

# 'New Normal': It's Time to Become More Independent in Developing Soft Skills and Character Education in Higher Education Level (Indonesian Context)

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## **A. Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic still haunts people all over the world, even in Indonesia. In Indonesia this plague is even more violent infecting every human body. Almost everyone in this country is very anxious to make. Like a ghost, this virus cannot be seen in plain sight, but must go through special tools carried out in the laboratory. It was so difficult to detect this virus that the public finally made efforts to prevent its spread. The government urges the public to implement various health protocols such as maintaining distance (social / physical distancing), conducting clean and healthy living behaviors (PHBS), and encouraging people to work from home, pray from home, and learning from home (Peraturan Pemerintah Nomor 21 Tahun 2020).

This situation is very unstable, all aspects of life in this country are very limited. The days passed only by confining themselves at home. Parents work from home, children learn from home. Finally since the beginning of June 2020, the government introduced the term 'New

Normal'. What is 'New Normal'? New Normal is a term for a new order of life or a guide to a new life that can be done in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic (Bramasta, 2020). This guide is certainly echoed the aim is to try to do activities outside the home in the midst of the ghost COVID-19. We cannot keep on stunned. We must keep on moving to do activities to meet all our needs. Life needs cannot be done only at home. It has been helped by the latest technology, but many things / activities that must be done outside the home. This is what is meant by the new order of life, still carrying out activities as usual but must be in accordance with health protocol standards in public places.

The Indonesian Ministry of Health has issued a decree of the Minister of Health Number HK.01.07 / MENKES / 328/2020. In this decision the minister of health regulates or provides guidance for the prevention and control of COVID-19 in office and industry workplaces in supporting business continuity in a pandemic situation (KemenKes RI, 2020). Likewise in the field of education it was decided about the new order of life with the Joint Decree of the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Religion, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Home Affairs (*SKB 4 Menteri*). The new school year continues to begin in July 2020, as well as for higher education starting around August and September 2020 (Kemenko PMK, 2020).

However education for our children must remain optimal. The Joint Decree was actually the initial step in education policy. As a basis the stakeholders take more technical decisions in the field. Learning is allowed to be done by face to face if the area is already in the green zone. But in fact in Indonesia the majority or almost 94% are in the yellow, orange, or red zones. Thus most will continue to learn from this house. Everyone must be very tired of this. It's a pity to see our children can't socialize with their

friends. Especially at Elementary and Secondary education levels.

At this level distance learning is less than optimal. Children need interaction with other people, both friends and teachers at school. This interaction will grow the character of the child himself. Children go to school is actually not only stuffed with science, but how to socialize, positive character. That's what children don't get during this pandemic. However, we cannot allow ourselves, our children, to lament this situation. We must think, look for positive things we can do in this difficult situation. Although we have to learn from home, we as teachers and parents should be able to help them to develop their interactions and positive character. Although the interaction is limited, which is more with family members, we can condition it so that activities at home become very enjoyable and useful in optimizing the development of children's character (Purandina and Winaya, 2020).

At the level of higher education in accordance with the decision of SKB 4 the Minister must still be done online, whatever the color of the zone. Why is that, because learning at this level is considered still able to be done online? The lessons at this level are able to learn independently, explore learning resources independently. Not as dependent on lecturers as students in primary and secondary education. Long before the outbreak of COVID-19, remote learning and online learning were used to being done. Many campuses have carried out this distance learning pattern, especially for international students. Even the Open University has developed this online learning earlier (Sylvana and Alwi, 2016).

For university level students, they are considered able to find their learning resources independently. Lecturers

only give instructions on designing learning so that students can explore deeper and broader lecture material. Actually, this has been designed by the Minister of Education and Culture, Nadiem Anwar Makarim long before the COVID-19 Pandemic existed. He is very revolutionary in making policy changes in the field of education. He introduced the concept or term Merdeka Belajar and Merdeka Campus. Merdeka Belajar - An independent campus is an educational policy that aims to encourage students to master various knowledge that is useful and beneficial to prepare themselves for the world of work. This freedom of learning gives educational institutions freedom and autonomy. There is no complicated bureaucracy in carrying out education at the tertiary level, and students will be given the freedom to choose their preferred field (Direktur Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi, 2020).

Students are given the right to three semesters to study outside the field of study. The learning activities that can be carried out outside of the study program are student exchanges, internships / work practices, teaching assistance in education units, research / research, humanitarian projects, entrepreneurial activities, independent studies / projects, and building villages / thematic real work lectures. This is intended to provide opportunities for students to study other fields of science outside the science of their programs, with the hope that later in the world of work will be useful. Students are given the freedom to broaden their horizons and broaden their skills which are not focused on one field of science.

## **B. Discussion**

In the era of the industrial revolution 4.0 students are required to master various kinds of multidisciplinary

science. Students are expected to be able to master the latest soft skills (multitasking). Students must also be able to compete quickly as fresh graduates who are not only still scientifically fresh, but must be able to be ready to compete with workers who have experience in contact with the world of work. What is the meaning of knowledge without experience? And vice versa, what's the experience without knowledge. So knowledge and experience must be prepared. Indeed, at the level of formal education such as tertiary institutions, it has been difficult to provide field experience to students. Indeed there are programs such as *Pelatihan Kerja Lapangan (PKL)*, *Program Pengalaman Lapangan (PPL)*, Internships, or whatever the term is, so far it is still not maximized. Still, once entering the workforce, this ex-student or fresh graduate student is still ashamed, unable to compete. Whereas in this era, someone is to work fast.

So to answer this challenge, and find solutions to these problems, of course students must be prepared as much or at least like people who have worked before. Students must be experienced, not only visible but even better already as skilled as experienced people. There is no other way, a shortcut, even fortal that directly leads to an experience. Students must be prepared with a thorough, very adequate education and sufficient practice. In theory this is easy to do, but in fact it is very difficult. So far, the curriculum is designed in such a way that there is more theory than practice. This is what must be changed. Let's redesign our tertiary curriculum so that more students are able to develop their skills in the real world, so they have valuable experience.

This is in accordance with the spirit of an independent campus. Has the essence of expanding autonomy, independence, accelerated bureaucracy, and innovation in higher education. Universities in Indonesia are

expected to be able to develop rapidly, with a variety of new breakthroughs, revolutionary innovations, so that universities are able to grow as servants of the community, assist the community in education, research and service. The Tri Dharma of Higher Education will further strengthen the skills, skills, knowledge and welfare of the community. In the fast-paced era, the demands of the fast-paced era, universities must always be able to help the community in solving the problems of limitations experienced by the community itself.

So that students in tertiary institutions should train a lot by practicing fieldwork, exploring other fields, etc. The spirit of the minister of education, especially at the level of higher education is to form students to be more independent in exercising their creativity. Not fixed or stuck at a certain point, but more developed through the boundary, through the walls of the limitations and constraints with a creative mind. In the era of the industrial 4.0 revolution, students must have several abilities such as:

1. Complex Problem Solving; students must be able to solve problems systematically. Identify the problem, select information, determine solution options and evaluate the solution to the problem.
2. Critical Thinking; students must be accustomed to think critically and make sense. Thinking with the standard High Order of Thinking Skills (HOTS).
3. Creativity; students must be able to be creative, find new things, new paths according to the demands of the times. Dare to innovate to find new and unique things.
4. People Management; students must have leadership abilities, manage people individually and even en masse. Fresh graduates must be able to be a leader, at least be a leader for themselves.

5. Coordinating with other; a student must be able to get out of his ego. As a social creature, of course, it must be able to maintain good relations, both at work, and in friendship and kinship. Good coordination will lead to good conditions.
6. Emotion Intelligence; students as young people naturally have explosive emotions. No doubt is due to hormones that are less stable. But this must continue to be trained so as to be more mature in dealing with problems.
7. Judgment and Decision Making; students must act quickly, be able to take and make decisions. Right and fast, and does not harm many people.
8. Service Orientation; students must have a high work ethic. Having a business and initial effort by serving others or customers well, with heart.
9. Negotiation; students must be able to become reliable negotiators. In the world of work, mutual agreement is the key to success. Must be able to collaborate with anyone.
10. Cognitive Flexibility; students must be able to think critically according to their needs. Not rigid, must be flexible, provide solutions in accordance with current problems, think ahead according to the demands of the times and flexible (Azhari, 2019).

This is the time for the university to be able to prepare a curriculum or system that can strive for the development of the ten abilities that students must have in this era. If not, they will be unable to compete in the jungle of work. The unemployment rate will be even higher. Even worse, unemployment that occurs is unemployed with a tie, or bachelor, master, and even doctoral level. Lecturers in each lecture must be able to design their learning designs by tucking into the ten abilities above. To achieve such students, of course, must be initiated by the lecturer.

Lecturers must be able to master the ten skills before, so they can be an example and inspire students.

In this New Normal era, this is not an obstacle, but this is the time we realize to be more creative and independent in learning at the college level. Indeed, this pandemic makes it difficult for us to move, be shackled, but we must think critically to find solutions to remain optimal in preparing Indonesia's young generation to be able to compete in the world of work in this world. Distance learning as in the New Normal era, as a lecturer should be able to design learning that requires students to be more critical, creative, and independent which then develops into the ten attitudes or skills above. Indeed distance learning is now very good at developing this critical, creative, and independent attitude.

Lecturers must prepare instructional instruction that requires students to think with HOTS, be more creative in completing assignments, and produce brilliant, unique, and renewable thinking (Purandina, 2020a). In distance learning this is very possible to do. Likewise, lecturers must be able to provide opportunities for students to continue collaborating, both with their campus friends, other campuses, lecturers, practitioners, and the world of work. In fact, distance learning with this online learning method should be a whip, to make lecturers and students more critical, creative and independent. The things that can be done by lecturers and students in the New Normal are;

1. Thinking critically, solving problems encountered, how to stay optimal and even better in the teaching and learning process, of course with HOTS.
2. Doing creative things, designing learning creatively, doing each class assignment creatively, uniquely, renewably.



3. Able to teach and learn independently. All are in each house so that they must be able to be independent.
4. Train digital multi-tasking, which is to train the ability to teach and learn with the latest technology, utilizing digital literacy as a source of learning, and social media in establishing communication.
5. Collaborating with various parties, by creating a network of good relations so that they can help and benefit each other.
6. Maintaining a good relationship with family at home, as good character development is accompanied by family members at home. Doing home activities together will greatly assist the development of character (Purandina, 2020b)

### **C. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this time, we welcome New Normal as a new era of change, a change to the spirit of *Merdeka Belajar* (Learning Independently). We must be able to think critically, creatively and independently in the midst of this pandemic. This COVID-19 pandemic indeed limits our space, but this is where we have to rise. Able to take advantage of existing opportunities, keep working and even more work. Raise the spirit of freedom of study in the midst of a pandemic. This is a new thing, a new order of life, New Normal, in our lives today. Keep doing positive and healthy activities. We are accepting this New Normal as our new habit, as a new era in higher education, so that Higher Education becomes more independent in its limitations.

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