

Lack of Interest of Junior High School/MTs Graduates in Vocational Education (SMK) in Indonesia: Analysis of Factors and Strategic Recommendations

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Abstract. Vocational education (SMK) has a strategic role in preparing human resources ready for work. Indonesia has targeted an increase in the proportion of vocational school students in order to prepare a productive workforce and reduce the unemployment rate of secondary education graduates (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). However, in reality, the number of students who graduated from junior high school/MTs who choose to continue to vocational schools is still lower than those who continue to high school or MA (BPS, 2023). The results of a mini research conducted by the researcher on grade IX students of SMP 1 Dawe Kudus for the 2024/2025 Academic Year through a questionnaire in the form of a *google form* about the selection of further study to SMA/SMK/MA/Pondok Pesantren, also show that high school is still more in demand by students. Of the 206 students, 143 students chose high school, 54 students chose vocational school, 3 students chose MA, and 6 students did not continue their studies. This article examines the factors that cause low interest in vocational schools and provides strategic recommendations to increase vocational education participation. Through literature studies and data analysis, it was found that negative public perception of vocational schools, inequality of quality between vocational schools, and weak linkages with the world of work are the main obstacles. It is necessary to transform the image of vocational schools, revitalize the curriculum, and increase synergy with industry to attract more students to vocational education.

Keywords: vocational education (SMK); factor analysis; strategic recommendations

INTRODUCTION

Vocational education plays an important role in preparing human resources who are ready to work, especially in facing the challenges of economic development and labor market needs in the global era. In Indonesia, Vocational High School (SMK) is a secondary education pathway specifically designed to equip students with practical skills and technical competencies relevant to the industrial world. However, in recent years, it has been shown that the interest of Junior High School (SMP) and Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) graduates in vocational education tends to decline, although the government has pursued various affirmative policies to encourage increased participation at this level.

The Government of Indonesia has targeted an increase in the proportion of vocational school students in order to prepare a productive workforce and reduce the unemployment rate of secondary education graduates (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). However, in reality, the number of students who graduated from junior high school/MTs who chose to continue to vocational school was still lower than those who

continued to high school or MA (BPS, 2023). Data from the Central Statistics Agency shows that junior high school / MTs graduates in Indonesia are still dominated by the choice of continuing to the high school or MA level, while interest in vocational schools is still relatively low.

The phenomenon of low interest of junior high school / MTs graduates to continue to vocational schools has various implications for national education policies, especially related to the imbalance between general and vocational education graduates. In fact, the existence of a skilled workforce is one of the key factors in encouraging the growth of the industrial and productive services sectors. In addition, low interest in vocational schools also has the potential to increase the open unemployment rate, especially among young people, due to the mismatch between the competence of graduates and the needs of the world of work.

Various studies show that the lack of interest in vocational education is influenced by various factors, including negative perceptions of vocational schools, lack of information about the job prospects of vocational school graduates, uneven quality of learning and infrastructure, as well as family social and economic factors.

Therefore, it is important to conduct an in-depth study to identify the determinant factors that influence the decision of junior high school / MTs graduates in choosing an educational path, especially for vocational schools.

This article aims to comprehensively analyze the factors that cause the low interest of junior high school / MTs graduates in vocational education. In addition, this article also provides findings-based strategic recommendations to increase student participation in vocational education as an effort to support strengthening link and match between education and the world of work.

METHODS

This article was prepared using a descriptive qualitative approach through literature study and document analysis. Primary data was obtained from grade IX students of SMP 1 Dawe Kudus for the 2024/2025 academic year through mini research by distributing questionnaires in the form of *Google Form* about the selection of further study to SMA/SMK/MA/Pondok Pesantren. Secondary data was obtained from reports from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), Ministry of Education documents, and the results of academic studies from various national and international journals. The analysis technique used is a thematic analysis of internal and external factors that affect students' decisions to continue their education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of Mini Research

The results of a mini research conducted by researchers on grade IX students of SMP 1 Dawe Kudus for the 2024/2025 academic year through a questionnaire in the form of a google form about the selection of further studies to SMA, SMK, MA, or Islamic Boarding School, show that high school is still more in demand by they to continue their education to a higher level than vocational schools. Of the 206 students, 143 students chose to continue their studies to high school, 54 students chose to continue their studies to vocational schools, 3 students chose to continue their studies to MA, 6 students didn't continue their studies showed in Table 1.

Grade IX students of SMP 1 Dawe Kudus for the 2024/2025 school year who chose high school as a further study gave the reason that they wanted to continue their education to college and not just to high school. They also want to improve their

Table 1. Further Study Data Grade IX students of SMP 1 Dawe Kudus TA. 2024/2025

No.	Class	SMA	SMK	MA	CE	Sum
1	IX A	16	15	-	-	31
2	IX B	23	7	-	-	30
3	IX C	27	3	-	-	30
4	IX D	14	11	3	1	29
5	IX E	21	5	-	4	30
6	IX F	23	5	-	1	29
7	IX G	20	7	-	-	27
Sum		144	53	3	6	206

knowledge more broadly and develop academic and non-academic achievements. Parents also support students to continue to high school. Students who choose to continue their studies at SMK give reasons because after graduating from vocational school they can immediately work. They are also limited to education fees to college. Parents who have limited education costs recommend continuing to SMK only. Students who choose to continue to MA give the reason that in addition to gaining knowledge, there is also more religious knowledge than in high school and vocational school. Students who do not continue their studies give reasons because they do not have education fees, orphans/orphans/orphans, are lazy to think, immediately work after graduating from junior high school. To further clarify it as Figure 1.

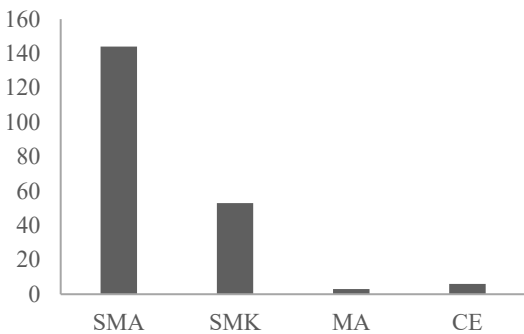


Figure 2. Grade IX students of SMP 1 Dawe Kudus TA. 2024/2025

Public Perception of Vocational Schools

One of the causes of low interest in vocational schools is the negative image of vocational education. Many parents and students still consider high school to be more prestigious and more guaranteed to graduate from college

Table 2. SWOT Analysis of Public Perception of Vocational Schools

Aspects	Fill
Strengths	Competency-based curriculum relevant to the world of work Dominant hands-on learning (70% practice, 30% theory) The existence of an industrial internship program and a <i>Teaching Factory</i> Leading Vocational Schools Are Starting to Be Known (SMK Pusat Keunggulan, BLUD)
Weaknesses	Negative perception that vocational schools are only for students who are unable to compete in high school Quality inequality between vocational schools (urban vs rural) Inadequate practice facilities in most schools High unemployment rate of vocational school graduates according to BPS data The increasing need for skilled labor in the era of industry 4.0 and the digital economy
Opportunities	Overseas job opportunities for vocational graduates Government support for the revitalization and transformation of vocational schools Potential for wider collaboration with the industrial world and local DUDI Dominate the social perception that high school is more prestigious and guarantees an academic future
Threats	Lack of effective socialization to students and parents Vocational school alumni who work not according to competence reinforce negative stigma Instability of the vocational sector job market

(Rahmawati, 2021). Vocational schools are perceived as a "second-class" option, especially for students with low academic achievement.

Public perception of vocational schools in Indonesia based on various studies, BPS reports, and vocational education studies: (1) in general, public perception of vocational schools in Indonesia is still mixed with a tendency towards a less positive direction than high schools. Many people still view vocational schools as a second choice or "last alternative" for students who are not accepted into high school. This is closely related to the old view that associates vocational schools with students who have lower academic achievements; (2) Factors that affect perception include: a) Prestige social, namely high school tends to be considered more "prestigious" because it is a path to higher education, vocational schools are often considered a "fast work" path and are not suitable for children who excel and have education costs, b) the absorption of graduates in the world of work, namely even though vocational schools are designed to be ready to work, in reality the open unemployment rate of vocational school graduates is still high, BPS data (2023) shows that vocational school graduates are the group with the highest open unemployment rate compared to high school and colleges. This raises the perception that

vocational schools have not been effective in guaranteeing jobs, thus reducing interest, c) the quality and infrastructure facilities, namely many people doubt the quality of practice and learning facilities in vocational schools, especially in rural or rural areas, superior vocational schools are indeed starting to develop, but the quality disparity between vocational schools is very high which has an impact on public trust, d) access to information, namely there are still many parents and students who lack information about the advantages of vocational schools, expertise programs, and job opportunities, socialization from the Education Office or schools is often formal and does not touch the family's deep understanding, e) negative experiences in the immediate environment, namely the presence of vocational school alumni in the surrounding environment who do not succeed in getting jobs, or working in fields that are not in accordance with competencies also form negative perceptions; (3) parental perception, namely parents have a great influence in determining the child's level of education, in many cases where parents encourage children to continue to high school even though the child has an interest in skills or engineering; 4) the latest change in perception, namely: several vocational schools have begun to build Branding positive

such as the Center of Excellence Vocational School, BLUD Vocational School, and industry-based vocational school; Internship program, Teaching Factory, and industrial cooperation began to increase the attractiveness of vocational schools in several major cities; however, this change in perception has not been evenly distributed throughout Indonesia, especially in the 3T (frontier, remote, disadvantaged) areas; 5) policy implications, namely that the government needs to strengthen information dissemination and systematic public campaigns to improve the image of vocational schools; real improvements are needed in the quality assurance sector, industrial partnerships, and graduate track record; Communication innovations such as involving successful alumni and educational influencers can help shape new, more positive perceptions.

Limitations of Quality and Facilities of Vocational Schools

Vocational schools are secondary education levels that have a strategic role in preparing a skilled and ready-to-use workforce. However, various studies show that the quality and facilities of vocational schools in Indonesia still face various serious obstacles that have a direct impact on the readiness of graduates to enter the world of work (Directorate of Vocational Schools, 2020; World Bank, 2018).

The first limitation of quality and facilities of vocational schools is the limitation of the quality of education. The quality of vocational education is greatly influenced by the quality of teachers, the relevance of the curriculum, and the effectiveness of school management. Many vocational teachers do not fully have pedagogic competence or technical expertise in accordance with the vocational field taught (Hasan & Azis, 2019). This is compounded by the lack of structured and ongoing industry-based training. The vocational curriculum is also still considered less adaptive to the development of the world of work. According to the OECD (2015), the mismatch between the vocational curriculum and the needs of the job market causes vocational school graduates to lack relevant skills, which has an impact on the high unemployment rate of vocational school graduates.

The second limitation of quality and facilities of vocational schools is the limitation of facilities and infrastructure. Practical facilities and infrastructure are important components of vocational learning. However, there are still many vocational schools, especially in disadvantaged

areas, experiencing limited practical tools, laboratories, workshops, and access to information technology (Setiawan, 2021). Inadequate facilities hinder the practice-based learning process and reduce students' technical skills. A study by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2022) emphasizes that investment in vocational equipment and infrastructure is urgently needed to ensure that skills training can be carried out in accordance with industry standards.

The third limitation of quality and facilities of vocational schools is the weakness of partnerships with the Business and Industrial World (DUDI). Concept link and match between SMK and DUDI has not been fully realized. Many schools have difficulty establishing strategic partnerships, both in the form of student internships, teacher training, and joint curriculum development (Directorate of Vocational Schools, 2020). As a result, learning does not get enough feedback from the world of work.

The fourth limitation of quality and facilities of vocational schools is the inequality of access and quality between regions. There is a striking disparity between vocational schools in urban areas and 3T (disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost) areas. Schools in the 3T region generally face greater barriers in terms of human resources, facilities, and digital connectivity (World Bank, 2018). This widens the gap in vocational education and weakens the equal distribution of employment opportunities.

Lack of Career Information and Guidance

Career guidance services are still not optimal in many schools. Students and parents do not get adequate information about job opportunities or career prospects for vocational school graduates, so they choose general education paths that are considered safer (Yuliana, 2022).

Effective career information and guidance services are an integral part of vocational education, including in vocational schools. However, there are still many vocational schools in Indonesia, this service is still not optimal. The lack of career information and comprehensive guidance is one of the significant obstacles in preparing students to enter the world of work and continue their education to a higher level.

The first thing: there are limitations in career guidance services. The main function of career guidance is to help students recognize their potential, understand trends in the world of work, and design realistic career plans. However, in

practice, many Guidance and Counseling (BK) services at vocational schools have not been focused on student career development (Supriatna, 2020). BK teachers are often burdened with administrative tasks or teaching other subjects, so the role of career guidance is marginalized.

The second thing: lack of access to information in the world of work. Most of the vocational school students come from lower-middle economic backgrounds who have limited access to the latest career information. The lack of cooperation with the industrial world in providing information on job opportunities, career development paths, and the skills needed is the main obstacle (World Bank, 2018). As a result, many students experience confusion when it comes to choosing a path after graduation, whether to work, entrepreneurship, or continue their education.

The third thing: the absence of a structured career monitoring system. Many vocational schools do not yet have an alumni tracking system or Tracer Study which can provide empirical information about the success of graduates in the world of work. Without this data, schools do not have a solid foundation to provide fact-based and relevant career guidance (Directorate of Vocational Schools, 2020).

Fourth: the impact on motivation and transition to the world of work. The lack of career guidance has a direct effect on the low readiness of students to transition to the world of work or higher education. A study by Trisnawati & Fitriani (2021) states that vocational school students who receive adequate career information services show a higher level of job readiness and confidence than those who do not receive these services.

Socio-Religious Orientation

Socio-religious orientation is one of the factors that can affect the interest of junior high school / MTs graduates in choosing to continue their education at vocational schools. Although not always explicitly mentioned in various studies, religious values and social norms embraced by individuals and their communities can play a significant role in educational decision-making. Some students choose to continue to MA or Islamic boarding schools because of religious factors or family demands, not because of career considerations or personal interests. This is also one of the causes of the low interest in vocational education.

The influence of socio-religious orientation on the interest to continue to vocational schools,

includes: (1) religious values and educational choices, namely in a society that upholds religious values, the decision to continue education is often influenced by religious views. For example, some parents or communities may advise their children to choose an educational path that is considered more in line with their religious values, such as continuing to Madrasah Aliyah (MA) rather than vocational school. This can affect students' perception of vocational schools as an option that is less in line with their religious orientation; (2) public perception of vocational schools, namely several studies show that public perception of vocational schools is still less positive. For example, there is an assumption that vocational schools are an option for students with low academic ability or that vocational school graduates have a smaller chance of going on to college. This view can be reinforced by social norms and religious values that prioritize high academic achievement as a reflection of success; (3) the influence of the social and family environment i.e. the social environment, including the family and religious community, plays an important role in shaping students' interest in continuing to vocational school. Studies show that socioeconomic background and community views can influence students' decisions. For example, in societies with strong religious orientations, educational choices are often influenced by the expectation of proceeding to a more general or academic educational path, such as high school or MA, rather than vocational paths such as vocational school showed in Figure 3.

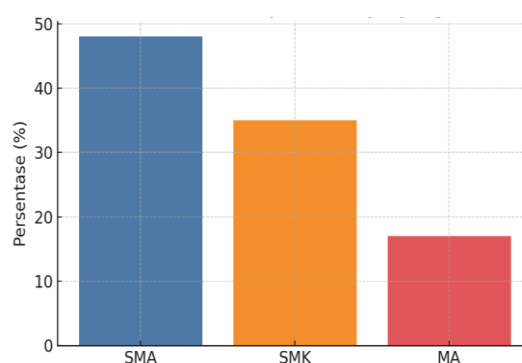


Figure 3. Percentage of Junior High School/MTs Graduates Continue to Secondary Education (Source: BPS, 2023)

Strategic Recommendations

Some strategies to increase interest in vocational schools include: revitalization of vocational curriculum, revitalization of practice facilities, positive image campaigns of vocational

schools, improvement of vocational school services in junior high schools/MTs, partnership between vocational schools and DUDI, integration of religious values in vocational school curriculum. It is described as follows.

Revitalization of the Vocational Curriculum

The revitalization of the curriculum aims to align vocational education with the needs of DUDI. The steps taken include: (1) a competency-based curriculum, namely developing a curriculum that focuses on practical skills needed by the industry, (2) Teaching Factory namely applying the concept of learning based on the production of goods or services according to industry standards, so that students are familiar with the real work environment, (3) improving teachers' competencies through training and certification programs in order to be able to teach materials that are relevant to the latest technological and industrial developments, (4) cooperation with industry, namely establishing partnerships between vocational schools and DUDI to ensure curriculum and training in accordance with the needs of the job market.

Revitalization of Practice Facilities

Adequate means of practice are essential to support vocational learning. Some of the efforts made include: (1) modernization of practice equipment, namely replacing old equipment with the latest technology so that students can practice using tools that are in accordance with industry standards, (2) the construction of a Student Practice Room (RPS), which is to provide representative practice facilities for various skill competencies, (3) the development of Teaching Factory namely in addition to being a learning method, Teaching Factory It also functions as a means of practice that is close to the actual industrial conditions, (4) increasing the capacity of productive teachers, namely through training and certification in managing and utilizing practice facilities optimally.

SMK Positive Image Campaign

Through the mass media, testimonials of successful alumni, and role models of vocational school graduates, it is necessary to form public opinion that vocational schools are a quality and promising path. Vocational schools' positive image campaign strategies include: (1) independent learning communication strategies. The Ministry of Education and Culture through the Directorate General of Vocational Education

implements five communication strategies to build a positive image, namely a) content, namely presenting a narrative that arouses audience awareness and consideration, b) context, namely associating the narrative with relevant data and facts, c) creative, namely using creative media to attract the attention of the audience, d) channels, namely choosing communication channels that are in accordance with the characteristics of the target audience, e) community, namely involving the community as a strategic partner in conveying information; (2) Re-branding SMK. Program Re-branding SMK aims to reintroduce SMK to the public with a more positive image. The steps taken include: redesigning the school's branding, publishing the school's brand through various social media platforms, managing social media content appropriately and periodically; (3) Programs "A Day at SMK". This program invites junior high school students to experience firsthand the learning experience at a vocational school for one day. Students are invited to participate in major practices, such as cooking with Culinary Arts or assembling devices in Computer and Network Engineering. This interactive approach aims to attract students' interest in continuing their education to vocational schools, (4) school branding. Some vocational schools develop special branding to improve a positive image, such as SMK Negeri 3 Semarang with the "JITU" (Honest, Innovative, Skilled, Excellent) brand. This branding is applied in various aspects, ranging from learning to extracurricular activities, and is published through social media and testimonials from alumni and industry partners; (5) the role of school public relations. School public relations plays an important role in building a positive image of vocational schools. The strategies used include: forming attractive branding on school social media, promoting the school's positive achievements and activities, establishing good communication with students' parents through groups.

Improving Career Guidance Services in Junior High School/MTs

Career guidance services in junior high school/MTs aim to: (1) help students recognize their potential through an understanding of talents, interests, and abilities, students can determine the appropriate direction of education and career; (2) providing information about the world of work and further education, i.e. students are given insight into various professions, levels of education, and the relationship between the two;

(3) guide students in career decision-making with the right information so that students can make advanced educational choices that fit their career goals.

Strategies that can be applied to improve BK services in junior high schools/MTs include: (1) the integration of career guidance in the curriculum, namely integrating career guidance materials in subjects or extracurriculars to provide a broader understanding to students; (2) training and competency development of BK teachers in order to be able to provide effective career guidance services; (3) the use of media and technology such as career guidance applications to convey information in an interactive and interesting manner; (4) collaboration with DUDI, namely collaborating with DUDI to provide direct information about labor needs and career prospects in various fields; (5) the preparation of career guidance modules that are in accordance with the needs of junior high school/MTs students to assist them in their educational and career planning.

SMK Partnership with DUDI

Strengthening link and match between SMK and DUDI will increase public trust in vocational schools as a relevant and adaptive educational path to the needs of the job market.

The partnership between SMK and DUDI has a crucial role, namely: (1) adapting the vocational curriculum to the needs and developments of the industry so that graduates have relevant competencies (2) Field Work Practice (PKL) by providing direct experience to students in a real work environment to improve practical skills, (3) improving teacher competence through internship programs or training in the industry so that teachers can update their knowledge and skills in accordance with developments technology and industry, (4) opportunities for graduate absorption, namely expanding cooperation networks can increase job opportunities for vocational school graduates in various industrial sectors.

Strategic steps in building an effective partnership between SMK and DUDI include: (1) joint planning, namely involving DUDI in planning education and training programs at SMK to ensure suitability with industry needs, (2) organizing activities, namely forming a cooperation team consisting of representatives of SMK and DUDI to manage and supervise the implementation of the Joint Program, (3) program implementation, namely implementing various

programs such as street vendors, teacher training, industrial visits, and collaborative curriculum alignment, (4) evaluation and development, namely conducting routine evaluations of partnership programs and developing new strategies to increase the effectiveness of cooperation.

Integration of Religious Values in the Vocational School Curriculum

The integration of religious values in the vocational school curriculum aims to combine technical skills education with the formation of spiritual character, thereby producing graduates who are professionally competent and have noble character.

The strategy of integrating religious values in the vocational school curriculum includes: (1) an integrated curriculum model. Some vocational schools implement a curriculum model that integrates religious and general education, such as the immersed and Networked; (2) the integration of Islamic values in general subjects. Islamic values can be integrated into a wide range of general subjects; (3) strengthening character through school activities; (4) the use of technology for religious education.

CONCLUSION

The lack of interest of SMP/MTs graduates to continue to vocational schools is a multidimensional problem that includes aspects of perception, quality, career information, and cultural factors. Factors that cause the lack of interest of junior high school/MTs graduates to continue to vocational schools include: (1) student interest which is influenced by internal factors such as self-understanding and motivation, as well as external factors such as family, school, and community environment; (2) The image of vocational schools in the community that still consider vocational school to be the second choice after high school so that it affects the perception of students and parents in choosing educational paths; (3) less than optimal BK services in junior high schools/MTs cause students to get less information and direction regarding vocational education; (4) lack of information about job opportunities; (5) limited partnership with DUDI. To increase the interest of junior high school/MTs graduates in vocational education, the strategies carried out include revitalizing the curriculum and practice facilities, positive image campaigns of vocational schools, improving BK services in

junior high schools/MTs, strengthening partnerships with DUDI, integrating religious values in vocational school curriculum.

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