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Evaluating the MBKM Teaching Assistance Program: Student Interns' Experiences in Indonesian Vocational High Schools

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Abstract. This study investigates how student interns perceive the implementation of Teaching Assistantships in Indonesian vocational high schools, focusing on the key drivers, challenges, and support mechanisms essential to program success. Grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, this qualitative case study employed maximum-variation sampling across 27 undergraduate interns from four commercial education programs during the 2025/2026 academic year. Data gathered through open-ended reflections and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, supplemented by Python-assisted NLP workflow audit procedures. The findings reveal that successful implementation extends beyond pre-departure university preparation. Although campus coursework establishes an essential pedagogical foundation, authentic school environments introduce unpredictable classroom complexities, emotional pressures, and administrative transition friction that expose the limits of purely theoretical knowledge. To bridge this gap, student adaptation relies heavily on multidimensional support: granular pedagogical feedback from mentors, administrative role clarity, and psychological encouragement from both peers and host school staff. Ultimately, this study conceptualizes Teaching Assistantships as a process of supported adaptive professional learning. Consequently, teacher education programs must shift from viewing field placements as static applications of university coursework toward offering dynamic, experience-sensitive scaffolding that enables preservice teachers to translate field challenges into enacted professional readiness.

Keywords: *Teaching Assistantship, Experiential Learning, Teacher Education, Self-Efficacy, Mentoring, Implementation Science, MBKM.*

INTRODUCTION

International Context: Experiential Learning in Teacher Education

International teacher training programs combine in-class learning at universities with hands-on teaching experience in schools. Aspiring teachers cannot stay confined to university campuses to study textbooks alone; they must also apply the content they learn at universities to real teaching scenarios. Theoretical knowledge from textbooks alone is completely incapable of equipping future teachers to handle the various complex situations that arise in real classrooms. Real classrooms do not proceed in the orderly manner described in textbooks; unexpected situations can emerge at any time, and theories that only exist on paper are completely unable to sustain actual teaching work. For this reason, the school internshiplink with one-on-one mentorship from dedicated instructors has become the core component of teacher training programs. Entering schools for internships does not mean exploring blindly; throughout the entire process, professionals supervise and guide trainees. The experience accumulated through these frontline, hands-on practices has now become an irreplaceable core element in the process of training teachers [1], [2].

This shift aligns with experiential learning theory [3], [4], which posits that learning occurs as experience is transformed into knowledge through continuous cycles of reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. To test and expand professional knowledge in the field of education, real, tangible campus settings are indispensable. The campus settings mentioned here are not simulated campuses for practice, but the fully operational real schools that we encounter in daily life. To refine the professional competencies of pre-service teachers, this type of real environment is an unavoidable core foundation: Darling-Hammond [1] identifies clinical experiences as key to effective preparation; Grossman et al. [2] stress enacting practice over relying solely on reflection; and Zeichner [5] advocates bridging the gap between campus coursework and field practice.

However, merely placing pre-service teachers in real schools cannot guarantee that their internships will actually be effective. It is not the case that as long as they enter the campus and complete the required internship duration, this experience will definitely benefit them. These pre-service teachers, who have not

yet officially stepped onto the podium, will encounter many situations they have never been exposed to when they first enter schools.

1.2 The Implementation Problem

Despite extensive research on outcomes such as self-efficacy, identity formation, and pedagogical skill, a critical implementation question remains: how do students themselves understand the conditions that render a teaching internship effective?

Program design frequently diverges from lived student experience. Although universities provide orientation, microteaching, and supervision guidelines, these provisions do not guarantee that students experience them as timely, relevant, or usable within real classroom settings. The core issue lies in the distinction between institutional provision and experienced implementation. Upon arriving at their school placements, students often encounter unexpected classroom conditions that force theoretical preparation to adapt rapidly into situated action.

Evaluating internships strictly through formal structures or intended outcomes overlooks how students interpret expectations, navigate challenges, and actively seek support. Institutional provision does not equate to experienced implementation. Even a well-designed program can generate uncertainty if communication is unclear, preparation lacks practical alignment, or mentoring proves inconsistent. Conversely, encountering challenges does not signal failure if students receive responsive feedback and structural support. Ultimately, implementation is best understood as a dynamic interaction among initial preparation, contextual challenges, and support mechanisms.

Indonesian Teaching Assistantship as the Context

Indonesia provides a compelling context for examining experiential teacher education through the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy, which expands opportunities for university students to participate in school-based Teaching Assistance programs. Designed to offer direct classroom immersion, these initiatives aim to strengthen prospective teachers' pedagogical, managerial, and communication competencies.

Indonesian scholarship highlights both the merits and the implementation hurdles of this model. While studies document clear gains in instructional competence and classroom familiarity, they also reveal persistent challenges in translating university-acquired theory into everyday teaching practice. Examining these implementation conditions directly, Hermawan et al. [6] identified pre-program coordination, infrastructure, supervision, context-driven training, and administrative burdens as critical factors shaping program outcomes. The Indonesian context thus offers a rich empirical setting for exploring how preservice teachers navigate the transition from campus-based preparation to authentic school practice.

Research Gap

While existing literature examines specific outcomes such as identity, anxiety, or self-efficacy, it frequently fragments the internship experience into isolated variables. Consequently, little attention has been given to how student interns holistically describe the interplay of conditions—facilitating drivers, disruptive challenges, and support systems—that collectively determine program success. These dimensions operate interdependently: pedagogical preparation requires supportive mentoring when unexpected classroom demands arise, just as administrative clarity enables students to focus fully on their teaching responsibilities.

Accordingly, this study shifts the central analytical focus from asking:

Does a Teaching Assistantship improve students' professional development?

to examining:

What do students themselves perceive as necessary for successful Teaching Assistantship implementation?

Research Aim and Question

This study explores how student interns perceive the implementation of Teaching Assistantships within the Indonesian context, focusing on the drivers, challenges, and support mechanisms essential to program success.

The primary research question guiding this investigation is:

What drivers, challenges, and support mechanisms do student interns identify as essential to successful Teaching Assistantship implementation?

To operationalize this central inquiry, two specific sub-questions are addressed:

What factors do student interns perceive as facilitating effective Teaching Assistantship implementation?

What challenges do student interns encounter during the transition from university preparation to school practice?

By analyzing student reflections, this study positions the lived experiences of interns as a crucial evidence base for enhancing experiential teacher education.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Teaching Assistantship and Experiential Teacher Learning

Teaching Assistantships function as school-based experiential learning environments in which prospective teachers develop professional competence through direct engagement with authentic educational settings. Unlike university coursework—which primarily emphasizes theoretical, conceptual, and pedagogical foundations—field experiences expose preservice teachers to the unpredictable, situated realities of teaching, including student diversity, institutional expectations, and classroom management constraints. Ultimately, placing candidates in real-world school settings enables them to bridge academic preparation with actual classroom practice [1], [2], [5].

This process is grounded in experiential learning theory [3], which conceptualizes learning as a continuous four-stage cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Under this model, simply placing students in classrooms does not guarantee learning; educational value emerges when students actively interpret their experiences, connect them with prior knowledge, and reconstruct their teaching practices.

Scholarship repeatedly frames the theory–practice connection as a core challenge. Grossman et al. [2] argue that professional knowledge cannot be acquired independently from enactment, while Zeichner [5] urges institutions to eliminate the traditional divide between campus coursework and field practice. Furthermore, experiential learning can shape broader outcomes, such as teaching self-efficacy and professional identity [7]. However, because student preparation and school environments vary, exposure to practice yields different outcomes. Teaching Assistantship is thus best understood as a mediated learning process where outcomes depend heavily on the conditions surrounding the experience.

Student Perceptions and Internship Implementation

Understanding program implementation requires examining the lived experiences of participating students. While formal program documents outline structures, objectives, and evaluation requirements, they cannot capture how students navigate real-world classroom challenges. Student perception serves as an indispensable evaluative lens for evaluating implementation effectiveness.

A central rationale for centering student perspectives lies in the discrepancy between program design and experienced implementation. Institutional provisions—such as orientation sessions, preparatory coursework, and supervision guidelines—may well exist on paper, yet students often experience them as delayed, ambiguous, or disconnected from immediate field demands. Because learners actively construct meaning from their environment [4], student accounts reveal critical operational nuances that formal institutional documentation frequently misses.

Empirical research confirms that student experiences during field placements directly shape psychological outcomes, including work-related stress, self-efficacy, and identity formation [7], [8]. By capturing student voices, researchers can pinpoint precisely where theoretical coursework falls short of real-world demands and identify the specific support systems that facilitate student adaptation. Ultimately, open-ended student reflections provide rich empirical evidence regarding how program structures actually function in practice.

Institutional and Relational Support

Experiential teacher learning relies on a multidimensional support framework consisting of administrative, pedagogical, and psychological/relational support. Rather than operating in isolation, these three elements interact dynamically to shape preservice teacher development.

Administrative Support (Institutional Scaffolding): Establishes organizational clarity through transparent communication, explicit role expectations, structured placement logistics, and coordinated university–school channels. Ambiguous expectations impose unnecessary cognitive load, whereas robust administrative scaffolding enables students to focus on pedagogical practice rather than logistical uncertainty [5].

Pedagogical Support (Translational Guidance): Assists students in converting propositional knowledge into situated action through instructional planning, classroom management guidance, modeling, and formative feedback. Complementary mentoring is critical: cooperating teachers provide immediate, contextualized feedback, while university supervisors facilitate broader reflective planning [9]. This feedback loop operationalizes Kolb's cycle by connecting concrete classroom encounters with reflective adjustments.

Psychological and Relational Support (Efficacy and Adaptation): Addresses the emotional demands, uncertainty, and anxiety inherent in early teaching practice. Grounded in Bandura's self-efficacy framework [10], constructive feedback, role modeling, and supportive social interactions build candidates' professional confidence. Positive mentoring and peer relationships provide a nonjudgmental space that fosters a resilient professional identity and a sense of belonging [8].

Figure 1. The flow of Institutional and relation support

Synthesis of the Framework

Successful Teaching Assistantship implementation is inherently an interactional, mediated process. Initial university-based preparation inevitably encounters real-world classroom challenges, and this interaction is actively mediated by administrative, pedagogical, and relational support systems. Together, these three interdependent dimensions determine whether students can successfully navigate the transition from academic learning to enacted professional practice.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative case study design to investigate how student interns construct meaning from their experiences with Teaching Assistantship implementation in Indonesian vocational high schools. Grounded in a constructivist epistemological framework, the inquiry acknowledges that participants build their understandings of professional teaching practice through interaction with specific institutional, social, and educational contexts [11]. The case was bounded by the Teaching Assistance program implemented during the 2025/2026 academic year, focusing specifically on the transition period from campus-based preparation to authentic school practice.

3.2 Research Context

This study was conducted within an Indonesian Teaching Assistance program that places undergraduate preservice teachers in vocational high schools through established partnerships between the university and host schools. This empirical setting provided interns with opportunities to engage in direct instructional delivery alongside related administrative activities, as they sought to bridge university-acquired theory with authentic classroom practice. Vocational schools offered a particularly rich context for investigation, as interns encountered distinct classroom dynamics, institutional duties, and interpersonal environments that differed markedly from their campus-based preparation.

3.3 Participants

The study involved 27 undergraduate student interns representing four distinct academic tracks:

Office Administration Education (9 participants_

Business Education (9 participants)

Accounting Education (6 participants)

Economics Education (3 participants)

To capture a broad range of perspectives across different academic disciplines and school placement environments, maximum-variation purposive sampling was utilized. Grounded in qualitative sampling principles, the objective was to identify core shared patterns alongside key variations across participant experiences, rather than to achieve statistical generalizability [12].

Table 1. The Respondent profiles

Demographics & Sampling Attribute	Details / Breakdown
Total Participants	27 undergraduate student interns
Academic Programs	Office Administration, Business, Accounting, & Economics Education
Sampling Strategy	Maximum-variation purposive sampling
Contextual Setting	Partner vocational high schools in Indonesia (2025/2026 academic year)

Demographics & Sampling Attribute	Details / Breakdown

3.4 Data Sources

Data were gathered through open-ended written reflections and semi-structured interview responses focusing on initial program preparation, transition experiences, encountered challenges, and perceived support during the Teaching Assistantship. These qualitative instruments were designed to enable participants to articulate their lived experiences, interpretations, and felt needs in their own words.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed primarily using reflexive thematic analysis, following the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke [13]. The initial coding process was inductive, driven by raw participant accounts, while concepts from experiential learning theory and institutional support served as sensitizing lenses during interpretation.

To complement the reflexive qualitative analysis, a computational natural language processing (NLP) workflow was introduced as a supplementary analytical tool. Python-assisted NLP libraries, including NLTK [14] and spaCy [15], were utilized for text preprocessing, lemmatization, and tokenization to identify recurring lexical patterns across the corpus. Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling were applied heuristically to surface prominent terms and textual clusters. As illustrated in the analytical sequence above, the computational workflow served strict audit and pattern-identification purposes:

NLP Pattern Identification: Algorithms highlighted high-frequency lexical clusters and semantic groupings.

Contextual Narrative Review: Researchers returned directly to the full original narrative transcripts containing those identified clusters.

Qualitative Interpretation: Transcripts were read in context to preserve participant meaning.

Theme Development: Qualitative researchers synthesized final themes reflexively.

Recognizing that computational tools do not automatically generate findings, the researchers used them to establish an empirical audit trail. This approach enhanced analytic rigor while keeping human qualitative interpretation at the heart of the data processing and analysis.

4. Findings

Analysis of the 27 open-ended student responses revealed that successful implementation is not defined simply by adequate pre-departure preparation or the total absence of field challenges. Instead, participants described a developmental progression: university preparation establishes an initial foundation, authentic school conditions expose its practical limitations, and relational as well as institutional supports enable students to adapt effectively.

The findings are structured around four core dimensions: Drivers, Implementation Challenges, Support Mechanisms, Adaptive Professional Readiness.

Figure 2. Finding Structure

4.1 Drivers of Successful Teaching Assistantship

Theme 1: Pedagogical Preparation as a Necessary Foundation

Students consistently recognized university coursework and pre-departure preparation—including microteaching, lesson planning, and instructional media design—as vital foundations. Informants 1 and 2 noted feeling sufficiently prepared, while Informant 13 pointed to microteaching and pedagogical strategies as essential building blocks.

However, students explicitly distinguished between foundational preparation and practical readiness. Informant 6 and Informants 25–27 acknowledged the sufficiency of campus coursework as a baseline, yet requested more realistic classroom management simulations and practical digital media applications. Crucially, students did not demand additional theoretical lectures; rather, they sought opportunities to rehearse teaching under conditions that closely mimic real-world school environments.

Theme 2: Readiness Requires More Than Knowledge

Readiness emerged not as a static condition achieved prior to placement, but as an enacted capacity combining confidence, mental preparedness, adaptability, and emotional regulation. Informants 1, 9, 11,

15, 16, 22, and 23 highlighted flexibility and self-regulation as essential attributes for navigating unexpected classroom situations.

"I felt academically prepared, but emotionally and practically overwhelmed by the actual teaching environment." — Informant 12

Informant 16 emphasized rapid adaptation, illustrating that professional readiness is fundamentally about having the confidence to adjust when classroom events depart from the initial lesson plan.

4.2 Challenges in Teaching Assistantship Implementation

Table 2. Challenge Dimentions

Challenge Dimension	Key Student Observations	Primary Impact on Interns
Theory–Practice Gap	Discrepancy between structured campus learning and unpredictable, uncooperative real classrooms.	Requires instant adaptive judgment rather than rigid procedure.
Administrative Friction	Delayed information, heavy reporting outputs, miscommunication, and 12-hour teaching loads.	Generates uncertainty that competes directly with pedagogical focusing.
Classroom Complexity	Diverse student characteristics, poor school facilities, and unfamiliar institutional cultures.	Induces psychological stress, anxiety, and feelings of burden.

Source: Python – NLP

Theme 3: The Theory–Practice Gap

The central challenge reported across transcripts was the gap between structured university environments and complex classroom realities. Informant 7 observed that while campus-based microteaching felt predictable, real students reacted unexpectedly, demonstrating that "knowing the theory is only half the battle." Informants 17–20 similarly noted that standard university procedures failed to prepare them for managing unconducive classroom environments or inadequate school facilities.

Theme 4: Administrative and Organizational Friction

Students encountered unexpected operational demands that competed directly with their primary pedagogical focus. Informants 15, 16, and 20 reported that administrative responsibilities were far heavier than anticipated. Ambiguous information, delayed communication between the university and host schools, and demanding reporting workloads created administrative transition friction, adding unnecessary cognitive load during their initial placement phase.

Theme 5: Classroom Complexity and Emotional Pressure

Navigating diverse student behaviors and sub-optimal facilities triggered both technical and emotional stress. Informant 24 associated heavy program output requirements and self-doubt with feeling overburdened. These accounts illustrate that classroom complexity constitutes simultaneously a pedagogical and a psychological challenge.

4.3 Support Mechanisms

Theme 6: Mentoring and Feedback as the Central Support Mechanism

Mentoring emerged as the single most critical support mechanism, though students consistently emphasized that the quality and regularity of feedback mattered far more than its mere presence.

"My mentor did more than just keep an eye on me; they provided granular feedback after every single session." — Informant 3

Whereas Informant 3 experienced direct performance transformation through granular feedback, Informants 4, 5, and 30 noted that mentoring in their respective placements was occasionally infrequent or insufficiently directed. Effective mentoring thus functioned as a relational bridge, converting field uncertainty into actionable professional learning.

Theme 7: Communication and Peer/School Support

Successful implementation proved deeply relational. Informants 1 and 10 linked clear communication across mentors, university supervisors, and school staff directly to task clarity and reduced operational friction. Peer support also proved valuable for adaptation (Informant 18), provided that peers shared clear goals and collaborated effectively rather than operating in isolation.

4.4 Integrative Finding: From Preparation to Adaptive Professional Readiness

Synthesizing all 27 student accounts reveals that successful Teaching Assistantship implementation is not produced by pre-departure preparation alone. Rather, it emerges through a dynamic interaction:

Figure 3. Integrative finding

Implementation Success = Initial Preparation X Field Challenges X Responsive Support

Preparation establishes the baseline foundation, authentic practice tests its boundaries, real-world challenges expose its limits, and responsive institutional and relational supports enable the adaptation required for emerging professional readiness. Ultimately, student interns perceive implementation success not as the total avoidance of difficulty, but as the supported capacity to respond constructively to it.

5. Discussion

The central empirical proposition emerging from this study is that successful Teaching Assistantship implementation is not produced by initial university preparation alone; rather, it emerges through a dynamic interaction among students' initial readiness, field-based challenges, and the institutional and relational support systems available to facilitate their adaptation. By shifting the analytical lens from whether Teaching Assistantship programs produce positive outcomes to how student interns actually navigate and experience their implementation, these findings provide important insights for experiential teacher education.

This section discusses the empirical findings in light of the theoretical framework and existing research across three main themes:

The transition from theoretical preparation to adaptive professional readiness

The nature of administrative and contextual friction

The role of multidimensional support in facilitating experiential learning

Figure 4. Theoritical theme Discussion

5.1 Redefining Readiness: From Propositional Knowledge to Enacted Adaptation

The findings demonstrate that while student interns view university coursework and pre-departure preparation (such as microteaching and lesson design) as necessary foundations, they explicitly distinguish between possessing foundational knowledge and being practically ready for the classroom. Informants repeatedly noted that campus preparation felt structured and predictable, whereas authentic vocational school environments introduced unscripted student behaviors, facility limitations, and contextual complexities.

This empirical pattern strongly aligns with experiential learning theory [3], [4]. Kolb posits that learning occurs through a continuous cycle where abstract conceptualization must be transformed through concrete experience, reflective observation, and active experimentation. Campus-based coursework primarily equips preservice teachers with abstract concepts. However, as Grossman et al. [2] argue, teaching is a complex, situated professional activity that cannot be mastered solely through reflection or theoretical acquisition; it requires opportunities for professional enactment.

Furthermore, the data reveal that readiness is not a static state achieved prior to school placement. Informant 12’s account of feeling "academically prepared" yet "emotionally and practically overwhelmed" illustrates that readiness is an enacted, situational capacity. This finding extends Bandura’s Self-Efficacy Theory [10] within teacher education.

While traditional preparation programs focus heavily on building content knowledge, an intern's actual teaching performance is mediated by their perceived capability to organize and execute instructional actions under conditions of uncertainty. When interns encounter unexpected classroom dynamics, their self-efficacy is rigorously tested. True readiness emerges when students possess both a solid pedagogical baseline and the psychological flexibility—or adaptability—to adjust their instructional plans in real time. This aligns with recent findings by Cai et al. [7] who observed that teaching internships shape professional identity through the mediating roles of self-efficacy and active learning engagement.

5.2 Bridging the Theory–Practice Gap and Mitigating Transition Friction

The theory–practice gap emerged as a primary challenge for student interns. Participants did not dismiss theoretical knowledge as useless; rather, they experienced a structural disconnect between the controlled environments where theory was learned and the messy reality of vocational classrooms. This disconnect directly reflects Zeichner’s [5] critique of traditional teacher education, which often treats campus coursework and field experiences as separate, poorly integrated domains.

However, the findings reveal a secondary, often overlooked source of disruption: administrative and organizational friction. Beyond pedagogical adaptation, interns faced:

Delayed information flow between universities and host schools;

Unclear role expectations;

Heavy administrative reporting burdens; and

High teaching loads (e.g., 12 hours weekly).

Table 3. the type of Friction and impact

Type of Friction	Source / Operational Context	Impact on Experiential Learning
Pedagogical Discontinuity	Mismatch between predictable campus microteaching and unpredictable student behavior in real classrooms.	Triggers cognitive dissonance and emotional stress; forces real-time instructional adaptation.
Administrative Transition Friction	Delayed instructions, misaligned expectations between campus and school, heavy reporting tasks.	Consumes cognitive energy and time; shifts focus away from pedagogical reflection toward procedural compliance.

As illustrated in the table above, administrative friction is not merely a logistical inconvenience; rather, it functions as a direct impediment to experiential learning. When student interns are consumed by administrative ambiguity or excessive reporting requirements, their cognitive energy is diverted away from pedagogical reflection and active student engagement. This extends the insights of Hermawan et al. [6], who noted that program effectiveness in Indonesian Teaching Assistance is heavily conditioned by organizational infrastructure, clear coordination, and administrative demands.

To optimize experiential learning, teacher preparation institutions must recognize that administrative clarity is not merely helpful, but a fundamental prerequisite for pedagogical growth.

5.3 Multi-Dimensional Support as the Engine of Adaptation

A key contribution of this study is the identification of how support systems operate interdependently to convert field challenges into productive learning opportunities. The data demonstrate that support must be multi-dimensional, spanning administrative, pedagogical, and psychological/relational domains.

Figure 5. TA Multidimentional framework

a. Pedagogical Scaffolding through Mentoring

A key contribution of this study is the identification of how support systems operate interdependently to convert field challenges into productive learning opportunities. The data demonstrate that support must be multidimensional, spanning administrative, pedagogical, and psychological/relational domains.

The findings underscore that the mere presence of a mentor is insufficient; rather, the character and frequency of feedback determine its ultimate value. Informant 3’s experience highlights how "granular feedback after every single session" enabled the intern to identify errors and bridge the gap between current capability and desired practice. This empirical insight aligns with Navarro-Ibáñez et al. [9] who found that immediate, specific feedback from cooperating teachers directly enhances preservice teachers' self-efficacy. Mentoring acts as the operational bridge in Kolb's cycle, converting a raw, potentially overwhelming classroom encounter into structured reflective observation and actionable conceptualization.

b. Psychological and Relational Support

Teaching in an unfamiliar environment inevitably triggers emotional vulnerability, anxiety, and self-doubt. Constructive relational support from mentors, school staff, and peer cohorts creates a psychologically safe space for interns to experiment, fail, and reflect. As Izadinia [8] observed, positive mentoring relationships bolster professional identity and confidence, whereas unsupportive environments exacerbate self-doubt. Peer relationships, when structured around shared goals, further serve as a vital mechanism for co-reflection and emotional regulation.

c. Administrative Scaffolding

Administrative support provides the structural stability required for pedagogical and relational mechanisms to function effectively. Clear schedules, transparent evaluation criteria, and aligned expectations between university supervisors and school mentors eliminate unnecessary cognitive load. When administrative scaffolding is strong, interns can focus their full attention on classroom enactment and reflective practice.

5.4 Summary: Supported Adaptive Professional Learning

Synthesizing these strands, this study proposes a shift in how teacher education programs conceptualize school-based internships. Internships should not be viewed merely as field placements for applying static university knowledge, nor as sink-or-swim tests of endurance. Instead, Teaching Assistantship is best understood as a process of Supported Adaptive Professional Learning.

In this process:

University preparation provides the initial conceptual repertoire.

Authentic school practice introduces necessary cognitive dissonance and contextual challenge.

Multidimensional support (administrative, pedagogical, relational) acts as the scaffolding that enables interns to reflect, adapt, and build self-efficacy.

Ultimately, successful implementation occurs when institutions move beyond providing program components on paper and focus on ensuring that support systems are dynamically experienced by students in the field.

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6. Implications

The study's findings yield several practical, institutional, and policy implications for university-based teacher education programs, host school leadership, and policymakers involved in nationwide experiential initiatives like Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM).

For University Program Design and Pedagogy: Universities must move beyond treating pre-departure preparation as mere theoretical lecture completion. Coursework and microteaching should be restructured to prioritize instructional enactment under conditions of uncertainty. Preparation modules should incorporate realistic classroom management simulations, problem-based scenarios addressing diverse student behaviors, and direct training in digital teacher administrative tasks. Bridging the gap between conceptual knowledge and classroom reality requires providing preservice teachers with genuine opportunities to rehearse adaptive instructional decision-making prior to entering host schools.

For Host School Leadership and Mentoring Frameworks: Host schools must formalize and support the role of cooperating teachers as pedagogical co-educators rather than passive supervisors. Given that student interns rely heavily on "granular, session-by-session feedback" to bridge performance gaps (Informant 3), host schools should institute scheduled, structured post-observation debriefs. Mentors should be trained to provide constructive, formative feedback that balances pedagogical coaching with relational encouragement, thereby safeguarding intern self-efficacy and emotional well-being.

For Policy & Institutional Coordination - At the policy level, educational authorities must address the administrative transition friction that frequently burdens student interns. Inter-institutional communication protocols between universities and host schools need streamlining to ensure clear expectations, standardized workloads, and timely dissemination of guidelines before placements commence. Reducing administrative overhead enables interns to dedicate their primary focus and cognitive energy to pedagogical reflection and student engagement.

Table 5. Implication as suggestion

Stakeholder Level	Core Actionable Implication
University Level	Shift microteaching from rigid lesson delivery to adaptive simulations and administrative training.
School Level	Mandate structured, routine debriefing sessions and train mentor teachers in formative feedback.
Policy Level	Streamline reporting channels to reduce administrative transition friction and align guidelines.

7. Limitations

While this study offers rich, experience-sensitive insights into Teaching Assistantship implementation, several methodological and contextual limitations should be acknowledged:

Sample Scope and Generalizability: The study involved 27 undergraduate interns drawn exclusively from four education programs (Office Administration, Business, Accounting, and Economics Education) placed within Indonesian vocational high schools. While maximum-variation sampling captured meaningful variations across these contexts, the qualitative case study design aims for naturalistic and conceptual transferability rather than statistical generalizability across all teacher education disciplines or general secondary schools.

Data Sources and Cross-Validation: Data collection relied on open-ended written reflections and semi-structured interview. Although these qualitative instruments captured the authentic, lived experiences and psychological responses of student interns, the study did not incorporate direct classroom observations or the perspectives of cooperating mentor teachers and university supervisors. Including multi-informant perspectives in future research could provide a more triangulated view of implementation dynamics.

Temporal Boundaries: The research examined participant reflections across a single academic year (2025/2026). Consequently, it did not track the longitudinal development of these interns as they transitioned into full-time professional teaching careers.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how student interns perceive the implementation of Teaching Assistantships within Indonesian vocational schools, identifying the key drivers, field challenges, and support mechanisms essential to success. The core empirical proposition established by this research is that successful implementation is not determined by initial university preparation alone. Rather, it emerges through a dynamic, mediated interaction:

Figure 6. Interaction connection

Initial Preparation X Field Challenges X Multi Dimensional Support = Adaptive Readiness

While campus coursework and microteaching establish an indispensable pedagogical foundation, exposure to authentic school practice invariably reveals the limits of theoretical knowledge. Interns face real-world classroom complexities, emotional pressure, and administrative friction that require rapid, situated adaptation.

The findings emphasize that converting these field challenges into productive professional learning requires multidimensional support. Granular pedagogical feedback from mentors, administrative clarity from institutions, and empathetic relational support from peers and supervisors serve as the essential scaffolding that enables preservice teachers to build self-efficacy and adapt their practice effectively.

Ultimately, teacher education institutions must shift from evaluating internships purely through formal structures or program delivery toward supporting the lived, adaptive experience of the student. Recognizing the Teaching Assistantship as a supported process of adaptive professional learning ensures that school placements effectively bridge the divide between campus preparation and real-world teaching.

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