

## Implementation of Differentiated Learning to Accommodate the Diverse Characteristics of Senior High School Equivalence Program Learners at PKBM RUMAN Aceh

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**Abstract:** The implementation of the independent curriculum emphasizes the necessity of differentiated learning to accommodate the unique characteristics of each student. This study aims to analyze the implementation of differentiated learning in non-formal education, specifically within the Senior High School Equivalence Program at PKBM RUMAN Aceh. Non-formal learners exhibit high diversity in terms of age, socioeconomic background, and working status, demanding a highly adaptive pedagogical approach. Using a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving tutors, institutional administrators, and learners. The findings reveal that tutors at PKBM RUMAN Aceh apply differentiation across three main domains: content, process, and product. Process differentiation is executed by combining andragogical approaches for adult learners with peer-tutoring for younger students. Furthermore, product differentiation allows working learners to submit portfolios and practical projects relevant to their daily occupations rather than standard written exams. The study concludes that differentiated learning in the PKBM context transcends cognitive mapping; it serves as a structural strategy to prevent dropout rates among working learners while maintaining academic quality and fostering an inclusive educational ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Differentiated Learning, Non-Formal Education, Learner Characteristics, Inclusive Ecosystem, religion, Social Phenomena, Islamic Religious Practices, Social Life

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### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary educational paradigms in Indonesia are undergoing a fundamental shift through the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which places individual uniqueness as the starting point of the learning process (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022). One of the main pillars of this shift is the concept of differentiated learning. In regular formal schools, differentiation generally focuses on mapping the learning styles and cognitive readiness levels of students within a relatively similar age bracket (Tomlinson, 2021). However, a far more complex challenge arises when this concept must be implemented in non-formal education tracks, particularly Community Learning Centers (PKBM).

PKBM RUMAN Aceh is an inclusive alternative educational institution serving learners from various social strata. In the Senior High School Equivalence Program equivalence program (equivalent to senior high school), the classroom is filled not only with school-age teenagers who have dropped out of regular schools but also with married adults, part-time workers, and children from underprivileged families mingling with learners from economically stable backgrounds. This extreme diversity ranging from age disparities and psychological backgrounds to study time availability renders uniform, traditional pedagogical approaches irrelevant and potentially triggers high dropout rates.

Research on differentiated learning has been widely conducted, yet the majority is localized within formal schools. A study by Suryani (2023) demonstrated that product differentiation effectively improves the creativity of public high school students. Similarly, Hidayat (2024) highlighted the effectiveness of flexible modules in vocational education. A clear literature gap exists regarding how differentiation is applied in multigenerational classrooms fraught with the dynamics of andragogy, or adult education (Amelia & Hasanah, 2024), combined with child pedagogy.

Departing from this phenomenon, this study formulates the problem of how tutors at PKBM RUMAN Aceh design and execute differentiated learning strategies to embrace the diverse characteristics of Senior High School Equivalence Program learners. The purpose of this research is to analytically dissect the implementation of differentiation across content, process, and product aspects, and to uncover how an inclusive learning ecosystem can maintain the motivation of learners across generations and economic statuses.

## **METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative approach utilizing a descriptive-analytical method. This design was chosen based on the need to deeply and naturally capture interactions, teaching strategies, and sociological realities within the classroom setting (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2021). The field study was focused on the Senior High School Equivalence Program at PKBM RUMAN Aceh, Banda Aceh.

Primary data were collected from February to May 2026 through three main techniques. First, non-intervention participant observation was conducted during face-to-face teaching and learning activities and independent tutorial sessions. Second, in-depth interviews were carried out involving the Director of RUMAN Aceh, the curriculum coordinator, three Senior High School Equivalence Program tutors, and learner representatives selected purposively. Third, the researchers conducted a document analysis of modified Lesson Plans (RPP), learning modules, and student portfolios.

The collected data were analyzed using an interactive model comprising data reduction, narrative-thematic data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2021). Data validity was tested through source triangulation, explicitly comparing the tutors' statements regarding their teaching methods with the actual experiences reported by the learners.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The essential first step before differentiation is applied at RUMAN Aceh is a non-cognitive diagnostic assessment. Unlike formal schools that rely heavily on intelligence tests or learning style inventories, assessment in this non-formal institution emphasizes mapping learners' time availability and emotional maturity. Interview results with the curriculum coordinator indicated that Senior High School Equivalence Program learners are divided into two dominant groups: a working group (ages 19-35) exhibiting high motivation but extremely limited time, and a teenage group (ages 16-18) with ample time but vulnerable motivation due to unpleasant prior school experiences. This sociological mapping compels tutors to abandon a singular pedagogical lens. Teaching the adult group requires tutors to position themselves as discussion facilitators, adhering to andragogical principles. Conversely, for the teenage group, tutors must provide more intense direct instructional guidance.

Building upon this assessment, process differentiation at PKBM RUMAN Aceh occurs organically and flexibly. For learners unable to attend due to conflicting work shifts, tutors implement independent module-based learning accessible asynchronously, combined with mentoring via digital communication groups (Hidayat, 2024). In multigenerational face-to-face classes, process differentiation is facilitated through cross-age peer tutoring (Lubis & Khairani, 2025). Younger learners who are more agile in digital literacy are frequently paired with adult learners struggling to find internet references or operate educational software. In return, adult learners share practical workplace experiences and ethics with their younger peers. This interaction proves that characteristic diversity is not an obstacle but a complementary instrument that strengthens the institution's social cohesion. Regarding content differentiation, the taught materials are consistently drawn into real-life contexts. For instance, in sociology and economics subjects, the case studies discussed are not macro theories, but local entrepreneurship issues or practical social problems daily faced by the working learners.

Furthermore, the most prominent finding of this study is the institution's boldness in applying product differentiation for the assessment process (Suryani, 2023). Tutors realize that forcing working learners to face conventional written exams will trigger academic stress and potentially lead to resignation. Consequently, final evaluations are transformed into portfolios of work. Learners are given the freedom to present their learning outcomes according to their interests and professional expertise. This assessment flexibility is proven to psychologically reduce learner anxiety and restore their self-confidence, ensuring they can achieve academic success without being uprooted from their socioeconomic realities.

## **CONCLUSION**

The implementation of differentiated learning in the Senior High School Equivalence Program at PKBM RUMAN Aceh transcends the theoretical boundaries of learning style adjustments. Differentiation in this institution functions as a strategic defense mechanism to maintain the educational continuity of marginalized and working learners. Through socio-psychologically based characteristic mapping, tutors successfully manage multigenerational classes by harmoniously blending andragogical and pedagogical principles.

Process differentiation through flexible scheduling and peer tutoring, along with product differentiation that values real profession-based portfolios, has proven highly effective in fostering student self-efficacy. RUMAN Aceh's success provides a strong exemplary model illustrating that inclusively managed and humanizing non-formal education can be a concrete solution to the rigidity of formal school systems. It is recommended that education policymakers provide flexible evaluation standards for PKBMs to support differentiated learning innovations that better suit the nature of community learners.

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