instrumental skills, while one that privileges *educere* fosters reflection, imagination, and moral agency.

In the 21st century, however, the convergence of education and economy has tilted this balance sharply toward *educere*, reducing education to a technocratic system of output optimization. The dominance of economic logic within universities is evident in the proliferation of performance indicators, publication metrics, and accreditation benchmarks (Barnett, 2010; Connell, 2019). Slaughter and Rhoades (2009) conceptualize this phenomenon as *academic capitalism*, in which universities and academics increasingly operate as market actors competing for prestige, funding, and intellectual property within globalized systems of knowledge. The challenge for higher education today is therefore to sustain a dynamic equilibrium between educating not only for productivity but also for purpose.

This global transition reflects what Habermas (1988) termed instrumental rationality, the tendency to measure human activity solely by efficiency and output rather than ethical or communicative meaning. As a result, education's moral and civic mission has been overshadowed by productivity imperatives. In the post-industrial era, educational reforms have become increasingly driven by the discourse of innovation, digital transformation, and global competitiveness. This tendency aligns with what Rizvi and Lingard (2009) describe as the neoliberal shift in education governance, where knowledge and learning are valued primarily for their market relevance rather than for their ethical or civic purposes. In Indonesia, this orientation is further reinforced by policy narratives surrounding *Industry 4.0* and *Society 5.0*, which emphasize efficiency, adaptability, and technological advancement as hallmarks of educational success (Kadarisman et al., 2022).

Postcolonial critiques by Alatas (1974) and Connell (2007, 2019) remind us that this dominance of economic rationality is inseparable from epistemic dependency. Knowledge dependency, they argue, perpetuates the intellectual subordination of the Global South. D'Souza & Thobani, (2024) extend this critique by showing how the contemporary global knowledge order continues to reproduce colonial hierarchies, privileging Eurocentric epistemologies and institutional frameworks that determine what counts as legitimate knowledge. This epistemic regime sustains cognitive dependency, marginalizing local wisdom, spirituality, and ethical reasoning in favor of Western scientism and market-oriented rationalities. Within such a context, universities risk functioning not as *laboratories of humanity* but as *factories of labor*. In contrast, education should serve as a moral and civic practice; spaces where diverse epistemologies coexist, moral imagination is cultivated, and social responsibility is exercised through sustainability and civic engagement (Biesta, 2020; Leal Filho et al., 2025).

In Indonesia, these global dynamics intersect with a long-standing philosophical tradition that conceives education not merely as instruction but as cultural and moral cultivation. The nation's educational philosophy, rooted in the ideas of Ki Hajar Dewantara, frames learning as the process of nurturing *budi pekerti*: the unity of thought, feeling, and action oriented toward ethical and communal life. Dewantara envisioned education as guiding each learner's innate potential so that they may pursue happiness and harmony as individuals and collectively (Wahyuni et al., 2023). His triadic model of *ing ngarsa sung tulada, ing madya mangu karsa, tut wuri handayani* emphasizes relational and moral formation, where knowledge serves life, community, and national integrity. Within this worldview, freedom (*merdeka*) in learning means autonomy rooted in responsibility, not market flexibility.

This indigenous educational philosophy resonates deeply with the *educare-educere* dialectic. Whereas the current global paradigm of education increasingly equates freedom with competition and adaptability, Dewantara's notion of freedom to learn stresses harmony between intellectual and moral grounding. Education, in this sense, should cultivate independent thinking anchored in empathy and communal ethics, a balance that modern higher education in Indonesia continues to struggle to sustain.

This tension has become increasingly visible in the wake of *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM), a flagship reform launched in 2020 under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. MBKM has engaged over 400,000 students across more than 900 higher education institutions (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2023). In 2024 alone, flagship programs targeted an enrollment of 193,000 students, while the number of universities implementing independent (Mandiri) MBKM grew by 60% within a single year (Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2024). *Merdeka Belajar* (“Freedom to Learn”) was conceived as a response to the rigidity of the previous education system and redefined learning as a flexible, student-centred process designed to bridge academia and industry. It promises freedom, flexibility, and innovation across all levels of education in alignment with *Industry 4.0* (Khoerunnisa & Illahi, 2023). Yet, through Dewantara’s philosophical lens, one might ask: freedom for what, and for whom? Does the notion of *merdeka* today still carry its ethical, civic, and cultural meaning, or has it been subsumed into economic discourse that values adaptability more than integrity?

At the higher education level, *Kampus Merdeka* operationalizes this vision by introducing eight forms of “independent learning” that allow students to study outside the classroom through internships, community engagement, research, teaching, and entrepreneurial projects (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2020). On the surface, this transformation appears progressive, aligning education with innovation, employability, and lifelong learning. However, the rhetoric of “independence” (*merdeka*) is often overshadowed by industrial rationality, where freedom is equated with adaptability within preexisting economic structures rather than genuine epistemic freedom. Studies show that universities’ implementation of MBKM remains uneven and is heavily shaped by administrative mandates, limited resources, and cultural hierarchies (Hidayat, 2025; Usman & Hartati, 2024). This dynamic manifests in the prioritization of technical and entrepreneurial skills over moral, cultural, or ecological literacy.

While these studies have explored institutional challenges, few have interrogated the epistemic implications of MBKM. This paper argues that Indonesia’s ambitious higher education transformation is entrapped in what can be called an *industrial-epistemic paradigm*. This paradigm equates education with technical production, knowledge with skill, and freedom with flexibility within predefined economic goals. As a result, universities risk becoming sites of *epistemicide* (Santos, 2018), where only forms of knowledge that are measurable, standardized, and monetizable are legitimized. The educational paradigm sustaining these reforms remains rooted in epistemic reduction, a reliance on technical, measurable forms of knowledge that marginalize local wisdom, moral reasoning, and ecological consciousness (Escobar, 2018; Shiva, 1995).

This narrowing of epistemic scope produces moral and ecological detachment, generating graduates who are competent yet disconnected from community, environment, and national identity. A deeper transformation is therefore needed toward an ecology of knowledge (Santos, 2014) and an epistemically adaptive paradigm (Horn et al., 2022), a framework that sustains both stability and adaptability across diverse ways of knowing. Achieving sustainable and equitable education reform requires universities to move beyond market responsiveness and cultivate epistemic sustainability in practice: sustaining diverse knowledges, fostering moral imagination, and reconnecting learning to life.

Theoretically, this article synthesizes the frameworks of ecology of knowledge, cognitive justice, and world-centred education into the concept of *epistemic sustainability*, offering a new lens for analysing education reform. Practically, it seeks to illuminate how Indonesian higher education can balance its economic imperatives with its epistemic and moral responsibilities. This study is guided by a set of interrelated research questions that examine the epistemic assumptions underlying the *Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) policy, particularly in relation to how the human capital paradigm shapes the values, orientations, and outcomes of higher education in Indonesia. It further investigates the extent to which the frameworks of knowledge ecology and epistemic sustainability can be employed to reimagine education within a post-industrial context. By engaging with these questions, the study offers a critical yet constructive reflection on Indonesia’s ongoing

educational transformation, emphasizing that the notion of “freedom to learn” must be extended toward a more substantive “freedom to know differently.” Collectively, these frameworks inform the analysis of MBKM’s policy discourse, its philosophical foundations, and its broader implications for educational sustainability.

2. Methods

2.1 Research design

This article adopts a qualitative conceptual approach, combining critical discourse analysis of policy documents with theoretical synthesis. Rather than conducting empirical fieldwork, it interprets how ideas, narratives, and epistemic assumptions shape Indonesia’s higher education landscape. This approach is well-suited for an inquiry concerned less with measuring outcomes than with uncovering the epistemological foundations of reform, what Foucault (1981) termed the *regimes of truth* that govern how knowledge and power circulate in educational systems.

The methodological strategy positions this paper within the tradition of critical qualitative inquiry, in which theory functions both as a diagnostic and as a transformative tool (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Through this lens, education policy is examined not merely as an administrative framework but as a cultural text, a site where competing visions of knowledge, modernity, and citizenship are articulated and negotiated. This design allows the paper to uncover how certain epistemic assumptions are legitimized while others are marginalized in the discourse of reform.

The analysis proceeds through three interrelated interpretive stages. It begins with a policy analysis that examines key documents and ministerial statements issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemdikbudristek), particularly those outlining the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) agenda. This is followed by a literature synthesis that engages with academic and policy-oriented works on higher education reform, employability, and human capital discourses in Indonesia as well as the broader Southeast Asian context. Finally, the study advances a theoretical interpretation by drawing on the works of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Shiv Visvanathan, Gert Biesta, and Paulo Freire, whose perspectives provide complementary decolonial, epistemic, and pedagogical frameworks for the analysis.

This design allows the study to trace how neoliberal rationalities shape educational discourse, not merely at the level of policy language but within the deeper assumptions that govern what counts as valid knowledge and desirable outcomes. By foregrounding these underlying epistemic structures, the analysis moves beyond surface-level critiques of implementation toward a more fundamental interrogation of the logic that sustains reform itself. In doing so, the study opens space to envision pathways toward a more plural, reflective, and sustainable epistemic model, one that is not confined to market-oriented metrics of success. The choice of a conceptual rather than empirical approach is therefore not incidental but necessary, as the primary objective is not to measure reform outcomes but to question the conditions that make such outcomes intelligible. This aligns with the study’s broader goal: to reframe Indonesia’s higher education reform from an issue of implementation to a question of epistemic condition, where the very ways of knowing that underpin reform determine its possibilities for freedom, justice, and sustainability.

2.2 Analytical framework

To interpret the epistemic structure of *Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka*, this study draws on three interrelated frameworks: ecology of knowledge, cognitive justice, and world-centred education. Together, these frameworks provide both critique and reconstruction. They interrogate the epistemic reductionism of the industrial-human capital paradigm while articulating principles for an alternative model of education grounded in pluralism, ethics, and sustainability. At its core, the analysis is guided by Santos’

(2014) concept of the ecology of knowledges, which views education not as a linear process of knowledge transmission but as a living ecosystem of interdependent epistemologies. Within this ecology, scientific, local, spiritual, and artistic ways of knowing coexist and coevolve. Santos (2014) warns that the persistence of epistemic hierarchies, rooted in colonial modernity, has led to “epistemicide,” the systematic erasure of local and non-Western knowledge systems. In response, the ecology of knowledge calls for relationality rather than mere pluralism: an understanding that all knowledges are partial and only through dialogue can collective understanding be sustained.

Earlier, Bowen (1985) conceived the ecology of knowledge as a bridge between the natural and social sciences, emphasizing systems-oriented inquiry. Later, scholars such as Shiva (1995) and Escobar (2018) extended this notion into a political ecology of epistemology, asserting that sustainable futures require sustaining epistemic diversity, just as biodiversity sustains ecological resilience. Santos (2018) thus situates Western science alongside indigenous, religious, and experiential knowledges in a dialogical relationship rather than a hierarchical one, forming a foundation for epistemic sustainability.

Complementing this, cognitive justice (Visvanathan, 2009) introduces an ethical and political dimension to epistemic diversity. Visvanathan (2009) argues that social justice is inseparable from epistemic justice; every knowledge system has the right to exist, evolve, and contribute to collective reasoning. Cognitive justice, therefore, forms the moral foundation of the ecology of knowledge. It challenges the global monopoly of Western rationality by recognizing the equal dignity of different knowledges, especially those marginalized by colonialism, scientism, or global capitalism. For Visvanathan (2009), sustainability itself is epistemic: it cannot be achieved without maintaining a diversity of ways of knowing.

In the Indonesian context, these principles resonate with ongoing efforts to reintegrate local and indigenous epistemologies into higher education. For instance, Ramli et al. (2025) demonstrate how Aceh’s integration of *adat* values in university curricula fosters community-based innovation and ethical engagement. Such initiatives align with Biesta’s (2021) idea of world-centered education, which orients learning not toward economic performance but toward meaningful participation in the world. Biesta (2021) emphasizes that education must cultivate attention, care, and responsibility, virtues that connect learners to the world as ethical and ecological subjects.

Together, these frameworks establish the conceptual scaffolding for this study. The ecology of knowledge provides the ontological foundation (how knowledge exists and interacts), cognitive justice provides the ethical foundation (why all knowledge deserves coexistence), and world-centered education provides the pedagogical foundation (how learning should relate to the world). Collectively, they guide the paper’s analysis of MBKM’s epistemic structure and its potential reorientation toward epistemic sustainability.

2.3 Theoretical framework: Epistemic sustainability

In dominant policy discourse, sustainability is often confined to environmental management or technological innovation. Yet scholars such as Wamsler (2020) and Walsh et al. (2020) argue that true sustainability education must also cultivate inner transformation; empathy, critical reflection, and moral awareness that allows humans to live responsibly within ecological and social systems. Within Indonesia’s policy landscape, sustainability is frequently invoked through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, this discourse often remains limited to environmental or economic metrics, rarely addressing the sustainability of knowledge itself. If ecological sustainability concerns maintaining the systems that support life, epistemic sustainability concerns maintaining the systems that support *understanding*.

Drawing from Santos (2014), Visvanathan (2009), and Escobar (2018), *epistemic sustainability* extends the metaphor of ecology to the realm of knowledge. It denotes the capacity of educational systems to preserve, regenerate, and evolve plural ways of knowing while maintaining ethical, cultural, and ecological balance. Like ecosystems in nature,

epistemic ecosystems thrive on diversity, reflexivity, and resilience (Bowen, 1985). When education relies excessively on a single epistemic mode, whether technical, rationalist, or market-driven, it creates what Shiva (1995) calls a *monoculture of the mind*: a cognitive environment incapable of responding to complex social and ecological crises.

By contrast, epistemic sustainability calls for cultivating dialogical coexistence among scientific, local, and spiritual epistemologies, ensuring that knowledge production remains ethically grounded, contextually relevant, and socially regenerative. This framework restores the balance between *educare* and *educere*: between nurturing moral and emotional awareness and developing intellectual and practical capacity. Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015) caution that dominant “resilience” narratives in sustainability education risk becoming conservative if it merely preserves existing systems. Instead, epistemic sustainability demands transformative and transgressive learning, challenging epistemic hierarchies and institutional inertia that reproduce monocultural ways of knowing.

Building upon these debates, epistemic sustainability functions in this study as both a diagnostic tool and a normative vision. Diagnostically, it critiques the dominance of instrumental rationality and epistemic reduction in MBKM. Normatively, it proposes that universities sustain not only natural environments but also the diversity of epistemic ecologies that make moral and social regeneration possible. It recognizes that no single epistemology, scientific, religious, or indigenous, can adequately address today’s intertwined crises of climate, inequality, and moral disconnection. Therefore, epistemic sustainability calls for knowledge systems that are open, dialogical, and interdependent, nurturing reflexivity and care as a core academic virtue. In the Indonesian context, epistemic sustainability offers a conceptual bridge between the nation’s philosophical tradition of *budi pekerti* and the global call for sustainability-oriented education. It invites universities to view learning not merely as an economic investment but as a living practice of caring for knowledge as one cares for life.

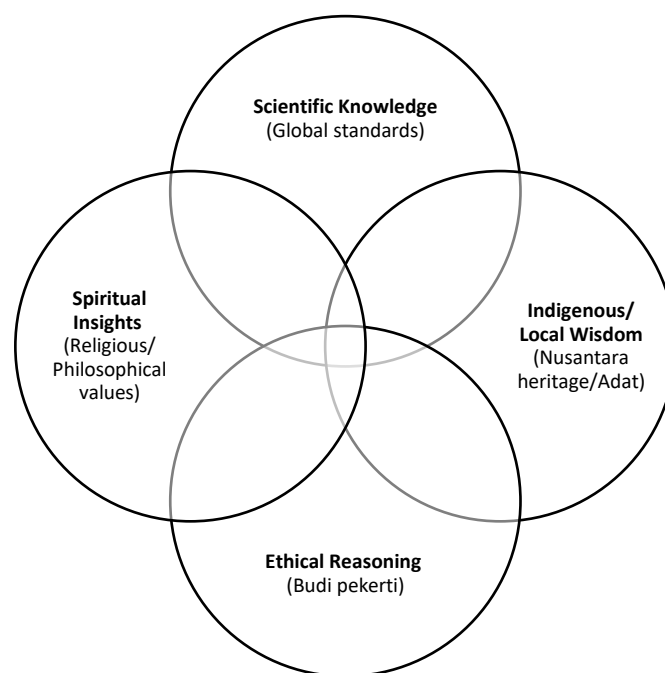


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of epistemic sustainability

3. Results and Discussion

To clarify the conceptual contrast underpinning this study, Table 1 presents a comparative overview of two competing educational paradigms: the dominant human capital framework embedded in the MBKM policy and the proposed epistemic sustainability

paradigm. Rather than serving as a merely descriptive comparison, the table functions as an analytical device to expose the normative assumptions that structure each paradigm. It highlights not only differences in educational goals and performance metrics, but also more fundamental divergences in how knowledge is defined, how subjectivity is formed, and how freedom is conceptualized within each framework. By making these contrasts explicit, the table enables a more systematic critique of the human capital paradigm, showing how its instrumental logic constrains the transformative potential of higher education. At the same time, it provides a conceptual basis for articulating an alternative orientation, in which education is positioned not simply as a means of economic optimization but as a space for epistemic plurality and reflective agency.

As shown in Table 1, the human capital paradigm prioritizes economic outcomes and labor market alignment, whereas the epistemic sustainability paradigm reorients education toward ethical responsibility, plural knowledge systems, and long-term societal well-being. This contrast underscores a fundamental shift from viewing education as an instrument of economic production to understanding it as a space for cultivating reflective, responsible, and contextually grounded forms of knowledge.

Table 1. Comparison of educational paradigms: Human capital vs. epistemic sustainability

Metric of comparison	Human capital paradigm (Current MBKM)	Epistemic sustainability paradigm (Proposed)
Primary Goal	Employability and market adaptability	Moral, civic, and ecological reflection
Metric of Success	Graduate salary, industry "link and match"	Epistemic diversity and ethical responsibility
Role of Student	Human capital/Labor in training	Ethical subject and world-minded citizen
Curriculum Focus	Technical and entrepreneurial skills	Integrative (Scientific, Local, Spiritual)
View of Freedom	Market flexibility/Institutional autonomy	Independence (Merdeka) rooted in responsibility

3.1 From instrumental rationality to epistemic independence

Modern education systems, shaped by colonial legacies and neoliberal governance, have increasingly reduced learning to measurable skills and competencies. This tendency exemplifies what Habermas (1988) termed *instrumental rationality*: the orientation of reason toward efficiency and control rather than understanding and ethical dialogue. Within this paradigm, knowledge production serves bureaucratic or economic purposes rather than communicative or moral ones. Barnett (2010) extended this critique to the university, observing that academic institutions have shifted from moral communities of inquiry into corporate actors competing for rankings, grants, and visibility.

Despite political independence, many postcolonial societies remain epistemically dependent on Western validation. Alatas (1974) famously describes this as the *captive mind*, a condition in which intellectual dependency reproduces structural inequality. Foucault's (1981) notion of *regimes of truth* helps explain how particular forms of knowledge gain authority while others are marginalized as invalid. When reflective inquiry is subordinated to technical performance and bureaucratic norms, education loses its dialogical and ethical dimensions, reducing learning to compliance within dominant epistemic orders.

This dynamic resonates with postcolonial critiques of education as a site of epistemic dependency (Alatas, 1974; Connell, 2007; D'Souza & Thobani, 2024). The dominance of English-language journals, citation metrics, and international accreditation creates what Santos (2015) calls *abyssal thinking*, a division between what counts as "valid" (scientific, measurable) and "invalid" (local, moral, spiritual). As a result, universities risk producing technically proficient graduates who can design and innovate yet lack ethical imagination

or social responsibility. Epistemic dependency thus manifests not only as intellectual imitation but also as moral detachment, where knowledge is stripped of its relational and ethical context.

The epistemic structures sustaining this rationality are never neutral. When education is evaluated primarily through market efficiency, universities risk severing their moral and civic connection with the communities they serve. Policy narratives emphasizing “link and match” with industry often obscure deeper linkages with society, culture, and ecology. Within the ASEAN regional context, Indonesian universities are encouraged to adopt market-oriented strategies to enhance competitiveness (Narimawati et al., 2018). While such strategies may improve institutional performance, they also reinforce the view of higher education as an economic instrument rather than a moral and civic enterprise, further entrenching epistemic dependency on external validation and marginalizing locally grounded innovation and cultural wisdom.

Connell’s (2007) *Southern Theory* offers a crucial intervention by urging universities in the Global South to recognize their intellectual traditions as theory-generating centres rather than empirical case studies. Mignolo’s (2011) notion of *epistemic disobedience* similarly calls for a conscious departure from Eurocentric paradigms to reclaim localized ways of knowing. In the Indonesian context, this means reimagining university not merely as consumers of global knowledge but as producers of epistemic creativity, rooted in the plural intellectual heritage of the Nusantara.

This vision resonates deeply with Ki Hajar Dewantara’s philosophy of education, which centers on *kemerdekaan* (independence) as the liberation of the human spirit and *budi pekerti*, moral and cultural intelligence that harmonizes thought, feeling, and action (Sukiastini et al., 2024). Dewantara envisioned learning as the cultivation of freedom that enlightens, not merely equips; an education that nurtures individuals who think independently yet remain ethically bound to their community. In this sense, the contemporary policy of *Merdeka Belajar* carries both promise and irony: while it borrows Dewantara’s vocabulary of freedom, it risks detaching that freedom from its moral and cultural roots if reduced to administrative flexibility alone. True epistemic independence therefore entails rediscovering the ethical foundation of freedom: freedom as responsibility, not merely adaptability.

A growing body of Indonesian scholarship articulates this epistemic aspiration. Badruddin and Halim (2025), for instance, frame educational reform through the lens of epistemologies of the South, arguing that knowledge production should emerge from Indonesia’s own socio-historical realities rather than imported models. Similarly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) defines epistemic freedom as the power to determine what counts as relevant and legitimate knowledge. Within this framework, Indonesian universities must move beyond human-capital formation to become epistemic commons, institutions that nurture not only skilled workers but also responsible, world-minded citizens capable of ethical and ecological reasoning.

However, this epistemic transformation faces persistent structural inequality. The concentration of academic resources, research funding, and governance capacity in universities located in Java and major urban centers reflects what Jacob et al. (2012) identify as unequal institutional autonomy within Indonesia’s higher education landscape. Such an imbalance perpetuates a “double dependency”: epistemic dependency on Western paradigms and developmental dependency on central governance. Peripheral institutions, often constrained by limited funding and recognition, struggle to enact meaningful reform.

Furthermore, Gumanti and Arumi (2023) report perceptions of MBKM’s impact vary among lecturers, students, and supporting staff, reflecting differences in institutional capacity and local context. Although these studies do not explicitly address regional disparity, they reveal how contextual inequities shape reform implementation and reproduce the hierarchy between central and peripheral educational spaces. These disparities expose a deeper paradox: the tension between autonomy and dependency. While the policy promotes flexibility and decentralization, it risks reinforcing the dominance of already-privileged institutions, particularly those with stronger ties to

industry and international networks. The prevailing discourse of “21st-century skills” and “employability” further narrows education’s horizon, equating success with market responsiveness rather than civic, ethical, or ecological contribution.

Reclaiming epistemic independence requires restoring education’s moral and civic vocation. This requires Indonesian universities to root innovation in cultural wisdom, to balance economic relevance with ethical reflection, and to embody Dewantara’s vision of freedom that enlightens rather than merely equips. Only through this reorientation can *Merdeka Belajar* evolve from a managerial reform into a living philosophy of liberation, aligning education with epistemic sustainability—the capacity to sustain and regenerate plural, moral, and life-affirming ways of knowing.

3.2 *The ecology of industry 4.0 and the paradox of autonomy in MBKM*

Merdeka Belajar “Freedom to Learn” was introduced in 2019 as part of Indonesia’s education transformation agenda, emphasizing flexibility, creativity, and student-centered learning. Building on this philosophy, the *Kampus Merdeka* program (2020) extends these principles to higher education, allowing students to study beyond their home institutions for up to three semesters through internships, research, teaching, or entrepreneurial projects. The initiative aims to bridge academic learning with the dynamic demands of *Industry 4.0* and the aspiration of *Society 5.0* (Aprilisa, 2020).

The *Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) policy was conceived as a transformative reform to expand interdisciplinary learning, strengthen autonomy, and realign academia with societal needs (Yusriadi et al., 2024). In practice, MBKM promotes experiential learning, community engagement, and professional readiness, an orientation reflecting Indonesia’s shift toward pragmatic and competency-based education. Philosophically, however, MBKM also gestures toward a deeper emancipatory lineage: its rhetoric of “freedom to learn” resonates with Deweyan and Freirean pedagogies that value dialogical, reflective, and contextually grounded learning (Prahani et al., 2020).

Yet, the rise of *Industry 4.0* and *Society 5.0* has profoundly reshaped Indonesia’s educational discourse. Globally celebrated as frameworks for innovation and competitiveness, these paradigms also intensify the economization of knowledge. Scholars identify this trend as *academic capitalism* (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009), where universities operate increasingly under market logics. While these frameworks promote digitalization, entrepreneurship, and technological fluency (Hayudiyani et al., 2020), they simultaneously risk deepening epistemic homogenization by framing knowledge merely as an instrument of productivity. Lukita et al. (2020), for instance, advocate a “*Curriculum 4.0*” that aligns higher education with industrial needs through programming, data analysis, artificial intelligence, and soft skills; reflecting the broader policy orientation toward employability and global market competitiveness. Yet, such models also exemplify how *Industry 4.0* discourse privileges technical rationality and workforce alignment over socio-ethical, ecological, and cultural dimensions of learning, reducing education to a mechanism of adaptation rather than transformation.

Within Indonesia, this industrial-epistemic logic manifests vividly in the MBKM reform. Government policy documents repeatedly describe education as a “national investment,” a “driver of competitiveness,” and a “tool to develop 21st-century skills” (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2020). These expressions mirror the logic of human capital theory, first articulated by Schultz (1961), and later elaborated by Becker (2008), which views education as an economic investment whose value lies in measurable output and productivity. MBKM operationalizes this logic through the “link and match” paradigm, emphasizing employability, innovation, and industry collaboration as key performance indicators. At its core, MBKM embodies Becker’s vision of education as human capital formation: universities become producers of skilled labor for the digital economy rather than cultivators of civic and moral reflection.

As Spring (2015) observes, globalization has transformed education into an economic enterprise, prioritizing productivity, and competitiveness over civic and cultural purposes.

This economization turns universities from intellectual commons into market actors, training students to solve market problems but seldom to question their ethical or structural origins. Ningsih et al. (2022) similarly note that Indonesia's education system is increasingly oriented toward developing human resources to meet performance standards, narrowing education's moral horizon and weakening its civic mission.

Empirical studies confirm this orientation. Apoko et al. (2022) report that students' enthusiasm for MBKM is driven largely by employability prospects and credit recognition, rather than for civic or reflective learning. Similarly, Susanti et al. (2023) find that MBKM is understood as a vehicle for career acceleration, while Handayani et al. (2024) observe that policy success is measured through graduate employability and institutional partnerships rather than moral or ecological outcomes. Collectively, these findings illustrate what Apple (2004) calls a *hidden curriculum*: the normalization of competition, productivity, and performativity under the guise of freedom.

Habermas's (1988) The notion of *instrumental rationality* illuminates this paradox at the heart of MBKM. When applied to education, instrumentalism reduces learning to performance and control while concealing its ideological roots in economic rationality. In practice, universities are encouraged to collaborate with industries or local governments, yet success is assessed through quantitative indicators such as, internship quotas, innovation metrics, and employability rates (Khairi et al., 2023; Risamasu et al., 2025). Anggara (2023) observes that while MBKM expands institutional autonomy, it leaves the question of educational quality unresolved, showing that autonomy functions within managerial rather than intellectual parameters.

Despite its emancipatory language, MBKM's institutional enactment remains tethered to neoliberal governance, producing what Giroux (2002) calls a *culture of performativity*, a condition where intellectual inquiry is subordinated to accountability and market relevance. Although MBKM borrows from Dewantara's *pendidikan merdeka*, which envisions learning as the harmonization of intellect, emotion, and action, its implementation often privileges administrative flexibility over moral cultivation (Taufikin & Ma'shumah, 2021). Mignolo's (2011) *colonial matrix of power* aptly captures this paradox: even as universities claim autonomy, they remain epistemically governed by Western standards of success, rationality, and progress.

The result is what Biesta (2009) describes as the "learnification" of education, where freedom is reduced to the capacity to perform rather than to reflect. In this context, students gain mobility without necessarily attaining meaning, while institutions achieve flexibility yet remain epistemically dependent. The civic and ethical functions of education are consequently overshadowed by its economic utility, producing a form of autonomy that lacks authenticity. Moving beyond this instrumental paradigm requires a shift in Indonesian higher education from mere structural reform toward a deeper epistemic transformation.

Such a transformation entails a fundamental reframing of the goals underpinning the MBKM policy. Rather than centering employability as the primary indicator of success, educational outcomes must also encompass civic consciousness, ethical reflection, and ecological literacy. This implies that accreditation systems and institutional evaluations should recognize and reward forms of learning that are community-engaged, participatory, and grounded in local wisdom, including the integration of *budi pekerti* and environmental ethics. At the same time, addressing the "double dependency" identified by Jacob et al. (2012) requires a more equitable distribution of epistemic authority. This can be pursued through the decentralization of academic resources and the empowerment of regional universities as sites of knowledge production, enabling them to generate contextually relevant and locally grounded insights.

In parallel, pedagogical practices within MBKM programs need to be reoriented toward more dialogical and reciprocal forms of engagement. Initiatives such as *Kampus Mengajar* and *Membangun Desa* should not be confined to service-delivery models, but instead developed as co-learning ecosystems in which students, communities, and educators collaboratively produce knowledge. In this sense, such programs hold the potential to function as epistemic commons—spaces that embody mutual learning and shared

responsibility—while operationalizing Dewantara’s Tri-Nga philosophy (*ngerti, ngrasa, nglakoni*) in a more substantive manner.

By embedding these shifts, MBKM can move beyond its current role as an administrative framework and evolve into a living laboratory for epistemic sustainability. Within this reorientation, freedom in learning (*merdeka belajar*) is no longer confined to institutional flexibility, but expands into a more meaningful freedom to know, to relate, and to coexist. This transformation is essential if education is to sustain not only economic development, but also the moral, cultural, and ecological dimensions of collective life, thereby underscoring the urgency of redefining freedom through the lens of epistemic sustainability.

3.3 Toward a paradigm of epistemic sustainability

Historically, higher education was envisioned as a moral and civic institution, a space where knowledge cultivated virtue, wisdom, and imagination (Barnett, 2010). Yet under neoliberal rationality, these humanistic aims have been displaced by managerial accountability and performance metrics. As Walsh et al. (2020) emphasize, education for sustainability must begin with *relational ethics*: a learning orientation that reconnects human beings to the more-than-human world. While many universities today claim alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), “sustainability” is too often reduced to a technical checklist or an accreditation requirement rather than embraced as an ethical worldview (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). In this technocratic framing, sustainability risks becoming an administrative slogan instead of a transformative epistemology.

This reductionism produces what may be termed epistemic alienation: a growing disconnection between what students learn and the moral–ecological contexts in which they live. Students acquire technical competence but often lack ethical imagination and ecological consciousness. Hall and Tandon (2017) argue that higher education continues to operate within a narrow epistemic frame, one that privileges Western technocratic knowledge while silencing other ways of knowing. Drawing from their work on knowledge democracy and decolonization, they warn that unless universities confront this “epistemicide,” sustainability will remain rhetorical rather than transformative.

This condition mirrors what Freire (1993) described as the *banking model* of education, where knowledge is deposited into passive learners rather than co-created through dialogue. Students may learn *about* sustainability but not *through* sustainable relationships with their communities and environments. Such pedagogy remains extractive; knowledge is removed from context, converted into measurable outputs, and returned as data. Biesta (2020) critiques this reduction of education to measurable outcomes, insisting that genuine learning involves qualification, socialization, and subjectification, the process of becoming a responsible subject in relation to the world.

Despite its limitations, Indonesia’s *Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) framework holds latent potential for epistemic transformation. Rather than abandoning the policy, the challenge lies in reorienting its epistemic compass to repurpose its structural flexibility toward cultivating *epistemic resilience*. Wamsler (2020) notes that few studies in sustainability education explicitly adopt relational approaches to resilience. Yet, as Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015) caution, resilience can become a tool for preserving the status quo if it is detached from structural change. What is needed, therefore, is transformative resilience: the capacity of universities to regenerate knowledge systems that sustain life, justice, and meaning, while actively challenging the hierarchies that constrain them.

Epistemic sustainability thus reframes universities as living ecosystems rather than industrial machines, positioning higher education as a moral, ecological, and epistemic community in which multiple forms of knowing are able to coexist and co-evolve. Within this perspective, education is not merely a technical process but an ethical practice and an ecological act, aimed at sustaining the very conditions that make understanding possible. Such a vision resonates with Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s (2020) notion of epistemic freedom,

understood not only as the capacity to produce knowledge but also as the authority to define what counts as knowledge in the first place.

Realizing this form of freedom, however, demands more than rhetorical commitment. It requires universities to embrace epistemic plurality by acknowledging that no single knowledge system can claim a monopoly on truth, while at the same time cultivating epistemic reflexivity through the continuous interrogation of their own institutional assumptions and socio-historical foundations. Equally important is the development of epistemic solidarity, whereby dialogue and cooperation are fostered across academic, local, and spiritual knowledge communities. Taken together, these orientations reconfigure the university as a site of shared inquiry and mutual recognition, rather than a hierarchical producer of standardized knowledge.

Practically, this entails expanding MBKM's definition of "skills" beyond technical competencies to include meta-skills for sustainability: ethical reasoning, ecological sensitivity, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving. These capacities enable graduates not merely to *function* in the economy but to *transform* it. Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015) emphasize that truly sustainable learning must be *transgressive*: it must challenge maladaptive habits of thought that reproduce unsustainable systems. Thus, transformative social learning must be participatory, reflexive, and community-embedded.

Several Indonesian initiatives already reflect this paradigm. Ramli et al. (2025) highlight how Aceh's curriculum innovation integrates *adat* values into environmental education, creating a model for culturally rooted sustainability. Similarly, pesantren-based ecological education programs show how religious and ethical teachings can harmonize with environmental stewardship. These examples demonstrate that epistemic sustainability does not reject modern knowledge but re-grounds it within *budi pekerti*, moral intelligence and cultural wisdom.

Integrating Santos's (2018) *Ecology of knowledge* offers a theoretical bridge for such practices. It enables universities to become epistemic commons, spaces where scientific, local, and spiritual knowledge systems engage in dialogue. This pluralist model resonates deeply with Indonesia's cultural ecology: Minangkabau's *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah* or Bali's *Tri Hita Karana* both embody relational worldviews that balance human, social, and environmental harmony. As Escobar (2018) argues, the "pluriverse"—a world where many worlds fit—suggests that Indonesian higher education can become both globally engaged and locally rooted, contributing to planetary coexistence through epistemic diversity.

Indeed, MBKM has already fostered innovation and enthusiasm across universities, with studies reporting increased student participation in interdisciplinary projects, digital collaboration, and community engagement (Anggara, 2023; Gumanti & Arumi, 2023). Its emphasis on experiential learning signals a departure from rigid, exam-oriented traditions. However, this transformative potential remains limited without a corresponding epistemic reorientation. Unless the policy critically engages with fundamental questions—such as whose knowledge is recognized and for what purposes knowledge is produced—MBKM risks reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to transcend.

From this synthesis, epistemic sustainability in higher education can be understood as a multidimensional orientation that integrates several interdependent principles. It entails a commitment to epistemic diversity, in which multiple knowledge systems are recognized as coequal and mutually enriching, alongside a form of dialogical reflexivity that embeds continuous engagement among academic, community, and ecological perspectives within curricular design. This orientation also foregrounds ethical relationality, prioritizing civic, spiritual, and ecological values over purely instrumental outcomes, while simultaneously calling for institutional decolonization through the reform of governance and evaluation systems to ensure greater knowledge equity. Finally, it emphasizes transformative resilience, understood as the capacity of higher education systems to remain adaptive while actively dismantling entrenched epistemic hierarchies.

Such a framework aligns with Connell's (2019) vision of the *good university*, an institution that sustains not only intellectual excellence but also ethical and ecological care.

Agirreazkuenaga (2020) Likewise, it emphasizes that universities bear a moral responsibility to align education with the *Agenda 2030* goals, not merely as performance metrics but as living commitments. Higher education must act as a *global moral agent*, embedding justice, empathy, and intercultural dialogue into its learning practices.

The enduring tension between *educare* and *educere* encapsulates both the crisis and promise of education. As Bass and Good (2004) explain, *educare* nurtures character and care, while *educere* draws out creativity and critical reasoning. Overemphasizing *educere* risks producing technically skilled but morally indifferent graduates; privileging *educare* without inquiry may foster obedience without innovation. A sustainable education paradigm reconciles the two, cultivating intellectual rigor alongside moral imagination.

In the Indonesian philosophical tradition, this synthesis resonates with *budi pekerti* (character) and *ilmu yang beradab* (knowledge with civility). It echoes Dewantara's call for *pendidikan yang memerdekakan*, education that liberates thought, feeling, and action in harmony. In alignment with Biesta's (2021) *world-centered education*, universities should orient learning not merely toward "the economy" but toward "the world": the social, natural, and ethical realities that define human existence. Through the paradigm of epistemic sustainability, higher education can recover its lost moral compass and reimagine its civic role. Rather than producing employable individuals, it can nurture responsible, reflective, and compassionate citizens—those capable of sustaining not only life but also meaning.

4. Conclusions

Indonesian higher education stands at a critical epistemic crossroads, where the promise of autonomy in the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) reform remains constrained by a human-capital paradigm that prioritizes market utility over ethical reflection. This study argues that such an orientation perpetuates epistemic reduction, marginalizing the moral, spiritual, and indigenous dimensions of wisdom essential for societal flourishing. To move beyond this impasse, the paper proposes "epistemic sustainability" as a conceptual framework for renewal. Grounded in the ecology of knowledge and cognitive justice, this framework emphasizes the regeneration of plural ways of knowing—scientific, local, ethical, and spiritual. Operationalizing this shift requires two transformative steps: first, redefining university performance metrics to prioritize cultural and community impact over narrow graduate salary data; and second, establishing dedicated funding for research that uses decolonial methodologies to validate local knowledge systems as alternative epistemic foundations rather than as symbolic cultural supplements.

As a theoretical synthesis, this study provides a robust conceptual diagnosis but lacks empirical validation; therefore, future research should explore how epistemic sustainability is operationalized through case studies across diverse regional contexts outside of Java. Such inquiries are vital to understanding how institutional contexts influence epistemic autonomy and how integrating local epistemologies fosters students' civic consciousness. Ultimately, reclaiming the principle that education takes place "in the world and for the world" requires a reconfiguration of the epistemic assumptions that currently reduce learning to an economic instrument. The Merdeka Belajar project can only be meaningful if freedom in learning extends to freedom in knowing, caring, and coexisting—ensuring that education serves as a foundation for life, justice, and meaning rather than being subsumed by instrumental logic.

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Biography of Author

Nadhira Asiyah Arrin, School of Culture and Communication, Faculty of Arts, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia.

- Email: nadhirasiyah@gmail.com
- ORCID: 0009-0009-1319-9657
- Web of Science ResearcherID: N/A
- Scopus Author ID: N/A
- Homepage: N/A