

Exploration of Factors Affecting the Interest of SMK Negeri 1 Binjai Students to Continue Their Studies to Higher Education

Loise Arinanda Sinulingga, Erwita Ika Violina, Fadinda Aisyah
Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The decision to pursue higher education is a critical educational transition for vocational high school students and is influenced by a complex interplay of personal and environmental factors. Despite the growing importance of higher education in enhancing career opportunities and social mobility, relatively limited research has qualitatively explored the factors shaping vocational students' aspirations to continue their studies. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the internal and external factors influencing the interest of twelfth-grade students at SMK Negeri 1 Binjai in pursuing higher education.

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach with an exploratory design. Ten twelfth-grade students from the Accounting and Financial Institution (AKL) program were purposively selected based on recommendations from the school guidance and counseling teacher. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced through source and technique triangulation.

The findings revealed that students' interest in pursuing higher education is shaped by both internal and external factors. Internal factors included motivation, career aspirations, educational awareness, field-of-study interests, and future planning, while external factors comprised family support, school and guidance counseling services, peer influence, economic conditions, and access to information about higher education. Among these factors, motivation and career aspirations emerged as the strongest drivers of students' educational aspirations, whereas financial constraints represented the primary barrier to higher education participation. Family support and school-based guidance services were found to play significant roles in strengthening students' intentions to continue their studies. This study contributes to the literature on career guidance and educational decision-making by providing an in-depth understanding of vocational students' higher education aspirations. The findings highlight the importance of comprehensive career guidance programs, family involvement, and financial support mechanisms in promoting higher education participation among vocational high school students.

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* **Corresponding Author:** louisarindaa@gmail.com

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Introduction

Higher education plays a strategic role in enhancing human capital, promoting social mobility, and strengthening national competitiveness in an increasingly globalized world. As economies become more knowledge-based, access to higher education has become an important pathway for individuals to improve their career prospects, socioeconomic status, and lifelong learning opportunities. Despite its significance, participation in higher education among Indonesian youth remains relatively uneven, particularly among graduates of vocational high schools (*Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan* or SMKs), who are generally prepared to enter the workforce immediately after graduation.

Unlike general senior high schools, vocational high schools are designed to equip students with practical and technical competencies that facilitate direct employment. Consequently, many vocational students face a critical decision upon graduation: whether to pursue higher education or enter the labor market. This decision is often shaped by a complex interaction of personal aspirations, career goals, family expectations, economic circumstances, and access to educational information. Previous studies have identified factors such as academic motivation, self-efficacy, parental support, socioeconomic status, and educational aspirations as important determinants of students' intentions to continue their studies at the tertiary level (Khadijah et al., 2017; Hutagalung, 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, students' decisions regarding higher education can be explained through the lens of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which emphasizes the

influence of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, personal goals, and environmental supports on educational and career choices (Lent et al., 1994). Similarly, Self-Determination Theory suggests that students are more likely to pursue higher education when their intrinsic motivations, personal interests, and future aspirations are supported by their social environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These perspectives highlight that educational decisions are not solely individual choices but are also influenced by contextual and environmental factors.

Although numerous studies have examined factors influencing students' educational aspirations, most previous research has predominantly employed quantitative approaches and focused on general senior high school students. As a result, limited attention has been given to vocational high school students, whose educational and career trajectories differ substantially from those of their counterparts in general education. Furthermore, existing studies often emphasize statistical relationships among variables without providing an in-depth understanding of how students perceive and interpret the factors that influence their decisions to pursue higher education. Consequently, there remains a need for qualitative investigations that explore students' lived experiences, motivations, challenges, and support systems in greater depth.

At the local level, school records at SMK Negeri 1 Binjai indicate that only approximately 37% of graduates continue their studies to higher education institutions. This figure suggests that a considerable proportion of students choose alternative pathways after graduation, particularly direct entry into the workforce. The relatively low transition rate to higher education raises important questions regarding the factors that shape students' educational aspirations and decision-making processes. Understanding these factors is essential for developing effective career guidance interventions and educational policies aimed at increasing access to higher education among vocational school graduates.

The novelty of this study lies in its qualitative exploration of both internal and external factors influencing vocational students' interest in pursuing higher education. Unlike previous studies that primarily relied on quantitative surveys, this research seeks to capture students' perspectives and experiences through an exploratory qualitative approach. By examining the interplay between personal motivations, career aspirations, educational awareness, family support, peer influence, school environments, economic conditions, and access to information, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape vocational students' educational decisions. Therefore, this study aims to explore the internal and external factors that influence the interest of twelfth-grade students at SMK Negeri 1 Binjai in continuing their studies to higher education. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on career guidance, educational psychology, and vocational education, while also providing practical implications for schools, guidance and counseling teachers, policymakers, and families in designing strategies to encourage greater participation in higher education among vocational school students.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the factors influencing vocational high school students' interest in pursuing higher education. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions, experiences, motivations, and considerations regarding their educational aspirations. The study focused on identifying both internal and external factors that shape students' decisions to continue their studies after graduation.

Participants and Research Setting

The research was conducted at SMK Negeri 1 Binjai, Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the selected informants could provide rich and relevant information related to the research objectives. The participants consisted of ten twelfth-grade students from the Accounting and Financial Institution (AKL) program who demonstrated varying levels of interest in pursuing higher education. The selection considered differences in academic achievement, educational aspirations, and family backgrounds to capture diverse perspectives.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source and were conducted to explore

students' motivations, future aspirations, educational awareness, family support, peer influence, economic conditions, and access to information regarding higher education. Observations were conducted to gain contextual understanding of students' educational environments and interactions, while relevant school documents were reviewed to support and validate the interview findings. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded with participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data condensation stage, interview transcripts and field notes were reviewed, coded, and categorized according to emerging themes. The categorized data were then organized into matrices and thematic displays to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring patterns and relationships among the factors influencing students' interest in pursuing higher education.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentary sources. Member checking was also conducted by asking participants to verify the accuracy of interview interpretations. Furthermore, peer debriefing with colleagues and academic supervisors was utilized to ensure the consistency and validity of the analytical process.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study was voluntary. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and provided consent prior to data collection. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, all personal information was anonymized, and pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings.

Result and Discussion

Results

The findings revealed that students' interest in pursuing higher education was influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. Internal factors included motivation, career aspirations, future planning, and educational awareness, while external factors comprised family support, peer influence, school support, social interactions, and economic conditions.

Table 1 presents the major themes identified from the interview data.

Table 1. Factors Influencing Students' Interest in Pursuing Higher Education

No.	Factor	Category	Key Findings	Number of Informants
1	Motivation	Internal	Desire for success, better future opportunities, and avoidance of future regret	10
2	Career Aspirations	Internal	Desire to become teachers, accountants, and other professional occupations	8
3	Future Planning	Internal	Efforts to study, work while attending university, and participate in admission selection processes	10
4	Educational Awareness	Internal	Understanding the importance of higher education for future career development	7
5	Family Support	External	Parental encouragement, guidance, expectations, and emotional support	10
6	Economic Conditions	External	Financial capability, tuition costs, and access to scholarships	10
7	School and Counseling Support	External	Information, guidance services, and encouragement provided by teachers and counselors	9
8	Peer and Influence	Social External	Influence of friends, social comparison, and information sharing about higher education	10

The results indicate that motivation emerged as one of the strongest internal factors influencing students' educational aspirations. Most participants expressed a desire to achieve a better future and improve their socioeconomic conditions through higher education. Similarly,

students who had clear career goals demonstrated stronger intentions to continue their studies after graduation.

Future planning and educational awareness also played important roles. Students who actively prepared for university entrance examinations, searched for scholarship opportunities, or considered working while studying showed higher levels of commitment toward pursuing higher education.

Regarding external factors, family support was identified as the most influential determinant. Nearly all participants reported that encouragement and expectations from parents significantly affected their educational decisions. Economic conditions were another important factor, as concerns about tuition fees and living expenses often shaped students' considerations regarding university enrollment.

Furthermore, schools and guidance counselors contributed by providing information about higher education opportunities, scholarships, and career planning. Peer influence also affected students' aspirations, as discussions with friends often encouraged or discouraged intentions to pursue higher education.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that students' interest in pursuing higher education is shaped by the interaction of personal and environmental factors. This result supports Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) proposed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), which emphasizes that educational and career decisions are influenced by self-efficacy, outcome expectations, personal goals, and environmental supports.

Motivation emerged as a central factor influencing students' aspirations to continue their studies. Students who perceived higher education as a pathway to a better future, improved employment opportunities, and personal achievement demonstrated stronger educational intentions. This finding is consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which suggests that intrinsically motivated individuals are more likely to engage in activities that support long-term personal development and goal attainment.

The study also found that career aspirations significantly contributed to students' educational decisions. Students with clear occupational goals, such as becoming teachers or accountants, were more likely to perceive higher education as necessary for achieving those aspirations. This finding aligns with Super's Career Development Theory (1990), which argues that educational choices are closely linked to individuals' career self-concepts and future occupational plans.

Among external factors, family support emerged as the strongest influence. Emotional encouragement, parental expectations, and financial assistance were found to strengthen students' confidence and willingness to pursue higher education. This result is consistent with previous studies indicating that parental involvement plays a crucial role in shaping students' educational aspirations and academic decisions.

Economic conditions, however, often acted as a barrier despite students' strong motivation. Many participants expressed concerns regarding tuition fees and educational expenses, highlighting the gap between aspirations and available resources. This finding suggests the importance of scholarship programs and financial assistance schemes in increasing access to higher education among vocational school graduates.

The role of schools, particularly guidance and counseling services, was also evident in supporting students' educational planning. Information regarding university admission pathways, scholarships, and career opportunities helped students make more informed decisions about their futures. These findings reinforce the importance of comprehensive career guidance programs in vocational schools.

Overall, the results indicate that increasing students' interest in pursuing higher education requires a collaborative approach involving students, families, schools, and policymakers. Efforts to strengthen students' motivation, provide adequate educational information, enhance family support, and expand access to financial assistance are essential for promoting higher education participation among vocational high school graduates.

Conclusion

This study explored the factors influencing vocational high school students' interest in pursuing higher education at SMK Negeri 1 Binjai. The findings revealed that students' educational aspirations are shaped by the interaction of both internal and external factors. Internal factors include motivation, career aspirations, future planning, and awareness of the importance of higher education, while external factors comprise family support, economic conditions, school support, guidance and counseling services, and peer influence.

Among the identified factors, motivation and career aspirations emerged as the primary internal drivers encouraging students to continue their studies. Students who possessed clear educational and career goals demonstrated stronger intentions to pursue higher education. In contrast, financial constraints were found to be the most significant barrier, often limiting students' ability to translate their aspirations into actual educational plans. Family support played a crucial role in strengthening students' confidence and commitment to higher education, while schools and guidance counselors contributed by providing information, encouragement, and career planning assistance.

The findings support Social Cognitive Career Theory, which emphasizes the importance of personal beliefs and environmental supports in educational decision-making. The results also align with Self-Determination Theory and Career Development Theory, highlighting the role of intrinsic motivation, career aspirations, and future-oriented planning in shaping students' educational choices.

Practically, this study suggests that schools should strengthen career guidance and counseling programs, increase students' access to information about higher education opportunities, and collaborate more closely with families to support educational aspirations. Furthermore, policymakers should expand scholarship programs and financial assistance schemes to reduce economic barriers that prevent vocational students from pursuing higher education.

Although this study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing vocational students' interest in higher education, it was limited to a small number of participants from a single school. Future research is recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples across different vocational schools and regions to obtain a broader understanding of students' educational aspirations and decision-making processes.

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