

## Factors influencing vocational students' interest in pursuing higher education

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### *Abstrak*

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui: (1) minat siswa SMK Batik 2 Surakarta dalam melanjutkan ke jenjang pendidikan tinggi; (2) faktor internal dan eksternal yang memengaruhi minat siswa SMK dalam melanjutkan ke jenjang pendidikan tinggi; (3) kendala yang dihadapi siswa dalam melanjutkan ke jenjang pendidikan tinggi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus yang dilaksanakan di SMK Batik 2 Surakarta. Informan penelitian berjumlah 15 orang yang terdiri dari siswa kelas XII jurusan Manajemen Perkantoran dan Layanan Bisnis, guru, serta orang tua siswa yang dipilih melalui teknik purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi terhadap kegiatan belajar mengajar dan lingkungan sekolah, serta analisis dokumen terhadap data alumni sekolah dan kajian terdahulu yang relevan. Uji validitas data dengan triangulasi sumber, waktu, dan metode, serta member checking. Teknik analisis data menggunakan model Miles dan Huberman yang terdiri dari tahap pengumpulan data, reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa: (1) minat siswa SMK Batik 2 Surakarta dalam melanjutkan ke jenjang pendidikan tinggi menunjukkan keberagaman, beberapa diantaranya memilih melanjutkan pendidikan tinggi dan ada pula yang cenderung memutuskan bekerja setelah lulus; (2) minat siswa untuk melanjutkan pendidikan tinggi dipengaruhi oleh faktor internal (motivasi pribadi dan prestasi belajar) serta faktor eksternal (lingkungan sosial, dan keterkaitan antara jurusan SMK dengan program studi di perguruan tinggi); (3) kendala yang dihadapi siswa dalam melanjutkan pendidikan tinggi antara lain, keterbatasan finansial keluarga dan rendahnya efikasi diri dalam menghadapi tantangan akademik.*

*Kata kunci: faktor eksternal dan internal; kualitatif; minat; siswa SMK; studi lanjut*

### **Abstract**

This study aims to investigate: (1) the interest of students at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta in pursuing higher education; (2) the internal and external factors influencing vocational high school students' interest in continuing to higher education; and (3) the obstacles students face in pursuing higher education. This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design conducted at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta.

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**Citation in APA style:** Mufidah, A.F., & Ninghardjanti, P. (2025). Factors influencing vocational students' interest in pursuing higher education. *Jurnal Informasi dan Komunikasi Administrasi Perkantoran*, 9(4), 378-386. <https://dx.doi.org/10.20961/jikap.v9i4.103089>

The study involved 15 informants consisting of Grade XII students majoring in Office Management and Business Services, teachers, and parents, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations of teaching and learning activities and school environment, and document analysis of alumni records and relevant previous studies. Data validity was ensured through source, time, and method triangulation, along with member checking. Data analysis utilized the Miles and Huberman interactive model, comprising data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Results indicate that: (1) students at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta demonstrate diverse interests in pursuing higher education—some choose to continue their studies while others tend to enter the workforce after graduation; (2) students' interest in pursuing higher education is influenced by internal factors (personal motivation and academic achievement) and external factors (social environment and alignment between vocational programs and higher education study programs); and (3) obstacles students face in pursuing higher education include family financial constraints and low self-efficacy in facing academic challenges.

**Keywords:** higher education aspirations; internal and external factors; qualitative; student interest; vocational high school

Received May 29, 2025; Revised May 31, 2025; Accepted June 30, 2025; Published Online July 02, 2025

<https://dx.doi.org/10.20961/jikap.v9i4.103089>

## Introduction

Education serves as the primary means of developing skills and abilities of a nation's future generations to form competent and competitive individuals, particularly in an increasingly competitive era of globalization. One pathway of formal education in Indonesia is Vocational High School (SMK), positioned at the secondary level with a focus on developing practical and technical skills to prepare graduates for direct entry into the workforce. SMK is designed to produce skilled workers who meet labor market needs. However, continuous industrial development demands higher skill levels, making higher education an important necessity for expanding knowledge and enhancing graduate potential.

According to SMK's primary objectives, students are expected to possess practical competencies suitable for workforce needs. In accordance with Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, Article 15 states that "Vocational education is secondary education that prepares students primarily to work in specific fields." This emphasizes that SMK has a primary orientation toward preparing students for workforce entry. Nevertheless, some students have begun viewing higher education as a means to develop career opportunities and enhance their professional capabilities. This phenomenon indicates a shift in interest, as increasing numbers of SMK students consider pursuing higher education.

Based on recent surveys conducted by the Directorate General of Vocational Education, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2024), there has been a significant increase in SMK students' interest in continuing education to higher institutions, reflecting awareness of higher education's importance in facing workforce challenges. In 2024, the number of SMK students registering for the National Selection Based on Achievement (SNBP) increased to 162,156, compared to 153,446 students in 2023. However, despite generally increasing interest in higher education, data show that SMK students still face various obstacles, such as economic constraints, limited information about higher institutions, and pressure to work immediately to support families. This reality is evident among students at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta, where only a small portion of students continue to higher education, while others choose to work directly or become entrepreneurs.

Based on data from SMK Batik 2 Surakarta, in the past two years, only a small portion of alumni continued to higher education. In the 2022/2023 academic year, only 11% of students chose to continue education to higher institutions out of 168 students, experiencing a slight decrease in the 2023/2024 academic year to 4% out of 158 graduating students. One cause of this declining interest is the imbalance between the number of job opportunities and the number of SMK graduates. Additionally, competition with higher education graduates who possess higher qualifications causes SMK graduates to be often considered lacking qualifications and merely as second-tier skilled workers (Fadlilah & Mulyeni, 2023). This fact indicates a gap between the ideal potential of SMK graduates, who should be able to continuously improve their competencies through higher education, and the reality that most choose to work directly without continuing education. This phenomenon suggests the need for in-depth research to understand factors influencing SMK students' interest in continuing to higher education, particularly at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta.

Various studies have been conducted to examine students' interest in continuing to higher education by identifying factors influencing student decisions. Setiawan (2018) states that students' interest in continuing higher education is influenced by two main factors: internal factors including personal motivation to increase knowledge and skills, and external factors including family economic support and social environment influence (family, peers, and teachers). Febryanti et al. (2023) add that internal factors such as personal motivation, needs, and student academic achievement have close relationships with students' interest in pursuing higher education. Meanwhile, external factors consist of parental support, economic conditions, and environmental influences that provide students with confidence and greater opportunities to continue education. In research by Wardani and Susantiningrum (2024), students' interest in continuing higher education is influenced by complex combinations of economic factors, academic achievement, and social environment.

Previous research reveals that combinations of internal and external factors play important roles in influencing students' interest in continuing higher education. However, limitations remain in understanding how these factors interact in specific contexts, particularly at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta, especially among Grade XII students in the Office Management and Business Services program. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by exploring in-depth the factors influencing students' interest in continuing to higher education at this location.

This research has a more specific focus, particularly at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta, to identify factors influencing students' interest in continuing to higher education. Several main factors receiving attention in this research include personal motivation, student academic achievement, social environment support, and alignment between SMK vocational programs and major choices in higher education. Personal motivation serves as the primary driver for students to continue to higher education. Additionally, student academic achievement also plays important roles in education continuation decisions, as students with good academic performance tend to feel more prepared and confident to continue education to higher institutions (Feryani et al., 2022). Although social environments including family, school, and community support have great potential in motivating students, many students may not receive adequate support, thus affecting their interest in continuing studies to higher institutions (Nandasari et al., 2019).

Furthermore, alignment between vocational programs taught in SMK and major choices in higher institutions also becomes an important factor. When major choices in higher institutions do not align with skills acquired in SMK, students may feel less interested or confident in continuing higher education. Therefore, this research is very important for exploring how these factors interact at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta. This research is expected to fill gaps in previous research and provide more relevant contributions to future educational policy development.

As part of efforts to improve human resource quality in Indonesia, higher education plays important roles in providing skills and knowledge needed to face increasingly competitive workforce challenges. However, as seen at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta, the still low percentage of SMK students continuing higher education indicates challenges requiring special attention. With this background, this research aims to understand how SMK students' interest in continuing higher education is formed, explore internal and external factors influencing this interest, and identify obstacles students face in continuing to higher education.

## Research Methods

The research was conducted at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta, located at Jalan Sere I, Pajang, Laweyan District, Surakarta City, Central Java. Research activities took place from March to April 2025. This research employed descriptive methods with qualitative approaches. Descriptive methods aim to describe situations or events or provide clear understanding of phenomena by emphasizing systematic, precise, and accurate fact presentation. This research uses qualitative data, describing and analyzing in-depth a phenomenon, namely factors influencing SMK students' interest in continuing higher education. This research aims to determine factors influencing SMK students' interest in continuing to higher education in specific contexts, particularly at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta, especially among Grade XII students in the Office Management and Business Services program.

The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, a nonprobability sampling technique where sample selection for data sources was conducted by considering various criteria related to research topics (Sugiyono, 2015). Data sources in this research consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data involved 15 informants consisting of Grade XII MPLB students at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta serving as key informants who experienced decision-making processes for continuing higher education, and school personnel and student parents as supporting informants to provide perspectives on family and school support. Secondary data in this research were collected through documentation processes from school documents, higher education-related statistics, and written references still related to research topics.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations of school environment activities related to interest in continuing higher education, and document analysis of alumni school data and relevant previous studies. To ensure data validity, triangulation techniques (comparing different sources, times, and methods) and member checking were employed. Data analysis techniques used the Miles and Huberman model consisting of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing stages.

## Results and Discussion

### Research Results

Interest can be defined as attraction to paying full attention to something, thus forming motivation to achieve something toward objects or activities. Students' interest in continuing to higher education not only serves as motivation for students to continue higher education but also becomes a foundation for achieving success according to their expectations.

SMK Batik 2 Surakarta students' interest in continuing to higher education is also reflected in alumni data recorded in school archives. In the 2022/2023 academic year, only 11% of students chose to continue education to higher institutions out of 168 students, experiencing a slight decrease in the 2023/2024 academic year to 4% out of 158 graduating students. Although the numbers do not show high trends, this reflects changes in SMK Batik 2 Surakarta students' perceptions about the importance of higher education as future investment. This interest development reflects growing perception changes among SMK students, beginning from direct work orientation to awareness of higher education's importance as future investment.

Through analysis of interview results, field observations, and school documents, SMK Batik 2 Surakarta students' interest in continuing to higher education has begun developing positively. This shows that interest not only motivates students in continuing higher education but becomes a foundation for achieving success according to their expectations. Individual interest does not emerge spontaneously but is influenced by various factors that become key elements in achieving goals. Factors influencing students' interest in continuing higher education consist of factors from within individuals called internal factors and factors originating from outside individuals called external factors.

Interest in continuing to higher education is influenced by internal factors originating from within students. One such internal factor is personal motivation, sourced from desires to realize aspirations, improve living standards, and make families proud. This is demonstrated by student

opinions stating, "My motivation is certainly that I can get higher education, then also get much better jobs than SMK graduates like me" (informant 5, interview, March 9, 2025). This statement reflects students' motivation to continue to higher education with hopes of improving better quality of life through better employment.

Internal factors also influencing students' interest in continuing higher education include academic achievement. Based on interview results, academic achievement becomes a factor influencing interest in continuing higher education. As stated by informant 2, who mentioned participating in economics olympiad competitions and achieving awards that might serve as provisions for pursuing higher education: "My grades are quite good, so I'm confident I can follow lectures well. I once participated in online economics olympiads, achieving 2nd place nationally. Maybe the certificate can add plus points for continuing college" (informant 2, interview, February 28, 2025). Observation results also show students with good academic achievement tend to have interest in continuing to higher education. This demonstrates the diversity of students' academic backgrounds influences their perceptions of achievement importance for higher education.

External factors also influence students' interest in continuing to higher education, including social environment support. Social environments around students influence their development, behavior, and social interactions. Social environments are divided into three main elements: family, school, and community. Family environments significantly influence students, as stated by informant 2, that interest in continuing to higher education is influenced by parental support and family member role models who have successfully pursued higher education. "Parents provide full support both financially and motivationally for me to continue college. Family members who went to college exist, my sibling graduated from STAN. So I'm motivated to continue education" (informant 2, interview, February 28, 2025). This statement illustrates that family members also function as role models for students interested in continuing to higher education while sharing experiences they gained.

Based on field observations at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta, the school has also created programs as facilities for students to broaden perspectives regarding various pathway options available after SMK graduation, especially for students still considering between working directly or continuing to higher education. During Edu Fair and Job Fair activities, all students appeared enthusiastic in seeking both job opportunities and planning for higher education. This was evident from students' active participation in seeking information from various institutions.

Meanwhile, community environments, based on interview results, can be assumed to have quite diverse influences on SMK students' interest in continuing to higher education. Community awareness of education can be motivating, but students personally still maintain control over interest in continuing to higher education. This indicates that combinations of external support and personal motivation play important roles in influencing student interest.

In this research, despite having growth in perceptions of the importance of continuing to higher education, several significant obstacles affect students in decision-making for continuing education were found. Two main obstacles hindering students in continuing to higher education are family financial constraints and low self-efficacy in academic challenges. Nevertheless, most students seek alternatives by making efforts to overcome obstacles in continuing higher education. This demonstrates students' strong interest in achieving their desires to continue to higher education.

Overall, research results show that students at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta basically understand the importance of continuing to higher education to achieve better opportunities in the future. Interest in continuing to higher education is greatly influenced by various personal conditions of each student, both internal and external factors that become main considerations in determining education continuation decisions. Internal factors such as personal motivation and academic achievement, plus external support in the form of active social environment roles, especially schools and alignment between vocational programs and higher education majors, contribute to growing awareness of perceptions about the importance of continuing education after SMK graduation. Combinations of internal and external factors can become consideration materials for determining decisions to continue to higher education.

## **Discussion**

### **Factors Influencing SMK Students' Interest in Continuing to Higher Education**

Factors influencing SMK students' interest in continuing to higher education are caused by two factor categories: internal and external factors.

#### **Internal Factors**

Internal factors originate from individuals consisting of two aspects: personal motivation and academic achievement. Personal motivation becomes one of the internal factors playing important roles in influencing SMK students' interest in continuing to higher education. According to Munira (2017), motivation is a process determining the extent of human activity levels, intensity, consistency, and action direction. In continuing to higher education, self-motivation is needed to trigger enthusiasm for achieving goals. Without strong personal motivation, students tend to lose motivation and give up easily.

Research results show that self-motivation becomes the main foundation for students in influencing interest in continuing to higher education. Students have motivation to continue to higher education not only based on academic needs but also encompassing emotional and social aspects. Personal motivation that emerges includes desires to achieve higher aspirations by expanding knowledge and obtaining academic degrees as future provisions. Additionally, student motivation also originates from hopes of improving living standards through better employment. Students have awareness that higher education degrees can open promising career opportunities. Through higher education, students also have desires to make parents proud and fulfill family expectations.

Internal factors also significantly influencing students' interest in continuing higher education include academic achievement. Achievement becomes an indicator of student success during learning processes that can influence interest in continuing higher education. Academic achievement can take academic and non-academic forms. Therefore, academic achievement encompasses not only cognitive elements but also human skills and attitudes influenced by oneself and others. This also becomes an indicator of student readiness in facing challenges at higher education levels.

Nevertheless, some students consider academic achievement not the only main factor influencing interest in continuing to higher education. This is because students feel desires and personal motivation in achieving aspirations for pursuing higher education are greater than relying on academic achievement. On the other hand, suboptimal academic achievement can become references for students to work harder in studying to compete in higher education entrance selections.

#### **External Factors**

External factors are influenced by environments around individuals, including social environment. Social environments influencing students in continuing to higher education, according to research by Janah et al. (2018), are divided into three main components: family, school, and community environments.

Families serve as environments where individuals grow and develop. Family environments, especially parents, play important roles in student decision-making for continuing to higher education. Support provided by families through motivation, advice, and care can influence students to have interest in continuing higher education. Meanwhile, economic support includes basic needs and supporting facilities during education. Supportive family environments instill long-term educational values, shaping student mindsets so they view education as future investment rather than merely academic obligations. Therefore, strong support from family environments becomes motivation for students in determining their futures, including having interest in continuing to higher education.

Schools become second social environments for students after family environments as formal educational institutions aimed at providing guidance, learning, and training for character development and student knowledge. Field conditions show SMK Batik 2 Surakarta provides adequate contributions to increasing students' interest in continuing to higher education, although school roles are still considered less effective in encouraging SMK students' interest in continuing to higher education. This is because SMK's primary orientation directs students to be ready for

workforce entry. Nevertheless, it is important for schools to continue providing opportunities for students interested in continuing to higher education. Forms of support already provided by schools include providing information regarding higher education selections and scholarships, distributing brochures or socialization from higher institutions, organizing Edu and Job Fairs, and teacher mentoring.

Communities also have significant influences supporting students to continue to higher education. Community environments consisting of relatives, neighbors, playmates, and social communities play important roles in forming and directing each child's personal development. Setiawan (2018) explains that community environments play important roles in children's personal development, influencing thinking patterns, behavior, and relationships with others. Research results show several students feel positive encouragement to continue to higher education. This reflects community expectations believing that education is one of the main paths to success. Communities serve as external environments providing hopes and recognition that younger generations are not sufficient with only secondary education.

Alignment between vocational programs chosen by students in SMK and major choices in higher institutions represents one of the key factors influencing interest in continuing higher education. Students who feel that majors of interest in higher institutions are relevant to educational backgrounds they studied in SMK tend to be more motivated to continue higher education. This relates to confidence from previous learning experiences influencing interest in continuing higher education.

Students express that interest in continuing to higher education by choosing majors relevant to SMK vocational programs is driven by desires to develop knowledge in fields they have previously studied. This emphasizes connections between SMK vocational program alignment and higher education majors as advanced stages in competency development acquired during SMK.

### **Obstacles and Efforts Students Face in Continuing to Higher Education**

In this research, several significant obstacles affecting students in decision-making for continuing to higher education were found. Two main obstacles hindering students in continuing to higher education include family financial constraints and low self-efficacy in academic challenges.

Family financial constraints become primary obstacles often experienced by students. Financial constraints make college costs one of the biggest considerations in determining decisions to continue education. Research results show that students at SMK Batik 2 Surakarta come from lower-middle-class families, so not all students can realize these desires. This aligns with research by Alexandro et al. (2021) stating that low student interest in continuing higher education is caused by financial constraints. Based on student statements, financial constraints exist because other family members still need educational costs. This causes several students to feel doubtful and worried that costs for continuing higher education will burden parents. Awareness of family financial responsibility can cause some students to postpone or abandon desires to continue education.

Some students whose families have concerns about educational costs choose to take initiatives or seek solutions through scholarships and part-time work. However, lack of scholarship information often hinders student development. This shows the need for stronger information and mentoring to help students have open and well-considered choices. Family financial constraints encourage students to seek various alternatives to continue to higher education. The most considered alternative to overcome family financial constraints for students is working. Several students plan to work part-time while attending college, while others plan to work full-time until financial conditions are stable enough to continue education.

Facing low self-efficacy in academic challenges, most SMK students in continuing higher education often encounter personal obstacles. One frequently experienced challenge is curriculum differences between SMK and SMA, especially in subjects that become subtests in higher education entrance examinations. This is based on SMK emphasizing readiness for workforce entry, making learning more dominant in practice than theory. These conditions create feelings of lack of confidence or low self-efficacy regarding their academic abilities. This situation also aligns with research by Lase (2020) stating that low student self-efficacy influences low interest in continuing education to higher levels.

Through these challenges, students make various efforts to adapt and prepare academically. Some use various learning materials and take initiatives for independent study. Additionally, some students utilize social media platforms to obtain information about higher institutions and join learning communities to expand their knowledge.

## Conclusion

From research results and discussion, there is interest development and growing perception changes among SMK Batik 2 Surakarta students. Beginning from direct work orientation, they have become aware of higher education's importance as future investment. It can be concluded that SMK students' interest in continuing to higher education is influenced by various factors, both from within students (internal) and from surrounding environments (external). Internal factors emerge naturally within students' personalities, such as desires to deepen skills, obtain degrees, and expand relationships and broader knowledge. Additionally, student academic achievement results during school can also influence student decisions depending on how good these results are. Meanwhile, external factors receive influences from outside individuals, including social environments from families, schools, and communities as closest interaction places for students. Meanwhile, alignment between SMK vocational programs and study program choices in higher education also becomes one factor related to students, thus influencing interest in continuing to higher education. Combinations of both factor categories are interconnected and mutually influential; supportive external factors will not be effective if individuals do not have strong motivation or desires from students' personalities. Therefore, balance between internal and external factors becomes a key element in growing and maintaining individual interest in continuing to higher education. By knowing the most influential factors, schools can implement socialization programs, mentoring, and higher institution visits as concrete strategies for building student knowledge as early as possible. Research results can also become references for students in future planning more wisely and realistically according to their interests and abilities. Students are expected to be proactive in various activities for self-development supporting their competencies and expertise, both academic and non-academic. It is also hoped that parents instill positive mindsets to support children's educational continuity, not only considering financial aspects but also as long-term investments for children's futures. Additionally, this research can become references for future researchers to examine broadly factors influencing SMK students' interest in continuing to higher education.

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