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Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) to Strengthen the Culture and Citizenship Literacy of Pre-Service EFL Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explain and describe the role of the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) or the Independent Learning Program in enhancing the culture and citizenship literacy of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) pre-service teachers at Universitas Almuslim, Indonesia, through the PERMATA-SAKTI Program, a student exchange program. This research employed a mixed method. The respondents of this study were prospective EFL teachers who participated in the program. Five informants were interviewed extensively to collect qualitative data. The interviews were transcribed and the results were analyzed through thematic analysis. A number of 35 pre-service EFL teachers filled in a closed-ended questionnaire to collect quantitative data. These data were analyzed descriptively. The findings of this study indicated that the program could strengthen the cultural and citizenship literacy of EFL pre-service teachers by introducing culture and diversity through the online learning process. The active combined learning process revealed the values of solidarity, tolerance, diversity, and unity. EFL pre-service teachers developed an attitude of mutual respect through a dynamic learning process involving diverse languages, races, ethnicities, religions, and worldviews. This study concluded that the PERMATA-SAKTI

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Program effectively strengthened the EFL pre-service teachers' cultural and citizenship literacy.

Keywords: EFL teachers, citizenship, culture, independent learning, literacy, student exchange.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in Indonesia has released a number of innovative programs to help mold the next generation of Indonesians into skilled workers to handle the challenges posed by the world's increasing interconnectedness. One of these is the *Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) or the Independent Learning Program. In order to foster innovations that address real-world issues faced by businesses, the Ministry of Education has launched a new initiative at universities called the 'MBKM policy' (Susilawati et al., 2021). The value of self-directed study has traditionally been more heavily weighted in Western than Asian educational systems (Sakai & Takagi, 2009). Independent Learning was originally implemented in 1993 in Indonesia and was later enhanced by the recent Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, Nadiem Makariem, in 2020. Independent campuses conform to connect and match the concept initiated by Wardiman Djojonegoro, the country's Minister of Education and Culture from 1993 to 1997 (Kodrat, 2021). In this course, students are given the freedom to design their own curricula, and the institution is required to support both online and traditional forms of education. The connect and match model is an educational pedagogical basis for creating graduates who are 'work-ready', as outlined in Government Regulation No. 9 adopted in 1990 regulating secondary education (Soesilowati, 2009).

According to Misnawati and Zuraini (2023), MBKM refers to the presence of a learning process within higher education that is characterized by autonomy and flexibility. This approach fosters an innovative learning culture that is not limited, but rather aligns with the diverse needs of students. MBKM encompasses three key dimensions of competencies, namely attitude, knowledge, and skills. One of the activities through which the instruction of MBKM is facilitated is the independent exchange student (*Program Pertukaran Mahasiswa* or PMM, literally translated as Student Exchange Program) program. The exchange student program encompasses a variety of activities, one of which is the Nusantara Module. The Nusantara module comprises a series of activities aimed at enhancing understanding of variety, fostering inspiration, promoting introspection, and encouraging social contribution. This module has been carefully planned to follow a sequential and sustainable approach. The Nusantara Module comprises a total of sixteen activities, including eight activities focused on variety, two activities centered on inspiration, five activities dedicated to reflection, and one activity aimed at social involvement ("*Buku panduan Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka*," 2020).

Meanwhile, in other countries, the MBKM program has been in use for some time but with different terminology. In the United States of America for instance, Carl Rogers proposed Freedom to Learn in the 1960s (Joseph et al., 2020). It was implemented to help people learn how to adapt flexibly to new problem situations and

internalize an adaptive mode of problem-solving. Furthermore, the Southern Freedom Schools which were pioneered by SNCC in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964 provided Freedom University that emphasized the importance of safe spaces to cultivate education for liberation (Soltis, 2015). Moreover, In Europe, the program was clearly articulated in the 1979 report prepared by Holec for the Council known as Learner Autonomy (Çakici, 2015). The learner autonomy aims at providing language learners with the ability to take on more responsibility for their own learning. Besides, Uzbekistan has implemented the same program called the Independent Learning program to improve the practical and creative training of future artists and teachers (Kholmuratovich, 2020).

In Indonesia, to help students reach their full academic and extracurricular potential, the government funds the program MBKM, which places equal emphasis on developing students' hard and soft abilities (Kodrat, 2021). Sampelolo and Kombong (2022) show that by involving students in real-world activities during the course of their education, MBKM can help them acquire valuable life skills that will serve them well in the future. The growth of the MBKM program contributes to students' increased interest in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields (Mariati, 2021). The program is an opening and a risk for the government; its goal is to equip recent college graduates with the skills and knowledge they will need to thrive in the unpredictable workplace of the future brought on by the industrial revolution. This program can serve as a platform where students can broaden their horizons and learn both the technical and interpersonal skills that best suit their own goals and passions (Rodiyah, 2021).

A component of the MBKM initiative is being carried out at Universitas Almuslim, located in Bireuen, Aceh, Indonesia. University students have the opportunity to pursue their own areas of academic interest, granting them the freedom to broaden their horizons and learn more about topics that particularly pique their interest (Sudaryanto et al., 2020). Universities are held to a higher standard, as students look to them to facilitate a learning experience that is both creative and limitless, adapting to their unique personalities and learning styles. This program further allows all Indonesian students to engage in as many non-classroom learning opportunities as possible (Meke et al., 2022). Students are permitted to take up to three semesters outside of their major, two semesters at other colleges or universities (equal to 40 credits), and one semester in a different major within the same university (20 credits) under the MBKM policy.

The PERMATA-SAKTI PERMATA-SAKTI (*Pertukaran Mahasiswa Tanah Air Nusantara Sistem Alih Kredit dengan Teknologi Informasi* or Students of the Homeland of the Archipelago Exchange Credit Transfer System with Information Technology) Program is a student exchange initiative with a credit transfer mechanism, debuted in 2020 as part of the MBKM's suite of initiatives. The initiative was implemented via an online learning process with the help of student ambassadors from all over Indonesia. This program is an initiative to incorporate cultural studies into the curriculum of all Indonesian universities. In 2020, Universitas Almuslim joined the program. A total of 14 universities worked with Almuslim as partners. Participants included future educators, such as English as Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers. The program is deemed as one of the ways that the Indonesian government is working to counteract the potentially harmful effects of 'outer' cultures.

As a result, the MBKM program hosts the PERMATA-SAKTI Program in order to increase students' awareness of Indonesia's cultural variety and citizenship literacy.

The student exchange program for pre-service EFL teachers is one policy that is traced in the research conducted by [Sampelolo and Kombong \(2022\)](#). They found that pre-service EFL teachers greatly benefited from the MBKM program because it provided them with opportunities to participate in different academic tracks. In addition to the on-campus instruction, pre-service EFL teachers had the option of participating in off-campus classes where they could improve their English language abilities and fluency by interacting with various lecturers and students. In addition, they were exposed to the unique academic practice learning culture. Participating in a student exchange program was a great way to broaden their horizons, expose them to new cultures, and develop important interpersonal skills.

[Krishnapatria \(2021\)](#) said that this program is designed to enable prospective pre-service English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to study at various universities across Indonesia. The primary goal of this student exchange program is to assist students in exploring various academic disciplines at different universities, thereby broadening their understanding of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Indonesia's national motto, which means 'Unity in Diversity') as well as the cultural diversity among Indonesian students, including those studying English teaching. The PERMATA-SAKTI program is also structured to enhance undergraduate students' learning experiences and provide them with opportunities for self-directed knowledge and interest development, ultimately better preparing them for graduation.

This study not only emphasizes academic aspects but also explores ways to enhance the engagement of pre-service teachers in understanding and appreciating culture as well as their responsibilities as citizens. Within this context, the research will focus on efforts to cultivate a sense of patriotism and strengthen unity among pre-service EFL teachers through the PERMATA-SAKTI program. This represents a significant advancement in higher education, as it places special emphasis on instilling citizenship values and promoting cross-cultural understanding among future generations of students. By incorporating these elements into the learning experiences of pre-service EFL teachers, this research has the potential to make a sustainable and positive contribution to fostering understanding, tolerance, and solidarity in an increasingly diverse society. The findings of this study could aid the MBKM program, managed by the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, and educational institutions across Indonesia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Concept of *Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) or the Independent Learning Program Policy

Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) or the Independent Learning Program has emerged to help students acquire the skills of social interaction, collaboration, and management ([Yudhawasthi & Christiani, 2021](#)). Students and grads of higher learning institutions should be able to do more than just learn the material covered in their courses and programs; they should also be able to learn new scientific information on their own ([Akmalovna, 2022](#)). Students who engage in independent

study are better able to retain and expand their knowledge, apply their skills in novel contexts, and broaden their horizons in search of novel solutions to familiar problems (Akmalovna, 2022). It teaches people to determine their own training objectives, create a plan for achieving those objectives, and make necessary adjustments to the implementation of that plan.

The MBKM program leads to changes to the higher education curriculum that provides autonomous freedom for education institutions (Zainudin & Utami, 2021). Since knowledge, skills, abilities, habits, conviction, and spirituality cannot be transferred from a teacher to a student via lectures alone, the importance of independent work is undeniable. They are mastered by each student through their own cognitive effort in a state of intellectual tension (Akmalovna, 2022). Such individual effort serves important developmental, instructional, and educational purposes. The MBKM policy issued by educational institutions is for students to choose activities outside their study program or campus as part of an innovative learning system (Arifin & Muslim, 2020). As a result, Indonesian students have the opportunity to make some of the quickest shifts in the development of high-quality resources that contribute to the civilizational development and national interests of their country. The Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia has introduced four policies: (1) automatic re-accreditation for study programs, (2) permission for state universities to become Legal Cooperation, (3) independence for qualified universities to establish study programs, and (4) the right of students to study for three semesters outside of study programs (Arifin & Muslim, 2020).

2.2 The Purpose of Developing the MBKM Program

The mission of the MBKM program is to foster in students an innovative learning culture that will enhance their intellectual capacity and creative prowess while simultaneously encouraging them to acquire a breadth of information in preparation for entering the global labor market (Zuhrohtun et al., 2021). In addition, it was explained by Sopiannyah et al. (2022) that the MBKM policy gives students the chance to choose their courses depending on their areas of interest, which makes the learning process more independent and adaptable. It is believed that the MBKM program, which is an invention, is able to help the achievement of graduates to have high quality and competitiveness in facing the competition of the world (Siregar et al., 2020). Graduates of universities can improve their capabilities in both hard and soft skills by participating in this program, which is tailored to meet the requirements of the commercial and industrial sectors (Puspitasari & Nugroho, 2021).

The objective of *Merdeka Belajar* is to examine teaching practices, curriculum content, and creative projects employed at universities. The autonomous approach posits that EFL acquisition is facilitated by creating an inclusive environment, where students can develop relationships and freely express themselves. The setting enables the language acquisition of practical skills within a supportive learning environment (Çakici, 2015).

According to Fitriyani et al. (2021), student exchange is a form of activity that can increase students' experience and insight to communicate across cultures by interacting and establishing friendships with students throughout Indonesia. This can be accomplished through student exchange programs. Student exchange programs are held as part of the Indonesian government's efforts to minimize the problem of

inequality in facilities and infrastructure for the implementation of the learning process in various educational units in Indonesia. This problem is a result of the fact that facilities and infrastructure for the learning process in Indonesia's various educational units are not uniformly good.

2.3 Culture and Citizenship Literacy

According to [Sari \(2021\)](#), cultural literacy is the capacity possessed by the people who inhabit a country to comprehend the significance of the country's culture in the formation of the nation's identity. Literacy in cultures other than one's own is an essential skill that all members of a community are obligated to acquire so that they can comprehend the traditions of their country of origin ([Ngema & Lange, 2020](#)). Understanding the range of cultural arts, as well as physical and intangible aspects of cultural heritage such as traditions, values, beliefs, and cultures, is an essential component of cultural literacy ([Sakura et al., 2021](#)). Improving both local and national culture as well as building the identity of the Indonesian nation within a global society in order to cherish and protect the culture requires cultural literacy ([Nusantara, 2018](#)).

Frequently, cultural literacy is reduced to intercultural communication skills with the primary focus being on the ability to tolerate and respect the ethnic culture of the other ([Arvizu & Saravia-Shore, 2017](#)). Instead, it should go beyond these universal moral duties and focus on the actual enactment of those competencies through participation in processes of negotiation, care, and understanding. Literacy in the sense of citizenship refers to the degree to which individuals within a community are aware of and able to carry out the duties and rights that come with being a part of that community ([Ahsani & Azizah, 2021](#)). Simultaneously, culture is uncommitted to language learning and teaching as it influences the meaning and context of language activities ([Némethová, 2020](#)). Culture and language are two factors that cannot be separated, and cultural practices influence linguistic ones ([Pennycook, 2017](#)). Some researchers have inspected the benefits of having cultural teaching objectives in ELT ([Mu & Yu, 2023](#)).

According to [Pratiwi and Asyarotin \(2019\)](#), cultural literacy and citizenship are developed in the MBKM program by teaching students about various histories, arts, traditions, and the noble values contained therein, as well as the rights and obligations as Indonesian citizens who can recognize, understand, respect, and actively participate in maintaining culture and values. Literacy in culture and citizenship refers to an individual's or community's capacity to interact appropriately with their social surroundings in the context of being a member of a culture and nation, whether that be at the individual or community level ([Wahyuningsih et al., 2019](#)). Literacy in multiple cultures and a strong sense of civic responsibility are both essential in a nation like Indonesia, which is home to a dizzying array of distinct ethnic groups, linguistic subgroups, customs, traditions, and worldviews ([Lailiyah, 2021](#)). As a result, having an understanding of the culture and obligations, in particular the unique identities and principles upheld by the culture of the people living in Indonesia, is absolutely necessary.

Several previous studies about the importance of culture and citizenship literacy to be integrated into the curriculum have been done by the researchers. [Sampelolo and Kombong \(2022\)](#) found that The MBKM program offers EFL pre-service teachers the chance to engage in learning experiences beyond their primary study program. This

enables them to pursue independent study based on their individual interests, talents, and abilities. This experiential learning process empowers students to explore and assess the influence of programs linked to life experiences within the national and state society. Consequently, ELT students will expand their comprehension of diverse cultural and citizenship facets within the framework of the nation and state, thereby positively contributing to the enhancement of their cultural and citizenship literacy.

A study by [Rapanta et al. \(2021\)](#) presented an innovative citizenship education curriculum based on dialogic, argumentative, and cultural literacy skills by proposing discursive practices of cultural identity construction at a collaborative level, especially within the current European landscape of continuous immigration and change. Furthermore, [Shliakhovchuk \(2021\)](#) reviewed new models of intercultural competency for life and work in a VUCA world. It was concluded that there is a pressing need for an updated model of cultural literacy that can serve as a powerful instrument for living in a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) world. An analysis and summary are made of common trends for a new set of skills and competencies necessary for success in the twenty-first century, studied by policy-making institutions like UNESCO, by education institutions like the British Council, by multinational corporations like IBM and Google, and by influencer organizations like LinkedIn and the World Economic Forum.

2.4 Student Exchange Program

One of the programs that can be accessed through the MBKM is a student exchange program. This program is managed by the participating universities, and it includes a system for transferring credits. Student exchange is an educational activity that is organized by MBKM with the goal of developing students' interests in expanding their knowledge and providing opportunities for students to study off-campus or overseas in order to broaden students' horizons. This activity's name comes from the fact that its organizers are students themselves ([Mudzakir, 2021](#)). This can boost students' experience and insight into how to connect across cultures, which can boost students' overall experiences ([Fitriasari et al., 2021](#)). In addition, [Fuadi and Aswita \(2021\)](#) argued that participation in a student exchange program can help mold the attitudes and personalities of Indonesian students in a way that makes them more appreciative of the variety of cultures, views, faiths, and beliefs that exist in the world. According to [Fitriasari et al. \(2021\)](#), the procedure of incorporating the student exchange program into the MBKM curriculum can be accomplished through one of four distinct types of learning activities. The following is a list of the educational activities that can be participated in: the student exchange program between study programs within the same university, the student exchange program within the same study program at a different campus, the student exchange program between study programs at various universities, and the student exchange program at multiple universities.

Furthermore, a virtual exchange project in English language learning was held to benefit the pre-service EFL teachers through innovation and collaboration with others to co-construct even better lessons ([Lenkaitis, 2020](#)). In virtual exchange, language and intercultural development are typically the goals for the pre-service EFL teachers while for the lecturers the focus is usually on developing ways to use technological tools for learning and teaching.

3. METHODS

This study aims to describe the reinforcement of cultural and citizenship competencies through a student exchange program. It utilized mixed-method designs.

3.1 Participants

The research subjects are pre-service EFL teachers from Universitas Almuslim, Bireuen, Aceh, Indonesia, who participated in the 2020 PERMATA-SAKTI Program. Five respondents were purposively selected for interviews; they were those who chose universities in two islands, Java and Sulawesi, as the locations of service. They were three eighth-semester students and two sixth-semester students. A number of 35 students were chosen to fill in the questionnaire. They were also students who had completed the program. In the program, these students are called pre-service teachers.

3.2 Instruments

Both the interviews and questionnaires were conducted to explore the pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of the impact of the PERMATA-SAKTI Program on enhancing their culture and citizenship literacy. The interviews were conducted in an unstructured manner comprising three inquiries, aiming to gather information on the factors contributing to increased cultural and citizenship literacy among participating EFL pre-service teachers involved in the program. The questions asked were:

1. What do you think about the learning process in the PERMATA-SAKTI Program with students from various regions in Indonesia?
2. Do you think the PERMATA-SAKTI Program is effective for implementing cultural and citizenship literacy in the learning process?
3. What benefits did you gain from participating in the student exchange program?

The questionnaire consisted of 20 items. The questions were adapted from the *Survei Kebhinekaan* or 'Diversity' Survey held by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. The diversity survey is an integral component of the independent student exchange selection process, conducted through the CBT-ANAEExamBrowser application. Students who successfully navigate the initial file or administrative selection stage are mandated to participate in this survey. It can be accessed on the official website at <https://pusmenjar.kemdikbud.go.id/sbh/pmm>. However, the survey link can only be accessed from 17 to 18 February 2022 when the participants took the survey and it cannot be accessed by others.

Furthermore, closed-ended items provide participants with a predefined list of possible responses from which they select one. To measure the respondents' responses, the Likert scale was employed. The respondents indicated their level of agreement using the options of strongly agree (SA), agree (A), not sure (NS), disagree (D), or strongly disagree (SD). It consisted of two parts: the first part focused on perceptions of cultural literacy improvement, while the second part addressed pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of enhanced citizenship literacy. Table 1 presents the blueprint for each section of the questionnaire.

Table 1. Blueprint of the instrument of the pre-service EFL teachers' perception of cultural and citizenship literacy (adopted from the *Survei Kebhinekaan* or 'Diversity' Survey).

Dimension	Item numbers
Culture Literacy	1, 2, 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19
Citizenship literacy	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, 18, 20

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were conducted one-on-one with the five respondents. Each interview lasted for 20-25 minutes and the session was recorded. The recording was later transcribed. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the interview data were identified and analyzed for reporting patterns or themes.

Meanwhile, the questionnaire was distributed to the respondents online. It took each respondent about 20-30 minutes to fill in the questionnaire. The results were analyzed statistically. Statistical analysis was also conducted to examine correlations between the variables under study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the instruments used to collect and analyze the data related to the culture and citizenship literacy skills of pre-service EFL teachers participating in the PERMATA-SAKTI Program, this section presents the results based on the interviews and questionnaires from the respondents.

4.1 Interview Results

After analyzing the data, three themes were uncovered: (1) the learning process, (2) culture and citizenship implementation, and (3) the benefits of the program. They are explained in the next sub-sections.

4.1.1 The learning process

From the interviews, pre-service EFL teachers reported that the learning process in the PERMATA-SAKTI Program improved their cultural literacy and citizenship skills, while also broadening their cultural competence. They stated that they increased their knowledge of Indonesian culture and civic insights. These pre-service teachers, when asked about the program's implementation with students from different regions, highlighted the numerous benefits they gained during the program.

- (R1) The learning program outside my field of interest through the Nusantara Module expanded my knowledge and now makes me think flexibly and comprehensively. I can also explore my knowledge of Indonesian culture and broaden my national insight by meeting students from various regions in Indonesia in class.
- (R2) The PERMATA-SAKTI Program is a new experience for me because it brought together friends from outside the province and island with different cultural and religious backgrounds. In addition, this program introduced a different system of lectures and added to my knowledge about Indonesia's cultural diversity.

- (R3) The PERMATA-SAKTI Program is exciting because I met students from various regions in Indonesia. I learned a lot about cultural diversity and values embraced in other regions. In addition, this program expanded my knowledge by choosing courses outside of my field of study.
- (R4) Implementing the PERMATA-SAKTI Program was very effective in enhancing my understanding of various cultures in Indonesia. I highly appreciate the hard work of the teaching team in designing and implementing this program. Students from various regions in Indonesia bring unique experiences and stories, so I am inspired to become more open-minded and tolerant towards differences.
- (R5) The PERMATA-SAKTI Program is considered necessary for strengthening the unity of Indonesian students by connecting students from various regions with different cultural and religious backgrounds. This program helped to increase my understanding and appreciation of Indonesia's cultural diversity. The teaching team that organized the program successfully carried out their task well.

The interview respondents (R1-R5) revealed that the PERMATA-SAKTI Program had expanded their knowledge about Indonesian cultures, improved their national insight, introduced a different academic system, and increased their knowledge about Indonesia's cultural diversity. They also stated that the program helped to enhance their understanding and appreciation of Indonesia's cultural diversity and strengthen the unity of Indonesian students. Overall, the program provided new and beneficial experiences and knowledge for both students and educators. It strengthened the values of unity and togetherness among students with different cultural and religious backgrounds, providing an opportunity to deepen their learning experiences and strengthen their potential.

4.1.2 Culture and citizenship implementation

The participants presented their perspectives on the implementation of culture and citizenship in the PERMATA-SAKTI program and their interest in how practical the implementation is. Regarding prospective EFL teachers' perception of cultural and citizenship literacy, the question is, "Do you think the PERMATA-SAKTI program is effective for implementing cultural and citizenship literacy in the learning process?" The perception of prospective EFL teachers towards this question is as follows:

- (R6) This program enhances students' understanding of various aspects of culture and citizenship. Through this program, students can interact with friends from various regions and islands in Indonesia who come from different cultural and religious backgrounds.
- (R7) The PERMATA-SAKTI Program is effective in introducing cultural diversity to students. During the learning process, lecturers often discuss the participants' culture, providing new insights and an introduction to the multicultural diversity of the Indonesian nation.
- (R8) This program effectively strengthens cultural communication among participants from different regions and helps me learn about customs and cultures from other regions in Indonesia. In addition, this program also improves my ability to speak Indonesian in daily conversations because I am used to speaking in regional languages and English.
- (R9) The PERMATA-SAKTI Program is effective in helping students understand cultural literacy and citizenship through opportunities to meet friends from different cultural backgrounds and learn about the diversity of Indonesian culture.

(R10) The PERMATA-SAKTI program effectively improves students' understanding of cultural literacy and citizenship. Through this program, students can learn about various Indonesian cultures and expand their knowledge through engaging activities. This program also helps enhance a sense of unity and national solidarity.

Based on the results of interviews conducted by the researchers regarding culture and citizenship literacy through the PERMATA-SAKTI program, it can be concluded that the activities of the program are appropriate to increase the EFL pre-service teacher knowledge about many things related to the culture and citizenship of Indonesians through cross-cultural interactions.

4.1.3 *Benefits of the program*

The learning experiences shared with students from various parts of Indonesia allowed them to explore different cultures and gain insights into new traditions and customs. Embracing new cultures is an opportunity to step out of one's comfort zone and discover something new. Studying at a different university may also mean encountering different teaching styles. The PERMATA-SAKTI program offers an opportunity to experience different teaching methods and determine the type of learning that works best for each student. Below are some excerpts from students' responses to the question, "What benefits did you gain from participating in the student exchange program?"

(R11) The opportunity I had while studying at three universities (Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari, and Universitas Kanjuruhan Malang) was extraordinary, even though the program was fully implemented using online learning. I was able to meet new lecturers and make friends from diverse backgrounds. Through this program, I gained a better understanding of the cultural diversity that exists in our country.

(R12) Participating in this program enhanced my academic skills, including time management and prioritization, while in a competitive learning environment. The program also allowed me to develop my civic literacy, which is crucial to becoming a responsible and active citizen. As a result, I am more prepared to contribute to society after completing my classes during this program.

(R13) Through my participation in the PERMATA-SAKTI program, I interacted with students from diverse regions of Indonesia and gained insights into each area's unique characteristics and cultural richness. This experience enhanced my interpersonal and communication skills by engaging with individuals from different backgrounds and cultures. Additionally, the program gave me a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by various regions of Indonesia and how they can contribute to social and economic development.

(R14) This student exchange program provides many benefits for me, such as expanding my social network. I met new friends from various regions in Indonesia and could learn a lot from them. Besides that, I also got to know different cultures and habits, which increased my understanding of Indonesian society.

(R15) The student exchange program has given me many benefits. Aside from increasing my knowledge about Indonesia's diverse culture, I also have the opportunity to meet friends from different regions with different cultural and religious backgrounds. This has broadened my perspective on the diversity of a nation and enhanced my interpersonal skills.

Based on several opinions expressed by respondents regarding the benefits of implementing the PERMATA-SAKTI program, the program could introduce and

preserve the diversity of customs and culture that Indonesia owns. It could happen by developing an educational curriculum containing cultural education. It contributes to the next generation in maintaining the culture of Indonesia. In short, implementing the PERMATA-SAKTI program has achieved the government’s goal, namely to broaden the horizons of Indonesian students in recognizing the diversity of culture, religion, ethnicity, race, religion, and language.

4.2 Questionnaire Results

The results showed that the respondents of the PERMATA-SAKTI program had a positive impact on their cultural literacy and citizenship skills. Furthermore, the EFL pre-service teacher’s responses for each item are described and discussed further.

4.2.1 Pre-service EFL teachers’ perception of culture literacy

Figure 1 shows the questionnaire results related to the EFL students’ perception of cultural literacy in the PERMATA-SAKTI program.

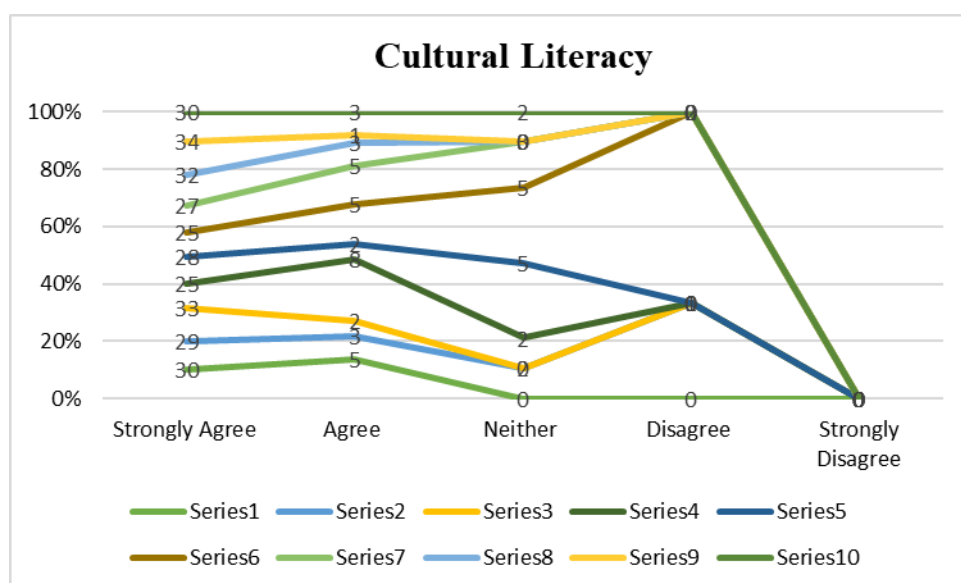


Figure 1. EFL ‘students’ perception of culture literacy of the PERMATA-SAKTI Program.

The respondents provided positive responses to the 10 questionnaire items given. In this case, the highest response indicates that the PERMATA-SAKTI program helped the pre-service EFL teachers understand and learn about various cultural topics more intensively. Through this program, students are exposed to various cultures and better understand how to interact with others.

The PERMATA-SAKTI program involved cross-campus learning intending to provide new insights and knowledge to address educational disparities. Additionally, the program aimed to foster brotherhood among regions, ethnicities, cultures, and religions to strengthen the spirit of national unity. Participants in the program participated because they could foresee its value and benefits. The program also

enhanced students' cultural skills, helped pre-service EFL teachers learn about students' cultures from various regions in Indonesia, and taught them to respect the nation's diversity. Student exchange programs could strengthen friendships among regions, ethnicities, cultures, and religions. In contrast, the pre-service EFL teachers' innovation, creativity, personality, and independence could develop through experiences in dealing with real-life situations and various dynamic fields such as competency, real-life issues, social interactions, collaboration, self-management, performance demands, targets, and achievements.

4.2.2 Pre-service EFL teachers' perception of citizenship literacy

Figure 2 shows the questionnaire results related to the EFL students' perception of citizenship literacy in the PERMATA-SAKTI program.

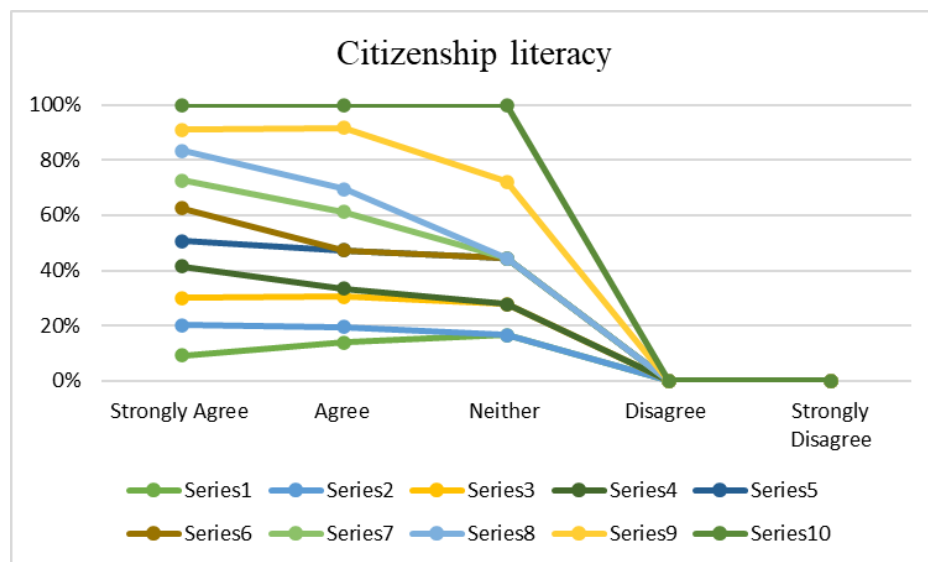


Figure 2. Perception about citizenship literacy of the PERMATA-SAKTI Program.

Based on the items, the respondents also gave positive responses indicating that the PERMATA-SAKTI program could help EFL students understand and learn about their rights and obligations as citizens. From the questionnaire statements, it can be concluded that the PERMATA-SAKTI program shaped their citizenship by forming citizens who understand their rights and obligations and have noble character. Indonesia is known to the world as a friendly nation, which adds value to foreigners and our diversity. Therefore, discipline in social life can strengthen citizenship literacy skills. The implementation of this program could foster a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect and enhance the values of unity and nationalism. This was achieved through interactions between students and lecturers at universities who come from different ethnicities, races, and religions.

The program provided an opportunity for students to establish a foundation of mutual respect regardless of their backgrounds. It trained them to build good communication skills from different perspectives. Hence, it helped them to have excellent teamwork when entering the job market. Furthermore, the PERMATA-SAKTI program trained their abilities to overcome problems and find solutions. This is in line with the concept of the PERMATA-SAKTI program where students are

expected to live independently outside their comfort environment. The pre-service EFL teachers who participated in the PERMATA-SAKTI program had to interact with many students from different universities. Therefore, good communication skills were necessary. Obtaining higher education provided opportunities for them to develop themselves optimally, acquiring the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to face global challenges.

In this collaboration, the pre-service EFL teachers practiced realizing their citizenship literacy. The relationship between them allowed each of them to exchange information related to phenomena and issues that occurred in their respective areas. The harmony in their relationship could foster their love for the cultural diversity of their homeland. It encourages them to strengthen and expand their competencies. The harmony also prevented division from occurring in society. This attitude is a must and has become a hereditary culture in Indonesian society. The interaction among these pre-service EFL teachers provided guidelines in the form of customs, norms, values, and rules determined by fellow community members to be adhered to together. Each region has unique traditions that should be respected by everyone.

5. DISCUSSION

This research found that the PERMATA-SAKTI program facilitated the pre-service EFL teachers to gain knowledge from various scientific fields. Based on the findings, the researchers found that the program played a role in developing their cultural literacy and citizenship. Primarily through the inculcation of social values, namely solidarity, unity, diversity, culture, and tolerance in students, especially pre-service EFL teachers. They can exchange ideas, exchange cultures, and respect each other's differences in diversity through this program.

Consequently, the pre-service EFL teachers gain great information to know multiple ethnic groups, nations, cultures, races, and religions. Thereby, it strengthens the essence of the value of national unity and integrity. [Tran and Bui \(2023\)](#) realized that a student exchange program can increase the EFL's awareness of the value of learning a culture of unity in diversity for incorporating the development of regional languages and cultural literacy in other countries. Students who are the target group in the implementation of the independent campus policy are trained to adapt to a multicultural environment, language, and culture ([Mambu, 2016](#)). Hence, this phenomenon indirectly enhances the level of cross-cultural awareness among EFL students who are pursuing a major in English Education. This attribute is considered vital for their academic and professional growth.

The PERMATA-SAKTI program plays a pivotal role in expanding knowledge related to diversity in nation-building ([Krishnapatria, 2021](#)). This program not only allows students to broaden their understanding of diversity in Indonesia but also helps them grasp the essence of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity) through interactions with individuals from various backgrounds. Moreover, it fosters their development in intercultural communication and teaches them to appreciate differences. As a result, the program enables students to develop the skills necessary for critical reading to access useful information from foreign sources given in the English language. The PERMATA-SAKTI initiative is in line with the vision of MBKM, that is to cultivate intelligent and heterogeneous generations in Indonesia.

Moreover, the findings indicate that the independent learning program is catalyzing a significant transformation in the higher education curriculum known as the student-centered curriculum, redefining students as the primary authorities in their own learning processes, as also found by [Joseph et al. \(2020\)](#). This shift empowers them to take greater responsibility for their education. Within this student-centered framework, pre-service EFL teachers can engage in educational objectives that are open to diverse experiences and perspectives, fostering a culture of validation for ideas originating from students of various backgrounds in the program. Consequently, it fosters the development of exceptional writing abilities in individuals, enabling them to effectively showcase the cultural aspects of their own country on a global scale.

Additionally, the PERMATA-SAKTI program meets the needs and promotes self-directed learning in higher education. It enriches pre-service EFL teachers' knowledge in developing a clear mechanism to organize and manage independent learning that can positively influence their teaching and learning activities ([Kholmuratovich, 2020](#)). Furthermore, it equips pre-service EFL teachers with the knowledge and skills to teach their EFL learners about cross-cultural understanding while also protecting their nation from negative foreign cultural influences.

These findings are consistent with the research conducted by [Soltis \(2015\)](#) as well, which highlights the role of universities in offering educational opportunities that promote liberation and foster the growth of leadership skills. These institutions aim to cultivate an understanding of a nation that is influenced by the varied rights, traditions, languages, and faiths practiced by its citizens. Creating an environment that allows students to not only acquire proficiency in the English language but also develop a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural aspects of different societies, is advantageous for pre-service EFL teachers.

In addition, cultural and citizenship literacy is the ability of individuals and communities to behave towards their social environment as part of a culture and nation. The principles of cultural and citizenship literacy consist of (1) culture as a realm of thought through language and behavior, (2) art as a cultural product, (3) multicultural and participatory citizenship, (4) nationalism, (5) inclusivity, and (6) direct experience ([Wahyuningsih et al., 2019](#)). Individuals and communities can behave towards their social environment as part of a culture and nation ([Abdullah et al., 2019](#)).

The learning activities carried out by students while studying across study programs through student exchange activities can develop their insight into *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity) ([Krishnapatria, 2021](#)). Therefore, it can be concluded that this program can expand the students' networking of different ethnic, traditional, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Even though they came from different backgrounds, they can unite as a nation in unity. The student exchange program can shape Indonesian students' attitudes and characters to appreciate the diversity of cultures, views, religions, beliefs, and tolerance for other opinions ([Fuadi & Aswita, 2021](#)). The results of this program can minimize various problems of inequality in facilities and infrastructure at higher education in Indonesia ([Fitriasari et al., 2021](#)).

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the researchers found that the PERMATA-SAKTI program can strengthen pre-service EFL teachers' cultural and citizenship literacy.

The program is essential in developing characters who highly value differences. This can be seen through the cultivation of social values such as solidarity, unity, diversity, culture, and tolerance. Through this program, they demonstrate an attitude of mutual respect for differences in their country.

This literacy skill is important to master in the 21st century. Indonesia has diverse ethnic groups, languages, habits, customs, beliefs, and social layers. Therefore, Indonesia is also involved in global development and change. Therefore, the ability to be tolerant, by accepting, adapting, and behaving wisely to this diversity becomes absolute. The opportunity to interact also trains pre-service EFL teachers to be more compliant in dealing with new environments outside their comfort zone, improving their ability to get along with people from different backgrounds and allowing them to establish friendships and form family bonds with students from various universities in Indonesia. With this program, pre-service EFL teachers are expected to love Indonesia more than their obligation to learn the language and culture of a foreign language.

The present study has provided significant implications in the field of ELT. However, it only emphasizes one specific sort of activity among the nine programs available in MBKM. Regardless of the limitations, it may contribute to the ELT studies, particularly in the area of culture and citizenship literacy for pre-service EFL teachers. Therefore, future studies are suggested to investigate more activities in the program to provide more comprehensive results.

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