

## Exploring Students' Experiences in Project-Based Learning in the Economics Education Program at Jambi University

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### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore students' experiences in the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in the Economics Education Study Program at the University of Jambi. Using a descriptive qualitative method, this research investigates students' direct experiences through interviews, observations, and project documentation analysis. The findings show that students engaged in PjBL gain broader learning opportunities and experiences that foster creativity, encourage active participation, and enhance collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. The study also reveals several challenges in PjBL, including unequal contributions among group members, limited time, coordination difficulties within groups, and insufficient learning resources, all of which may affect the quality of the projects produced, as well as the need for more intensive guidance from lecturers. The implementation of PjBL is influenced by lecturer readiness, student abilities, institutional support, and careful planning.

### KEYWORDS

*Student Experiences, Project-Based Learning, Economics Education, PjBL, University of Jambi*

## 1. Introduction

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is increasingly implemented in higher education as an effort to bridge theoretical knowledge with real-world practice, which students will need in their future professional careers. The PjBL model emphasizes 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving abilities. As noted by Silaban & Toruan (2024), PjBL can foster creativity and innovation among university students through guided inquiry that balances exploratory freedom with lecturer guidance.

In the context of the Economics Education Study Program at the University of Jambi, this approach serves as an essential strategy to strengthen students' critical thinking, economic literacy, creativity, and readiness to face workplace challenges. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR)

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conducted by Pratiwi, Ahman, & Disman (2023) also shows that PjBL effectively improves academic achievement, critical thinking, and learning motivation among economics students under the Merdeka Curriculum. Although many studies highlight the strong benefits of PjBL, challenges in its implementation are still common, including lecturer and student readiness, time and project assessment demands, availability of resources, and the need for effective group collaboration.

Within the Economics Education Study Program at the University of Jambi, PjBL is used to strengthen pedagogical and professional competencies, as well as students' critical thinking skills. However, the success of PjBL is greatly influenced by how students perceive, understand, and internalize the stages of the project. Evaluating students' experiences is therefore essential to determine the extent to which PjBL develops the expected competencies. The effectiveness of PjBL can be observed not only through academic outcomes but also through students' learning experiences. This study is expected to provide practical recommendations for program administrators and lecturers to enhance the quality, relevance, and meaningfulness of PjBL implementation.

This research focuses on exploring the experiences of students in the Economics Education Study Program at the University of Jambi in implementing PjBL. The findings are expected to offer practical input for lecturers and program administrators, particularly regarding project design, mentoring strategies, and assessment models that align with student characteristics and the local context of the University of Jambi, while simultaneously supporting the implementation of the MBKM policy at the program level.

## **2. Research Method**

### ***2.1 Research Approach and Type***

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design. This approach was chosen because the study aims to deeply understand the experiences, perceptions, and meanings felt by students during their participation in Project-Based Learning (PjBL). According to Creswell & Poth (2020), phenomenology is used to explore individuals' subjective experiences of a phenomenon, enabling researchers to capture the essence of those experiences comprehensively.

### ***2.2 Research Location and Subjects***

The study was conducted in the Economics Education Study Program at the University of Jambi. The research subjects were students who had taken courses implementing the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model in the current or previous semesters.

### ***2.3 Sampling Technique***

The sample was selected using purposive sampling, in which participants are chosen based on

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specific criteria that enable them to provide relevant information. The participant criteria included:

1. Active students of the Economics Education Study Program.
2. Having completed at least one project-based course.
3. Willing to participate as informants.

According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposive sampling is effective in qualitative research to select informants capable of providing in-depth data aligned with the research objectives.

## **2.4 Data Collection Techniques**

### **a. In-depth Interviews**

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the meaning of students' experiences more comprehensively. The interview questions covered students' perceptions of PjBL, perceived benefits, challenges encountered, and suggestions for improvement. According to Kallio et al. (2016), semi-structured interviews allow flexibility in exploring participants' experiences without losing the focus of the research.

### **b. Observation**

Observations were carried out during learning activities or project presentations to directly observe student interactions, group engagement, and classroom dynamics. Observation provided contextual data that strengthened the interview findings. In line with Flick (2018), observation is essential in qualitative research to capture phenomena that may not emerge through interviews alone.

### **c. Documentation**

Documentation included activity photos, project guidelines, students' project outputs, project reports, and academic archives as supporting data. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis provides additional evidence that enhances the credibility of qualitative data.

## **2.5 Data Analysis Technique**

Data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis as developed by Braun & Clarke (2021). The steps included:

1. Familiarization: reading the entire dataset repeatedly,
2. Generating initial codes: coding relevant sections of the data,
3. Searching for themes: grouping codes into potential themes,
4. Reviewing themes: evaluating the alignment of themes with the data,
5. Defining and naming themes: refining definitions and labels of themes,
6. Producing the report: presenting the findings systematically.

Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns in students' experiences in depth

## **2.6 Data Trustworthiness**

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To ensure data trustworthiness, the study employed four strategies proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985), which continue to be widely referenced in contemporary qualitative research:

1. Credibility – achieved through source triangulation (interviews, observations, documentation), member checking, and expert consultation.
2. Transferability – providing detailed contextual descriptions to enable readers to understand the research setting.
3. Dependability – maintaining thorough documentation of the research process through an audit trail.
4. Confirmability – ensuring objectivity by keeping records of procedures and evidence throughout the study.

### **3. Findings**

#### **3.1 Students' Positive Perceptions of PjBL as an Active Learning Approach**

Students expressed highly positive perceptions of PjBL, particularly regarding increased engagement and academic interaction. They viewed PjBL as different from conventional, lecture-centered approaches. Several students reported feeling more *involved* and a greater sense of *ownership* over their learning process.

*“With project-based learning, I feel more active. We really have to think and collaborate, not just listen,” (Aj).*

This finding aligns with recent studies showing that PjBL significantly enhances collaboration, motivation, and student engagement in higher education contexts (Marleni, Faizal, & Nadhirah, 2024; Mutanga, 2024).

#### **3.2 Implementation Barriers—Time Management and Group Coordination**

Nearly all students reported difficulties in managing project timelines, mainly due to conflicting class schedules and student organization commitments.

*“The hardest part is finding time together. Some have organizational meetings, others work part-time. So the project often gets delayed,” (Fa).*

Group coordination also posed challenges, especially when some members were less active in completing assigned tasks.

*“There are usually one or two passive members, so the rest of the group ends up doing more work,” (Rk).*

These barriers align with findings from other higher education research indicating that time management and team dynamics are the most frequent obstacles to successful PjBL implementation (Auliyani, 2024; Novalia, 2025).

#### **3.3 Development of Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills**

Students reported that PjBL required them to analyze real-life problems and identify applicable

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solutions, which fostered higher-order thinking skills (HOTS).

*“Because the project is real, I have to analyze data, discuss ideas, and find solutions. It makes me think more than regular assignments,” (Ds).*

This finding supports literature noting that PjBL promotes critical thinking and problem-solving skills because students engage directly in investigation and solution development (Sofiatun, 2024; Mutanga, 2024).

### **3.4 Need for More Intensive Facilitation and Guidance from Lecturers**

Although students appreciated the PjBL approach, most of them stated that the learning process would be more effective if lecturers provided clearer scaffolding, routine guidance, and structured assessment rubrics.

*“If we had weekly guidance, I think the project would be more focused. Sometimes we’re confused about the lecturer’s expectations,” (Tr).*

Students also suggested that peer assessment could help improve accountability within groups. These insights are consistent with literature emphasizing the essential instructional role of lecturers in guiding students throughout project implementation (Savery & Duffy, 2021; Marleni et al., 2024).

### **3.5 PjBL as a Real Learning Experience for Professional Development**

During reflection sessions, students stated that PjBL helped them understand learning not merely as an academic task but as a real-world experience relevant to their future profession as economics educators.

*“This project made me realize that teaching economics isn’t just theory. We have to solve problems and collaborate like in the workplace,” (Dv).*

PjBL was also associated with increased readiness for workplace demands, including communication skills, report writing, and professional presentation abilities.

This finding supports the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy, which emphasizes the importance of contextual learning experiences to strengthen student competencies (Kemdikbud, 2021).

## **4. Discussion**

Overall, PjBL has a positive impact on students’ learning experiences, particularly in terms of engagement, collaboration, and the enhancement of critical thinking skills. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of PjBL is strongly influenced by factors such as time management, team dynamics, and the quality of lecturer facilitation. PjBL also plays an important role in strengthening the professional readiness of students in the Economics Education Study Program at Universitas Jambi.

## **5. Conclusion**

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This study shows that students have a positive perception of project-based learning (PjBL) because it enhances engagement, collaboration, as well as critical thinking and problem-solving skills. However, the implementation of PjBL still faces challenges related to time management and group coordination. Students also expect a more intensive facilitator role from lecturers to ensure a more structured project process. Overall, PjBL is viewed not merely as an academic task, but as a learning experience that is relevant to professional demands in the workplace.

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