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\* Corresponding Author

# STUDENTS PERSPECTIVES ON STUDYING AT UNIVERSITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY USING SELF- DETERMINATION AND PLANNED BEHAVIOR THEORIES

Ahmad Azmi Abdel Hamid Esmaeil<sup>1</sup>, Ismail Maakip<sup>2</sup>, Peter Voo<sup>3\*</sup> & Abu Huraerah<sup>4</sup>

<sup>123</sup>Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

<sup>4</sup>Pansundan Universitas, Bandung, Indonesia

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Email: [ahmad\\_azmi\\_bp21@iluv.ums.edu.my](mailto:ahmad_azmi_bp21@iluv.ums.edu.my), [daeng@ums.edu.my](mailto:daeng@ums.edu.my),  
[huraerah\\_ks@unpas.ac.id](mailto:huraerah_ks@unpas.ac.id), & [peter@ums.edu.my](mailto:peter@ums.edu.my)\*

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**Abstract.** This research attempts to explore students' perceptions about continuing their studies at university. As well as understanding why they continue their studies and why they choose a particular study program. This study has used a qualitative method for the purpose of deepening the perceptions conveyed by the respondents of this study. This study has interviewed a total of 15 students from one of the IPTA in Malaysia, thematic analysis has been used in the data analysis. The results of the study found that many students consider studying at university as a place to develop their minds and personalities. In addition, the findings of the study also found that students gain specialized knowledge especially in the field or program they choose. Universities must also provide a conducive environment and ensure development especially for academic staff to facilitate student learning. The findings of the study also found that students enter university for various reasons, such as pursuing interests or worrying about their future jobs. While other respondents stated that they entered the university to meet the demands of their families or to follow their friends. Finally, respondents chose a university based on a particular program because they found it easy or because it was the only option available to them. Although most of the respondents are more focused on self-improvement, most of those who come to university are based on their own future and limited options.

**Keywords:** Self determination, Planned behavior, Qualitative Method, University Student, Higher Education in Malaysia.

**Abstrak.** Penelitian ini coba untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi mahasiswa tentang melanjutkan studi di universitas. Serta memahami alasan mereka melanjutkan studi dan alasan memilih program studi tertentu. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan tujuan untuk memperdalam persepsi yang disampaikan oleh responden penelitian ini. Penelitian ini telah mewawancarai total 15 mahasiswa salah satu IPTA di Malaysia, analisis tematik digunakan dalam analisis data. Hasil penelitian menemukan bahwa banyak mahasiswa yang menganggap kuliah di universitas sebagai tempat untuk mengembangkan pikiran dan kepribadiannya. Selain itu, temuan penelitian juga menemukan bahwa mahasiswa memperoleh pengetahuan khusus terutama pada bidang atau program yang mereka pilih. Perguruan tinggi juga harus menyediakan lingkungan yang kondusif dan menjamin pengembangan khususnya bagi tenaga akademik untuk memfasilitasi pembelajaran mahasiswa. Temuan penelitian ini juga menemukan bahwa mahasiswa masuk universitas karena berbagai alasan, seperti mengejar minat atau khawatir akan pekerjaan masa depan mereka. Sedangkan responden lainnya menyatakan masuk perguruan tinggi karena memenuhi tuntutan keluarga atau mengikuti teman-temannya. Terakhir, responden memilih universitas berdasarkan program tertentu karena mereka merasa mudah atau karena itu adalah satu-satunya pilihan yang tersedia bagi mereka. Meskipun sebagian besar responden lebih fokus pada pengembangan diri, sebagian besar dari mereka yang masuk universitas didasarkan pada masa depan mereka sendiri dan pilihan yang terbatas.

**Kata Kunci:** Determinasi diri, perilaku terencana, studi kualitatif, mahasiswa, perguruan tinggi Malaysia.



## PENDAHULUAN

During the pre-nation stage, universities have two missions: teaching (where universities have liberal arts and professional education) and research (where research is integrated with classroom teaching). In modern universities, there are three main missions for educational institutions: nationalization (where universities are required to serve the national state) and democratization (where universities are required to serve individuals who belong to the state). In other words, universities are meant to fulfill individual and societal needs, and there is a public service stage (where universities are concerned with serving the public). During the globalization stage (21st century), universities take the previous triad of missions (nationalization, democratization, and public services) to a more global scale (internationalization) (Scott, 2006).

A 2011 study by Boulton and Lucas says that universities should focus on teaching students' basic skills that they can use in many different fields and situations. This would help them deal with the fact that society constantly changes. Instead of just teaching a bunch of facts that might be out of date by the time they graduate, schools should teach skills like logical thinking and being able to question the status quo (Boulton & Lucas, 2011). It is a setting that fosters both universal and focused student intellectual ability and it helps society by producing highly educated leaders and informed citizens (Benson & Boyd, 2015). Learning and cognitive changes, psycho-social changes, attitudes and values, moral reasoning, and economic and career impact are some of the social effects of postsecondary education (Pascarella et al., 1988).

### **What Motivates Students to Get Their Degrees?**

According to Gallup surveys on the state of higher education (Gallup-Lumina State of Higher Education, n.d.), 68% of enrolled students continue their studies for the sake of knowledge and skills. According to another study, traditional college students attend higher education because of societal and economic pressures (Mettler, 2014) (Mettler, n.d.). Especially when we consider the growing disparity between those with bachelor's degrees and those without. As a

result, many students regard higher education as a ticket to future employment (Greenstone et al., 2012; Urahn et al., 2012). Another point to consider is that the primary reason for some students to pursue higher education is to feel secure, to mature and become self-sufficient, to seek intimacy, and to live in an internet-based world (Levine et al., 2012).

Other research indicates that having access to the internet, encouragement from teachers, attending a Catholic school, coming from a high socioeconomic background, and family expectations can all influence student motivation to pursue a higher education (Bowden & Doughney, 2012; Cote & Levine, 1997; Kirk et al., 2011). According to (Bodovski, 2010; Lareau, 2011), parental education and occupational level were positively associated with the child's educational attainment.

However, their other personal motivation for pursuing higher education is the desire to grow personally and intellectually and to comprehend the world around them (Cote & Levine, 1997). Lastly, a study (Kutty, 2014) has noted the impact of self-motivation (like academic goals and career aspirations), family-based motivation (like family socioeconomic status and parental expectations), and school habitus (like having a positive school experience and the role of teachers) among first-generation students.

### **Literature Review**

Research that answers the first question seems to be scarce (student views of university purpose). According to one of the studies, such topics are not typically discussed; for these students, attending college is the default setting. Higher education is also meant to prepare people for the job market, personal growth and development, and societal change and development (Brooks et al., 2021). Another survey comes to similar conclusions (Liz Shutt & Alistair Shutt, 2019).

Qualitative literature that attempts to answer the second research question (why students attend college) using qualitative methods. We found few studies answer this question. For example, one survey found listed the desire to be intrinsically stimulated, continuing education, pursuing a specific career,

and having a passion or interest as the top reasons (bhardwa, 2017). another study shows that career prospect was the main reason for attending university (Balloo et al., 2017). Nevertheless, few studies conducted using the qualitative method to answer both questions, and no study have been conducted in the Malaysian context. The current study aims to fill both gaps using self-determination and the theory of planned behavior.

### **Self-Determination Theory and The Theory of Planned Behavior**

To understand the psychological aspect of the student's desire to attend university, we relied primarily on two theories in this study. According to the theory of self-determination, humans are primarily motivated by three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The more that these components are fueled, the more individuals will be satisfied and function at their highest potential (Deci & Ryan, 2012). In addition, they propose two types of goal aspirations: internal and external. Internal aspiration is the one that will fulfil the three needs, such as self-development and community service.

External aspirations, on the other hand, such as gaining other people's approval and becoming famous, would not nurture our needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). And, in general, they noticed that when we pursue internally aspired goals, we are happier than when we pursue externally aspired goals. In the theory of planned behavior proposed by Ajzen, the intention is posited as a product of three main elements. These are behavioral attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control.

Attitude toward a behavior refers to our positive and negative attitudes toward the outcome as well as the probability that such an outcome will occur. While subjective norms refer to what others think about us when we perform certain behaviors and how much we tend to comply with their expectations, Lastly, perceived behavioral control refers to our perception regarding our capability to perform certain behaviors (Ajzen, 2012).

Given this, the study aims to evaluate and understand how students perceive the purpose

of the university and the factors that underlie pursuing their degree.

### **METHOD**

In this study, we use the qualitative method since it allows the researchers to develop a deeper understanding of student thinking toward the research subjects.

A qualitative approach was used to conduct this study. While the sampling used in this study is purposive sampling. This means that researchers do not necessarily have a quota to meet. The selection of respondents is usually based on the factors of time, finance and available resources. According to Bernard (2000), purposive sampling is obtained from the results of the researcher's consideration of the type and characteristics of the sample that is to be obtained to meet the needs or purposes of the research. While Creswell (2008) stated the selection of study respondents and suitable places to obtain good study results.

The current aim is to answer two main questions: 1) What are students' perceptions regarding the purpose of a university? 2) What is the underlying logic for pursuing their current or future degree? The methodology section will be divided into three parts, data collection, participants' profile, and data analysis.

#### **Data Collection**

In this study, students were chosen based on their availability. We recruited our research participants by visiting the main library at the university. We try to maximize the variation of our samples to have a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Students also were recruited based on their ability to speak English. Since one of the interviewers was not a native speaker of the Malaysian language.

The interview protocol was developed independently. However, we follow the main guideline proposed by Rubin in his books (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In the interview, we ask two main questions: 1) In your opinion what is the purpose of a university? 2) Why did you choose your current program? (In case we interview foundation students we ask them: what do you want to study in the future? And why?)

## Participant Profile

In this study, we interviewed fifteen students. Four were foundations, others were already in their degrees. The others were divided between psychology and education, business and accountancy, engineering, science and natural resources, tropical forestry, and medicine. We tried to attain an equal proportion of males and females, we get seven males and eight females.

## Data Analysis

In this study, we used Atlas.ti 23 to analyze the interview transcription. The study used a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which provides flexibility as well as independence from a specific theoretical or epistemological perspective. The analysis process was conducted as follows: a) We familiarize ourselves with the data during the transcription process. And by going through it again. b) We had initial codes and themes from reading the literature. However, we stay open to any new and potential themes. c) Lastly, we discussed and finalized the themes and sub-themes.

**Tabel 1 Respondents' details**

Respondent detail	Faculty	Gender
Student 1	Tropical forestry	Female
Student 2	Medical	Female
Student 3	Foundation	male
Student 4	Foundation	Female
Student 5	Foundation	Female
Student 6	Software engineering	Male
Student 7	science and natural resources	Female
Student 8	Psychology and Education	Female
Student 9	Psychology and Education	Male
Student 10	Education and Psychology	Female
Student 11	Civil engineering	Male
Student 12	Foundation	Male
Student 13	Education and Psychology	Male
Student 14	Business, Economy and Accountancy	Female
Student 15	Business, Economy and Accountancy	Male

## Theme 1: What Is Motivation to Studies in University?

For some students, university is a place where students develop themselves by being more mature, broadening their minds, and discovering themselves. It is also where students develop their intellectual and scientific thinking. Universities are meant for developing student character. And, to develop specific knowledge regarding a specific field. As stated by student 1:

*"It seems that university life has taught us the true meaning of life when we become adults. University has made us mature and become adults."*

For another students, university as a process of developing the mind, as stated by student 2:

*"I see this as a process of developing the mind and can share with others the results of learning at university."*

About university as a place to develop student's mature, stated by student 3:

*"For me, studying at university has matured ourselves to some extent. We managed to explore something new just like what we dreamed of when we were teenagers."*

*"In my view, the University is a place to gain knowledge and self-development. Most importantly it has helped me develop myself intellectually, and how we develop thinking scientifically" (Student 6).*

*"I see the importance of character development.... the purpose of university is for character development. The second thing is to build knowledge of what course you take, because you will enroll in university in the first year. (Student 11).*

Moreover, university is a place where you can develop your social skills by interacting with different people from different backgrounds. For one of the students, the university is the place where she will go out of her comfort zone. *"Currently, the university is a place where I can make friends with people from different backgrounds and cultures. I gain new knowledge such as social skills, soft skills and of course gain more knowledge." (Student 7)*

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

**Table 2:1 Theme and Sub Theme Of The Result**

Theme	Sub Theme
Motivation to study in university	Developing our thinking Developing our character Proving us with field-specific knowledge Providing proper environment Provide an expert who can facilitate our learning

**Table 2:2 Theme And Sub Theme Of The Result**

Theme	Sub-Theme
Why I came here?	Interest or passion Future concern Surrounding Convenience or availability

*"And also, being in university means that you have to step out of your comfort zone. and start to socialize with many people. which actually I am more scared of. because I do not trust people that much. but, you know, as I have been here, all the people seem just nice, and I am grateful for that. and it is a way for me to see myself and grow myself." (Student 4)*

Nevertheless, we might ask ourselves: How could the university help develop all these aspects? In terms of developing our intellectual and other skills. Like holding a debate, providing books and sources, and clubs that fulfil students' interests. Besides that, the university might develop student character by providing freedom, allowing students to be more independent and autonomous.

*"I think it should be more and more a place to debate, to create new ideas. I think it should not like to be like the schools..... because when you try to find the information online. a lot of things. you just face it with specific due to your research. due to a search in Google. They just give you a specific, probably, not complete idea of what you are looking for. but when you go to the library. They are books, they are books of many authors, philosophers. as I look at the books in the library here." (Student 10)*

*"Maybe before this. before I come to university. I do not have the facility to join the robotic club. So, here, we have the robotic club. and I feel like, oh my god. I feel joy with that." (Student 5)*

*"So, I just graduated from my school. and then, I study at university. I really can feel the difference between school and university. which is what university is like. They really. It is freedom life in this university. because when we were in school the teachers most of the time will guide us. make sure we attend all the classes when we are in the school. but is different when you at university.... when you are at university. We study and we relate our life to study. and go, after that we do all the things independently. the next time we go to work. which we live independently. We just working. Maybe I can compare it to a university. but university is just less stressful,*

*I think. I think from my perspective. The university is the basis of real life." (Student 12)*

In terms of learning, some students' points internet may provide you with all the knowledge and information but still, you need someone (an expert) to organize all this knowledge in a systematic way. Moreover, even if many lecturers may not be very good at teaching but still, they are the main source of knowledge we have.

*"Let me put it this way. How can I say this? Yeah, like nobody has borderless information, right? but when you go to the university. You have a mentor who is our lecturer. who is knowledgeable enough to guide us. which is pure. oh, I mean. how to find systematic knowledge. and then when you are outside of the university. Of course, you can search for everything. let us say for example. in the university, lecturers told you how to do a research method. So, you do it systematically. if you are not in the university. of course, you scroll, scroll, and then, oh this is a research method. What is the research method? It is bullshit. So see. You have no knowledge about research methods. but it is in Google. but when you are in the university. lecturers told you to: do a systematic review. do systematic research." (Student 9)*

*"Yes, but not 100%. Like maybe in my study, I also watch YouTube to increase my understanding. maybe it is about 20%. and 20% from YouTube, and 10% per cent from Google. and the rest comes from the lecturers." (Student 5)*

In the end, the university provides you with a professional certificate, which is essential for your future job.

*"The purpose of going to university. well, first, of course, you know, by as were living. it is important for you to have a good education to at least to get a proper job." (Student 6)*

*"For me, I think university is the place that we get, like a more professional certificate." (Student 13)*

## Theme 2: Why I came Here?

Some students choose their current major or plan to choose one because they are interested in their field of study or the subjects they might study. However, others choose their course merely because they want to experience a different environment and experience independence by moving away from their family.

*"I went to university, the objective was to pursue what I aspired to when I was in high school, I was active with the nature club at school, I found that I have a deep interest in nature. Therefore by continuing to study at the University I can do something for nature when I graduate and I must continue this effort until I succeed" (Student 1)*

*"Actually my choice when applying to the University was civil engineering, while my second choice was geology. I come from a rural area and it was my first experience to this University and I found the campus so beautiful and my friends from my district also applied to this university, and I think it's good because I have friends and I'm not bored here." (Student 7).*

However some students just come to university to get a certificate, since they believe it to be the main key for their future employment. While helping people and serving human beings was the main motivation for other students.

*"I need to get my Degree. And I need to get a job with a decent salary after graduation. Because this is my objective in applying to this university." (Student 7).*

*"It is important to get a degree, apply for a job and get paid. Because to get a degree, you must study for that purpose before you succeed. If you want a good job you need a degree and to get a degree you need to come to the University to study." (Student 15).*

*"I want to help the community... I hope to become a scholar who specializes in my field" (Student 2).*

*"I want to become a psychologist to help society and those who need my help. I want*

*to be someone where my help will ease their burden and problems" (Student 7).*

And some students attend university due to the encouragement of their parents or friends. One student, for instance, had no interest in attending college. However, he only joined to simply follow his friends. Or possibly because they had no other choice. Therefore, people go for the simplest option available. or the one that they can take given their qualifications.

*"My family thinks I should continue my studies at university. They think that if I am able to study further then I should go to university, and I just follow what they recommend" (Student 7)*

*"You ask a funny question about why I go to university??. I'm actually not interested in coming here at all" (Student 11)*

*"I'm not really interested in studying.....no interest at all, studying at the university is not my choice, I see my friends open their computers and start applying to enter the University and choose a course. I just follow my friends to apply. I followed their choice of course, I tried to follow the course they applied for, but I have chosen the civil engineering course. My other friends also chose the civil engineering course, so that we can be in the same class the same. the results came out and they were offered a different course than me. I was alone as a civil engineering student." (Student 11)*

*"I have a plan to take a networking course in the future. I chose a safe course so that I can survive because I am not good at mathematics and software engineering that requires skill in mathematics." (Student 4)*

*"My choice at that time was to apply for a Science course at this university... but my qualifications did not allow me to take a science course." (Student 15)*

The participants in this study are aware of the significant role that universities play in the overall development of students from a variety of vantage points, beginning with the student's intellectual and character development. In addition, the knowledge that they possess regarding their field would prepare them for employment opportunities in the future.

Also, we note the disparity between the students' perceptions of the university's mission and the reasons they choose to attend the institution. Even though most of them were more focused on self-improvement. However, most of them did not come to join to attain this sort of interpersonal development. Few of them participate out of interest and passion. While others join for their employability concern and societal pressure, some join because they do not have another choice.

In other words, students in this study did not enter University because they had any internal aspirations or goals which would fuel our basic motivational needs. Instead, many could not question coming to the University, which might thwart their motivations for study and learning.

The finding from the first part of the study (what is the Purpose of University) aligns with the previous studies and surveys (Brooks et al., 2021; Liz Shutt & Alistair Shutt, 2019) While the findings of the second part of the study support the previous results (Greenstone et al., 2012; Mettler, 2014; Urahn et al., 2012) that regard future employment and societal and economic pressures as the main reason for attaining higher education. However, we need also to consider that some students still come as part of their interest, which goes along with previous findings (bhardwa, 2017; Kutty, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

The current highlights student perception regarding the role and purpose of the university and explores why they attain their degrees. What students think about university might not align with why they attend university.

While many of them keep intensely focused on intellectual and attitudinal development. None of them are concerned with these purposes when they come to university. Few of them join to fulfil their interest. and others come because of their surroundings (parents, friends, societal expectations). Alternatively, because they did not have any other options. The university was necessary for their future employment, and their current program was the only available choice.

From our findings, students need to be aware of why they come to university and encouraged to think wisely and thoroughly before making this decision significantly if such a decision would cost them thousands of ringgits and 3 or 4 years of their life. The study found that students who continue their studies at university have a positive future when they finish their studies later. Because if they have the opportunity to continue their studies at a higher level in any University they will try to finish their studies and start a job by applying for a job as a new graduate.

In an effort to improve themselves by continuing their studies at the University, self-motivation is an important factor in determining their decision to continue their studies. Aspects such as the belief that knowledge is important for self-advancement and learning can change someone's fate as well as change perspective of their thoughts in daily life, all of these are a source of motivation for a person to continue studying. Future prospects are also a motivating factor for students to continue studying for the sake of to get a better job through improvement in academics.

The role of the University in providing encouragement to students to continue their studies and give opportunities to them to make a decisive choice field of study is also a motivation for them to continue their studies.

Other factors that are taken into account such as socio-economic aspects that also motivate students to continue their studies, family life conditions for example will give them motivation to change their own and family's fate. Students' families provide inspiration in determining the direction of their child's education in the field of study.

Finally, this study suggests that the government, especially the ministry of higher education, can promote and spread effective information from the ministry of higher education and encourage students who have an interest and are unable to continue their studies with basic assistance or scholarships.

Therefore government encouragement to the community is necessary enhanced in giving awareness to middle school students to continue their studies for human capital needs in the future. Encouragement from teachers for the

students to continue their education is also very important. Therefore, the teacher can take initiative to motivate and make extra classes for students so that their results are worthy and accepted into public universities.

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