

Research Article

The Role of Vocational High Schools in Increasing Graduate Absorption in the Cities of Depok and Bogor

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Abstract

This research aims to identify the steps that have been taken by SMK Forward Nusantara in order to improve and build the school's image as shown by the absorption of graduates. This research was designed with a qualitative approach and used interview, observation and document analysis research instruments. The results of this research state that SMK Forward Nusantara has a mission to create a mid-level workforce that is skilled and professional and ready to enter the world of work/industry and is expected to be able to channel its alumni or act as job introducers. This hope can be realized by entering into a cooperation agreement between the Employment Service, the Education Service and the Business/Industrial World which is linear with the existing departments. As a follow-up to the cooperation agreement, SMK Forward Nusantara is responsible for absorbing its graduates to obtain jobs that suit their interests, abilities and career by establishing a Special Job Fair.

Keywords: Role of Schools, Absorption of Graduates, Special Job Market.

INTRODUCTION

Education is an important medium for improving and developing the quality of human resources for the purpose of development. The advancement of science and technology has resulted in changes and developments in society towards a more



complex direction, requiring society to keep up with this progress. One of the efforts to improve the quality of human resources is carried out through the education sector, which refers to individual needs and development. Regarding the function and purpose of national education, it is necessary for an educational institution to play a role in realizing the national education goals. Schools are educational institutions that serve as places where the educational process takes place.

Education at all levels is crucial, whether from elementary school, junior high school, or senior high school/vocational school. General senior high schools have a significant role in determining whether students will venture into entrepreneurship, enter the workforce, or continue to higher education. Vocational schools (SMK) are held as a continuation of junior high school (SMP/MTs/Paket B) according to talents, interests, and abilities to meet the needs/opportunities of the workforce that is currently developing in the region. Vocational schools are one of the choices for junior high school graduates to continue their studies. However, the number of students opting for vocational schools has increased, as the number of applicants has grown each year. For example, in West Java in 2022, the number of applicants accepted into public vocational schools (SMKN) was 112,325 students, a rise from 103,924 students in 2021. "This means that in 2022, the number of students accepted into SMKN in West Java increased by 8,401 students," said Edy Purwanton, Head of the SMK Development Division of the West Java Education Office. Interestingly, the increase in applicants to vocational schools in West Java occurred in nearly all admission pathways. For instance, the number of applicants accepted through the special needs (ABK) route was 87, compared to only 53 students in 2021. "This year, there are 34 additional students who applied through the ABK route, while applicants through the low-income family (KETM) route increased by 750 students, from 21,692 students in 2021 to 22,442 in 2022. Similarly, the number of applicants through the specific condition route increased by 158 students. In 2021, there were only 457 students accepted, but this year, 615 students were accepted. The highest number of applicants was through the industrial class preparation route. Last year, 18,956 students were accepted through the industrial route. However, this year, 30,212 applicants were accepted into vocational schools. This means there was an increase of 11,256 students in the 2022 admissions (Ditjen Vokasi Kemendikbud Ristek, 2022). Although there is a growing interest in vocational schools, the highest unemployment rate is among vocational school graduates due to a lack of socialization about the potential of vocational schools, leading the public to perceive vocational school graduates as less qualified.

The Minister of National Development Planning (PPN) and Head of the National Development Planning Agency (Bappenas), Bambang Brojonegoro, noted an anomaly in the absorption of the workforce in Indonesia. Referring to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in August 2018, which showed an open unemployment rate (TPT) of 6.99 million people, or 5.34% of the total workforce of 131.01 million people, the data revealed that 11.24% of vocational school graduates were unemployed. Bambang concluded that this situation was illogical since vocational school graduates are more likely to find work due to their competencies and skills compared to general high school graduates. Bambang concluded that vocational school management in Indonesia is still lacking, with the main issue being that the competencies of graduates do not meet the needs of employers.

This phenomenon is not surprising if the public prefers formal education routes that are more general. This is due to the lack of socialization regarding the potential of vocational schools, where graduates are more prepared for the business/industrial world compared to high school graduates. Therefore, vocational schools need to make greater efforts to attract the public's interest and gain trust that vocational education offers a promising future. This requires the presence of a public relations function within the school as a medium for socialization. The West Java Education Office launched the "Educational Transformation" at SMKN 2 Bekasi in Bekasi City on Wednesday (January 24, 2024). This educational transformation includes the integration of information technology in educational services, collaboration with the business/industrial world, and the introduction of the West Java Education Office's identity, including its logo, tagline, uniforms, and new jingle. The launch was conducted symbolically by the Head of the West Java Education Office, Wahyu Mijaya, along with all Heads of Divisions at the West Java Education Office. The Head of the Education Office explained that this transformation is an effort to keep up with changes in the era while being well-prepared. "We have good intentions for the future. This is our effort to plan and arrange steps for the future," he said. The new logo of the West Java Education Office has a deep philosophical meaning, including principles such as continuous growth in education, the usefulness of knowledge that keeps evolving, adaptability to technological changes, commitment to improving the quality of learning and educational management, perseverance in achieving educational goals, and the Education Office as a "shelter" for all education stakeholders in West Java who continuously collaborate dynamically, harmoniously, and in harmony to realize the ultimate educational goals. Meanwhile, the Education Office's mascot, named DIBA, represents the "best educated" figure consisting of different interconnected elements such as a pencil, stylus, bee, and robot. "DIBA symbolizes the relationship between humans, nature, and technology in the context of a complex and dynamic life," he said. The tagline "Best Educated" embodies the spirit of "educated now and the best in the future" for all educators who are knowledgeable, skilled, and expected to compete globally while preserving local wisdom. He further explained that there are four paradigms that form the foundation of today's educational transformation, namely dynamic governance, network governance, whole governance, and digital governance. "From these four paradigms, we take several steps that form the educational transformation in West Java," he said. A concrete example is that all information applications are now served through a one-stop service. In addition, cooperation programs with the business/industrial world are being expanded, targeting 103 vocational schools in West Java. In the effort to improve the quality of human resources, the West Java Education Office targets that each teacher/educational staff possesses competencies certified through skill certification. "So, this is not just about a new logo or tagline, but about the spirit of facing the anticipated process of change," he added. Meanwhile, the Acting Head of the West Java Education Office, Deden Saepul Hidayat, stated that this transformation is a collaboration between all fields and UPTD in the West Java Education Office. "The innovations presented include collaboration in education, integration of education, access to education, and competent human resources." This policy is intended to make it easier for vocational school graduates to find job openings, which will automatically reduce the number of unemployed individuals. This quote is one of the efforts to attract the public's attention to consider vocational schools more, as vocational school graduates are also qualified and more prepared for

the workforce/industry.

Based on data from the West Java Provincial Education Office, there are 125 vocational schools in Depok City, consisting of 4 public vocational schools and 121 private vocational schools (KemedikbudRistek, 2024). From this data, the author took only one sample school to research the role of the school in improving the absorption of vocational school graduates into the business/industrial world.

In human history, almost no group of people has not used education as a tool for civilization and improvement, even in societies that are still backward or primitive (Sanaky, 2003). Education is one of the key pillars in improving and building the country because it can change individual behavior to become more focused and better through the learning process. Education plays a significant role in creating quality human resources to process natural resources in order to maintain survival and improve the prosperity and welfare of the people.

Education is the most effective and efficient means of transferring knowledge, culture, and other aspects from one generation to the next. Education is one of the institutions directly involved with the future of humanity (Abudinata, 2003). According to Gibson & Mitchell (2011), vocational education is education that prepares individuals for careers in specific technical fields. In other words, vocational education proves that secondary-level education can directly link to the world of work/industry.

According to Basuki (2005), "Vocational education is part of the education system that prepares individuals to work in a specific occupational group." Vocational schools are responsible for producing and preparing skilled labor to enter the job market, both in terms of the specialized field and the educational process they have undergone. The challenge faced in the middle-level labor market is the tight competition between graduates of secondary education, so the competencies of vocational school graduates are expected to meet these needs. Considering the growing unemployment rate, the need to align the interests of education with the business/industrial world is becoming increasingly urgent.

According to Ahmad (2017), some factors causing unemployment include a lack of job opportunities, job seekers lacking skills, or not having access to information about job openings. One of the reasons is that schools have not optimally prepared students to be work-ready. It is evident that there are still vocational schools that have not been able to bring in the business/industrial world directly to the school to improve students' (prospective graduates) understanding and knowledge about the scope of the workforce (Hana, 2015).

SMK Forward Nusantara is a vocational school specializing in the fields of tourism, information technology, and fine arts. The school was established in 2016 with a license issued by the one-stop licensing office of West Java Province on December 30, 2016. SMK Forward Nusantara offers five areas of expertise: Skin Beauty, Computer Networking, Visual Communication Design, Culinary, and Industrial Machine Technology.

SMK Forward Nusantara aims to prepare students for the workforce/industry. To achieve this goal, one of the efforts made by the school is to equip all students as prospective graduates to enter the business/industrial world by providing services to

graduates through the school's role in improving the absorption of graduates. Public Relations (PR) plays an important role in the educational process. In this case, public relations helps foster good relationships with the public so that with a harmonious relationship, public support can be obtained in preparing vocational school graduates who possess professional skills that meet the needs of the workforce and are ready to compete in the workforce, aligning with one of the objectives of vocational schools. Therefore, the role of public relations is needed to bridge the school and the community.

Vocational school management is designed to achieve the main goal of vocational schools effectively and efficiently, which is to prepare graduates who are ready to enter the workforce and work. Planning and implementing programs as closely as possible to workplace conditions is an important task of vocational schools. Public relations activities are crucial in communicating, disseminating, and acting as a mediator with external parties to promote the advantages of SMK Forward Nusantara. These activities include promoting SMK Forward Nusantara to the public through various media, and thus, the presence of public relations at SMK Forward Nusantara is necessary to clarify the public's understanding of the school's advantages. SMK Forward Nusantara, located in Perum Kopassus Kedayutاما Tapos Depok, as a private vocational school, acknowledges the importance of public relations in maintaining its existence. The implementation of public relations activities aims to introduce and increase public awareness of SMK Forward Nusantara. However, it is felt that public relations activities have not been optimal in improving the image of SMK Forward Nusantara.

METHOD

This research design is descriptive with a qualitative approach, aiming to reveal the issues under investigation by describing the condition of the subject/object of the study at the present time based on visible facts or as they are (Moleong, 2012). This study describes the data that has been collected, compiling information obtained from the research regarding the role of public relations in enhancing the image of the school at SMK Forward Nusantara. The selection of informants in this study uses purposive sampling, meaning that the researcher selects informants based on the assumption that they can provide the information needed in accordance with the research problems through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data analysis in this study begins with reducing the collected data from interviews, observations, and document analysis, which is then analyzed and interpreted. The findings are presented in a collection of information that is easy to understand in terms of its meaning. The researcher then connects and compares existing theories with practical results in the field, allowing conclusions to be drawn as answers to the research problems (Darmadi, 2013; Djaelani, 2013).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research was conducted at SMK Forward Nusantara. SMK Forward Nusantara was established in 2016 and initially offered two programs: Skin Beauty and Computer Network Engineering. In line with the needs of the business and industrial world, along with the demand for graduates in the arts field, which at that time was very limited, SMK Forward Nusantara added a Visual Communication Design program in 2018. This program was the first of its kind in Depok City. The growing demand for

culinary industries, marked by the proliferation of culinary small and medium enterprises (SMEs), led SMK Forward Nusantara to add a Culinary Arts program in 2024, followed by an Industrial Machine Technology program in 2023. The Industrial Machine Technology program was created to meet the demand for operators and experts in the industrial machinery field.

The school's vision is to "Become an excellent and independent school that prioritizes attitude and professionalism." Meanwhile, the school's mission is: 1) To build student discipline, 2) To teach students effective communication, 3) To instill systematic and chronological thinking, and equip students with programming skills, particularly in algorithmic logic, 4) To teach students entrepreneurship from an early age.

The challenges include low graduate achievements (both in quality and quantity), limited research and scholarly work (local, national, and international), the number and level of teacher qualifications, academic facilities, including laboratories and libraries. The availability of modern learning resources and instructional technology that supports the teaching and learning process, as well as performance and prestige, are also concerns.

In terms of educational facilities, school buildings, including classrooms, practice rooms, offices, and appropriate furniture, will have their own appeal for the school's popularity.

In the social domain, SMK Forward Nusantara's participation with the surrounding community, such as through community service, national or religious holiday celebrations, sanitation projects, and other activities, will enhance the perception of the school's care for the surrounding environment as a member of society, continuously aware of environmental issues and dedicated to community development.

Sports and artistic activities can serve as a platform for school-community relations, such as in sports and arts competitions between schools, which can bring recognition to the school and promote the name of SMK Forward Nusantara. The school can provide its facilities for the benefit of the local community as long as it does not interfere with the smooth running of teaching and learning activities. Similarly, community facilities can be used for the benefit of SMK Forward Nusantara. The involvement of community leaders in the school's curricular and extracurricular activities, both directly and indirectly, is also important. Many other operational activities involving school-community relations can be creatively planned according to the situation, condition, and resources of the involved parties.

The school's community engagement activities at SMK Forward Nusantara will succeed if supported by several factors, such as the presence of systematic programs and planning, a well-documented database, skilled personnel, necessary facilities and resources, and an organizational structure that facilitates improving school-community relations.

The vision of SMK Forward Nusantara's Public Relations (PR) is to ensure that SMK graduates are absorbed into the business and industrial world according to their competencies, in a professional, productive, independent manner, with noble character, and capable of competing in the global and international market. The mission of SMK Forward Nusantara's PR is to channel and place SMK graduates into the business/industrial world and enhance collaboration with employers. SMK Forward Nusantara's PR has the following goals: 1) To connect SMK graduates with businesses/industries in need of skilled workers, facilitating the exchange of

information; 2) To provide opportunities for SMK graduates to offer their competencies to the business/industrial world; 3) To improve cooperation between SMK and the business/industrial world through interactions between school management and industry representatives; 4) To broaden SMK graduates' understanding of job opportunities in the business/industrial world, enabling them to choose work opportunities based on their competencies; 5) To ensure recruitment processes are aligned with job formations and the competencies of graduates; and 6) To successfully absorb graduates into the workforce.

SMK Forward Nusantara's Job Placement Office (BKK) reports and is accountable for its activities periodically. All activities are reported in a format determined by the Depok City's Department of Labor and Transmigration. These reports include data from the BKK along with any necessary analyses, following the technical guidelines of the Job Placement Office. To track the activities of graduates after completing their studies at SMK Forward Nusantara, the BKK management conducts surveys using Google Forms. The graduate absorption data for SMK Forward Nusantara in the business and industrial world, based on alumni tracking data for the last three years (2022, 2023, and 2024), is as follows:

Table 1. Recap of Alumni Absorption in the Business and Industrial World

NO	TAHUN AJARAN	JUMLAH	BEKERJA	MELANJUTKAN	WIRUSAHA	MENUNGGU
1	2021 - 2022	61	35	20	4	2
			57%	33%	7%	3%
2	2022 - 2023	65	37	18	7	3
			57%	28%	11%	5%
3	2023 - 2024	75	42	20	10	3
			56%	27%	13%	4%

Cooperation between the Business World and the Industrial World from the documentation data obtained by the researcher, BKK SMK Forward Nusantara collaborates with several business worlds and industrial worlds in Indonesia, this is stated in the cooperation agreement between the two parties and is displayed in the following table.

Table 2. Public Relations Cooperation, BKK SMK Forward Nusantara with the Business World and the Industrial World

No	Company name	No PK	Information
1	PT Pasifik Satelit Nusantara		Internships and Recruitment
2	PT Mahaga Indonesia		Internships and Recruitment
3	PT Gramedia		Internships and Recruitment
4	Bank Syariah Indonesia		Apprenticeship
5	Arya Duta Hotel		Internships and Recruitment
6	Double Three Hotel		Internships and Recruitment
7	CV Hamamasa		Apprenticeship
8	The Charm of Arkadewi Clinic		Internships and Recruitment
9	Bamboo Spa		Internships and Recruitment
10	PT Panasonic		Internships and Recruitment

Based on the documentation data obtained by the researcher from the BKK SMK Forward Nusantara Work Program Book, which has a mission to create skilled

and professional middle-level workers who are ready to enter the business/industrial world and are expected to be able to channel their graduates or act as job placements. This idea is reinforced by the existence of a cooperation agreement between the Manpower Office and the Education Office. As a follow-up to the cooperation agreement, SMK Forward Nusantara feels responsible and participates in thinking about its graduates to obtain jobs that match their interests, abilities, and competencies by establishing a Special Job Exchange (BKK) (Fatmawati, 2013; Iskarim, 2017).

In general, the duties of the Special Job Exchange (BKK) according to Dewi (2014) are 1) providing employment information services to students and graduates who will enter the workforce; 2) fostering and developing cooperative relationships with the government and private sector in providing employment information including job training information and its distribution; 3) carrying out activities related to the selection of prospective workers sourced from SMK forward Nusantara graduates with the assistance of government and private agencies; 4) fostering good relationships with alumni who have worked and succeeded in the business sector to help provide placement opportunities for subsequent graduates who need work. The work program of the Special Job Exchange (BKK) of SMK forward Nusantara is 1) seeking information about job vacancies in the business world and the industrial world both locally, nationally and internationally; 2) preparing and providing facilities/infrastructure for job tests at schools; 3) compiling work programs and consultations; 4) preparing Human Resources (HR) in this case preparing students who are in the process of education; 5) holding and preparing career development for both students and alumni; 6) recording student and alumni data; 7) visits to the business/industrial world; 8) services, placement, and distribution; 9) making contact/communication with alumni and parents/guardians of students; 10) collaborating with the business/industrial world regarding cooperation contracts and in the distribution of workers; 11) conducting graduate tracking; and 12) conducting evaluation and analysis of activity results (Hermansyah, 2009; Hardiani, 2017; Lukman, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The role of schools in increasing the absorption of graduates includes establishing a Special Job Exchange tasked with finding information about job vacancies in the business and industrial world, both locally, nationally and internationally, preparing and providing facilities for job tests at schools, recording student and graduate data, making contact/communication with graduates and parents/guardians of students, collaborating with the business/industrial world regarding both cooperation contracts and in the distribution of labor; and conducting graduate searches.

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