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Link and match implementation enhancing graduate capability and employability in vocational education

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examined the effects of Link and Match implementation on graduate capability and graduate employability in vocational education. **Methods:** A quantitative explanatory survey was conducted involving 116 respondents selected through total sampling from SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Cileungsi, including school management, Grade XII students, graduates, and industry representatives. Data were collected using a validated five-point Likert questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson and Spearman correlation, and multiple linear regression. **Results:** Graduate capability showed the strongest relationship with employability ($r = 0.636$), while Link and Match implementation significantly influenced graduate capability and employability. Together, both predictors explained 49.7% of the variance in graduate employability ($R^2 = 0.497$, $p < 0.001$). **Conclusions:** Strengthening sustainable school–industry collaboration and competency-based learning is essential for improving graduate capability and enhancing employability in vocational education.



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Introduction

The increasing complexity of the global labor market has intensified the demand for vocational education institutions to produce graduates who possess not only technical expertise but also transferable competencies, including adaptability, problem-solving ability, communication skills, and lifelong learning competencies (Jooma et al., 2025; Kholifah et al., 2025). In Indonesia, vocational education continues to face challenges in aligning graduates' competencies with industrial expectations, making employability an important educational concern. To address this issue, the Link and Match policy has been promoted as a strategic framework for strengthening collaboration between vocational schools and industry through curriculum synchronization, industrial internships, competency certification, teaching factory implementation, and sustainable partnerships with employers (Agezew & Erdei, 2026; Echeverria-Guzman et al., 2025). Effective implementation of this policy is expected to improve both graduate competencies and their readiness to enter an increasingly competitive labor market.

Previous studies have consistently shown that school–industry collaboration enhances graduate competence and employment outcomes by providing authentic workplace experiences and competency-based learning opportunities (Fraser et al., 2019; Wafi et al., 2022). Competency-based vocational education has also been recognized as an effective approach for preparing graduates to meet technological developments and evolving

workplace demands (Bonnard, 2023; Çağlar et al., 2026). Likewise, industry partnerships contribute to improving curriculum relevance and strengthening graduates' transition into employment (Finch & McIntyre, 2021; Ilieva-Trichkova, 2014). Nevertheless, existing studies have primarily emphasized the positive effects of school–industry collaboration while providing limited explanation of the mechanisms through which these partnerships improve graduate employability.

Despite these advances, several research gaps remain. Most previous studies have focused on the direct relationship between school–industry collaboration and graduate employability without adequately explaining the role of graduate capability as an underlying mechanism (Bello et al., 2013; Ioannides & Papazis, 2016). In addition, graduate capability has generally been treated as an educational outcome rather than as a construct linking Link and Match implementation with employability. Empirical studies integrating Link and Match, graduate capability, and graduate employability within a single analytical framework remain limited, particularly in Indonesian vocational secondary education (Habibi & Hapsari, 2021; Kasanah et al., 2025; Rahayu et al., 2020). Consequently, the pathways through which industry collaboration enhances employability by strengthening graduates' competencies are still insufficiently understood.

To address these gaps, this study proposes graduate capability as the central mechanism connecting Link and Match implementation with graduate employability. Unlike previous studies that mainly evaluated partnership effectiveness or employment outcomes separately, this research simultaneously examines the relationships among industry collaboration, competency development, and employability using evidence collected from multiple stakeholder groups, including school management, vocational teachers, Grade XII students, graduates, and industrial partners (Pohan et al., 2023; Suprap et al., 2024; Wahjusaputri et al., 2024). The inclusion of these stakeholder groups provides a more comprehensive understanding of vocational education practices and strengthens the empirical explanation of how school–industry collaboration contributes to employability (Kim et al., 2022; Nzozzo, 2017).

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the influence of Link and Match implementation on graduate capability and graduate employability, as well as the contribution of graduate capability to employability among vocational education graduates at SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Cileungsi, Indonesia. The findings are expected to enrich the literature by clarifying the relationships among school–industry collaboration, competency development, and graduate employability while extending the application of human capital and employability perspectives in vocational education (Kholifah et al., 2025; Nzozzo, 2017; Subkhan, 2023; Wafi et al., 2022). Furthermore, the study provides practical implications for policymakers, vocational schools, and industrial partners by demonstrating that the effectiveness of Link and Match depends not only on establishing institutional partnerships but also on systematically developing graduates' competencies to meet contemporary labor market demands.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative explanatory survey design to examine the relationships among Link and Match implementation, graduate capability, and graduate employability in vocational education. The study was guided by a conceptual framework in which Link and Match implementation functions as the independent variable, graduate capability as an explanatory variable, and graduate employability as the dependent variable. An explanatory correlational approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to investigate the magnitude and direction of the relationships among naturally occurring educational variables without manipulating the learning environment. The proposed relationships were examined through multiple linear regression analysis to evaluate the contribution of each predictor to graduate employability under actual vocational education conditions.

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Cileungsi, Indonesia, a vocational secondary school implementing industry-oriented education through the Link and Match program within the Merdeka Belajar Vokasi framework. The study involved stakeholders directly participating in the implementation and evaluation of school–industry collaboration, including school management, vocational teachers, Grade XII students, graduates, and industrial partners.

Because the target population was relatively small and fully accessible, total sampling was employed to minimize sampling bias and ensure comprehensive representation of the vocational education ecosystem. Consequently, all 116 eligible participants were included, comprising 15 school management personnel, 51 Grade XII students, 48 graduates from the 2025 cohort, and two representatives from partner industries. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups was intended to capture complementary perspectives regarding

program implementation, competency development, and graduate employability rather than relying solely on student perceptions.

Research Variables and Instruments

The study examined three principal constructs: Link and Match implementation, graduate capability, and graduate employability. Link and Match implementation was measured through seven dimensions, namely school–industry partnership planning, curriculum alignment, industrial internships (*Praktik Kerja Lapangan*), industry participation in learning activities, teaching factory and industrial classes, competency certification, and sustainability of school–industry collaboration. Graduate capability was assessed using indicators of technical competence, work skills, professional ethics, responsibility, adaptability, and work readiness, while graduate employability was measured through job acquisition, employment relevance, employment status, learning relevance, employment sustainability, and career development.

The research instrument was developed by adapting indicators from previous studies on vocational education, Link and Match implementation, graduate capability, and employability, and subsequently adjusted to the Indonesian vocational education context. Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Prior to the main survey, the instrument underwent validity and reliability testing. Construct validity was assessed using the Pearson Product–Moment correlation, while internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. All questionnaire items met the validity criterion ($r_{\text{calculated}} > r_{\text{table}}$), and all constructs produced Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70, indicating satisfactory validity and reliability for subsequent statistical analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted from stakeholders through three complementary techniques. The primary data source was a structured questionnaire distributed directly to all respondents according to their respective roles. Documentary evidence, including partnership agreements, internship reports, competency certification records, teaching factory documentation, tracer study reports, and graduate employment records, was collected to verify institutional implementation of the Link and Match program. In addition, limited non-participant observations were undertaken to document the implementation of industrial internships, industry-based learning activities, and teaching factory practices.

The documentary review and observational findings were not analyzed as independent datasets but were used to corroborate the questionnaire results and strengthen the credibility of the quantitative findings through methodological triangulation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including minimum values, maximum values, means, and standard deviations, were first calculated to summarize respondents' perceptions of each construct. Prior to hypothesis testing, regression assumptions were evaluated through normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity tests. Although the normality test indicated non-normal data distribution, the sample size ($n = 116$) satisfied the Central Limit Theorem, supporting the use of parametric analysis. To verify the consistency of the findings, Spearman's rank correlation was additionally employed as a robustness check alongside Pearson correlation.

Multiple linear regression analysis was subsequently performed to examine the simultaneous effects of Link and Match implementation and graduate capability on graduate employability. The regression model was evaluated using the F-test, coefficient of determination (R^2), standardized regression coefficients (β), and t-tests for individual predictors. Statistical significance was determined at the 5% significance level ($p < 0.05$), while multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance values to ensure that the predictor variables met the assumptions required for regression analysis.

Results and Discussions

This study examined the relationships among the implementation of the Link and Match program between schools and industry, graduate capability, and graduate employability within the framework of vocational education at SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Cileungsi. A total of 116 respondents participated in the study, representing school management, Grade XII students, graduates, and industrial partners. The results are presented sequentially, beginning with descriptive statistics, followed by assumption testing, correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis, and hypothesis testing to provide comprehensive empirical evidence regarding the proposed research model.

Table 1. Respondent Profile and Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Category
Link and Match Implementation	116	42	105	83.40	9.667	High
Graduate Capability	116	48	120	99.22	14.226	High
Graduate Employability	116	33	90	71.51	13.057	High

The descriptive statistics indicate that all research variables were perceived positively by the respondents. Graduate capability recorded the highest mean score ($M = 99.22$, $SD = 14.226$), suggesting that graduates generally possessed strong technical competencies, work readiness, adaptability, and professional attitudes. The implementation of the Link and Match program also demonstrated a high level of effectiveness ($M = 83.40$, $SD = 9.667$), indicating that collaboration between the school and industry had been well established through industrial internships, curriculum synchronization, teaching factory activities, and competency certification. Graduate employability obtained a relatively high average score ($M = 71.51$, $SD = 13.057$), reflecting that most graduates had successfully entered the labor market despite remaining opportunities for further improvement. Overall, these findings suggest that vocational education at SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Cileungsi has successfully established a favorable educational ecosystem that supports workforce preparation.

Table 2. Assumption Testing Results

Statistical Test	Variable/Relationship	Test Statistic	Sig.	Decision
Kolmogorov–Smirnov	Link and Match		0.000	Not normally distributed
Kolmogorov–Smirnov	Graduate Capability		0.000	Not normally distributed
Kolmogorov–Smirnov	Graduate Employability		0.000	Not normally distributed
Shapiro–Wilk	All variables		0.000	Not normally distributed
Linearity	Link and Match to Employability	$F = 3.606$	0.000	Linear relationship

The assumption testing revealed that the distributions of all research variables significantly deviated from normality ($p < 0.001$). Although the normality assumption was not satisfied, the sample size of 116 respondents was considered sufficiently large to satisfy the Central Limit Theorem, allowing multiple linear regression to remain statistically appropriate. To strengthen the robustness of the findings, Spearman's rank correlation was additionally employed as a non-parametric alternative alongside Pearson's correlation analysis. Furthermore, the linearity test confirmed a significant linear association between Link and Match implementation and graduate employability ($F = 3.606$, $p < 0.001$), supporting the application of linear regression analysis in the subsequent stages.

Table 3. Correlation Analysis among Research Variables

Relationship	Pearson (r)	Spearman (ρ)	Sig.	Interpretation
Link and Match to Graduate Capability	0.370	0.333	0.000	Moderate positive
Link and Match to Graduate Employability	0.518	0.425	0.000	Moderate positive
Graduate Capability to Graduate Employability	0.636	0.607	0.000	Strong positive

Both Pearson and Spearman correlation analyses consistently demonstrated statistically significant positive relationships among all variables ($p < 0.001$). The strongest relationship was identified between graduate capability and graduate employability (Pearson $r = 0.636$; Spearman $\rho = 0.607$), indicating that graduates possessing stronger competencies, professional attitudes, and workplace readiness were substantially more likely to obtain employment. Meanwhile, the implementation of Link and Match exhibited moderate positive relationships with both graduate capability and employability, suggesting that industry-oriented educational practices contribute meaningfully to improving graduates' competencies as well as their transition into employment. The consistency between parametric and non-parametric analyses further confirms the robustness of these empirical findings.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis Results

Regression Model	Value
R	0.705
R Square	0.497
Adjusted R Square	0.488
Standard Error of the Estimate	9.341
F-value	55.855
Significance (p-value)	<0.001

The multiple regression analysis demonstrated that the proposed model provided a satisfactory level of explanatory power. The multiple correlation coefficient ($R = 0.705$) indicates a strong positive relationship between the independent variables and graduate employability. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.497$) shows that 49.7% of the variance in graduate employability is jointly explained by the implementation of the Link and Match program and graduate capability, while the remaining 50.3% is attributable to other factors not included in the model. Furthermore, the regression model was statistically significant ($F = 55.855$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that the two predictor variables simultaneously explain a significant proportion of the variation in graduate employability. These findings indicate that the proposed regression model possesses adequate explanatory capacity and is appropriate for examining the contribution of vocational education practices to employment outcomes.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	Beta	t	Sig.	Decision
Constant	-12.268		-1.468	0.145	Not significant
Link and Match Implementation	0.442	0.327	4.558	0.000	Significant
Graduate Capability	0.473	0.515	7.175	0.000	Significant

The regression coefficients reveal that both independent variables exert significant positive effects on graduate employability. Specifically, every one-unit improvement in Link and Match implementation increases graduate employability by 0.442 units, whereas each one-unit improvement in graduate capability contributes an increase of 0.473 units, assuming the remaining variable remains constant. Among the two predictors, graduate capability demonstrated the largest standardized regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.515$), indicating that it represents the strongest determinant of graduate employability. These findings imply that while institutional collaboration with industry establishes valuable learning opportunities, graduates' competencies ultimately play the dominant role in securing successful employment outcomes.

Table 6. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statistical Evidence	Decision
H1: Link and Match implementation positively influences graduate capability.	Pearson $r = 0.370$; Spearman $\rho = 0.333$; $p < 0.001$	Supported
H2: Link and Match implementation positively influences graduate employability.	$r = 0.518$; $\beta = 0.327$; $t = 4.558$; $p < 0.001$	Supported
H3: Graduate capability positively influences graduate employability.	$r = 0.636$; $\beta = 0.515$; $t = 7.175$; $p < 0.001$	Supported
H4: Link and Match implementation and graduate capability simultaneously influence graduate employability.	$F = 55.855$; $R^2 = 0.497$; $p < 0.001$	Supported

The hypothesis testing provides comprehensive empirical support for the proposed conceptual framework. All four hypotheses were accepted at the 5% significance level, confirming that the implementation of Link and Match contributes directly to strengthening graduate capability and improving graduate employability. More importantly, graduate capability emerged as the most influential predictor of employability, emphasizing that vocational education should prioritize competency development alongside sustained industry collaboration. These findings highlight that effective school-industry partnerships become most impactful when they successfully translate industrial experiences into measurable improvements in graduates' competencies, thereby increasing their competitiveness in the labor market.

The findings indicate that the implementation of the Link and Match program, graduate capability, and graduate employability were all perceived at high levels, with graduate capability recording the highest mean score. This finding suggests that industry-oriented learning has effectively strengthened students' competencies through curriculum alignment, industrial internships, teaching factory activities, and competency certification. The higher score for graduate capability than employability further indicates that vocational education can

directly enhance students' competencies, whereas employment outcomes remain influenced by external labor market conditions. These findings support Human Capital Theory, which emphasizes that educational investment improves workforce quality and employment opportunities (Becker, 1993), and are consistent with previous studies highlighting the role of school–industry collaboration in strengthening graduate competence and work readiness (Dehnie et al., 2026; Finch & McIntyre, 2021; Ilieva-Trichkova, 2014; Soltani & Zegwaard, 2024). Therefore, the effectiveness of the Link and Match program should be evaluated not only through the existence of partnerships but also through its ability to produce measurable improvements in graduates' competencies.

The correlation analysis demonstrated significant positive relationships among all variables, with graduate capability showing the strongest association with graduate employability, exceeding the relationship between Link and Match implementation and employability. This finding indicates that industry collaboration improves employability primarily by strengthening graduates' competencies rather than through institutional partnerships alone. Practical learning experiences become meaningful when they successfully develop technical competence, adaptability, communication skills, and professional attitudes required in the workplace. These findings are consistent with employability theory, which emphasizes that labor market success depends on individuals' capabilities and professional competencies (Finch et al., 2016; Mtawa et al., 2021; Ningsih et al., 2025; Papadopoulos & Armatas, 2013). Compared with previous studies, the present research further demonstrates that the effectiveness of school–industry collaboration depends largely on the quality of competency development generated through the collaboration.

The regression analysis revealed that Link and Match implementation and graduate capability jointly explained 49.7% of the variance in graduate employability, indicating that the proposed model has moderate-to-strong explanatory power. Nevertheless, the remaining variation suggests that employability is also influenced by factors beyond the educational process, including labor market conditions, career aspirations, socioeconomic background, and employment opportunities (Ningsih et al., 2025; Saryadi et al., 2024; Suryana & Holik, 2026; Widayanti et al., 2025). Furthermore, graduate capability emerged as the strongest predictor of employability, implying that competency development contributes more substantially to employment outcomes than institutional collaboration alone. Consequently, vocational schools should prioritize curriculum alignment, competency-based learning, industrial internships, teaching factory activities, competency certification, and authentic workplace assessment to ensure that industry collaboration produces graduates who possess competencies aligned with labor market needs. This finding is consistent with previous competency-based vocational education studies emphasizing the central role of graduate capability in supporting successful labor market transition (Hermawan et al., 2026; Mukhadis & Ulfatin, 2018; Yoto et al., 2022).

The findings confirm that the implementation of the Link and Match program enhances graduate employability by strengthening graduate capability, thereby supporting the proposed conceptual framework. Unlike previous studies that primarily evaluated partnership effectiveness, this study demonstrates that competency development represents the principal pathway through which school–industry collaboration contributes to employability (Ahmad & Mastiani, 2025; Gholibi et al., 2024; Irwanto, 2025). These findings provide practical implications for vocational schools and policymakers by emphasizing that sustainable industry partnerships should be accompanied by competency-based learning, authentic workplace experiences, and industry-relevant assessment systems. Future studies are recommended to incorporate additional determinants, including digital competence, entrepreneurial skills, career self-efficacy, labor market characteristics, and organizational support, to develop a more comprehensive model of graduate employability in vocational education.

Conclusions

This study concludes that the implementation of the Link and Match program positively contributes to strengthening graduate capability and improving graduate employability in vocational education. The findings demonstrate that effective school–industry collaboration, reflected through curriculum alignment, industrial internships, teaching factory implementation, and competency-based learning, enhances graduates' competencies and increases their readiness to enter the labor market. Furthermore, graduate capability emerged as the strongest predictor of graduate employability, indicating that competency development plays a more substantial role in employment outcomes than institutional collaboration alone. Collectively, Link and Match implementation and graduate capability explained 49.7% of the variation in graduate employability, confirming that both factors are important determinants of successful labor market transition. These findings highlight the need for vocational education institutions to strengthen sustainable partnerships with industry while simultaneously prioritizing the development of graduates' technical competence, professional attitudes, adaptability, and work readiness to meet the evolving demands of the contemporary workforce.

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