

Social support, grit, and academic stress among MBKM students

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ABSTRACT

Since its implementation in 2020, the *Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka (MBKM)* program has produced both positive and negative impacts on students. It enhances soft skills, cognitive abilities, social competence, scientific literacy, and problem-solving skills. However, it also creates challenges such as time management difficulties, limited communication with lecturers, and increased physical and mental fatigue, which contribute to rising academic stress. Initial data from 78 students showed an average academic stress score of 42.4 for non-participants, while *MBKM* participants reached 51.1. This study aims to assess the predictive role of social support and grit on academic stress in *MBKM* students. A total of 224 students from various regions in Indonesia participated in this quantitative study. Analysis was conducted using multiple linear regression in SPSS. The results showed that social support and persistence were significantly related to academic stress ($0.000 < 0.05$), with $F = 48.472$ (greater than F table = 3.09) and $R^2 = 0.305$. This means that 30.5% of the variation in academic stress can be explained by social support (4.69%) and persistence (25.8%). The regression coefficients of social support (-0.225) and persistence (-0.866) indicate that an increase in both factors is associated with a decrease in academic stress. Overall, this study concludes that persistence is a stronger predictor of academic stress in *MBKM* students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Educational policy changes in Indonesia in recent years reflect the government's systematic efforts to prepare human resources who are adaptive, collaborative, and ready to face the complexities of the world of work. One of these strategic policies is *Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka (MBKM)*, which was launched by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia in 2020. This program provides students with the opportunity to study outside their study program and outside their home university for up to three semesters through various schemes, such as certified internships, independent study, teaching campuses, student exchanges, and independent entrepreneurship (Pusat Informasi Kampus Merdeka, 2024).

A number of studies show that the implementation of *MBKM* has contributed positively to the development of student competencies. Participation in the *MBKM* program has been proven to increase additional competencies, broaden problem-solving perspectives, and strengthen students' soft skills and contextual learning experiences (Pohan & Kisman, 2022; Puspitawati & Afnan, 2024). However, the flexibility and intensity of learning offered by *MBKM* also present significant academic adaptation challenges for students.

In practice, the implementation of *MBKM* in various universities is still faced with limitations in system readiness, unclear mechanisms for converting semester credit units, and concurrent academic and non-academic burdens. These conditions have the potential to trigger psychological pressure on students, especially when curriculum changes require students to step out of their comfort zone and adapt to new learning patterns (Widiyana, 2021; Maolana, 2024). Sentiment analysis on social media also shows that although *MBKM* is perceived positively, financial issues, allowances, and credit conversion are still sources of student complaints (Febriyani & Februariyanti, 2023).

This pressure is closely related to academic stress, which is a condition where students perceive academic demands to exceed their adaptive capacity, thus triggering maladaptive emotional, cognitive responses, physiological and behavioral (Gadzella & Masten, 2005). Various studies show that the level of academic stress among students is in the moderate to high category, both before and after the implementation of *MBKM* (Purwati & Handiyani, 2012; Ambarwati et al., 2017). In the context of students participating in the *MBKM* internship program, most participants also reported experiencing moderate academic stress due to the high workload and college assignments that had to be completed simultaneously (Widyachandara et al., 2023).

Academic stress that is not managed adaptively has the potential to have a serious impact on students' mental well-being and academic achievement (Purwadi et al., 2023). Previous studies have shown that academic stress contributes significantly to a decline in academic achievement and an increase in mental health disorders among students (Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Rimala et al., 2024). This condition is even more concerning when linked to the increased vulnerability of students' mental health after the pandemic, including anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of isolation during lectures (BBC News Indonesia, 2024).

Within the framework of educational psychology, social support is considered an external protective factor that can reduce students' academic stress levels (Oktavio et al., 2023; Isma et al., 2024; Sani et al., 2024). Social support is described as an individual's perception of the attention, concern, appreciation, and assistance provided by family, friends, and close associates (Zimet et al., 1988). Several studies have consistently shown a negative correlation between academic stress and social support, including among students participating in the *MBKM* policy (Vian et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2024). Students who feel emotionally and

instrumentally supported tend to have more adaptive coping skills in dealing with academic pressure.

In addition to external factors, grit as an internal psychological resource also has an essential role in supporting students in managing academic stress. Duckworth et al. (2007) define grit as a person's tendency to remain persistent and maintain a stable interest in pursuing long-term goals, even when faced with various obstacles. Empirical research shows that grit is negatively correlated with academic stress and functions as a protective factor that helps individuals interpret academic demands more adaptively (Lee, 2017; Amawidyati et al., 2022). Students with high levels of grit tend to be more focused, resilient, and consistent in undergoing challenging learning processes.

Although the relationship between academic stress and social support, as well as between grit and academic stress, has been extensively studied separately, studies that simultaneously integrate these two variables in *MBKM* participants in Indonesia are still limited. However, the dynamics of *MBKM* present a combination of academic and non-academic demands, as well as high psychological adaptation needs, requiring a more comprehensive understanding of relevant protective factors.

Based on this research gap, this research examines the relationship between social support and grit with academic stress on students who participate in the *MBKM*, both together and separately. This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of academic stress studies in the context of ever-changing high education policy, as well as provide practical benefits for universities and policymakers in developing more effective mentoring and psychological support systems for *MBKM* students.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a quantitative survey design to analyze the contribution of grit and social support to academic stress among undergraduate students who participate in the *MBKM* program at universities in Indonesia. The target population consisted of active undergraduate students who had participated in at least one *MBKM* program, with individual students serving as the units of analysis. Participants were recruited using a non-probability snowball sampling technique, whereby initial respondents were contacted through academic networks and subsequently asked to disseminate the questionnaire to peers who met the inclusion criteria. The minimum sample size was determined using G*Power software with an assumed effect size of 0.10, an alpha level of 0.05, statistical power of 0.95, and two predictors, resulting in a minimum required sample of 158 participants. Data was collected through self-administered online questionnaires distributed voluntarily and anonymously. Academic stress was measured using a scale developed based on Gadzella and Masten's (2005) framework, encompassing physiological, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive reactions; after item

validation, 20 items were retained, demonstrating high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.929). Grit was measured using a researcher-developed scale grounded in Duckworth et al. (2007) theory, covering consistency of interest and perseverance of effort; the final scale consisted of 11 valid items with good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.856). Perceived social support measurement was adapted from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support by Zimet et al. (1998), comprising three dimensions, significant others, family, and friends, with 11 valid items and satisfactory reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.873). Responses for academic stress and grit were rated on five-point Likert scales, while social support was measured using a seven-point Likert scale. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS version 25, beginning with assumption testing including normality (Kolmogorov–Smirnov), linearity, multicollinearity (Tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor), and heteroscedasticity, all of which met the required criteria. Hypothesis testing was conducted through multiple linear regression to assess the effect of grit and social support on academic stress, both simultaneously and partially, with a statistically significant threshold set at $p < 0.05$.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

Aspect	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	75	33.33%
	Female	149	66.67%
Age	19 years old	8	2.10%
	20 years old	20	7.61%
	21 years old	92	39.90%
	22 years old	76	32.55%
	>22 years old	28	11.02%
Place of Study	Outside Surabaya/Sidoarjo within Java	14	6.25%
	Kalimantan	10	4.46%
	Sulawesi	17	7.5%
University Category	Sumatra	35	15.62%
	Surabaya/Sidoarjo	148	66.07%
	Public University	44	19.42%
	Private University	180	80.58%
Participation in the MBKM Program	IISMA	5	2.2%
	Teaching Campus	8	3.57%
	Merdeka Entrepreneurship	29	12.95%
	Independent Internship	82	36.61%
	Building Villages	9	2.36%
	MSIB	26	6.82%
	Merdeka Student Exchange	12	3.14%
Research	34	8.92%	
Humanitarian Project	19	4.98%	

Source: Processed Data (2025)

According to the data collected, the number participants in this research was 224 students who participated in the MBKM program. In terms of gender, most participants were

female, namely 149 people (66.67%), while male participants numbered 75 people (33.33%). These findings indicate that female student participation in this study was more dominant than male student participation.

In terms of age, most respondents were in the 21-year-old age group, namely 92 people (39.90%), followed by 76 people (32.55%) in the 22-year-old age group. There were 20 respondents aged 20 (7.61%), 8 respondents aged 19 (2.10%), and 28 respondents aged above 22 (11.02%). This shows that the respondents were dominated by students in the final phase of their undergraduate studies.

Based on the location of study, most respondents came from the Surabaya and Sidoarjo areas, namely 148 people (66.07%). Meanwhile, respondents from outside Surabaya and Sidoarjo but still within Java numbered 14 (6.25%). Respondents from outside Java were spread across several regions, namely Sumatra with 35 respondents (15.62%), Sulawesi with 17 respondents (7.50%), and Kalimantan with 10 respondents (4.46%). This data shows that the respondents came from diverse regional backgrounds, although they were dominated by the Surabaya and Sidoarjo areas.

In terms of higher education institution categories, most respondents came from private universities, namely 180 people (80.58%), while respondents from state universities numbered 44 people (19.42%). This condition indicates that the participation of *MBKM* students in this study came mostly from private universities.

Based on the type of *MBKM* program participated in, the Independent Internship program was the most popular among respondents, with 82 people (36.61%). This was followed by Independent Entrepreneurship with 29 people (12.95%), Research with 34 people (8.92%), MSIB with 26 people (6.82%), and Humanitarian Projects with 19 people (4.98%). Other programs included Teaching Campus with 8 people (3.57%), Independent Student Exchange with 12 people (3.14%), Village Development with 9 people (2.36%), and IISMA with 5 people (2.20%). These findings indicate a considerable variation in *MBKM* experience among the research respondents.

Table 2. Statistic Descriptions Result

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation
Social Support	21	77	57.04	12.26
Grit	19	55	40.49	7.64
Academic Stress	20	94	49.25	13.09

Source: Processed Data (2025)

The descriptive analysis shows that students reported relatively high levels of social support (M = 57.04, SD = 12.26) and grit (M = 40.49, SD = 7.64), while academic stress was at a moderate level (M = 49.25, SD = 13.09). The standard deviations indicate sufficient

variability across respondents, suggesting heterogeneity in psychosocial resources and stress experiences among *MBKM* students.

Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression Results

Independent Variable	B	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constanta)	97.158	—	—	—
Social Support (X1)	-0.225	-0.211	-3.759	0.000
Grit (X2)	-0.866	-0.506	-9.011	0.000

Source: Processed Data (2025)

Table 4. R-square

R	R Square	F	Sig.
0.552	0.305	48.472	0.000

Source: Processed Data (2025)

Consistent with these descriptive patterns, the multiple linear regression results indicate that social support and grit significantly predict academic stress, both showing negative effects. This indicates that students who report higher levels of social support and greater perseverance tend to experience lower academic stress. Moreover, grit demonstrates a stronger predictive contribution than social support, reinforcing its role as a key personal resource in mitigating academic stress within the *MBKM* context.

The regression results show that social support and perseverance simultaneously had a statistically significant effect on the academic stress of *MBKM* students. This finding is supported by an F value of 48.472 with a significance of 0.000 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that the model is valid and can be used to predict academic stress.

There is a strong relationship between social support and perseverance and academic stress, as reflected in the correlation coefficient value of $R = 0.552$. The R Square value of 0.305 indicates that social support and perseverance can explain 30.5% of the variation in academic stress, while the remaining 69.5% is influenced by other factors outside the variables examined in this study.

Partially, the social support variable shows a significant negative effect on academic stress with a regression coefficient value of $B = -0.225$, a t value of -3.759, and a significance of 0.000 ($p < 0.01$). This means that the higher the level of social support received by students, the lower the level of academic stress experienced.

The grit variable also shows a very significant negative effect on academic stress with a regression coefficient value of $B = -0.866$, a t-value of -9.011, and a significance of 0.000 ($p < 0.01$). This finding indicates that students with higher levels of grit tend to be better able to manage academic demands, resulting in lower academic stress. Based on the standardized

beta coefficient value, grit has a more dominant effect than social support in reducing academic stress among *MBKM* students.

Discussion

Academic stress refers to various demands that require individuals to continuously adjust to their academic environment, including academic workload, time pressure, competition, and expectations from lecturers and parents (Gadzella & Masten, 2005). It confirms that academic stress remains a relevant and persistent problem among college students, especially for those enrolled in the *MBKM* program. Previous studies have consistently shown that the majority of students experience academic stress at a moderate level, with an increasing trend over time (Purwati & Handiyani, 2012; Ambarwati et al., 2017; Widyachandara et al., 2023). This escalation may be attributed to structural changes in higher education, including the compressed curriculum and additional demands introduced by the *MBKM* policy (BBC, 2024).

The findings of this study indicate that social support and grit simultaneously have a significant relationship with academic stress among *MBKM* students, explaining 30.9% of the variance in academic stress. This result suggests that both external resources (social support) and internal personal resources (grit) play an important role in helping students cope with academic demands. The remaining variance may be influenced by other factors such as coping strategies, self-regulation, academic self-efficacy, or financial stress, which were not examined in this study.

Social support has been shown to correlate negatively with academic stress, consistent with previous research findings. Similarly, Vian et al. (2023) also reported that among *MBKM* students, the higher the level of social support received, the lower the level of academic stress experienced. Social support, defined as perceived care, appreciation, and assistance from significant others, family, and friends (Zimet et al., 1988), functions as a protective factor that buffers the negative effects of academic stressors. Similar results were also reported by Hidayat and Darmawanti (2022) and Zhang et al. (2022), indicating that social support consistently reduces academic stress across different cultural and academic contexts. These results reinforce the stress-buffering theory, which suggests that social support can mitigate the negative effects of stress by strengthening emotional security and improving individuals' perceptions of their coping abilities.

In addition to social support, grit demonstrated a strong and significant negative relationship with academic stress. This result supports previous studies showing that grit serves as an important psychological resource in managing academic stress (Amawidyati, 2022; Oktafia, 2022). Duckworth et al. (2007) define grit as perseverance and sustained interest toward long-term goals. Students with high grit are more likely to persist through

academic challenges, maintain motivation, and perceive stressors as manageable rather than overwhelming. The large standardized beta coefficient for grit in this study indicates that grit is a stronger predictor of academic stress compared to social support, suggesting that internal resilience may play a more dominant role in stress regulation among *MBKM* students.

The dominance of grit as a predictor may be explained by the demanding nature of the *MBKM* program, which requires students to adapt quickly, work independently, and sustain effort in unfamiliar environments such as internships or community projects. A number of studies show that grit is negatively related to academic stress in college students, as reported by Amawidyati et al. (2022) and a study at Ataturk University. In line with this, in challenging situations, perseverance in effort and consistency of interest are important aspects for maintaining psychological stability.

Overall, the results of these studies show that both social support and grit are significant protective factors against academic stress among *MBKM* students, with grit making a greater contribution. These findings highlight the importance of developing personal resilience and grit, as well as strengthening social support systems in higher education institutions, to reduce academic stress and improve student well-being.

4. CONCLUSION

This research examines how perceived social support, grit, and academic stress are connected for undergrads taking part in the *MBKM* program. Using a quantitative survey design and multiple linear regression analysis, the findings indicate that perceived social support and grit are significant negative predictors of academic stress. Together, both variables explained 30.5% of the variance in academic stress, with grit emerging as the stronger predictor. These results suggest that students who have higher levels of perseverance and long-term commitment, as well as those who feel stronger social support from significant others, friends and family are likely to experience lower levels of academic stress in the context of *MBKM*.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends the literature on academic stress by integrating internal psychological resources (grit) and external social resources (social support) within the context of a flexible and experiential learning policy. The findings support stress-buffering and positive psychology perspectives, highlighting grit as a critical personal resource that may play a more dominant role than social support in mitigating academic stress. Practically, the results imply that universities and policymakers should not only focus on structural and administrative aspects of *MBKM* but also foster students' psychological resilience and supportive learning environments. Programs aimed at strengthening growth mindset, perseverance, and peer support may be beneficial in reducing academic stress among *MBKM* students.

There are a number of limitations to this study. The use of self-report instruments in data collection has the potential to introduce bias, such as the tendency to respond in accordance with social norms or response bias. In addition, the cross-sectional design used in this study means that it cannot strongly confirm a causal relationship between variables. Third, although the sample included students from various universities and *MBKM* programs, the use of non-probability sampling limits the generalization of findings to all *MBKM* participants.

Future research is encouraged to address these limitations by employing longitudinal or experimental designs to examine causal mechanisms between grit, social support, and academic stress. Intervention-based studies, such as the development and testing of growth mindset, mindfulness, or grit-enhancement modules, are also recommended to evaluate their effectiveness in reducing academic stress. Additionally, future studies may explore other potential predictors, such as coping strategies, academic self-efficacy, or institutional support, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of academic stress among university students.

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