

The Relationship between Self-efficacy and Decision to Pursue Higher Education

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Abstract

Education plays a pivotal role in national development, yet Johor, a key economic and demographic hub in Malaysia, faces a critical challenge in retaining SPM graduates within the higher education pipeline, as a significant number of students choose not to pursue further studies, leading to potential gaps in human capital development and limiting the socioeconomic prospects of these youth. This study explores the relationship between self-efficacy and the decision to pursue higher education among Form Five students in Muar, Johor, Malaysia. Recent trends indicate a growing number of Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia graduates are choosing not to continue their studies. With specific objectives to identify the level of self-efficacy among the students, determine their level of decision to pursue higher education, and examine the relationship between self-efficacy and their decision to continue their studies Utilizing a quantitative research design, this study distributed a structured questionnaire to Form Five students across Muar Johor. The instrument measured levels of self-efficacy, key influencing factors, and students' decision regarding higher education. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, and correlation. The findings for Objective 1 indicate that Form Five students in Muar, Johor generally demonstrated a moderate to high level of self-efficacy, while the results for Objective 2 show that students also exhibited a relatively positive inclination toward pursuing higher education. The findings further indicate a positive relationship between self-efficacy and the decision to pursue higher education among Form Five students in Muar, Johor, with higher self-efficacy associated with a clearer intention to continue their studies.

1. Introduction

Education strongly influences both national progress and individual futures. In Malaysia, the SPM examination marks a critical point where students decide whether to pursue higher education, join the workforce, or explore vocational training, a choice that shapes their career opportunities and contribution to the country. Recently, a growing number of SPM graduates have chosen not to continue their studies, raising concerns about the nation's ability to build a skilled workforce. While external factors such as financial constraints and family background are often highlighted, internal psychological factors, particularly self-efficacy, or belief in one's abilities are increasingly recognized as important in shaping educational decisions. However, research in Malaysia has largely focused on socioeconomic barriers, leaving a gap in understanding the role of self-efficacy. Therefore, this study examines the relationship between self-efficacy and the decision to pursue higher education among SPM students,

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aiming to provide insights that can help educators and policymakers develop effective support systems to enhance student confidence and increase educational participation.

Malaysia's education system follows a structured pathway from six years of primary education to five years of secondary school, culminating in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination, which shapes students' academic and career directions. After SPM, students can pursue pre-university programs, diplomas, TVET, or enter the workforce. However, an increasing number of graduates are choosing not to continue their studies, raising concerns about human capital and personal development. Nearly 48.74% of the 2021 SPM cohort did not pursue higher education, prompting questions about the factors influencing these decisions and their long-term impact on Malaysia's skilled workforce.

Several challenges contribute to this trend, including economic factors such as stagnant salaries, reduced graduate earnings, and a mismatch between graduate supply and job demand. Additionally, many students lack clear direction after SPM, particularly those with lower academic achievement. Although government initiatives like the Malaysia Education Blueprint aim to improve higher education participation through targeted support, career guidance, and flexible pathways, a deeper understanding of both personal and contextual influences is needed. Therefore, this study focuses on self-efficacy as a key personal factor and examines how it shapes Form Five students' decisions to pursue higher education, with the goal of helping educators and policymakers develop strategies that support confident and informed educational choices.

This study is driven by the rising number of Form Five students who choose not to pursue higher education despite the availability of pathways such as matriculation, STPM, diploma, and vocational programs (Tekin, 2023). In Malaysia, over 300,000 school leavers reportedly opted out of further education in 2023, raising national concerns about youth disengagement and its implications for human capital development (Yaacob, 2023). This trend not only limits individuals' career advancement and financial stability but also challenges Malaysia's goal of building a skilled, knowledge-based workforce. Although initiatives have been introduced to address barriers such as financial hardship, geographic access, and institutional limitations (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2023), these external factors alone do not explain why students from similar backgrounds make different educational choices, suggesting that internal psychological factors may also play a critical role.

Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to manage future challenges, is one such psychological factor. Students with high self-efficacy are more likely to set goals, face academic challenges confidently, and persist in their education, whereas those with lower self-efficacy may doubt their abilities and avoid higher education (Ahmed *et al.*, 2021). Despite international evidence linking self-efficacy to academic motivation and decision-making, research in Malaysia remains limited and often focuses more on external influences than on students' self-beliefs. Therefore, this study examines how self-efficacy shapes SPM graduates' decisions to pursue higher education. The findings are expected to support policy development and guide schools in implementing mentorship, motivational programs, and personalized counseling that strengthen students' confidence, resilience, and long-term academic aspirations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Higher Education in Malaysia

The decision to pursue further education is a critical turning point for Malaysian secondary school students after completing the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination. At this stage, students must choose between pathways such as pre-university programs, vocational education, diploma studies, or entering the workforce, a choice that significantly influences their quality of life, earning potential, and career opportunities.

Higher education is widely recognized as essential for both individual and national development, offering better employment prospects, higher salaries, and greater job stability (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2023). Although the Malaysian government has introduced initiatives such as scholarships, outreach programs, and expanded post-secondary institutions, many students including those in Johor still choose not to continue their studies due to financial constraints, limited awareness of available options, and the immediate attraction of employment (Phang, 2024). Students' perceptions of the value of higher education and their confidence in their academic abilities also shape this decision. Overall, understanding the factors influencing this complex choice is vital for developing effective interventions that support informed and beneficial educational pathways.

2.2 Decision to Pursue higher Education

A higher education decision is a student's choice to pursue studies beyond secondary school, such as diploma, matriculation, pre-university, or degree programs, shaping their future education and career (Hossler *et al.*, 1999). For Form Five students, this decision is influenced by personal goals, perceived benefits, finances, and social factors, with those confident in the value and their ability to succeed more likely to continue, while others may opt out despite available pathways (Perna, 2006).

2.3 Theories Related to Decision to Pursue Higher Education

Several theories explain students' decisions to pursue higher education. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that intentions are influenced by attitudes, social expectations, and perceived control over academic challenges. Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993) views education as an investment, with students pursuing higher education when long-term economic benefits outweigh costs. College Choice Theory (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) emphasizes the role of personal traits, family influence, school environment, and social factors in shaping educational decisions.

2.4 Past Studies on Decision to Pursue Higher Education

Research shows that self-efficacy strongly influences students' decisions to pursue higher education, enhancing academic performance, motivation, persistence, and career expectations, while reducing dropout rates (Yang *et al.*, 2025; Cheng & Baki, 2025; Visoso, 2024; Rosita *et al.*, 2025; Savugathali *et al.*, 2025; Bernardo *et al.*, 2025). Higher education decisions are shaped by personal factors (e.g., academic ability, motivation), environmental factors (e.g., family support, peers, SES), and contextual factors (e.g., socioeconomic and geographic conditions), with self-efficacy reinforcing confidence in handling tertiary-level learning (Richardson *et al.*, 2012; Bandura, 1997).

2.5 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to plan and take action to achieve desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997). In education, it reflects students' confidence in completing academic tasks, overcoming challenges, and achieving learning goals. Students with high self-efficacy tend to set higher goals, remain persistent, and show resilience, while those with low self-efficacy often doubt their abilities, avoid challenges, and lack motivation (Bandura, 1986). Among Form Five students, self-efficacy plays a crucial role in shaping decisions about higher education, as strong academic self-belief increases the likelihood of viewing further studies as achievable and worthwhile, whereas low self-efficacy may discourage pursuit of higher education.

2.6 Theories Related of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is rooted in Social Cognitive Theory, which posits that human behavior is influenced by a dynamic interaction between personal factors, the environment, and behavior itself (Bandura, 1986). Within this framework, self-efficacy serves as a primary driver that shapes an individual's thoughts, emotions, motivation, and actions.

2.7 Past Studies on Self-Efficacy

Previous research emphasizes that self-efficacy plays a crucial role in learning and educational decision-making. Academic interests, goals, and career choices are closely linked to self-efficacy (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), while academic self-efficacy predicts performance and persistence (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). In Malaysia, students with higher self-efficacy demonstrate stronger academic motivation and clearer intentions to pursue tertiary education (Abdullah & Osman, 2010; Ahmad, Ismail, & Rahman, 2018).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design utilizing a survey method to investigate the influence of self-efficacy on the decision of Form Five students in Muar, Johor to pursue higher education. The survey research design is appropriate for this study as it allows for the systematic collection of data from a relatively large sample, providing the ability to generalize the findings to the broader population of Form Five students in Muar.

3.2 Research Process

Research process outlines the systematic steps to conduct this study on the influence of self-efficacy on Form Five student's decision to pursue higher education in Johor. Which is research problems, research objectives, population and sampling, development of research instrument, data analysis, discussion and conclusions.

3.3 Population and Sampling

The population for this study consists of all Form Five secondary school students in the Muar district, Johor, for the 2025 academic year. According to recent statistics from the Muar District Education Office, the total population includes 3,114 students. To ensure representativeness across different school types, 346 Form Five students from the chosen schools will be randomly selected to participate in the study.

3.4 Research Instrument

The research instrument for this study is structured into three sections to collect relevant data from respondents. Section A focuses on demographic information, including gender and type of school, which provides context for analyzing differences in self-efficacy and educational decision-making. Section B measures students' level of self-efficacy using the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (Modul B), which assesses respondents' confidence in handling academic and personal challenges (Kisii University, 2019). Section C evaluates students' decisions to pursue higher education and is adapted from the Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) Institutional Repository, measuring students' intentions and readiness to continue studies beyond secondary school (UTAR, 2014). Collectively, these sections form a comprehensive instrument to examine the relationships between demographic factors, self-efficacy, and higher education decision-making.

3.5 Reliability Test for Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted by distributing 20 questionnaires to Form Five students in Muar, Johor. For the Self-Efficacy scale, the Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.942 across 13 items, indicating excellent internal consistency. The Decision to Pursue Higher Education scale demonstrated a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.931 across 5 items, also reflecting high reliability. These results suggest that the instrument was consistent and suitable for use in the main study.

3.6 Reliability Test for Actual Study

The reliability of the instrument was further confirmed in the actual study. The Self-Efficacy scale achieved a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.961 across 13 items, while the Decision to Pursue Higher Education scale had a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.951 across 5 items. These findings indicate excellent reliability, confirming that the instrument is highly consistent and appropriate for collecting data in this research.

3.7 Data Collection

Data Collection was conducted after the pilot study to ensure the instrument's validity and reliability, involving 156 Form Five students from secondary schools in Muar, Johor. Ethical approval was obtained from school authorities and participants, and confidentiality was assured. The data were analyzed using SPSS for descriptive statistics, reliability, and correlation, with collection carried out over two months.

3.8 Response Rate

The respondents completed an online questionnaire via Google Forms. Out of 341 questionnaires distributed, 156 were returned, yielding a response rate of 45.8%.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Demographic Background

Table 1, shows the demographic characteristics of the 156 respondents were analyzed based on gender, race, type of school, and their decision to pursue higher education. Most respondents were female (55.1%) and Malay (82.1%). In terms of school type, the majority attended SMK (65.4%), followed by SM SAINS and KV (both 12.8%), and SMKA (9.0%). Regarding plans for further education, 79.5% intended to continue to higher education, 16.7% were unsure, and 3.8% did not plan to continue.

Table 1 Respondent's Demographic

Demographic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	70	44.9
	Female	86	55.1
Race	Malay	128	82.1
	Chinese	12	7.7
	Indian	12	7.7
	Others	4	2.6
Type of School	SMK	102	65.4
	SMKA	14	9.0
	SM SAINS	20	12.8
	KV	20	12.8

Decision to Pursue Higher Education	Yes	124	79.5
	No	6	3.8
	Maybe	26	16.7

4.2 Analysis on Self-Efficacy and Decision to Pursue Higher Education

Based on Table 2 shows the analysis shows that both self-efficacy and the decision to pursue higher education scored high on average. Self-efficacy had a mean score of 4.24 with a standard deviation of 0.933, while the decision to pursue higher education had a slightly higher mean score of 4.35 with a standard deviation of 0.936, indicating that respondents generally exhibited high levels for both variables.

Table 2 Analysis on Self-Efficacy towards Decision To Pursue Higher Education

Item	Average Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Level
Self-Efficacy	4.24	0.933	High
Decision to Pursue Higher Education	4.35	0.936	High

4.3 Correlation Analysis

Based on Table 3, the results of Spearman's correlation analysis, the relationship between self-efficacy and the decision to pursue higher education was found to be positive and statistically significant ($\rho = 0.709$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H1 is accepted, indicating that higher levels of self-efficacy are significantly associated with decisions to pursue higher education among Form Five students in Muar, Johor.

Table 3 Spearman's Correlation between Self-Efficacy and Decision to Pursue Higher Education

			Self-Efficacy	Decision to Pursue Higher Education
Spearman's rho	Self-Efficacy	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.709**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		<0.001
		N	156	156
	Decision to Pursue Higher Education	Correlation Coefficient	0.709**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001	
		N	156	156

5. Conclusion

Based on This study examined the relationship between self-efficacy and the decision to pursue higher education among Form Five students in Muar, Johor. The findings indicate that students generally demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy, reflecting confidence in achieving academic goals, overcoming challenges, and persisting through difficulties. Similarly, most respondents expressed strong intentions to continue their studies, suggesting that self-efficacy significantly influences educational aspirations. Correlation analysis confirmed a positive and significant relationship between self-efficacy and the decision to pursue higher education, supporting the hypothesis that higher self-efficacy is associated with stronger educational intentions.

The results have theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they extend Bandura's concept of self-efficacy to educational decision-making within the Malaysian context. Practically, they emphasize the need to foster self-efficacy among students through mentoring, skill development, supportive learning environments, and counseling services. Policy-wise, integrating confidence-building strategies into the curriculum can enhance students' motivation and preparation for higher education. Overall, the study highlights that psychological factors, particularly self-efficacy, play a crucial role in shaping students' educational choices and, by extension, contribute to personal growth and national human capital development.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **study conception and design:** Ad Dein Imran Azmi, Shazaitul Azreen Rodzalan; **data collection:** Ad Dein Imran Azmi; **analysis and interpretation of results:** Ad Dein Imran Azmi; **draft manuscript preparation:** Ad Dein Imran Azmi and Shazaitul Azreen Rodzalan. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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