



A NEW FRAMEWORK: FACTORS DETERMINING STUDENTS' INTENTIONS TO PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION-STRUCTURAL, CULTURAL, AND SCHOOL STRATEGIES

Fajar Agung Pangestu ^{1*}, Hilda Rakerda ²

¹ Pendidikan Bahasa Indonesia, Universitas Bangka Belitung, Bangka, Kep. Bangka Belitung, Indonesia

² Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Bangka Belitung, Bangka, Kep. Bangka Belitung, Indonesia

*Email penulis koresponden: fajaragung@ubb.ac.id

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Abstrak

Penurunan minat siswa sekolah menengah atas untuk melanjutkan pendidikan ke perguruan tinggi menjadi perhatian global yang mencerminkan kesenjangan akses pendidikan dan motivasi belajar. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengembangkan kerangka baru untuk memahami faktor yang mempengaruhi minat studi lanjut siswa. Metode campuran digunakan dengan data kuantitatif dari 97 siswa melalui kuesioner dan data kualitatif dari wawancara mendalam dengan tiga guru serta enam siswa di tiga sekolah. Hasil menunjukkan keputusan siswa dipengaruhi oleh integrasi faktor struktural (kondisi ekonomi dan dukungan orang tua), faktor kultural (lingkungan sosial dan budaya lokal), serta peran strategis sekolah. Faktor ekonomi dan persetujuan orang tua menjadi penentu utama, sedangkan pengaruh teman sebaya dan budaya lokal membentuk motivasi pribadi. Strategi sekolah memiliki peran untuk mengintervensi hambatan faktor struktural dan kultural.

Kata kunci: Faktor Determinan; Minat Studi Lanjut; Pendidikan Tinggi; Faktor Struktural dan Kultural; Strategi Sekolah.

Abstract

The declining interest of high school students in continuing their education to college is a global concern, reflecting the gap in educational access and learning motivation. This study aims to develop a new framework to understand the factors influencing students' interest in further study. A mixed method approach was used, with quantitative data from 97 students via questionnaires and qualitative data from in-depth interviews with three teachers and six students in three schools. The results indicate that students' decisions are influenced by an integration of structural factors (economic conditions and parental support), cultural factors (local social and cultural environment), and the strategic role of schools. Economic factors and parental approval are the main determinants, while peer influence and local culture shape personal motivation. School strategies have a role to play in intervening in these structural and cultural barriers.

Keywords: Determinant Factor; Further Study Interest; Higher Education; Structural and Cultural Factor; School Strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education serves as a pivotal instrument in enhancing the quality of human capital and strengthening a nation's global competitiveness. Despite its strategic importance, participation rates in higher education across various regions of Indonesia continue to encounter persistent challenges, including within the Province of Bangka Belitung Islands. According to data from the Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) on the 2024 Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) for Higher

Education, Bangka Belitung Islands ranks among the three lowest provinces nationally, with a GER of only 20.14%. This percentage is markedly below the national average of 32%, reflecting the limited interest of students in this province to pursue tertiary education.

Extant literature on students' low participation in higher education has highlighted several influential factors. Among these, economic constraints remain the most dominant. Parental income has been identified as a key determinant shaping students' decisions to continue their studies at the tertiary level (Manuaba et al., 2024). The substantial financial burden of tuition fees, compounded by broader family economic pressures, often prompts students to enter the workforce immediately after completing secondary education. Nevertheless, previous research has primarily centered on economic determinants, leaving a notable gap in understanding the role of schools and the strategic interventions teachers can employ to foster students' aspirations toward higher education.

Beyond economic constraints, several other determinants contribute to students' reluctance to pursue higher education, including the absence of parental encouragement and limited environmental support (Wijaya et al., 2021). Parental involvement represents a crucial source of motivation that can significantly influence students' decisions to enroll in tertiary education. Similarly, a lack of intrinsic motivation or personal aspiration has been identified as a major factor contributing to low interest in continuing education (Lestari et al., 2020). Effendi et al. (2024) emphasize that motivation serves as the primary driver of students' educational aspirations; hence, schools should develop structured programs aimed at enhancing students' motivation. In general, students' interest in higher education is influenced by both internal and external dimensions internal factors such as self-determination and future expectations, and external factors including family influence and peer relationships (Lubis et al., 2023).

Yessica et al. (2024) further highlight the pivotal role of the school environment in shaping students' decisions to pursue higher education. A supportive school climate characterized by strong teacher-student and principal-student relationships, along with disciplined academic behavior can profoundly affect students' attitudes, behavior, and career orientation, including their aspiration for tertiary education (Putri & Kusmuriyanto, 2018). These findings underscore the necessity for further investigation that extends beyond the student perspective to encompass the roles of school principals and teachers. As integral components of the educational ecosystem, principals and teachers play an instrumental role in cultivating students' mindsets and fostering motivation toward higher education.

This study seeks to address the research gap in prior studies that have primarily concentrated on students' perspectives in higher education decision-making. Empirical evidence suggests that the school environment significantly contributes to shaping students' educational pathways. Therefore, this study expands the analytical scope by examining the institutional perspective specifically, how schools and their stakeholders influence students' motivation to pursue higher education. As indicated by Yunus et al. (2021) and Prayogi et al. (2024), school principals can collaborate with higher education institutions through outreach and "socialization" programs to promote the importance of tertiary education, while teachers can strengthen students' academic orientation through career guidance and counseling initiatives (Indriastuti et al., 2022).

These considerations reaffirm that principals and teachers hold a strategic position in nurturing students' aspirations and enthusiasm for higher learning. Consequently, research that integrates both student and institutional perspectives is necessary to obtain a holistic understanding of the factors influencing educational progression. Within this framework, guidance counselors also play a critical role in assisting students' academic planning and readiness for tertiary education. Thus, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how school leadership, institutional policies, pedagogical practices, and social support systems collectively enhance participation in higher education.

Bangka Barat Regency presents a particularly relevant case due to its distinctive socio-economic landscape. The region's economy, dominated by the mining and plantation sectors, often directs students toward immediate employment rather than continued education. Students' choices to pursue or forgo tertiary education are shaped by multiple variables, including parental income, socio-economic standing, and academic motivation (Supit et al., 2020). Selvia and Fitriani (2023) argue that such decisions are influenced by both internal and external factors suggesting that motivation alone is insufficient without supportive environmental conditions. Hence, a more in-depth analysis is required to identify the interplay among these factors.

This study goes beyond prior research by integrating external institutional influences, particularly the role of schools, into the analysis of students' educational decisions. It investigates how principals, through school-based programs, and guidance counselors, through targeted student assistance, contribute to fostering aspirations for higher education. Enhancing higher education participation is vital for advancing human capital quality. Higher education not only provides individuals with specialized knowledge and competencies but also expands opportunities for contributing to local socio-economic development. This study contributes theoretically by examining the key determinants influencing students' intentions to pursue higher education, and practically by providing strategic recommendations for policymakers and educational institutions to improve students' participation in higher education, thereby fostering a globally competitive generation and supporting sustainable regional development.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, selected to generate comprehensive research outcomes and mitigate methodological constraints inherent in single-method designs (Creswell & Creswell, 2019). This approach was deemed appropriate to develop an in-depth and holistic understanding of the multifaceted factors influencing high school students' interest in pursuing higher education within Bangka Barat Regency. Specifically, a Convergent Mixed Methods Design was employed, enabling the concurrent collection of quantitative and qualitative data, which were subsequently analyzed independently to ensure methodological rigor and data triangulation. Figure 1 presents an overview of the Convergent Mixed Methods Design.

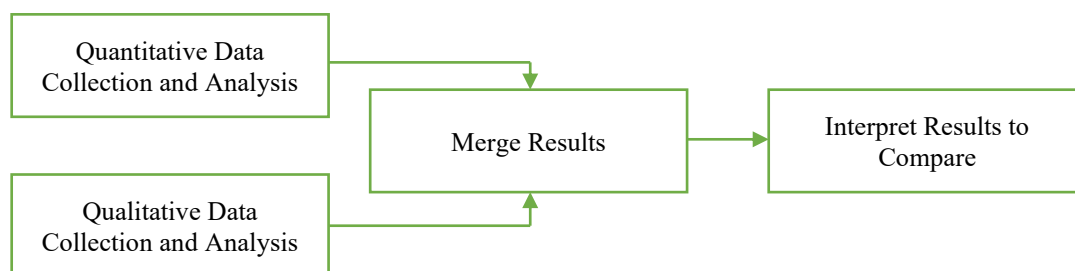


Figure 1. Convergent Mixed Methods Design

The selection of research sites in Bangka Barat Regency was conducted using a purposive sampling technique, a non-probability sampling method in which samples are deliberately chosen to represent specific characteristics of the target population (Gay & Mills, 2019). According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), the total number of high school students in Bangka Barat Regency during the 2023/2024 academic year was 4,241. Schools were therefore selected based on the criterion of having a relatively large student population to ensure that the data obtained could provide a representative overview of the factors influencing students' interest in pursuing higher education. Based on the Ministry of Education's Sekolah Kita database, three schools with the highest student enrollments were identified: SMA N 1 Muntok with 878 students, SMA N 1 Kelapa with 801 students, and SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip with 556 students. These schools were consequently selected as representative institutions for Bangka Barat Regency in this study.

Quantitative data were collected through the distribution of structured questionnaires to a minimum of 30 twelfth-grade students from each selected school. The resulting data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. Meanwhile, qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews, which serve to explore respondents' perspectives in depth until data saturation is achieved, thereby enabling a holistic understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Sugiyono, 2013). The interviews were conducted with guidance and counseling teachers as well as two to three students from each school to obtain diverse insights into students' motivations, challenges, and decision-making processes related to higher education. Following data collection, both quantitative and qualitative datasets were integrated and jointly interpreted to identify areas of convergence and divergence. This analytical process enabled the researchers to draw comprehensive conclusions regarding the key determinant factors influencing high school students' interest in pursuing higher education in Bangka Barat Regency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal variations in the level of students' interest in pursuing higher education across the three senior high schools in Bangka Barat Regency. Based on the quantitative data collected, the distribution of the research sample from the three participating schools is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. General Description of Quantitative Data

No	School	Number of Samples	Male Students	Female Students	Students Intending to Continue to Higher Education	Percentage
1	SMA N 1 Kelapa	30	10	20	20	67%
2	SMA N 1 Muntok	32	17	15	21	66%
3	SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip	35	13	22	18	51%

Based on the data presented above, SMA N 1 Muntok recorded the highest percentage of students expressing an interest in pursuing higher education (66%), followed by SMA N 1 Kelapa (63%) and SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip (51%). Each respondent was asked to identify the primary factors that either support or hinder their decision to continue their studies. These factors encompass family support, economic conditions, and personal motivation (Lubis et al., 2023; Selvia & Fitriani, 2023). Other factors such as students' academic achievement and intelligence level can influence students' motivation to study at a higher level (Abasimi et al., 2025; Akhir &

Suardi, 2024). The findings revealed several underlying reasons that influence students' educational choices. The supporting factors that motivate students to pursue higher education are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Supporting Factors Influencing Students' Decision to Pursue Higher Education

No	Factor	Number of Students	Percentage
1	Desire to obtain better employment opportunities	14	24%
2	Encouragement from parents or teachers	13	22%
3	Personal motivation (broadening knowledge, achieving aspirations, making family proud)	31	53%
4	Stable economic condition	1	2%

As shown in Table 2, personal motivation emerged as the most dominant factor influencing students' intention to pursue higher education, reported by 31 students (53%). This includes aspirations to expand knowledge, achieve career goals, and bring pride to their families. Other motivating factors include the desire for better job prospects (24%), encouragement from parents and teachers (22%), and stable economic conditions (2%). A student's educational achievement to a higher level of education/learning is determined by their internal motivation, starting from studying or wanting to gain a sense of pride from their family (Rahmi, 2025). Students' career achievements are largely determined by their internal motivation. Conversely, the inhibiting factors that discourage students from continuing to tertiary education are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Inhibiting Factors for Students to Continue Education

No	Factor	Number of Students	Percentage
1	Lack of parental support	1	3%
2	High tuition fees	4	11%
3	Poor family economic condition	14	37%
4	Lack of motivation to pursue higher education	6	16%
5	Preference to work immediately after high school	13	34%

As indicated in Table 3, the family's economic condition is identified as the principal barrier to pursuing higher education (37%), followed by students' preference to enter the workforce immediately after graduation (34%), lack of motivation (16%), high tuition costs (11%), and limited parental support (3%). The findings demonstrate that students' interest in higher education in Bangka Barat Regency varies across schools and is influenced by multiple interrelated dimensions. These include structural factors (e.g., family income and parental support), cultural factors (e.g., social environment and local cultural norms that shape students' aspirations), and institutional factors, particularly the role of schools as mediating agents that facilitate students' access to higher education. Parents' economic conditions, cultural environment, and other factors influence students' decisions to pursue higher education (Ha et al., 2023; Manuaba et al., 2024; Rughoobur-Seetah, 2019).

Schools can play a strategic role through career guidance programs, university outreach initiatives, and the dissemination of scholarship information to expand students' awareness and readiness for higher education. Schools should be a vehicle for encouraging students' academic

motivation to continue studying at a higher level educations (Dincer, 2021). These three dimensions structural, cultural, and institutional will be examined in greater depth in the following section to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the determinant factors shaping students' motivation to pursue tertiary education.

1. Structural Factors: The Role of Economic Conditions and Parental Support

Structural factors represent external determinants that significantly influence students' decisions to pursue higher education. These encompass the economic conditions of the family, as well as parental and teacher support. The findings of this study reveal that these three components consistently emerged as the most salient determinants from both teacher and student perspectives. Teachers across all three schools identified financial constraints as a persistent and central challenge. This observation is corroborated by interview data with both teachers and students. At SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip, a teacher explained that *"many parents perceive higher education as financially burdensome, thus directing their children to enter the workforce, even when they are financially capable"* (Teacher, SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip). A similar concern was expressed at SMA N 1 Kelapa, where teachers reported that many parents discourage their children from pursuing university education due to cost considerations, despite having sufficient financial capacity. From the students' standpoint, economic limitations were also strongly emphasized. A student from Simpang Teritip stated, *"If I don't get a scholarship, I'll just work at the fish farm or plantation"* (Student, SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip). In contrast, students from SMA N 1 Muntok demonstrated a more positive attitude, as illustrated by one student's comment: *"My parents are very supportive. Financial issues are not a big problem as long as I choose a major suited to my abilities"* (Student, SMA N 1 Muntok).

Financial constraints, however, can be mitigated through the availability of scholarship programs at the tertiary level, which function as key structural instruments influencing educational opportunities. All three schools actively promote information related to scholarships, such as KIP-K, provincial government scholarships, and various private sponsorships. A teacher from SMA N 1 Kelapa explained that *"scholarship socialization is routinely conducted, including KIP-K, PGRI, BCA, and BSI scholarships"* (Teacher, SMA N 1 Kelapa). Students also acknowledged their strong reliance on scholarships as both a financial and motivational driver. The availability of scholarship opportunities encourages students to plan their higher education pathways more seriously, whereas the absence of such information or access often redirects them toward immediate employment.

In addition to economic and financial support, parental approval emerges as a decisive factor in students' final decisions regarding higher education. A teacher from SMA N 1 Muntok remarked that *"many students aspire to attend university, but the final decision ultimately depends on their parents. Some parents are highly supportive, while others impose restrictions on the choice of study programs"* (Teacher, SMA N 1 Muntok). This observation is echoed by students' testimonies. Loren, a student from SMA N 1 Muntok, stated, *"My parents are very supportive but often remind me about social behavior, especially if I study far from home"* (Student, SMA N 1 Muntok). Conversely, a student from SMA N 1 Kelapa shared, *"Some of my friends want to continue their studies, but their parents tell them it's better to work since college is too expensive"* (Student, SMA N 1 Kelapa). These findings highlight the role of parental endorsement as a form of social legitimacy in educational decision-making. Even highly motivated students may find it difficult to pursue higher education without parental consent.

These findings reaffirm that structural factors function as gatekeeping mechanisms in shaping students' educational trajectories. Parental influence plays a vital role in shaping students' motivation to pursue further studies (Manuaba et al., 2024). Parents can guide their children to find personal motivation to achieve a higher level of education (Elya umi Hanik, 2020). But, family financial capacity and the availability of scholarships remain critical determinants in the decision-making process (Ha et al., 2023). Economic status, scholarship accessibility, and parental approval are interdependent elements that collectively define students' opportunities and constraints. Although limited financial resources do not inherently preclude higher education, perceptions of high tuition costs and limited scholarship awareness often lead students to seek

immediate employment opportunities as reflected in Table 3, where 34% of respondents indicated a preference for working after high school. Parental approval simultaneously serves a dual function: providing both financial and social validation for pursuing higher education. Therefore, structural factors should not be viewed solely as barriers but rather as an interconnected system of determinants that shape both limitations and opportunities in students' pursuit of higher education.

2. Cultural Factors: Social Environment and Local Community Culture

Beyond structural determinants, students' interest in pursuing higher education is profoundly influenced by cultural factors. These factors encompass the social environment including family and peer relationships that shapes individuals' motivation to attain better career prospects through higher education, as well as the broader cultural values embedded within the local community. While structural factors are material and institutional in nature, cultural factors are more closely associated with the values, norms, and worldviews that orient students' perceptions of their future and guide their educational aspirations.

Quantitative findings presented in Tables 2 and 3 indicate that personal motivation constitutes one of the most dominant factors influencing students' decisions to pursue higher education. Such motivation reflects multiple aspirations, including the desire to acquire broader knowledge, achieve self-fulfillment, and bring honor to one's family. These aspirations are substantially shaped by the social environment, particularly familial and peer influences. Parents play a pivotal role in fostering their children's educational motivation (Rahmadhany et al., 2021), while peers act as a crucial external influence that can either encourage or hinder students' decisions to continue their studies (Hafifah et al., 2022). Within the school context, peers often emerge as one of the most significant socializing agents.

Peer influence notably affects students' educational choices. Many respondents acknowledged that their decisions were strongly guided by the actions and preferences of their peers. A student from SMA N 1 Kelapa remarked, *"If many of my friends apply for university, I'll join them; but if most of them start working, I might reconsider"* (Student, SMA N 1 Kelapa). Similarly, a teacher from SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip confirmed, *"Students here are easily influenced by their peers. When some choose to marry early or work on plantations, their friends tend to follow"* (Teacher, SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip). These narratives underscore how peer group dynamics can either strengthen or diminish students' educational aspirations. Peers can influence students' self-confidence in continuing their education (Marlyana et al., 2019). Consequently, both family and peer groups form critical components of the social environment that collectively shape students' motivation to pursue higher education.

Across the three schools studied, variations in student motivation were evident. Many students expressed a strong desire to pursue higher education as a means of securing a better future. As articulated by a student from SMA N 1 Muntok, *"I want to go to college so I can get a better job and not live like my parents who work odd jobs"* (Student, SMA N 1 Muntok). However, this aspiration was not uniformly observed. In SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip, several students demonstrated a more pragmatic orientation. One student stated, *"If I can't go to college, that's fine as long as I can help my parents work"* (Student, SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip). These differing attitudes illustrate the extent to which students' aspirations are context-dependent, reflecting the influence of their immediate social environments. Teachers corroborated these observations. A teacher at SMA N 1 Kelapa noted, *"Students' motivation remains low; they find it difficult to think long-term about their careers. Many simply follow what their peers or parents suggest"* (Teacher, SMA N 1 Kelapa). Such accounts reveal that weak intrinsic motivation constitutes a notable cultural barrier to higher educational attainment.

Beyond the social environment, local cultural norms exert a significant impact on students' educational orientations. In Simpang Teritip, traditional values such as early marriage and a general reluctance to migrate for educational purposes often deter students from continuing their studies. A teacher explained, *"Here, there's still a belief that it's better for girls to marry after high school rather than study away from home"* (Teacher, SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip). In contrast, Muntok, which has a more urbanized and cosmopolitan character, demonstrates a more progressive cultural outlook. Students there are familiar with alumni who have successfully

pursued higher education in other regions, which fosters a more positive attitude toward tertiary education. As one student expressed, *“Many of our seniors study in Bangka Belitung or Java, so I’m motivated to follow their path”* (Student, SMA N 1 Muntok).

Local cultural contexts thus operate as a filter of aspiration. In communities where higher education is valued and regarded as essential for upward mobility, students tend to exhibit stronger motivation. Conversely, in communities that prioritize immediate economic contribution or early marriage, higher education may be perceived as less necessary. These findings align with Rughoobur-Seetah (2019), who emphasizes that community norms and local culture can either support or constrain students’ educational trajectories. Therefore, schools should actively engage with local communities to raise awareness of the long-term socioeconomic benefits of higher education and to cultivate environments that encourage students to pursue tertiary studies.

Cultural factors reveal that the decision to pursue higher education transcends individual choice; it reflects the internalization of prevailing social norms and cultural values. High educational aspirations among certain students are not always mirrored by their peers, indicating that the social environment can alternately suppress or reinforce motivation. In SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip, local traditions emphasizing early marriage or immediate employment tend to reduce students’ interest in pursuing tertiary education. Conversely, the presence of successful alumni in Muntok contributes to a more supportive social climate for higher education. SMA N 1 Kelapa, meanwhile, occupies an intermediary position, where students’ decisions are influenced by both peer behavior and parental guidance. Collectively, these findings affirm that cultural factors through the interplay of social environment, community norms, and local traditions play a decisive role in shaping students’ educational aspirations and trajectories.

3. School Strategies in Promoting the Continuation of Higher Education

Schools serve a pivotal role as institutional agents capable of reinforcing students’ motivation and capacity to pursue higher education. The findings of this study reveal that variations in students’ interest in continuing their studies across schools in West Bangka Regency are influenced not only by structural and cultural factors but also by the strategic initiatives implemented by individual schools. The programs designed and executed by schools function as crucial mediating mechanisms, enabling students to explore, plan, and actualize their aspirations for higher education.

Although all three schools conducted outreach programs related to higher education, their scope and intensity varied considerably. SMA N 1 Muntok implemented the most comprehensive set of strategies, which included inviting alumni as guest speakers, collaborating with universities, and organizing scholarship information sessions. As noted by one teacher, *“We actively invite alumni who are now studying at university so that students can gain a concrete understanding of campus life”* (Teacher, SMA N 1 Muntok). At SMA N 1 Kelapa, outreach activities were primarily facilitated through guidance counseling sessions and homeroom teachers. A teacher explained, *“We provide information about study programs, university admission pathways, and scholarships, but students are still encouraged to seek additional information independently”* (Teacher, SMA N 1 Kelapa). In contrast, SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip also conducted socialization activities; however, these efforts were often constrained by limited institutional networks with higher education institutions. As one teacher stated, *“We would like to invite university representatives more frequently, but access is still limited”* (Teacher, SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip). Based on the interviews, each school implemented distinctive programs tailored to their respective contexts, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. School Programs

No	School	Programs Implemented
1	SMA N 1 Kelapa	Classical counseling, Career Day, <i>Turun Gunung</i> (alumni sharing), scholarship outreach
2	SMA N 1 Muntok	Study planning for 12th-grade students, free UTBK tryouts, campus expo, KIP-K mentorship
3	SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip	Career guidance from 10th grade, home visits, parent association, campus visits

At SMA N 1 Kelapa, a notable strength lies in its classical counseling program, in which teachers guide students' academic and career orientations through large-group counseling sessions conducted four times annually. Additionally, small-group sessions are organized every one to two weeks in 12th-grade classrooms to assist students in determining their academic majors, selecting universities, identifying their talents and interests, and obtaining scholarship information. Counseling has a positive impact on increasing students' interest in continuing to college (Nikmarijal & Ahmad, 2023).

SMA N 1 Muntok distinguishes itself through its commitment to providing financial and academic support, including free UTBK (university entrance test) tryouts for students who intend to pursue tertiary education. Meanwhile, SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip has introduced career guidance programs beginning in the 10th grade, focusing on early talent and interest development to prepare students for potential educational advancement.

Empirical data suggest that schools with more systematic and structured strategic interventions, such as SMA N 1 Kelapa and SMA N 1 Muntok, have succeeded in cultivating an academic climate conducive to higher educational aspirations. Nevertheless, several challenges persist. At SMA N 1 Kelapa, classical counseling activities occasionally face difficulties in acquiring the most current information. As Kefi et al. (2023) emphasize, schools must transform within the digital era to access updated and relevant educational information. Meanwhile, SMA N 1 Muntok continues to face financial limitations, preventing universal participation in the UTBK tryouts.

Despite these constraints, such programs demonstrate exemplary institutional commitment. As argued by Aslindah and Mulawarman (2022), the realization of quality education is closely linked to effective financial management. SMA N 1 Muntok exemplifies good practice by allocating resources to fund free UTBK tryouts for students aspiring to continue their education. However, due to limited financial capacity, participation remains restricted to students who explicitly express their intention to pursue higher education. The combination of intensive outreach and technical support in both SMA N 1 Kelapa and SMA N 1 Muntok has effectively strengthened students' confidence and readiness to continue their studies.

Conversely, SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip has also undertaken commendable initiatives, although the proportion of students intending to pursue tertiary education remains relatively modest. As presented in Table 1, only 51% of students at this school expressed the desire to continue their studies, a figure lower than that of the other two institutions. As discussed in the preceding section on cultural factors, sociocultural norms such as early marriage and reluctance to migrate have limited students' educational aspirations. To address these issues, the school plans to conduct parental engagement and awareness programs emphasizing the long-term benefits of higher education.

These findings reinforce the argument that schools function not only as providers of formal education but also as facilitators of students' educational transitions. Schools that adopt proactive strategies in guiding students play a determinative role in fostering academic motivation (Dincer, 2021), particularly in stimulating the pursuit of advanced knowledge through higher learning. Consequently, school strategies for promoting study continuation emerge as a critical mediating variable that can either amplify or attenuate the influence of structural and cultural factors on students' aspirations for higher education.

4. A New Framework for Understanding Students' Interest in Higher Education

The findings of this study reveal that high school students' interest in pursuing higher education in West Bangka Regency cannot be explained from a single perspective. Instead, students' decisions emerge from a complex interaction among structural factors, cultural factors, and school strategies. This study proposes a new analytical framework for understanding students' aspirations toward higher education by integrating the role of schools as a mediating variable an aspect that has been underrepresented in previous research.

Structural factors, which include family economic conditions, scholarship availability, and parental approval, function as gatekeepers that either enable or restrict students' opportunities to continue to university. Without financial support or social legitimacy from parents, students' aspirations often remain at the level of discourse rather than materializing into action. Family income is a critical determinant of students' educational choices, as many depend on scholarships

to pursue further studies (Abbas et al., 2021). The availability of scholarships expands students' possibilities in selecting preferred universities (Ke et al., 2022). Thus, while economic conditions and financial aid are central components of structural factors, these elements do not operate in isolation they interact closely with cultural factors.

Cultural factors, encompassing the social environment and local cultural values, illustrate how community norms and beliefs shape students' educational orientations. Students' confidence and motivation to pursue higher education are shaped by their social surroundings, including parents, peers, teachers, and the broader community. For example, at SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip, traditional norms favoring early marriage and reluctance to migrate for study tend to weaken students' aspirations to continue to higher education. Conversely, at SMA N 1 Muntok, the presence of successful university alumni has created a more progressive and aspirational social climate, fostering collective motivation toward higher education.

These two factors structural and cultural are deeply intertwined. Parental support (a structural element) often aligns with local cultural values (a cultural element). This interaction resonates with Al-Ali Mustafa et al. (2018), who assert that cultural values, parental occupation, and educational expenses collectively influence students' decisions about pursuing further education. In communities emphasizing practical economic roles, parents are often reluctant to allow their children to attend university. However, in more open and progressive communities, parental support tends to align with children's educational aspirations. 73% of parents fail to provide an understanding of the importance of continuing education, so the role of schools is needed (Nikmarijal & Ahmad, 2023). This study also identifies school strategy as a crucial mediating variable capable of strengthening or mitigating the influence of structural and cultural factors. Schools that actively implement career guidance, talent-interest counseling, university expos, scholarship dissemination, and technical preparation programs such as free entrance test simulations can effectively reduce both economic and cultural barriers. SMA N 1 Muntok serves as a notable example, where initiatives such as UTBK practice tests, alumni engagement, and scholarship information sessions have successfully fostered a positive environment that encourages higher education aspirations. As one student explained, *"We are provided with online tryouts, so we become familiar with university entrance exams"* (Student, SMA N 1 Muntok). This statement illustrates that schools function not only as information providers but also as facilitators of experiential learning that support students' transition to higher education. Conversely, schools with limited strategic interventions, such as SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip, exhibit lower student motivation to pursue tertiary studies. A teacher stated, *"We would like universities to visit our school to help socialize higher education opportunities to parents and the community"* (Teacher, SMA N 1 Simpang Teritip). This finding underscores that without active institutional engagement, structural and cultural barriers remain difficult to overcome.

Drawing on the field findings, this study advances a conceptual framework for understanding students' interest in pursuing higher education. This framework integrates three interrelated dimensions: (1) Structural Factors, which serve as the material foundation and source of social legitimacy encompassing family economic conditions, scholarship availability, and parental support; (2) Cultural Factors, which shape students' orientations and motivations through aspirations, peer influence, and local cultural norms; and (3) School Strategies, which operate as mediating variables that can either reinforce or attenuate the influence of structural and cultural conditions. Within this framework, students' interest in higher education emerges not merely as a product of familial and cultural interactions but as a socially constructed process mediated by schools as institutional actors.

The distinct contribution of this study lies in its inclusion of the school's role within the analytical model of determinants shaping students' educational aspirations. Prior research has largely emphasized the student perspective, focusing on individual motivation or economic barriers. In contrast, the findings of this study demonstrate that schools perform a pivotal function in mitigating structural and cultural constraints. Schools are positioned not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as agents of social transformation, capable of cultivating a counter-culture to challenge prevailing community norms that discourage higher education. For instance, in contexts where early marriage is culturally normalized, schools can invite successful alumni as

role models to reshape student and community perceptions. Concurrently, schools can provide structural interventions through scholarship facilitation, career guidance, and preparatory programs. Hence, schools emerge as critical institutions in cultivating higher education aspirations within socio-economically constrained environments.

This proposed framework carries important implications for educational policy and practice, particularly in regional and peripheral contexts. First, interventions aimed at enhancing students' aspirations for higher education must move beyond the provision of financial aid, emphasizing instead the institutional capacity of schools as facilitators of transition. Second, guidance and outreach initiatives should be culturally adaptive, ensuring sensitivity to local norms while promoting inclusive educational values. Third, schools should strengthen partnerships with higher education institutions to broaden students' access to accurate and credible information regarding academic pathways and opportunities. Through this integrative perspective, students' aspirations to pursue higher education in West Bangka Regency can be understood as the outcome of a dynamic interplay between structural, cultural, and institutional forces. By foregrounding the mediating role of schools, this framework enriches theoretical and policy discussions on educational access, equity, and human capital development, particularly in archipelagic and rural regions that face distinctive socio-economic and cultural challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that high school students' interest in pursuing higher education in West Bangka Regency is shaped by the dynamic interaction among structural, cultural, and institutional (school) factors. Structural factors such as family economic conditions, scholarship availability, and parental support serve as key determinants that either enable or constrain students' access to higher education. In parallel, cultural factors comprising personal aspirations, peer influence, and local cultural norms play a pivotal role in forming students' motivation and educational orientation. A significant contribution of this study lies in the identification of the school's strategic role as an intermediary variable capable of amplifying or mitigating the effects of structural and cultural conditions. Through initiatives such as socialization programs, counseling and career guidance, technical support, and the engagement of alumni as role models, schools can actively influence students' aspirations and decisions regarding higher education. The findings underscore the importance of adopting an integrative analytical framework that positions schools as strategic agents in mediating structural and cultural barriers to higher education. Strengthening the institutional capacity of schools to design and implement sustainable educational programs, expanding partnerships with universities, and developing culturally responsive interventions are essential strategies to enhance students' access to tertiary education. By doing so, schools can play a transformative role in promoting educational equity and long-term human capital development, particularly in regions with socio-economic and cultural constraints. This study has several limitations that should be considered, as it only involved teachers and students as respondents. In fact, the findings indicate that parents play a significant role in influencing students' decisions to pursue higher education. Therefore, this study has not yet accommodated the perspectives of parents. Based on this limitation, future research is recommended to incorporate parents' perspectives as an additional variable in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing students' intentions to pursue higher education. Furthermore, future studies may also explore in greater depth school-based programs that are effective in enhancing students' learning motivation, which in turn is expected to contribute to improving the overall quality of graduates.

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