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# Educational Aspirations among First-Generation Students and their Parental Influence towards Pursuing Tertiary Education

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## Abstract

The purpose of this pilot study is to ascertain the level of educational aspiration among first-generation students and the extent of parental influence in the students' aspirations to pursue tertiary education. A total 71 form four students responded to questionnaires containing aspiration scales and the role of parent's items. The results showed that the level of educational aspirations of first-generation students to pursue studies at higher education institutions is high. The study also showed that parents' factors influence the first-generation students' educational aspirations in pursuing tertiary education.

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*Keywords:* Parental influence; Rural area; First-generation students; Predisposition; Risk

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## 1. Introduction

In Malaysia, the competition is very high for a student to gain a place for further studies into tertiary education particularly for public higher education institutions. The situation occurs because tertiary education opportunities available are not sufficient to meet the demands of society and the growing needs of the country (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2001; Ishak Yussof, 2007). In addition, studies on access into higher education institutions are very important as means to help the underprivileged students to enhance their academic achievement and social status. This is evidently true, especially among first-generation students who require education mobility to achieve social mobility.

First-generation students are those whose parents possess education level at secondary school and they have not been to institutions of higher learning (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003). Previous studies found that first-generation students differ much compared with non-first-generation students (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Pratt & Skaggs, 1989). The difference is first-generation students have low level aspiration (Saenz et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996; 2001) and in many cases, they come from families of low socioeconomic status (Ceja, 2001; Peters, 2009). Because of these differences, the first-generation students are at risk to drop out of higher education institutions. Aware of the risks and differences, many previous studies have been done by the researchers for the first-generation students with a focus on various issues such as academic

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performance (Riehl, 1994), experience in college (Pike & Kuh, 2005) and demographic characteristics (Terenzini et al., 1996; Bui, 2002). Research in western countries, in respect of academic achievement, college experience and demographic characteristics of first-generation students are many. Unfortunately, there is only limited research especially in developing countries regarding motives or factors that encourage first-generation students to pursue studies at higher education institutions.

This study is expected to contribute to the shortage of studies on first-generation children and to added literature related to the entry of the first-generation of students to higher education institutions. Based on the theory of college choice by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), there are three stages of college selection process - the first stage (predisposition), second (search) and third (choice). At the first stage (predisposition), the student will decide whether to extend education to college or not. According Thallemer (1998) the first stage is the formation of educational aspirations, including the factors and processes influencing it. Accordingly, the first stage of the research focus is consistent with the purpose of this study which is to determine the level of educational aspirations of students and factors influencing it.

## 2. Objectives

This study will attempt to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the educational aspirations of first-generation students to pursue studies at higher education institutions?
- 2) Is parent factors influence the 'first-generation students' aspirations for further studies at higher education institutions?

## 3. Methodology

This is a pilot study which uses a survey method conducted in a cross-sectional way. The sample for the survey comprised of secondary school students in rural areas who were chosen to be involved *Projek Menara Gading* in Kuantan, Pahang. *Projek Menara Gading* is organized by the Istana Abdul Aziz Foundation. This intervention project is a long term two- year programme aim to help improve the quality of the education among orphans and disadvantaged students from rural areas in the state of Pahang. Of the 78 participants in *Projek Menara Gading* Cohort 5, 71 of them can be categorized as first-generation students (parent education level at secondary schools only) and they have been selected to participate in this study.

Questionnaires were used for data collection. The questionnaire consists of several parts, including the demographics, the motivation and the influence of parents. The questionnaire contained demographic questions to obtain students personal data including information on educational aspirations for students. Educational aspirations are measured based on the highest level of education to be achieved by students after secondary school education. The questionnaires on parents was adapted from Marvin-Humann (2008); Yamchuti (2002) and Kono (2000) questionnaire. There are seven items, all of which attempt to measure the influence of parents on the encouragement and support they give to the children to further their education in higher education institutions. The questionnaire on the influences of parents section requires the students to respond to statements made based on likert scale of level 1 = strongly disagree to the extent 5 = strongly agree.

Data obtained from questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS version 16.0. There are two methods of analysis used which are descriptive statistics and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics (mean, frequencies and percentages) were used specifically to obtain information on demographics, level of educational aspirations and parental influence. Inferential statistics (regression) were used to determine if there is a relationship and the influence of motivational variables and parental involvement on educational aspirations to higher education institutions in the first-generation students.

## 4. Result and Discussion

The results of descriptive analysis found that the overall mean for first-generation students' educational aspirations is 4.52. This means that the first-generation students' educational aspirations for further education to higher education institutions are at a high level. Of the 71 students who became respondents, the majority of the 56 students (78.9%) would like to pursue a university education (see Table 1). There are 4 students (8.5%) and 2

(2.8%) would like to extend their education in college / matriculation / polytechnics and institutes of industrial skills. While a total of 6 students (5.6%) would like to pursue their studies to form 6. However, there are 3 students (4.2%) who are not sure of their educational aspirations.

**Table 1. Educational aspirations to higher education institutions**

Level of education	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Not sure	3	4.2
Form 6	6	5.6
Institute of Industrial skills	2	2.8
College / Matriculation / Polytechnic	4	8.5
University	56	78.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>100</b>

The results displayed in Table 1 showed that the level of educational aspirations of first-generation students is at a high level. These findings contradict previous studies which found that first-generation students have lower levels of educational aspirations (Saenz et al. 2007; Acker-Ball (2007). However, contradictory findings are not surprising because this is indeed the aspiration of the unstable factors in the process college selection (Chapman 1984). The case is in fact true in the longitudinal study by Horn and Nunez (2000) who found that educational aspirations of first-generation American grade-8 level students are at a high level but dropped when the students were in the sophomores.

In terms of parents' influence and educational aspirations, results of regression analysis showed *R square* ( $R^2$ ) is 0.003. This value indicates that parental influence is a significant predictor in making estimates about the aspirations of institutions of higher education. The influence of parents can be explained by 3% of the variance that exists in the aspirations of higher education institutions to students in the first-generation.

Parental influence can be seen in the form of encouragement that they give to children. Based on the perceptions of students (see Table 2), showed 59 (83.1%) students strongly agree that their parents allowed them to pursue higher education. In fact, they not only gave permission, but 49 (69.0%) students strongly agree that their parents seek them to do so. Linked to this, students' perceptions of their parents clearly emphasize the importance of higher education. A total of 44 (62.0%) strongly agree that their parents stressed the importance of education. Encouragement of parents to children to pursue their studies in higher education institutions are also accompanied by strong support such as making financial savings (22 student or 31.0% = strongly agree), discuss with the child-related expenses (27 student or 38% = agree), and discuss plans to pursue higher education qualification. (25 student or 35.2% = agree).

**Table 2. Influence of parents and educational aspirations**

The influence of parents	Frequency & Percentage (%)					Mean	S.D
	SDA	D	NS	A	SA		
Allow further studies	0	0	3 (4.2)	9 (12.7)	59 (83.1)	4.78	0.50
Require further studies	1 (1.4)	2 (2.8)	6 (8.5)	13 (18.3)	49 (69.0)	4.50	0.87
Education savings	3 (4.2)	6 (8.5)	22 (31.0)	18 (25.4)	22 (31.0)	3.70	1.12
Setting the field of study	19 (26.8)	24 (33.8)	12 (16.9)	10 (14.1)	6 (8.5)	2.43	1.26
Emphasizing the importance of education	0	2 (2.8)	5 (7.0)	20 (28.2)	44 (62.0)	4.49	0.75
Discuss plans for further studies	2 (2.8)	11 (15.5)	13 (18.3)	25 (35.2)	20 (28.2)	3.70	1.12
Discuss continuing education expenses	2 (2.8)	14 (19.7)	19 (26.8)	27 (38.0)	9 (12.7)	3.38	1.03

**\*\*Notes:** SDA = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; NS = Not Sure; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree; S.D = Std. Deviation

Therefore, this study found that parent' highly encourage and support their children to pursue their studies in higher education institutions. These findings contradict previous studies which found that first-generation students' lack of support and encouragement from parents to further their education to college (York-Anderson & Bowman 1991). These findings contrast with results from a similar study by Horn and Nunez (2000), Saenz et al. (2007) and Gofen (2009) who found that students placed first-generation parental support as key factors that encouraged them to pursue college.

However, the majority of the variance that exists can not be explained by parents' factors. This is due to gaps in the variance which is influenced by environmental factors not included in this study as the influence of peers, teachers and counselors. The findings Horn & Nunez (2000) of first-generation students find much reference to their peers than their parents' plans and programs related to their schooling. The study by Doyle & Reyes (2009) found that school counselors help students by providing ideas what to do after high school.

Thus, further studies at higher education institutions can give further insights into ways and opportunities need for first-generation students to enhance their social mobility and improve their living standards. Parental influence plays an important role to encourage students to further their studies in higher education institutions. Thus, if the factors that affect student aspirations, such as parental influence are not taken seriously into intervention programmes, they can be barriers to first-generation students to seize the opportunity to enter higher education institution.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

The results of this study suggest that the intervention programme such as *Projek Menara Gading* can help increase the aspirations of students to pursue tertiary education. Thus, policy makers who want to increase enrollment of students into higher education institutions should give more attention, space and opportunity for first-generation students to help them see the need and find the aspiration to pursue studies at higher education institutions. If not, they will face the risk of dropping out after secondary education.

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