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Research paper

Industry Partnerships as a Strategy for Enhancing Learning Innovation and Vocational School Branding

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ABSTRACT

Background: Collaborations between schools and industry are often merely formalized without a deeper understanding of their benefits. This study will examine the benefits of industry partnerships from the perspective of learning innovation and vocational school branding.

Method: The research method used is qualitative with a phenomenological approach. Two schools with unique furniture specialties will be selected. Six respondents will be selected from each school. Data collection will be conducted using primary data (in-depth interviews and participant observation) and secondary data (supporting documents).

Result: The results showed that the benefits of partnerships from the perspective of learning innovation are the implementation of TEFA and industry participation in the implementation of the Final Project. Meanwhile, from the perspective of vocational school branding, industry can assist schools in providing positive branding to the community.

Conclusion: School-industry partnerships offer numerous benefits in various areas. This collaboration needs to be maximized to benefit learning innovation, school branding, and other sectors.

INTRODUCTION

Industry requires resources to continue its daily operations. Human resources are a key resource that industry must possess in its operations. This need must be addressed by vocational education institutions by providing competent graduates and promoting them to industry. However, the reality is not as smooth as planned. The alignment between industry and vocational schools remains a persistent contemporary issue. One characteristic of this suboptimal alignment is the high unemployment rate.

Based on data on open unemployment rates by educational attainment (Table 1), from the lowest level (elementary school and below) to the highest (doctoral) level, the highest open unemployment rate is for vocational high school graduates (8.45%), followed by high school graduates (6.55%) in 2025. Although unemployment trends at all levels have decreased over the past three years, these unemployment rates remain very high. This indicates that current efforts to improve the absorption rate of vocational high school graduates need to be improved and supplemented with other strategies to reduce open unemployment.

Table 1.

Unemployment According to Highest Education Completed February 2024- November 2025

Karakteristik	Februari 2024 (persen)	Agustus 2024 (persen)	Februari 2025 (persen)	Agustus 2025 (persen)	November 2025 (persen)	Perubahan Ags 25–Nov 25 (persen poin)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
TPT Menurut Pendidikan Tertinggi yang Ditamatkan						
SD ke Bawah	2,38	2,32	2,32	2,30	2,29	-0,01
Sekolah Menengah Pertama	4,28	4,11	4,35	3,80	3,76	-0,04
Sekolah Menengah Atas	6,73	7,05	6,35	6,88	6,55	-0,33
Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan	8,62	9,01	8,00	8,63	8,45	-0,18
Diploma I/II/III	4,87	4,83	4,84	4,31	4,22	-0,09
Diploma IV, S1, S2, S3	5,63	5,25	6,23	5,39	5,38	-0,01

Source: (BPS, 2026)

One of the government's strategies for reducing unemployment is improving the quality and competency of human resources. This is achieved through the provision of vocational education, often referred to as TVET (Technical Vocational Education and Training). The goal of TVET is to meet the needs of the labor market, with a sequential curriculum (Sarkees & Scott, 1995). Trainers/instructors, who are experienced in industry or business, can educate their students based on their knowledge and experience. Furthermore, the chosen system separates vocational education from academic education. Furthermore, the philosophy of essentialism emphasizes that curriculum development and learning must be aligned with the needs of the workplace/industry.

The goal of TVET is to meet the individual's needs and fulfill their life's requirements (Miller, 1985, 1996). Furthermore, this philosophy emphasizes problem-solving processes and higher-order thinking. Initially, TVET was designed based on this theory, which required high-level thinking to create, innovate, and find solutions to existing problems to meet economic needs. However, as developments developed, it became clear that human needs extend beyond

economics. These include social needs, the need for appreciation, the need to be someone/play a certain role, and so on (Sudira, 2017).

Subsequently, Miller and Gregson updated their theory, often referred to as Pragmatism (Reconstructionist strand). The goal of TVET is to transform society into a more democratic one, building a society willing to learn, organizations willing to learn and develop, and a society that is proactive in adapting to changing times, thus avoiding clinging to past beliefs and experiences that are considered the most correct (Miller & Gregson, 1999). This philosophy is certainly suitable for use in the future (Rojewski, 2009) because it includes various aspects that are in line with and in tune with current developments. It is no longer the era of only being successful for the sake of making oneself successful, but success is said to be when one can make others successful, prosperous, and educated around them.

The TVET education system currently in place has not been effective in truly reducing unemployment. Alignment between industry and vocational schools is closely related to the compatibility between the labor market and the workforce produced by the schools. Four variables influence the alignment between industry and vocational schools: location, time, quantity, and quality (Slamet, 2014). Of these four variables, quality is the one that schools and industry can work to achieve. The other three variables require the involvement of other stakeholders for optimal implementation.

Quality is the relationship between graduate competencies and industry competency needs. This definition implies the need for a close relationship between vocational schools and their partner industries (Estriyanto, 2021). This relationship is likened to a partnership. Mutual understanding, complementarity, and mutual support are essential. However, the relationship between the two sectors remains very limited, focusing only on industrial practices and practical exams (Rochmadi, 2016). In fact, many activities should be maximized between schools and industry, such as sharing knowledge, skills, equipment, and funding, as well as a willingness to integrate industry-specificities into the learning process (Estriyanto, 2021).

If schools can maximize their relationships with industry, they can reap numerous benefits. Internships, project-based learning, industry certification, and relevant learning facilities are just a few of the benefits vocational schools can gain through these partnerships. Maximizing these benefits will indirectly enhance the school's brand image within the industry. When industry trusts and maintains a strong relationship with the school, it indirectly increases public confidence in the school, believing it implements quality learning and is capable of meeting industry needs (Basori et al., 2025).

Partnerships can provide both academic and economic benefits (Purnamawati & Yahya, 2019). Academic benefits result from increased knowledge (substantial) within the school's learning process. Academic partnerships are generally conducted for the transfer of service and production technology, knowledge/skills transfer, and learning technology transfer. Some partnership models between vocational schools and industrial industries (DUDI) that provide academic benefits include the Training Model. Training is the process of teaching, informing, or educating someone to improve their skills in performing their work. Economic benefits can be achieved when each party gains financially during the partnership process. If students' practical work is conducted in industry, it will certainly benefit the school because it gains efficiency in its

equipment and resources, while the industry will gain efficiency in the human resources employed there.

Designing a partnership model between vocational schools and the workplace requires theoretical consideration of partnership patterns, as well as an analysis of needs and problems. Several key indicators serve as model components in the analysis to produce a viable partnership design, where data flow is utilized to achieve partnership goals. The partnership model design has seven components, developed based on an analysis of the needs and problems of partnerships between vocational schools and the industrial world. The components of the partnership are: (1) ministry policy, Government policy in partnership emphasizes that both parties can implement the contents of the MoU by paying attention to the agreed program stages, (2) the core strategy concept that explains the steps in implementing the contents of the MoU with 5C (Five Core Strategies), (3) vocational high school policy, SMK and DUDI policies through the MoU contain programs that must be implemented and mutually agreed upon, (4) industrial management related to planning, implementation and evaluation, (5) service principles, Partnership principles and partnership activities are adjusted to the MoU between parties, (6) graduate competencies, Expected competencies are competency criteria adjusted to DUDI expectations, (7) absorption of SMK graduates, absorption of SMK graduates describes the acceptance of interns for internships and work contracts with DUDI (Purnamawati & Syahrul, 2018).

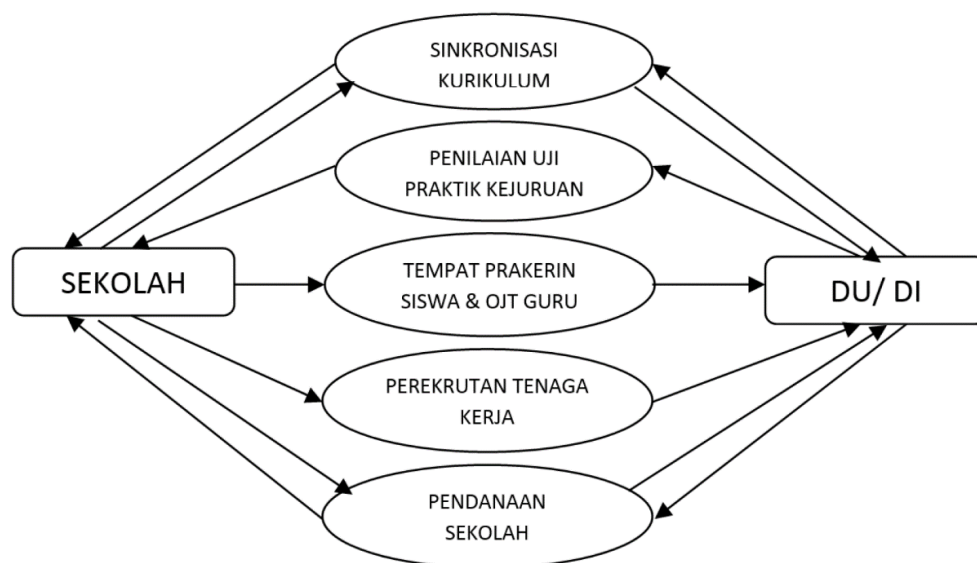


Figure 1. Partnership Model of Muhammadiyah 2 Wuryanto Vocational School
Source: (Ixtiarto & Sutrisno, 2016)

The results of the research conducted (Ixtiarto & Sutrisno, 2016) show that partnership management planning at SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Wuryantoro is carried out to manage the school's potential to support collaboration with the business and industrial worlds: (1) School promotion planning in establishing communication with the business and industrial worlds, in curriculum synchronization, student internships, graduate placement, teacher internships, (2) Utilizing the special roles of the business and industrial worlds such as guest teachers, school

funding, and scholarships, (3) Business and industrial cooperation outlined in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The implementation of the collaboration is made by an MoU whose contents cover the agreed areas of cooperation, including curriculum validation and synchronization, industrial visits, guest teachers, industrial work practices, vocational competency tests (UKK), OJT teachers, certification, and graduate recruitment/placement.

Furthermore, there is a combined partnership model for an optimal environment, training, and human resources. There are factors that influence the development and maintenance of partnerships in vocational education and training and other industrial sectors. When key variables are gathered, an interesting mix of situational, organizational, cultural, and human factors emerges (Callan & Ashworth, 2004). The framework guiding the current research is presented in Figure 2. Within this framework, it is proposed that three overlapping factors determine the success of a training partnership. To ensure that training is delivered at the right time and place, financial and administrative support must be provided. When these three key elements are combined and work well together, a successful partnership is expected (Callan & Ashworth, 2004).

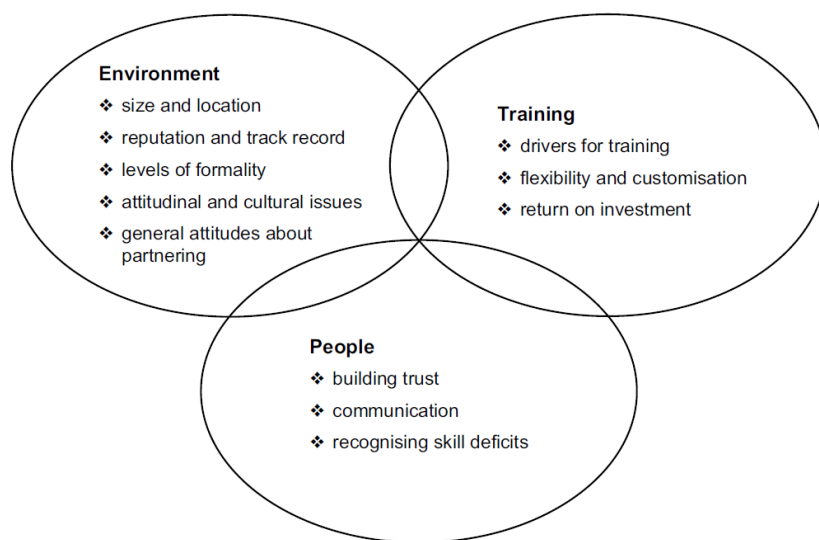


Figure 2. Optimal Partnership for Environment, Training, and Human Resources
Source: (Callan & Ashworth, 2004)

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. The researcher will seek to understand the lived experiences of schools in collaborating with industry, which has been in place for several years. The researcher attempts to capture the meanings given by respondents to the techniques or strategies employed and then elaborates on these in a concrete conclusion without altering the natural setting.

Participants

The research locations are SMKN 2 Jepara, SMK Lemuria, and SMK PIKA (Higher Wood Industry Education). All vocational schools are located in Central Java. These three vocational schools were selected based on various fundamental considerations. SMKN 2 Jepara was

chosen because it is a vocational school located in an area with a long history of carving and furniture, thus having the crucial task of developing and maintaining the quality of furniture and carving human resources in Jepara. SMK Lemuria was chosen because it is a new school with the best quality machinery and equipment in Indonesia. Even at the university and polytechnic level, no other school in the wood and carving field has more advanced equipment and machinery than SMK Lemuria. This vocational school has such advanced infrastructure for a reason. This was achieved because SMK Lemuria received support from the Djarum Foundation to encourage the school in terms of state-of-the-art facilities and infrastructure.

Data Collection

Data sources are sources of facts or information used to answer research questions. The data to be studied comes from primary and secondary sources. Primary data is data obtained directly from the data source. In this study, primary data was obtained primarily from in-depth interviews and participant observation. Participants from whom information was collected were selected based on criteria relevant to the problem being discussed. Relevant, in this case, means understanding the facts, possessing information, and being aware of events related to the branding strategy and brand equity of SMKN 2 Jepara and SMK Lemuria Kudus. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from documents found to support the primary data.

Table 2.

Interview respondents at each school.

No	Position/ Role	Total
1	Vocational High School Principal	1
2	Vocational High School Deputy Principal for Curriculum	1
3	Vocational High School Deputy Principal for Public Relations	1
4	Expertise/Practical Teachers	1
5	Grade 10 and 11/12 Students (Students who excel and actively participate in learning)	1
6	Industry/Cooperation Partners	1
Total		6

The selected informants represent various SMK stakeholders, namely: (1) the SMK Principal; (2) Vice Principal (curriculum and public relations); (3) Teachers; (4) Students; (5) and school partner industries. For more details, this is presented in Table 2. Based on Table 2, it can be obtained that in this study 6 respondents will be interviewed at each school, so that a total of 12 respondents will be interviewed. This is in accordance with Polkinghorne who recommends interviewing 5 to 25 informants for qualitative research (Polkinghorne, 1989).

RESULTS

Learning Innovation

Based on the analysis of the data obtained, collaboration between schools and industry can benefit schools in terms of learning innovation. The learning innovations analyzed include two activities: the implementation of teaching factories within school learning and the participation of industry in the implementation and evaluation of students' final assignments.

TEFA is a learning model that integrates real-life production processes with school-based learning activities. This automatically positions schools as both pedagogical and industrial. SMK Lemuria implements the TEFA learning model. The school has established a furniture production unit called Abhirupa. The unit's role is to receive furniture orders from various institutions and individuals and work on them with SMK Lemuria students as its workforce. Upon entering the Abhirupa production area, students are required to comply with all established industry procedures. Communication patterns, discipline, and even rewards and punishments are applied in accordance with industry standards. Furthermore, students will earn income from their work.

“...We do have workshops, sir. We have the Teaching Factory program, where we accept external projects, especially from Djarum. We design all the schools we support, and we design the interiors...” [YO_IA.L_04.25]

Abhirupa has received a wide variety of orders, including speaker boxes, meeting tables, robotic production tables, table and chair sets, and more. Some of the major projects it has handled include the creation of a table and chair set for Raden Umar Said Vocational School, a Jiva Bestari bakery cabinet, a table and chair set for Bhakti Kudus Vocational School, a Cafe Oza table and chair set, a meeting table for Gebog 2 Junior High School, a robotics lab for Muhammadiyah Watukelir Junior High School, and more. Production is carried out during school hours, but if the customer requires a faster turnaround time and a mutual agreement is reached, the production process will be expedited. One method used is overtime. During overtime, students who agree to participate are given additional incentives as a form of appreciation. This aligns with real-world conditions in the company, where overtime is rewarded in addition to their salary.

Students are not only taught the furniture-making process at school, but also the assembly and installation process at the customer's premises. Students are taught how to transport furniture from the production unit to the customer. They are also taught how to install and set up the furniture. If there are complaints or problems, students will be taught how to manage conflict so that consumers feel valued and satisfied.



Figure 3. TEFA Production Results at SMK Lemuria Kudus Ordered from SMK Raden Umar Said

Source: (DP_F_L_07.24)

Slightly different from SMK Lemuria, SMKN 2 Jepara has a business unit called Usaha Mandiri (Usman) Craft and Craft Gallery. This business unit is located in the same area as SMKN 2 Jepara, right on the main road, making it easily accessible to customers. Usman sells all products produced by all departments at SMKN 2 Jepara. There are several purchasing options. The first is to purchase items from the gallery. These items are neatly arranged and coordinated by Usman and his staff. If an item in the gallery doesn't match your choice, you can proceed to the second option. The second option is to place an order with Usman for the desired item.

Efforts made by Usman's management to increase product sales include collaborating with the local government and other relevant parties. Furthermore, Usman actively participates in various events organized by both the local government and the private sector. They utilize and utilize current social media and frequently hold competitions at Usman's school. Usman is proactive in engaging with various groups with the goal of advancing the school's reputation.

“...because all majors make products, so all majors are included here, from wood to furniture, like nightstands, cabinets, wooden and metal shelves, ceramics, fashion, textiles, and even animation in the form of films...” [IM_KU.J_04.25]

“...so I collaborated with the local government and other friends, we created a program and held a competition. Elementary, middle, and high school students, including the general public, made these; we funded them, and they just carved them...” [IM_KU.J_04.25]

“...so when we launched this in 2024, I invited the head of the district, the regent. If we invited the regent, they would all come. So I asked him to invite me here again every time he had a guest. Because the nature of the Fish Gallery is that I'm not just promoting it. Our gallery has all the crafts in Jepara: ceramics, textiles, wood, metal, Monel, furniture, and clothing. Back then, Kriyan had a lot of garment factories, and we also had batik. Anyone from any government agency, please stop by here if you're having a picnic. It's one of the businesses. And if you need souvenirs, just call. If you need batik or other products, it sells pretty well. For 800,000, you'll have a sign with writing on it, and you can just send it...” [IM_KU.J_04.25]



Figure 4. Some of Usman's Furniture and Carving Products from SMKN 2 Jepara

Source: (DP_F_J_07.24)

In addition to the TEFA process, industry collaborates with schools, including internships/industrial work experience, training, final project assessments and evaluations, and graduate acceptance. Focusing on the final project evaluation process is certainly unique, as few industries are willing to participate in educational activities at schools to this extent. The process of implementing students' final projects is carried out in collaboration between the school and industry. Industry is actively involved in these activities. Industry participation in the implementation of students' final projects encompasses three aspects: design, production, and evaluation of the results. During the initial design process, students will be guided and directed by a specialist teacher, covering design concepts, dimensions, utility value, and so on. Once the product design process is complete, industry will be invited to visit the school to verify the designs. This verification includes the concept of utility value, dimensions, product ergonomics, and design details. Next, the required tools and materials will be calculated and analyzed. Each tool and material will be identified in more detail, including its type and quality, according to the required tools and materials. The final result will be a product plan, from design to Cost Plan and Budget (RAB). At this stage, the student's design will receive feedback, suggestions, and even improvements from industry to ensure the product is truly feasible and has good utility and sales value.

The next stage is the production process. Once the design is finalized, it will be taken to the workshop to be used as a guide for product creation. The tools used will be identified, and the required materials will be carefully vetted to ensure they are fully compliant with the plan. Once the tools and materials are obtained, the process of measuring, smoothing (grinding), painting, cutting, making joints, and assembling the product components continues. During this stage, students will be guided by technicians, teachers, and industry representatives. These three parties share the same goal: ensuring students work according to correct procedures, adhere to appropriate standards, and adhere to Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) principles. Once the product is assembled, the finishing process will continue, including surface smoothing, wood filler application, re-smoothing, spraying coatings and dyes, and surface protection. Each student, with different product details, may implement different procedures because each product has its own specifications and manufacturing techniques. Because of this detail and specificity, the role of these three parties is crucial for students.

Once the product is completed and enters the assessment stage, the industry also plays a role in implementing Quality Control (QC). Products will be assessed and evaluated based on established industry standards. Any products with quality deficiencies or weaknesses will be corrected. Students will be provided with information on how to properly perform product QC. Furthermore, they will be informed of the correct steps and procedures for product improvements to ensure they remain effective and efficient.

“...So this year's TA is collaborating with a company appointed by the school. For example, for furniture there is a collaboration with CV Wahyu Jati. So, from the start of the design at ACC, the design student will be accompanied by a department teacher, when it is finished, the company will come here to verify it. So, why is the design like this, sir, and why does it work like that? Let's say a cupboard. This size is like this, what if the shape isn't like this? There was assistance 3 times. The first stage is design, the second stage is production,

and the third stage is the result. The production is here, the father has a workshop, so you can also do it at home. If it's here, maybe it's gentian. But especially for finishing here. Even if, later, when finishing here, the results are not optimal, please take it home and repair it at home. If you want to see below, there are children's works. Tomorrow it will be exhibited on exhibition day, the 28th. Soon. This is a chair, this table is made by children..." [MS_BKK.J_04.25]

Vocational School Branding

Collaboration with external parties is one branding strategy chosen by vocational schools. The school benefits from this collaboration by enabling external parties/relevant stakeholders to understand and comprehend the school's work program. This can broaden stakeholders' understanding of the school's strengths, uniqueness, and weaknesses. The next step is to collaborate on work programs or sponsor school activities. Stakeholders often assist and support school programs with concrete, beneficial activities in implementing them.

Industrial collaboration is a crucial aspect of this partnership and requires annual improvement. SMKN 2 Jepara benefits significantly from its geographic location, as Jepara boasts a diverse range of furniture industries, ranging from local to national to international. Many industries have collaborated with SMKN 2 Jepara, including internships/industrial work experience, training, final project assessments and evaluations, and graduate admissions.

The industries collaborating with SMKN 2 Jepara are not limited to Jepara. They also include industries from Semarang and even West Java. In fact, some internationally recognized furniture industries are often branches of similar industries abroad. Some are owned directly by Asian (Taiwan) or even European (Italy) owners who established furniture factories in Semarang or Jepara. These furniture industries have collaborated with SMKN 2 Jepara and are actively involved in several activities.

"...There are many. If we want to place our students, we want to find a large company, so they know the results have to be good, not just like home craftsmen. Then there's CV. Alpin Mebel Karangbagusan, which also exports. Yesterday, I asked the alumni here where they send them. America, sir. There are various places, some in France, America, Taiwan, and so on. PT Dhian Adi is in Singapore and America too..." [AZ_KJ.J_04.25]

"...There are many, sir. We've established partnerships with industry, we've fostered those relationships so they trust us. The Japanese industry, sir, is called AST, and they have a branch in Semarang. They've been willing to come here and signed an MOU with us. Our students are asked to do internships there, and if they're willing, they can also be accepted to work there..." [AM_WH.J_04.25]

The industries that collaborate with SMK Lemuria are quite numerous and varied. The industries that collaborate with SMK Lemuria cover various fields, namely internships/industrial work practices, learning (Teaching Factory) and accepting graduates. Even when it was still in its infancy and did not have practical facilities, SMK Lemuria collaborated with PT. Kudos Istana Kreatif by means of direct practice in the Industry where previously given theory at school. In addition, industry during the internship will consistently provide input to the school regarding the competencies and quality of students expected. Industry is very proactive in providing input

for the benefit of students during internships because currently finding competent workers is not easy. Often, industries find competent workers who have worked well (gaining experience), but within a short time the employees leave and establish their own industries. This presents a challenge and opportunity in terms of fulfilling the workforce in the furniture and carving sector.

“...Because at that time there were no machine facilities, the learning model was made very unique: one semester studying theory at school, and the next semester direct practice at the PT Kudos Istana Creative factory...” [M_KS.L_04.25]

“...Continuing to be a company too, "Mas grandma iso engko kowe nek print my students sing iso pictures, sing iso calculate..." Finally, we meet their needs. So, it will be processed later... into a curriculum that is appropriate to the industry. Hey. I'm just talking about what's going on, who's doing it, or not doing it, so I don't understand. The industry is very proactive. Because of what, sir? Because now it's difficult to find a handyman, sir. Wis is so clever and so clever. That's right, it's cool, isn't it? The final point is to golek people, teach new people...” [AM_KF.L_04.25]

DISCUSSION

Collaboration between schools and industry is a necessity for vocational schools. One of the TVET philosophies is essentialism, where TVET is designed to serve and meet the needs of industry (industrial function). The curriculum, programs, and learning activities implemented in schools are focused and tailored to serve and meet industry needs. Collaboration between schools and industry will bring numerous benefits. Among the benefits of learning innovation are the implementation of the TEFA learning process and the participation of industry in students' final projects. A closer look reveals that during the TEFA process, students become exposed to industry as early as possible in the learning process. This provides a valuable learning experience, enabling them to adapt and prepare for internships and employment. When TEFA runs smoothly, students will work on their final projects with ease and confidence under the guidance of industry. Students will feel comfortable and motivated to complete their final projects to the best of their ability.

The next stage after students complete their final assignment is a product exhibition. At this stage, students will showcase their work and even sell it. If students truly learn and work according to instructions, they are highly likely to develop confidence in their products, as they are marketable, high-quality, and the result of their hard work and learning experience. This self-confidence is not easy to cultivate in students, but through collaboration between schools and industry in innovative learning, students' confidence can be fostered and enhanced.

From an industry perspective, this also benefits them. Finding skilled, competent, and trustworthy workers is currently a challenge. This is especially true for specific competencies, such as those taught in vocational schools. Industries don't need to allocate large budgets for additional training and education. They can save on these costs because the TEFA process and participation in final project implementation have helped them select and train prospective workers easily, affordably, and effectively. Furthermore, finding workers with strong soft skills is certainly not easy. Often, industries find workers with strong hard skills but weak soft skills, forcing them to terminate their jobs. Through the process at schools, industries can accurately

identify students who possess both hard and soft competencies. Therefore, when recruitment finally takes place, it can be implemented quickly and accurately, thus benefiting the industry.

The second benefit of collaboration is the vocational school's branding, which indirectly benefits the school. When graduates are accepted into industry, their juniors have a greater chance of being accepted into the same industry. Furthermore, if a good relationship between the school and industry is maintained, the chances of graduates being absorbed will increase. This is especially true when the high quality and industry-standard products produced by students at exhibitions are seen, which will undoubtedly further strengthen the school's branding.

If a vocational school is able to educate students into competent graduates in demand by industry, it will be perceived as a successful school in the eyes of the public. If this is maintained, the school to become a favorite vocational school among various groups (having a brand image). This is when vocational schools benefit from vocational school branding. If this condition can be maintained and maintained properly, the school to achieve strong brand equity.

CONCLUSION

School-industry collaboration can be considered a strategy to improve the quality of learning and the image of vocational schools. Objectively, the benefits of improving learning quality are derived from the learning aspects through TEFA and industry participation in the implementation of final assignments. In terms of the image of vocational schools, collaboration with industry helps graduates achieve high quality, so they can be absorbed by industry. This is sufficient for a school to become an influential brand, as the school can produce graduates who meet industry standards. A school's image of excellence and popularity can be easily achieved across various levels of society if the school can maintain its quality and consistency. The school may have strong brand equity in society and industry.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author (s).

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