

Exploring Motivational Factors Influencing Senior High School Students' Aspirations Toward Higher Education: Evidence from Sukamara Regency, Indonesia

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Abstract: This study investigates the internal and external factors associated with senior high school students' interest in pursuing higher education in Sukamara Regency, Indonesia. Data were collected from 277 Grade XI and XII students across 14 schools using a structured questionnaire. Grounded in Expectancy-Value and Self-Determination Theories, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) revealed seven key motivational dimensions, with Aspirational Drive and Confidence and Initiative emerging as dominant factors. Chi-square analyses demonstrated a significant, medium-sized association between gender and higher education interest, with female students displaying stronger aspirations ($p < .001$, Cramér's $V = 0.254$). While parental education and school type did not show significant categorical differences, a significant monotonic trend indicated that student interest tends to increase with higher parental education levels. The findings highlight strong intrinsic motivation among students in this region, despite external challenges. Policy implications emphasize enhancing institutional credibility, strengthening familial support systems, and expanding accessible higher education infrastructure.

Keywords: higher education aspirations, student motivation, exploratory factor analysis, gender and education, educational equity

1. Introduction

The pursuit of higher education stands as a pivotal factor in shaping individual trajectories and catalyzing socio-economic advancement on both global and national scales [12], [32]. Globally, access to higher education is increasingly recognized as a fundamental pillar for fostering innovation, economic competitiveness, and social mobility, thereby enabling nations to thrive in an ever-evolving landscape [43]. In the Indonesian context, higher education plays a particularly critical role in a nation characterized by its vast archipelago, diverse population, and ambitious development goals [41]. The

Indonesian government has made considerable strides in recent decades to increase access through various initiatives, including the establishment of new universities, the provision of scholarships, and affirmative action policies [4] targeting disadvantaged groups. These efforts align with the national imperative to enhance human capital, reduce disparities, and propel Indonesia towards becoming a globally competitive knowledge-based economy [25]. Despite these advancements, significant challenges remain in ensuring equitable access across the archipelago, particularly for students from remote

and underserved regions, as well as those from low socio-economic backgrounds [1], [20].

Despite increasing high school enrollment in Indonesia, disparities in access to higher education persist across regions and socioeconomic strata, posing a significant impediment to realizing the nation's developmental aspirations [55], [20], [40], [47]. These inequalities underscore the need to understand the factors influencing senior high school students' decisions about higher education. Addressing these disparities constitutes a critical imperative for Indonesia [47], necessitating a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors that influence students' decisions, particularly in developing regions such as Sukamara Regency, where unique socio-economic and geographical contexts shape educational opportunities [27].

Understanding the factors associated with senior high school students' decision-making is essential for policymakers seeking to promote equitable access. Grounded in Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this decision-making process is shaped by students' perceived utility and attainment value of education [49], alongside their psychological needs for competence and relatedness through familial and social support [14]. Such theoretical framing is particularly relevant in regions like Sukamara Regency, where local dynamics and structural barriers significantly interact with students' internal motivations and perceptions concerning higher education [21].

The Indonesian government has introduced various educational reforms to increase student retention and encourage progression to higher education, alongside policies to ensure equitable access for disadvantaged backgrounds [20], [23]. This approach seeks to motivate students to continue their education beyond secondary school, particularly in areas like Sukamara. However, despite these efforts, socio-economic disparities remain a significant factor associated with students' aspirations. Research suggests that family background [18], [32], school resources [34], [55], [50], and peer influences [51], [52], [17] create a complex landscape that affects students' educational trajectories in Indonesia.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the motivational factors influencing senior high school students' interest in pursuing higher education in Sukamara Regency, Indonesia. Specifically, it examines the relationships between gender, parental education, and school type in relation to students' aspirations. Furthermore, the study seeks to identify key factors of higher education interest using Exploratory Factor Analysis, thereby offering empirical insights to inform educational policy and practice in rural settings.

2. The Comprehensive Theoretical Basis

2.1. Global Trends in Higher Education

The global landscape of higher education is undergoing a transformative shift, characterized by increasing demand, expanding access, and growing recognition of its pivotal role in driving socio-economic development [54]. Globally,

governments and policymakers are increasingly prioritizing higher education as a key driver of economic competitiveness, social mobility, and innovation [35]. The global trend towards massification of higher education has led to increased participation rates across various regions, with a growing number of students pursuing post-secondary education [10], [58] with the world Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio rising significantly between 1995 and 2015 [42].

Furthermore, the integration of technology into teaching and learning is revolutionizing the delivery of higher education, offering new opportunities for online learning, blended learning, and personalized instruction [6]. These dynamics have significant implications for national education systems, requiring strategic adaptation and innovation to meet the evolving needs of students, employers, and society. Higher education has become a vital engine for knowledge creation, innovation, and human capital development, playing a crucial role in shaping the future of nations.

2.2. Internal Motivational Factors

A wide range of interrelated factors contribute to students' decisions to pursue higher education. First, internal factors such as personal aspirations, cognitive and emotional mechanisms, and the cultivation of self-identity play a significant role. For instance, the integration of cultural identity in teaching positively influences self-perception and reduces anxiety, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation for higher education [14]. Moreover, the perception of educational value is heavily contingent upon students' assessments of both monetary and non-monetary costs as well as their personal attitudes toward education and career prospects [49]. These internal processes are further conceptualized within a three-stage college-choice process that begins in early adolescence, suggesting that decisions about higher education are gradual and deeply embedded in personal development [9].

2.3 External Influences: Family and Institutions

Additionally, family influence and social capital are pivotal determinants in the pursuit of higher education. Empirical evidence indicates that parental support, encouragement, and the level of parental education significantly shape students' educational aspirations and choices [11]. In addition to family, the broader social environment including the institutional habits of schools, peer influence, and societal expectations collectively reinforces family messages and contributes to decision-making processes [53]. This interplay of social factors often results in a form of cultural capital that not only guides educational attainment but also helps explain persistent social class differences observed in higher education participation [5]. Another influential dimension stems from the efforts of higher education institutions themselves. With the proliferation of private and for-profit institutions, strategic marketing initiatives have become instrumental in shaping prospective students' perceptions about quality and value [31]. Such strategies include emphasizing aspects such as institutional reputation, program diversity, and the physical and cultural environments surrounding the university (e.g., city image) [49]. Furthermore, considerations related to

employment opportunities and better career prospects sometimes associated with obtaining international or overseas degrees also provide a strong rationale for pursuing higher education, particularly in contexts where economic rationality is paramount [37], [36].

2.4. Rural-Urban Disparities

Remote areas often face significant challenges in ensuring equitable access to higher education, resulting in lower participation rates compared to urban centers. This disparity stems from a confluence of factors, including limited access to quality secondary education, inadequate infrastructure, socio-economic constraints, and a lack of awareness regarding the benefits of higher education. Moreover, the cost of higher education, including tuition fees, living expenses, and transportation, can be prohibitive for students from low-income families in remote areas, further exacerbating the problem of low participation rates. This can create a cycle of poverty, which can be difficult to break [63].

These challenges collectively contribute to a disparity in educational opportunities and outcomes, hindering the socio-economic mobility of individuals residing in these underserved regions [63]. Addressing these barriers requires targeted interventions, such as scholarships, financial aid programs, and the establishment of local higher education institutions, to promote greater access and participation in higher education among students in remote areas [39], [46]. Disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes, stemming from the imbalance between urban and rural education investment and teaching quality, exacerbate challenges of access [13]. Inequalities in education access, resource provision and quality education between regions are tremendously phenomenal, and it has progressively widened [24]. The lower participation rate of students in rural areas compared to urban [48], [30] poses a significant obstacle to improving the skills and competitiveness of the local workforce [16], [64] which ultimately hinders the economic development and social mobility in rural communities [63]. This gap in educational attainment can perpetuate cycles of poverty and limit opportunities for economic advancement in remote regions.

3. Methodology

This research employed a descriptive quantitative design to explore the motivational dimensions associated with senior high school students' interest in pursuing higher education in Sukamara Regency, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. A descriptive approach is well-suited for systematically examining attitudes, motivations, and contextual factors without manipulating variables, thus allowing the researcher to observe naturally occurring patterns within the population [15]. The design supports the identification of underlying trends and potential disparities based on student background, school type, and geographic location.

The study was conducted in Sukamara Regency, a region in the southwestern part of Central Kalimantan with developing higher education infrastructure. The target population included Grade XI and XII students from a range of secondary

school's general high schools (SMA), vocational schools (SMK), and Islamic high schools (MA). Using non-probability purposive sampling, 277 students were selected from 14 schools representing various geographic subdistricts and educational profiles. Although non-random, this method was considered appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the study and logistical constraints.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from school authorities, and informed assent was obtained from all student participants. For participants under 18 years of age, parental consent was facilitated. Data confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire consisting of 29 close-ended statements measured on a four-point Likert scale ("Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree"). The items were grouped into four thematic dimensions: (1) Personal aspirations, (2) Socio-economic and family background, (3) Perceptions of higher education access, and (4) External influences. The questionnaire was administered in Bahasa Indonesia and reviewed by three education experts for content and language clarity. Four negatively worded items (Q5, Q7, Q18, Q21) were reverse coded prior to all analyses to ensure directional consistency. The instrument's reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a value of 0.915, indicating excellent internal consistency [56].

Students' interest in higher education was measured using a single self-report item with five response categories (Very Low, Low, Moderate, High, Very High). For inferential analyses, responses were dichotomized into "Interested" (combining "High" and "Very High") and "Less Interested" (combining "Moderate," "Low," and "Very Low"), following established practices for handling skewed ordinal outcomes in educational aspiration research.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 25.0. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the distribution of student interest and background variables. To explore the underlying structure of the Likert-scale items, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) conducted using Maximum Likelihood (ML) extraction with Varimax rotation. ML was chosen to provide statistical tests of model fit, while Varimax was retained to produce a conservative, orthogonal baseline of distinct motivational dimensions, acknowledging that oblique rotation could be considered in future studies. Seven factors with eigenvalues above 1.0 were extracted, explaining 53.32% of the total variance. Factor scores for each dimension were computed as the means of the items loading on that factor, enabling straightforward interpretation of subscale means.

To examine associations between categorical variables (gender, parental education, and school type) and students' higher education aspirations, Chi-Square tests of independence were performed. Statistical significance was evaluated at 0.05 level, and Cramér's V was reported to assess effect sizes, distinguishing practical importance from statistical significance. Given the cross-sectional and purposively sampled nature of the data, causal language was avoided; findings are reported as observed associations and motivational dimensions rather than associated factors or

determinants.

4. Result

4.1. Respondent Profile

A total of 277 senior high school students participated in this study, with a gender distribution of 52.35% female ($n = 145$) and 47.65% male ($n = 132$), reflecting balanced representation. The participants were drawn from 14 senior high schools across five sub-districts in Sukamara Regency, Central Kalimantan. Notably, most respondents (73.83%) resided in the central Sukamara District, indicating a concentration of educational access and infrastructure in the urban center.

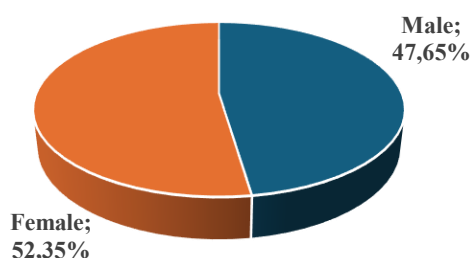


Figure 1 Gender Distribution of Participants

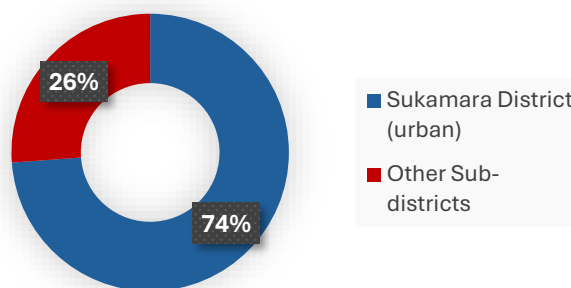


Figure 2 Distribution of Participants by Location

In terms of socioeconomic background, the educational attainment of students' parents revealed important insights into household educational capital. The parental education variable was constructed by identifying the highest educational attainment between father and mother for each student, creating a single "Household Highest Parental Education" indicator. The distribution revealed that 39.71% had parents who completed senior high school, 22% completed primary school, 19% completed junior high school, and 18.77% had at least one parent with a bachelor's degree or higher. A small proportion (0.36%) reported parents with no formal education. These statistics suggest that a significant proportion of respondents are potential first-generation college students, a factor that can influence motivation and access to post-secondary pathways.

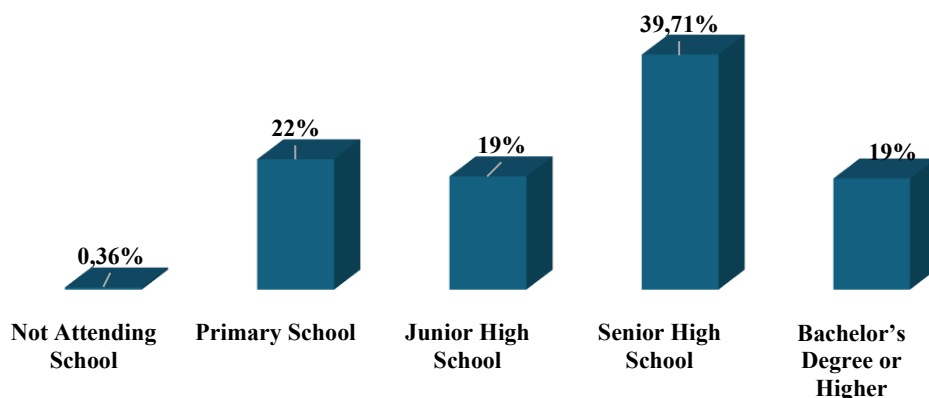


Figure 3 Parental Education Levels Distribution

4.2 Interest in Higher Education

Student responses revealed a strong desire to pursue higher education. The interest variable was operationalized from a single self-report item with five response categories (Very Low, Low, Moderate, High, Very High), which were subsequently dichotomized for inferential analyses into "Interested" (combining "High" and "Very High") and "Less Interested" (combining "Moderate," "Low," and "Very Low").

Results showed that 90.98% of participants expressed either "high" or "very high" levels of interest in continuing their education after high school. Specifically, 59.21%

indicated "high interest," while 31.77% reported "very high interest." A small proportion (9.02%) expressed "moderate" interest, and no respondents reported "low" or "very low" interest. These results underscore a widespread aspirational drive among students in Sukamara Regency, despite the socioeconomic constraints typically associated with rural areas.

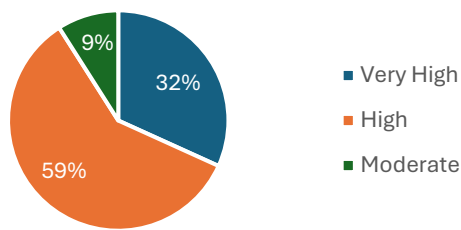


Figure 4 The level of Participants' Interest to Higher Education

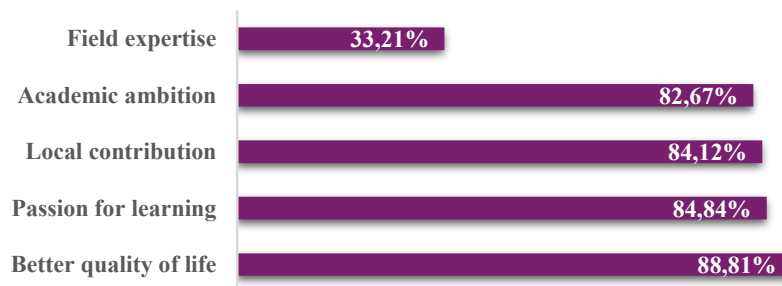


Figure 5 Internal Motivational Factors Influencing Higher Education Aspirations.

External influences were also significant in shaping student aspirations. Teacher encouragement and the desire to make family members proud were the most commonly cited, each endorsed by 89.53% of respondents. Parental support followed closely at 84.48%, alongside inspiration from family members who had completed higher education (53.43%) and

peer encouragement (52.35%). Although financial concerns were acknowledged by 36.82% of students, they were not the most dominant concern. Additionally, only 10.11% of students indicated that proximity to a university significantly influenced their decision, suggesting a willingness to pursue higher education regardless of geographic barriers.

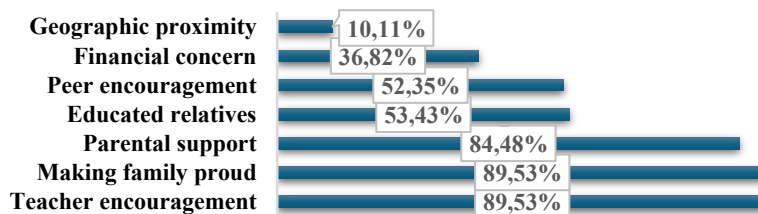


Figure 6 External Motivational Factors Internal Motivational Factors Influencing Higher Education Aspirations.

4.4 Factor Analysis of Student Motivation

To examine the underlying dimensions of student motivation, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted on 29 Likert-scale items using Maximum Likelihood extraction with Varimax rotation. Four negatively worded items (Q5, Q7, Q18, Q21) were reverse coded prior to all analyses to ensure directional consistency. The results revealed a seven-factor solution that together explained 53.32% of the total variance in responses. Sampling adequacy was confirmed ($KMO = 0.910$), and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 3953.22$, $p < .001$), validating the factorability of the dataset.

The extracted factors include: (1) Aspirational Drive: capturing long-term ambitions and the desire for life

improvement (15 items); (2) Institutional Trust and Access: reflecting confidence in educational infrastructure and perceived accessibility (2 items); (3) Community and Social Responsibility: denoting a motivation to contribute to regional development (1 item); (4) Perceived Barriers or Challenges: encompassing financial difficulties and family responsibilities (3 items); (5) Personal Readiness: capturing psychological enablers of academic motivation (2 items); (6) Social/Family Influence: reflecting interpersonal support (3 items); and (7) Confidence and Initiative: capturing self-efficacy beliefs (2 items). Items with factor loadings below 0.30 were excluded from interpretation, and two items (Q5, Q21) showed low communalities and cross-loadings.

Reliability coefficients for each subscale were calculated separately. The Cronbach's alpha values were as follows: Aspirational Drive ($\alpha = 0.932$), Institutional Trust and Access ($\alpha = 0.827$), Personal Readiness ($\alpha = 0.726$), Social/Family Influence ($\alpha = 0.706$), and a combined factor of

Perceived Barriers and Financial Concerns ($\alpha = 0.578$, 5 items). Community and Social Responsibility was represented by a single item (Q13); thus, Cronbach's alpha was not applicable. While the alpha for the combined barriers factor is below the conventional 0.70 threshold, it is considered acceptable for exploration research involving reverse-coded items. The overall instrument reliability remained excellent ($\alpha = 0.915$). Factor scores were computed as the mean of items loading on each respective factor (with loadings ≥ 0.30), enabling straightforward interpretation of subscale means while maintaining equal weighting across items. Items with low communalities and cross-loadings (Q5, Q21) were excluded from factor score computation.

To complement the factor extraction, descriptive statistics were calculated for each motivational factor. The highest mean score was observed for Social/Family Influence ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.44$), followed closely by Aspirational Drive ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.49$), indicating that interpersonal support and personal ambition are the strongest drivers among students. Conversely, Community & Social Responsibility ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.69$) and the combined Perceived Barriers & Financial Concerns dimension ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.45$) had the lowest mean scores. Overall, the distribution of mean scores reflects a predominantly intrinsic and socially supported motivation pattern among students in Sukamara Regency.

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations of Student Motivation Factors ($n = 277$)

Factor Dimension	Number of Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
Social/Family Influence	3	3.18	0.44
Aspirational Drive	15	3.15	0.49
Personal Readiness	2	2.82	0.60
Institutional Trust and Access	2	2.79	0.61
Perceived Barriers & Financial Concerns (Combined)	5	2.78	0.45
Community & Social Responsibility	1	2.64	0.69

4.5 Inferential Analysis of Group Differences

Relationship between Gender and Interest in Higher Education

This study examined the relationship between student gender and interest in pursuing higher education. The cross-tabulation revealed notable differences in the proportions of interest across genders (table 2). Among the 132 male students surveyed, 110 (83.3%) expressed interest in pursuing higher education, while 22 (16.7%) were categorized as less interested. In contrast, among the 145 female students, 142 (97.9%) reported strong interest in continuing to higher

education, and only 3 (2.1%) fell into the less interested category.

To statistically evaluate this relationship, a Chi-square test of independence was conducted. The test yielded a Pearson Chi-square value of 17.933 with 1 degree of freedom, and the result was highly significant ($p < .001$). All assumptions of the Chi-square test were met, with 0 cells (0.0%) having expected counts less than 5 (minimum expected count = 11.91). The effect size, measured by Cramér's V, was 0.254, indicating a medium-strength association between gender and educational aspiration. This suggests that the observed gender difference is not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful.

Table 2 Association between Gender and Student Interest

Variable	Interested	Less Interested	Total
Male	110 (83.3%)	22 (16.7%)	132
Female	142 (97.9%)	3 (2.1%)	145
Total	252	25	277

Test Statistic	Value	df	p-value	Cramér's V
Pearson Chi-Square	17.933	1	< .001	0.254
Continuity Correction	16.199	1	< .001	
Likelihood Ratio	17.939	1	< .001	
Fisher's Exact Test	—	—	< .001	
Linear-by-Linear Association	17.868	1	< .001	



Relationship between Parental Education and Student Interest

This study revisited the question of whether students' interest in continuing to higher education is influenced by the level of parental education. The cross-tabulation revealed the following distribution: among students whose parents did not attend school, 1 (100%) was interested and 0 were less

interested (figure 7). In the primary school category, 52 out of 61 students (85.2%) expressed interest, while 9 (14.8%) were less interested. Of those whose parents had completed junior high school, 45 students (84.9%) were interested and 8 (15.1%) were not. Among students with parents who had completed senior high school, 104 (94.5%) were interested and 6 (5.5%) were less interested. Finally, in the bachelor's degree or higher category, 50 students (96.2%) were interested and 2 (3.8%) were less interested

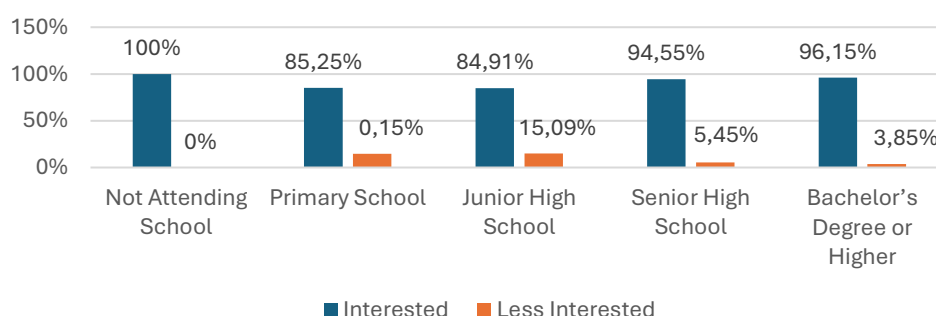


Figure 7 Participants' Interest Level by Parental Education Background

Although these distributions suggest a slight upward trend in interest as parental education increases, the Pearson Chi-square test (Table 3) did not reach statistical significance, $\chi^2(4, N = 277) = 8.322, p = .080$. The Likelihood Ratio test similarly indicated a near-significant association, $\chi^2 = 8.376, p = .079$. However, the Linear-by-Linear Association test was significant, $\chi^2 = 6.436, p = .011$, implying a monotonic trend

that is, student interest in higher education tends to increase with higher levels of parental education.

One notable limitation is that four cells (40%) had expected counts less than 5, with the minimum expected frequency as low as 0.09. This violation of Chi-square assumptions suggests that the Pearson result should be interpreted with caution, as sparse data in several categories may reduce the power of the test. The significant Linear-by-Linear trend, however, provides more reliable evidence of an ordinal association.

Table 3 Association between Parental Education Level and Student Interest

Parental Education	Interested	Less Interested	Total
No formal education	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	1
Primary School	52 (85.2%)	9 (14.8%)	61
Junior High School	45 (84.9%)	8 (15.1%)	53
Senior High School	104 (94.5%)	6 (5.5%)	110
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	50 (96.2%)	2 (3.8%)	52
Total	252	25	277

Test Statistic	Value	df	p-value	Cramér's V
Pearson Chi-Square	8.322	4	.080	0.173
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.436	1	.011	-

Relationship between Types of School and Student Interest

A Chi-square test of independence was conducted to determine whether students' interest in pursuing higher education varied significantly based on the type of school they

attended. The school types in this analysis included SMA (general senior high school), SMK (vocational high school), and MA (Islamic senior high school). Students' interest was previously recorded into two categories: "Interested" (a combination of "High" and "Very High" interest) and "Less Interested" (representing "Moderate", "Low", and "Very Low" interest). The test involved 276 valid cases.

Descriptive results (figure 8) showed that students across all three types of schools expressed high aspirations to

continue their studies at the tertiary level. Among students attending SMA, 133 (88.7%) reported being interested, while 17 (11.3%) were less interested. For SMK students, the proportion was slightly higher, with 65 (92.9%) expressing interest and 5 (7.1%) reporting less interest. The highest proportion was observed among MA students, of whom 53 (94.6%) were interested, and only 3 (5.4%) were not.

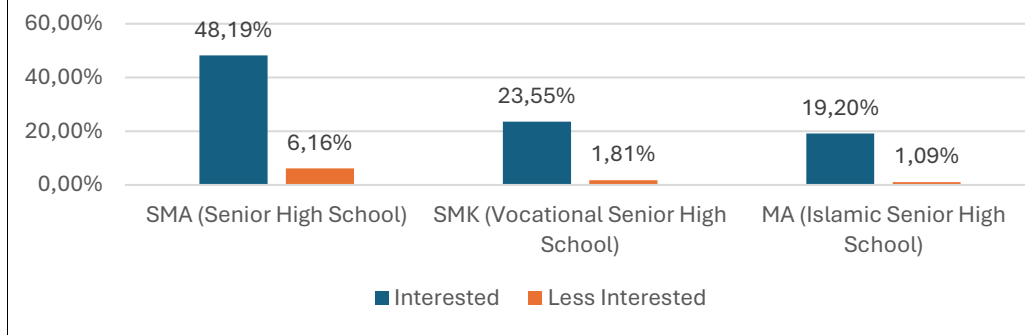


Figure 8 Participants' Interest Level by Types of School

Despite these apparent differences in proportions, the Chi-square analysis (table 4) found no statistically significant relationship between school type and interest level, $\chi^2(2, N = 276) = 2.186$, $p = .335$, Cramér's $V = 0.089$. All cells met the expected count assumptions, with the smallest expected

frequency being 5.07. The small effect size (Cramér's $V = 0.089$) indicates that school type explains very little variance in students' educational aspirations, suggesting that motivational factors transcend curriculum tracks in this context.

Table 4 Association between Type of Secondary School and Student Interest

Type of School	Interested	Less Interested	Total	
SMA (General High School)	133 (88.7%)	17 (11.3%)	150	
SMK (Vocational High School)	65 (92.9%)	5 (7.1%)	70	
MA (Islamic Senior High School)	53 (94.6%)	3 (5.4%)	56	
Total	251	25	276	
Test Statistic	Value	df	p-value	Cramér's V
Pearson Chi-Square	2.186	2	.335	0.089

5. Discussion

This study reveals a strong and widespread interest among senior high school students in Sukamara Regency in pursuing higher education. The finding that over 90% of respondents expressed either high or very high interest underscores a positive aspirational climate, particularly significant given that the majority come from families with limited formal education. This suggests that motivational dimensions among students in this region are shaped by a combination of internal aspirations and external support systems.

Viewed through the lens of Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT), the dominant presence of the "Aspirational Drive" factor indicates that students perceive high utility and attainment value in higher education as a pathway for upward social mobility [33]. Education is perceived not merely as a route to employment, but as a meaningful investment in long-

term life improvement. Concurrently, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a complementary interpretation: the emergence of "Institutional Trust and Access" as a distinct factor suggests that students' psychological needs for competence and environmental support are being met, particularly through the recent establishment of the PSDKU Polnep campus in Sukamara. Such institutional expansion appears to strengthen the community's overall confidence in formal education systems and reduce perceived geographic barriers, resonating with findings by [8] on how institutional proximity reshapes educational aspirations.

"Community and Social Responsibility" emerged as another key motivational dimension, pointing to a collective orientation where students are motivated by the desire to contribute to regional development. This mirrors findings by [59], who observed similar trends among youth in developing regions, suggesting that educational aspirations are often embedded in a broader sense of civic duty. Policymakers and

educators can build on this sense of local commitment by designing service-learning programs or community-based scholarships that reinforce this motivation.

Factors such as "Perceived Barriers," including financial limitations and family obligations, are consistent with structural challenges commonly experienced in regions with developing educational infrastructure. These findings point to the importance of mitigating such barriers through targeted interventions like tuition waivers, transport subsidies, and parental engagement programs. The presence of "Confidence and Initiative," "Social/Family Influence," and "Personal Readiness" further illustrates that internal psychological resources and interpersonal encouragement are vital in shaping educational decisions.

Regarding demographic associations, the gender-based Chi-square analysis revealed that female students were significantly more likely than male students to express a strong interest in higher education ($\chi^2 = 17.933$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = 0.254$, a medium effect size). This aligns with global trends reported by [57] and [7], which show increasing female participation in post-secondary education. In Indonesia, similar shifts are observable, with young women increasingly outperforming men in secondary and tertiary enrollment rates. This trend may be associated with changing gender norms, enhanced female role models in education, and stronger academic engagement among young women. On the other hand, the relatively lower interest among male students may reflect socio-economic pressures to enter the workforce earlier or cultural norms that prioritize male economic roles over formal education. Programs tailored to male youth such as school-to-college mentorship, exposure to successful male graduates, or vocational pathways linked to tertiary education could help address this gap.

The association between parental education and student interest did not reach statistical significance in the Pearson Chi-square test ($p = .080$), likely due to sparse cells (40% of expected counts below 5). However, the Linear-by-Linear Association test revealed a significant monotonic trend ($p = .011$), indicating that student interest tends to increase with higher levels of parental education. This partial pattern supports literature such as [38], which highlights how parental educational attainment is associated with students' academic values and aspirations. In the context of Sukamara, the modest overall effect may also reflect the role of collective community influences (e.g., school initiatives, public campaigns) that appear to partially compensate for lower parental education and encouraging signs that local systems can disrupt traditional cycles of educational disadvantage.

Interestingly, no significant association was found between school type (SMA, SMK, or MA) and student interest ($\chi^2 = 2.186$, $p = .335$, Cramér's $V = 0.089$, a small effect size). This suggests that regardless of curriculum focus, whether academic, vocational, or religious students in Sukamara share similar aspirations. This uniformity may be associated with shared values across school environments, strong teacher encouragement, or broad-based policy communication promoting higher education as a regional development priority.

This study is not without limitations. First, it relies on cross-

sectional, purposively sampled data, limiting causal inferences. Second, students are nested within 14 schools, but the analysis treats all 277 observations as independent; school-level clustering may affect standard errors and should be modeled in future research. Third, 73.83% of respondents resided in the central Sukamara District, meaning findings should be interpreted as representative of students in this semi-urban center rather than generalized to all rural Indonesian students. Fourth, the study relies on self-reported data, which could be influenced by social desirability bias. Fifth, the highly imbalanced outcome variable (only 25 of 277 students classified as "Less Interested") precluded the use of complex multivariable analysis, and findings from the Chi-square analyses should be interpreted with caution. Future research could employ longitudinal methods to explore how aspirations evolve from high school into post-secondary pathways, use multilevel modeling to account for school-level clustering, and examine how institutional interventions affect actual enrollment and persistence.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes meaningfully to the understanding of educational motivation in underrepresented regions. It highlights the importance of designing multi-dimensional, context-sensitive strategies that do not only focus on improving access but also on sustaining and enhancing motivation. Given Indonesia's ongoing efforts to expand higher education access across its archipelago, studies like this provide a valuable lens for ensuring that regional policies are informed by local realities and student perspectives.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes valuable insights into the factors associated with senior high school students' aspirations toward higher education in Sukamara Regency, Indonesia. Despite socioeconomic and geographic limitations, most students demonstrated high or very high interest in continuing their education. The identification of seven motivational dimensions including Aspirational Drive, Confidence and Initiative, and Institutional Trust and Access highlight the complex interplay between internal ambition, perceived opportunities, and social influences.

Gender emerged as a significant factor associated with aspiration levels, with female students showing considerably higher levels of interest compared to their male counterparts. Although parental education and school type did not reach statistical significance in categorical comparisons, a significant monotonic trend suggested that student interest tends to increase with higher parental education levels. These findings suggest that intrinsic motivation and community-driven responsibility are prominent features even in contexts of material scarcity.

Based on these findings, policymakers and educational planners should prioritize not only increasing the number of accessible higher education institutions but also fostering trust in these institutions and reinforcing familial and community support. Special attention should be directed at developing targeted interventions aimed at engaging male students, who appear to show relatively lower levels of aspiration.

Furthermore, longitudinal research is recommended to track how initial aspirations translate into actual enrollment and success in higher education. Expanding research across other regions in Indonesia would also provide a more comprehensive understanding of regional variations and inform strategies to achieve greater educational equity.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest related to this research or the publication of this article.

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