

Why Go to University? Exploring the Purpose of Attaining Higher Education among First-Born Students from B40 and M40 Malay Families

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Abstract

In recent years, conversations surrounding the purposes of higher education have been influenced by national policy discourse that is framed in relation to economic contexts. The preoccupation with labour market interests and employability issues continue to dominate the discussion on the purpose of higher education. This presents specific discursive constructions of what it means to attain higher education qualifications, and more broadly, in orienting the provision of higher education itself. While such views generate mixed response among different institutional stakeholders, the perspectives of young people who wish to pursue a university education are rarely considered in the discourse. This article aims to highlight the reasons behind young people's aspirations to further their studies at the university level. Data were drawn from a series of semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of fourteen first-born matriculation and foundation students from B40 and M40 Malay families. The findings demonstrate that intrinsic reasons were expressed alongside extrinsic, economic rationales as the students explained their motives to pursue higher education. While differences in the articulation of these reasons may not be sharply evident when comparison of socio-economic and generational status of the students is made, the notion of social mobility is relatively absent in the students' accounts. Altogether, these findings illuminate the multiple views on the personal motives of attaining higher education, both corresponding to and in contrast with the instrumentalist view of higher education replete in contemporary state-projected discourse.

Keywords: *Purpose, aspirations, higher education, young people, B40, M40, first-generation, second-generation*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary conversations surrounding the purposes of higher education have been largely shaped by national policy discourse that is framed in relation to economic contexts. This continues to present specific discursive constructions of what it means to attain higher education qualifications, and more broadly, in orienting the provision of higher education. At the same time, the heavy-handedness of economics in the field of education policy has led to the adoption of neoliberalist narratives in articulating the purpose of higher education, in which these notions are dominated by aspirational perspectives of the state. For instance, in recent years, there has been a persistent tendency to articulate purposes of higher education that are tied to instrumental goals such as preparing students for employment and occupational prospects. Universities are seen as the training institutions that are responsible for preparing students to successfully participate in the labour market. Following this, contemporary policy documents are replete with buzzwords such as human capital, knowledge economy, entrepreneurial mindset, industrial revolution 4.0, among others. Such manifestations explicitly identify students as future workers or job creators (Ministry of Education, 2015) by emphasising the role of higher education in producing a highly educated workforce in order to achieve economic prosperity and competitiveness. In brief, instrumentalist, measurable, outcome-based purposes advanced by the state continue to overshadow the discourse, further accentuating a rather impersonalised purpose of progressing into higher education.

However, such outlook has also generated mixed responses among the public in evaluating the purpose and function of the university as an organised educational institution. There have been ongoing conversations between the government, employers, and the public revolving around the failure of universities as the educational institutions responsible for preparing skilful graduates (Biesta, 2008). More importantly, the intensification of these narratives continues to de-emphasise the primarily educational purpose of university education by stressing on the need to align university curriculum to be responsive towards the markets' needs, transforming universities into training institutions focused on industrial interests. This consequently masks the purpose of higher education with that of employability concerns. As such, the individual purposes of pursuing higher education become de-personalised to a certain extent, given the pervasiveness of these issues in shaping the purpose of attaining higher education. While acknowledging universities as a part of the higher learning ecosystem have served manifold functions that are tailored to the envisioned goals of the state, society, private entities, communities, and individuals among others, this outlook further instils a doxic sensibility in which the individual purpose of progressing into higher education is thought about.

Moreover, the changing landscape of higher education, specifically the massification of higher education in Malaysia elicits interesting yet underexplored questions about how young people contextualise their purposes and rationales for aspiring towards higher education as part of their academic trajectories. The significant shift from a traditionally elitist model of higher education to a mass, democratised higher education system in the country has brought about significant changes in which the structure and purpose of higher education is framed in relation to its social, cultural, and economic functions, both at the personal and collective levels of discourse. While a university qualification is traditionally seen as a differentiator, the expansion

of higher education, together with its supporting mechanisms such as national study loans (PTPTN), has to a certain extent led to greater accessibility and higher rates of participation among young people in the country. This further contributes to the normalisation of higher education aspirations and attainment.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

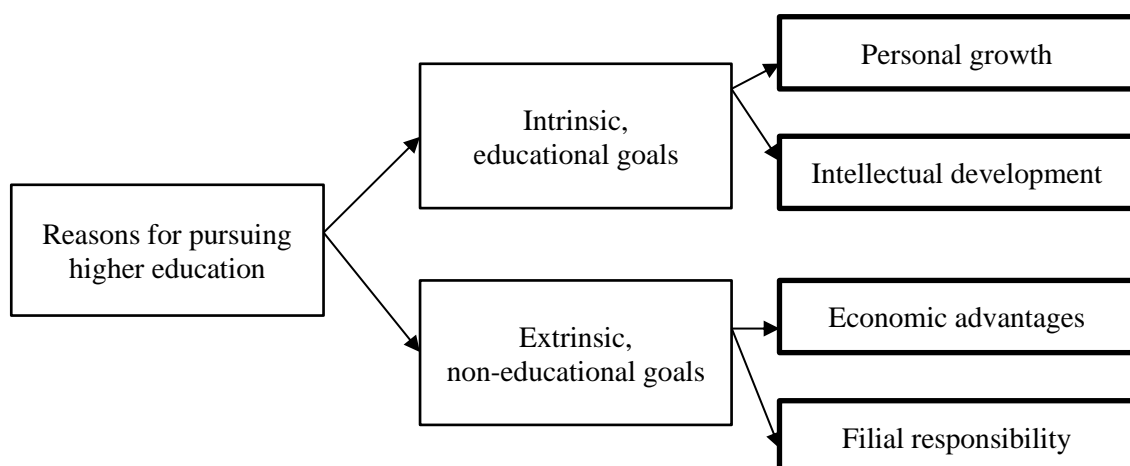
This article explores how matriculation and foundation level students from the B40 and M40 Malay families articulate their purposes of aspiring towards higher education. It aims to unpack their personal reasons in wanting to pursue a university education as they are positioned in the matriculation/foundation studies upon completing their secondary education, which is a kind of liminal, temporary space of preparatory college before progressing into higher education. Therefore, the study seeks to address the following research question: What are the reasons that underlie these students' aspirations to pursue higher education?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study borrows in part, the elements of self-determination theory from psychological and behavioural research, namely intrinsic and extrinsic motivations as proposed by Ryan and Deci (1985). These elements, however, are considered using a sociological lens to study the reasons that may underlie the students' aspirations to pursue a higher education. This is done by tying the micro-perspectives that were expressed by the students to the discourse surrounding higher education attainment as part of the analysis context.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework of the Study



In brief, individual reasons to aspire towards higher education have been argued to consist of both intrinsic and extrinsic aims (Kennett et al., 2011). Intrinsic aims refer to personal growth and self-development that corresponds to the educational opportunity, while extrinsic goals refer to the non-educational aspects associated with the economically and socially advantageous

outcomes of attaining specific higher education credentials. This includes notions such as upward social mobility, greater social status, or respectability. These inputs provide a starting point in thinking about the individual-level purposes of pursuing higher education, both towards educational and non-educational aspects that correspond to the functions of a university education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As briefly outlined in the previous section, furthering one's education up to the higher education level brings observable practical benefits given the immersive experience of university life. Universities function both as intellectual and social sites that prepare students to actualise their academic potentials and to later lead a fulfilling lives as members of a civil society (Arum & Roksa, 2014). Following this thought, the purposes of higher education are usually considered in relation to the stakeholders' perspectives – sometimes resulting in complex and conflicting narratives about the ideal aims in provisioning higher education. These purposes may be expressed across various theoretical registers depending on the context of discussion, some of which are philosophical while others are sociological. Philosophical purposes of higher education may entail both personal and collectivist values of such an education, often tied to the public and civic relevance of higher education institutions in democratic societies. On the other hand, sociological purposes of higher education promote the importance of higher education institutions as sites of socialisation, where students are able to familiarise themselves with particular norms and values, in order to contribute meaningfully as members of society.

Young people's aspirations to pursue higher education are shaped by a composite range of influences. The ambition to progress into the higher education and successfully obtain formal qualifications by pursuing such an education offers may be driven by their individual cognitions, or in a combination with other factors that can be attributed to family, peers, and society (Wainwright & Watts, 2019). Recent studies have also noted the role of popular discourse espoused by mass media (Kintrea et al., 2015; Zipin et al., 2013), such as television series with occupation or career centred storylines or vlog contents on YouTube in engendering higher education aspirations, among others. A descriptive study by Fernandez (2010) examined reasons why first-year students from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) chose the institution to further their tertiary level education. The study found that a majority of the students surveyed considered gainful employment and acquiring knowledge as extremely important reasons to pursue higher education. Similarly, a comparative study carried out by Brooks et al. (2020) using qualitative approaches on students from six European countries found that the students tend to express the purposes of higher education in relation to labour market and employment concerns, personal growth, and societal progress. A later study by Cuellar et al. (2021), found that first-generation students viewed attainment of higher education as a necessary criterion to achieve personal success and social mobility, therefore strengthening their reasons to further their studies at the level.

It is notable that many of the existing discussion on the purpose of higher education were framed from philosophical arguments (see works by Barnett 1988;1990, Labaree, 1997) instead

of focusing on the perspectives of the aspiring students themselves. Besides these theoretical idealisms, sociological studies noted earlier and elsewhere in the broader literature have argued that the instrumentalist purposes advanced by the state continue to overshadow the discourse, further perpetuating an impersonalised purpose of progressing into higher education (Brooks et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2016) that are amplified in state policies. These non-educational reasons for pursuing higher education dominate the discourse surrounding the purpose of attaining higher education, further marginalising the perspectives of the aspiring students themselves. Moreover, there is a limited body of research that has attempted to examine the perspectives of students themselves as to why they aspire to pursue higher education (Cuellar et al., 2021; Kennett et al., 2011; Phinney et al., 2006). Considering this situation, the present study responds to the empirical gap by posing a similar research question yet bounded by different policy and socio-economic contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The article draws primarily upon qualitative case study data from a broader mixed method research exploring the articulation of higher education aspirations among students from different socio-economic (B40 and M40 Malay families) and generational status backgrounds (prospective first-generation and second-generation students). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these research participants to explore and understand how they articulate their reasons to progress into higher education. In brief, participants were directly asked to reflect on their reasons for wanting to pursue higher education upon completing their matriculation or foundation level studies.

Participants

A total of fourteen matriculation and foundation level students from B40 and M40 Malay families were purposively sampled and interviewed for this study. These students are first-borns in their family. The first-born criterion was applied to rule out influence by elder siblings. Eight of them were prospective first-generation students (FGS) as neither of their parents had attained higher education qualifications, while the remaining six were categorised as prospective second-generation students (SGS) where one or both of their parents were university educated. Most of the students were from the Science stream, while a small number were from the Law and Technical streams. To ensure anonymity, the names of all interview participants were changed into pseudonyms. Table 1 provides the background details such as gender, socio-economic and generational status for all the participants.

Table 1
Backgrounds of the Research Participants

| | Pseudonym | Gender | SES | Generational Status | Matriculation/Foundation Stream |
|----|-----------|--------|-----|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Adib | M | B40 | FGS | Science – Module I |
| 2 | Ihsan | M | B40 | FGS | Science - Module II |
| 3 | Ikmal | M | B40 | FGS | Science -Module I |
| 4 | Haffiz | M | B40 | SGS | Technical |
| 5 | Amira | F | B40 | FGS | Life Sciences |
| 6 | Zetty | F | B40 | FGS | Science – Module I |
| 7 | Eliza | F | B40 | FGS | Law |
| 8 | Izzah | F | B40 | SGS | Technical |
| 9 | Zikri | M | M40 | SGS | Science – Module I |
| 10 | Reza | M | M40 | SGS | Science – Module I |
| 11 | Jasmin | F | M40 | SGS | Physical Sciences |
| 12 | Nina | F | M40 | SGS | Science - Module III |
| 13 | Atiqah | F | M40 | SGS | Science – Module I |
| 14 | Nadia | F | M40 | SGS | Science – Module I |

Data Collection

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions and probes developed by the researchers. Prior to conducting the actual interviews with the participants, the interview questions were first reviewed by two academic experts who offered feedback on additional probing questions that they considered relevant to the topic at hand. After integrating their comments into the interview guide, two pilot interviews were conducted with a Year 1 university student of similar criteria as the targeted sample. All modifications made to the methodology and methods, alongside rationales of changes that were employed during the actual fieldwork, data analyses and interpretation stage were documented by the researchers in an audit trail (Tobin & Begley, 2004). These steps were carried out as part of the measures to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the qualitative study were maintained throughout the research process.

The semi-structured interview sessions with the participants allowed us to have in-depth, casual “conversations with a purpose” (Burgess, 1984). This enabled the researchers to exercise flexibility and control in asking and improvising the interview questions based on the responses given by the participants.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out to analyse the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews. Audio recordings of the interview sessions with each of the research participants were transcribed, familiarised with, and coded using thematic categories. Both inductive and deductive approaches were applied to identify and interpret themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process comprised several readings of the transcripts leading to developing general

and specific aspects of the categorical themes before proceeding to the interpretation and reporting phase. After developing the themes that corresponded to the research questions, the researchers engaged three peers who had similar socio-economic backgrounds with the interview participants to review these themes. This was carried out as part of the measures to enhance the credibility of the study findings.

Ethical Consideration

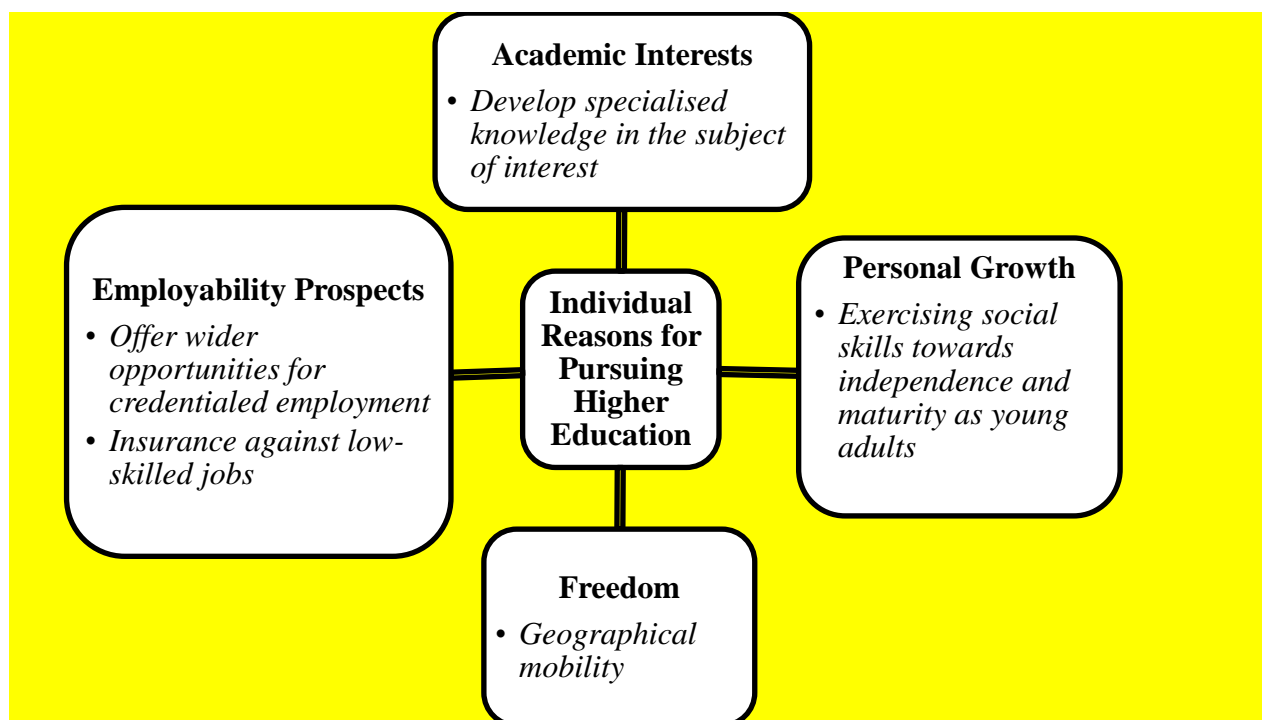
Permission to conduct the study was obtained from Education Planning and Research Division (EPRD) of Ministry of Education (MOE), Malaysia. Each interview participant voluntarily consented to contribute their data to the research. They were assured that the data collected from the study would be kept confidential and that their participations would remain anonymous. The names of all the participants in this study are reported using pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis focused on the reasons why the students aspire to pursue their studies at the university level upon completing their matriculation/foundation studies. Four subthemes were extracted as illustrated in Figure 2 below. Each of these subthemes will be elaborated in the sections that follow.

Figure 2

Overview of Theme and Subthemes



Employability Prospects

Obtaining a higher education qualification was largely perceived by the majority of the participants as an instrumental necessity, which substantiated their aspirations to pursue higher education in general. This extrinsic goal was expressed as the primary purpose as they locate their future selves in the labour market linking it with their current aspirations to pursue higher education. When directly asked about their reason to pursue higher education, their responses substantiate the personal emphasis on the instrumentality of higher education in equipping them for successful employment in their future. For example, Reza commented:

“I think the proper reason why you would go to a university is because you want to grab the ticket...the ticket that you want to ensure our employment in some companies, right?” (Reza, M40, SGS)

A similar view was also shared by Adib who articulated his aspirations to go to university and complete his higher education as the standard pathway to secure future employment opportunities:

“For me, it’s one of the important things because it guarantees our future. At least, once we finished studying, maybe...we can apply for work in whichever company that we want.” (Adib, B40, FGS)

Some students elaborated their reasons to go to university by drawing in the prospect of wider employment opportunities upon completing their studies:

“Wider employment opportunities. That’s what I think about it now. It doesn’t mean that if we don’t go to university, we won’t be able to get any job. But I think, the door of opportunities will be broader for us if we do.” Atiqah, M40, SGS)

“After degree, I will have a higher qualification, right? So, at this point, I have no idea yet. But I think I’ll be able to apply for any job later on.” (Ihsan, B40, FGS)

For Eliza, the primary reason for her to go to university was attached to her interest to study for a Law degree that she believed would enable her to access wider employment prospects that are not necessarily restricted to practising law. She remarked:

“I am interested in the opportunities that are available for me if I read Law. I don’t necessarily have to be a lawyer or judge if I read Law. I still can venture into other fields, like HR, journalism.” (Eliza, B40, FGS)

It should be noted here that there were nuances in the way that the students perceived the relationship between their aspirations to pursue a university education and the labour market. Although a majority of the students interviewed perceived obtaining higher education qualifications as the necessary investment in order to secure professional or credentialed employment in their imagined future, a small number of the students saw it as insurance against

low-skilled or lower-paid jobs, but not simultaneously hinting at upward mobility. This nuance was detected in contrast to the belief of wider employment opportunities elaborated earlier which points to the horizontal occupational prospects that are accessible upon successful completion of their higher education. The following excerpts from Zetty and Haffiz are illustrative of this:

“Because I want to have a decent job. A decent job and have a normal life. Because nowadays you need at least a degree to have a decent job. Even if you have a degree, you get to lowest ranking job sometimes. For example, you get to be the salesperson, not even a clerk or something. So, I guess that's why I felt the need to at least, have a degree. So, I can get a decent job...” (*Zetty, B40, FGS*)

“Let’s say if I studied at SMK (National Secondary School), but I didn’t get to go to university, maybe I’ll work part-time, or maybe I just do basic jobs at the mall, or work with my friends, or sell burgers, or loiter around. Something like that” (*Haffiz, B40, SGS*)

The above extracts point to the perceived function of higher education qualifications that safeguard the students from downward mobility that is associated with lower- paid jobs or underemployment. As Zetty humorously responded when she was asked to imagine her future had she not aspired to pursue higher education: ‘What would I do? Work at McDonald’s?’

Broadly speaking, all the extracts presented earlier point to the labour market as the macro system that organises and embeds employability as the principal purpose in the students’ aspirations to pursue higher education. This reflects the socio-ideological underpinnings of attaining higher education, in which obtaining higher education credentials was seen as an indispensable criterion in securing employment. Furthermore, this points to the frequent contemporary assertion of the discursive element that is present in the students’ educational aspirations which are inescapably tied to the importance of securing employment post-graduation. It reframes the students as skilled, self-responsible, and accountable university applicants as they navigate their higher education aspirations into successful entrance into the field by explicitly connecting their academic aspirations with that of employment prospects.

However, the optimistic belief surrounding their aspirations to pursue higher education in order to secure formal or steady employment was also laced by the notion of precariousness given the inflation of higher education credentials in the current economy. When the students were posed with a hypothetical question that challenges the common belief of obtaining higher education to ensure professional employment opportunities given the current credential-inflated labour market, many consider the situation as inevitable yet would strive their best to secure matching employment that is related to their field of study:

“Considering the current economy, things are like that right? There are graduates who are unemployed and all. Maybe I first have to work in a field that is not really related to survive. But at the same time, I will try to find jobs that match my qualification.” (*Adib, B40, FGS*)

“I’m not sure what the future brings. But I will try my best to find a job that is related to my field of study.” (Nadia, M40, SGS)

Most of the students hoped to be employed in professional sectors upon completing their studies. Nevertheless, their optimism was also conveyed with a sense of realistic anticipation by acknowledging the uncertainty of their future. They stressed the importance of keeping their options open; accepting opportunities that will come along their way and making do with them. Concurrently, they emphasised self-responsibility in seeking employment that matches their higher education qualifications and skillsets in light of growing unemployment among graduates in the country.

Interestingly, the notion of ‘*rezeki*’ (roughly translated as ‘divine provision’ here) was mentioned by three of the students in coping with this uncertainty. Consider the succinct response by Haffiz below as he reflected upon the unpromising aspect of higher education qualifications in securing employment in a matching field by drawing in the concept of divine provision in Islam:

“In my opinion, it actually depends on one’s *rezeki*. Sometimes, there are people who studied Aerospace for example, but they work in a different field from what they want, like working as a cybercafe manager or as a Foodpanda [delivery boy]...it all depends on their *rezeki*. We can see now that some degree holders work as Grab drivers, but they still work. Because *rezeki* comes from Allah.”
(Haffiz, B40, SGS)

In brief, the majority of the students who were interviewed articulated their personal purposes of pursuing higher education in a manner that was indicative of prospects of employability in the labour market upon completing their university education. This is a key reason that occurred in almost all of the transcripts analysed which demonstrates the students’ optimistic belief in the instrumentality and economic returns of higher education qualifications that will facilitate employment in their future. However, although the instrumental association of pursuing university education is frequently narrated in relation to employment opportunities and labour market invariably across socio-economic background or generational status, there was a subtle difference in which the outlook was expressed across the interviews. For some students such as Atiqah, Reza, and Eliza, obtaining a university degree was seen to enable wider horizontal opportunities for them in the labour market upon completing their higher education. While for the others such as Zetty and Haffiz, possession of higher education qualifications was perceived to serve as an effective measure against lower-paid jobs, functioning as a form of protection against vertically lower paid or semi-skilled employment. Both instances reflect the tendency of the students to manifest self-accountability by following through the upward progression along the formal education track that is accessible to them. Their self-accountability requires cognisant effort to maintain their aspirations, and subsequently work hard to successfully participate in higher education and stay on to complete their higher education studies in order to maintain the perceived prospect of assured employability in their imagined future.

Academic Interests

Pursuing higher education as a pathway to explore their academic interests was the second reason that was mentioned by a small number of the participants when they were further probed as to why they would want to pursue a university education. In answering this question, three students directly remarked that progressing into higher education will enable them to learn more about their area of interests. This strengthened their aspirations to further their education. The two extracts below best illustrate this reasoning:

“Continuing our studies is one of the ways to learn more about the field that we’re interested in.” (*Haffiz, B40, SGS*)

“I know that I have deep interest in Biology. So, I want to pursue my interest by learning deeper about the field that I am interested at university later.”
(*Nadia, M40, SGS*)

Pursuing a bachelor’s degree in the field of interest was also perceived by one of the students as a structured way of learning that will lead to obtaining an accredited qualification in the subject area. For instance, Eliza commented on her reason to pursue higher education that was largely guided by her passion to read Law formally that will eventually enable her to achieve her career aspirations:

“During my foundation studies, I have taken up a number of basic subjects in Law. So, at this point, if I can pursue my interests and read Law for my university degree, insha’Allah I will obtain a proper LLB qualification to practice as a lawyer.” (*Eliza, B40, FGS*)

Later in the interview, she elaborated that her aspiration to study Law for her higher education was strongly attached to her enthusiasm to explore the subject in a formal manner:

“I’ve looked at Law syllabus at a number of universities, especially ... So from first to fourth year, we’ll learn Tort 1 in one semester, and Tort 2 in the next one, for example. I’m excited to learn more based on the subject level at university later, compared to what I’ve learned in foundation which was just some basic stuff.”
(*Eliza, B40, FGS*)

For these students, the opportunity to develop specialised knowledge about their particular fields of interest by pursuing higher education studies over the period of three to five years underscored their aspirations. University aspirations in this sense, were positively constructed in relation to their personal subjectivities that signified their desire to satisfy their intellectual curiosity by pursuing their intrinsic academic interests. These preferences can be linked to the rational element that partly configures their decisions to further their education at the higher level, which were expressed in terms of specific subject pursuits as they foresee the possibility of exploring and cultivating such interests formally. More broadly, this reflects the notion of aspirations that were anchored to the idea of personal intellectual development,

denoting the dimension of agency that these students demonstrated in their narratives of higher education aspirations, as they encountered the decision-making process concerning their imagined higher education future.

Personal Growth

The third purpose that was derived from the analysis was the articulation of higher education aspirations that was linked to the notion of personal growth. This was evident in four out of fourteen transcripts, where the students emphasised the chance to develop their social skills as part of their aspirational narratives towards higher education. For Ikmal, his aspiration to study at the university level was not only attached to his occupational aspirations to become a professional data analyst, but was also connected to his view that pursuing such a level of education will provide the space for independence and personal maturity as he treads along his education journey:

“Plus, the university itself will teach us how to be independent. So, it will lead me to mature myself.” (*Ikmal, B40, FGS*)

A similar, yet much more elaborate, notion of higher education aspirations that was constituted with the aim of personal growth was also mentioned by Atiqah. She was able to imagine the difference in the responsibility in managing her day to day life if and when she successfully enrolled in higher education, compared to her life back when she was in the school setting. She described her excitement to pursue higher education that was fortified with the hope of practising personal responsibility towards her academic commitments:

“I think it’ll be fun because when I go to university, I can manage my own time, make decisions on my own, study on my own. At school, everything follows the same schedule.” (*Atiqah, M40, SGS*)

This was also echoed by Zikri, who considered the importance of pursuing a university education that will equip him with the much needed skill sets to navigate the working world. Besides identifying higher education as the institution to gain subject knowledge formally, the conditional opportunity to develop his people skills was also present in his ambition to pursue higher education.

“When we enter the working world, we’ll meet many kinds of people. So, we need to know how to cope with these situations. To prepare ourselves for that, we need to go to university. It’s not just for seeking knowledge, but for us to develop our soft skills and others. Like organisational skill, things like that.” (*Zikri, M40, SGS*)

Atiqah also spoke about the opportunity to interact with diverse groups of individuals given the opportunity to study at the higher level that in turn, will equip her with interpersonal skills that she regarded as important in her own growth as an adult. She related:

“When we study at the university, we’ll meet a variety of people. Plus, at the university, we’ll do a lot of group assignments. So that’s an opportunity for us to become more prepared, more mature as an adult when we deal with so many kinds of people.” (*Atiqah, M40, SGS*)

The idea of staying on in the academic tracks to pursue higher education was seen as an instrumentally positive route for them to further develop their interpersonal skills. This reason however is much more pronounced in the transcripts of M40-SGS in contrast to B40-FGS, which implies a sense of cultivated cultural capital as they locate their relationships with the field of higher education that demonstrate the schema of understanding concerning the instrumental reason for such aspirations, which extends beyond vocational prospects as described earlier.

Freedom

Some of the participants considered the idea of going to university as the gateway for them to become independent from their families. The notion of eventual freedom that can be attained by pursuing university education as they will have to stay in university hostels provides an opportunity for them to live independently, although this was attached to the unique family context.

For Ihsan, the contingent outcome of staying on the university campus as a result of furthering his education at the university would enable him to move out of his family home. This, he justified, will finally offer him an opportunity to have some space from his parents whom he considered too controlling at times. He alluded to his aspirations to study at the university which was primarily driven by his hope to detach himself from this troubling condition at home:

“The foremost thing is actually for me to be free from my family. Because I have some family problems...I think [my parents] control me too much...I feel so. So, when I enrol into university later, I will find freedom.” (*Ihsan, B40, FGS*)

On the other hand, Haffiz explained that the chance of being accepted into any university that is geographically far from his family home will finally relieve him from carrying out the burdensome chores of helping his father’s business. He expressed his preference to apply for universities that are not located in the vicinity of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor which led him to deliberately organise his university choices by selecting universities that are located in the northern and southern parts of Peninsular Malaysia. His aspirations in this sense were also motivated by his wishes to move away from his family home as he explained:

“Furthermore, I think I am the type who enjoys staying far away from my family home. Back when I was travelling home from Kedah, I enjoyed that. For me personally, if I stay at home, my parents will always ask me for help. I don’t mind helping my mom. But my dad...he’s like...he’s running many businesses, laundromat...this and that. I’m the eldest and male, and all my younger siblings are

female. So, the responsibility of doing all the hard work fell on me.”
(*Haffiz, B40, SGS*)

Expressed this way, aspirations, and subsequently anticipated successful entrance into the field of higher education convey the significance of geographical mobility, as they foresee the opportunity to move away from their family home. The desire to pursue higher education is underlined by the imaginative aspects of seeing themselves physically situated in a distant location, which then offers them the opportunity to disengage or relieve them from their filial issues.

DISCUSSION

Similar to the work by Kintrea et al., (2015), this study illuminated the multidimensionality of higher education aspirations that were held by B40 and M40 students, particularly in the ways these aspirations were anchored to a variety of reasons as identified in the thematic analysis. The articulation of higher education aspirations was scaffolded by conceptualisations of both purpose and personal reasonings indicating relationships with young people’s underlying values and meaningful preferences as they imagined their future (Bohon et al., 2006; Kintrea et al., 2015). The students’ personal purposes of aspiring to further their studies at the university level reflect both intrinsic and extrinsic goals; each with different level of importance and recognition among the students.

The dominant view of pursuing higher education by considering it the necessary pathway to obtain secure employment was held by the majority of the participants is similar to the findings by Brooks et al. (2020). This points to the discursive subjectivity of the rational, economic function of higher education that has been embodied by the students, concurrently acknowledging that secondary school qualifications are no longer adequate to secure a rewarding employment. This, therefore, necessitates the students to aspire for and successfully progress into higher education (Tierney & Sirat, 2015). The findings strengthened the nuances in the prospect of employability as identified by Brooks et al., (2020) and Carrillo-Higuera & Walton (2019) where obtaining higher education credentials was seen as a practical route to gainful professional employment as adults or functioning as a preventive measure against lower-paid jobs.

More importantly, these accounts of higher educational aspirations were not necessarily accompanied by the notion of desiring upward intergenerational mobility or social status by obtaining higher education qualifications, particularly among those from the lower-income or prospective first-generation backgrounds, similar to findings by Hoskins (2016). This is in contrast with the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016-2020) which explicitly stated the aim to increase the B40 household participation in higher education as a means to facilitate upward social mobility and economic growth, in order to create a larger middle-class section of the society. Qualitative findings of this study suggest initial consideration on the applicability of such state discourse in the composition of individual reasons to progress into higher education

as it is not necessarily reciprocated by the B40 students sampled in this study. In particular, this raises a critical question on the relevance of achieving social mobility through tertiary education attainment as heavily communicated in government policies, as this was not evident in the responses of the students from B40 backgrounds as they narrated their reasons to further their studies.

Despite the popularity of the instrumentalist discourse in discussing the purpose of higher education, it should be noted here that the aspirations to pursue a university education should not be exclusively narrowed to that of economic, extrinsic drives. The findings demonstrate that the employment-centred rationale of pursuing higher education was also fused with a mixture of temporal, short-term goals such as geographical mobility and continuous, intrinsic long-term goals such as personal growth and exercising independence. These goals dynamically shape their aspirations to pursue a university education (Black & Walsh, 2020).

For instance, existentialist themes such as individual freedom, geographical mobility, and personal growth can be examined in light of the students' anticipation of physical distance from their family home and the eventual transition into a new 'world' of lifestyle and experiences of independent university life (Holdsworth, 2009). In particular, the theme of freedom that is tied to the prospect of geographical mobility as demonstrated in the study findings may have been overlooked or understudied previously. Such findings suggest an important reason that should be considered further in examining extrinsic motivation that drives students to aspire towards higher education. This concerns the opportunity to relocate themselves to a new place as they are presented with the possibility to move out from their family home and to experience living independently in the campus dormitory as young adults.

On the other hand, the notion of personal growth that was expressed by the participants echoes the findings by Arum and Roksa (2014) where university education is viewed as an important phase in their lives where the students will be able to cultivate the necessary social skills that they perceive to be useful in many social settings as they mature into adulthood. This indicates their recognition of the shift from childhood into the early phase of adulthood as the students foresee themselves venturing into higher education as a meaningful pursuit (Fuller, 2013; Tieken, 2016).

All of the rationales elaborated earlier are embedded in their intention to pursue university education situate their aspirations as part of their strategic plans for self-improvement and gaining independence, reflect multiple desires that the students hold in context to their higher education aspirations (Sellar & Gale, 2011). These reasons signify personal, financial, and intellectual values that constitute their rational decisions attached to their aspirations to further their studies at university level. To add, the data presented here challenge the notion in which higher education is increasingly identified with that of economic and financial gains, in light of these personal, intrinsically motivated reasons that underscore such aspirations.

CONCLUSION

The article has explored a number of reasons that underlie the aspirations to pursue higher education among first-born matriculation and foundation level students from the B40 and M40 Malay families. The students' reasons to pursue higher education were influenced by several contexts that frame their aspirations. In many instances, these reasons are established as a set of expectations in relation to the potential benefits stemming from their progression into higher education and the experiences thereof that may contribute positively to their personal lives.

Similar to the findings by Brooks et al. (2020), the employment rationale, while being the dominant perspective, is not the only reason as to why these students intend to pursue a university education. To add, while the employment reasons are internalised by the students as a doxic sensibility in rationalising their aspirations, other reasons, often expressed as intrinsic goals such as academic interests, personal growth, and individual freedom are also found in their accounts. This reflects multiple expectations of the university life in general. In other words, these pragmatic considerations signify their hopes of what a university degree may bring into their lives, and how these then were translated into articulated, idealistic reasons. More importantly, these indicate a broader perspective on the purposes of attaining higher education beyond the confine of employment concerns and upward social mobility – further asserting the educational purposes in the provision of higher education. More strikingly, these narratives occasionally may not coincide with that of the economic, instrumentalist purposes of higher education advanced by the state. It is therefore apt to suggest here that students bring an array of perspectives in their motivation to progress into higher education. This should be considered in communicating the purposes of experiencing higher education as a positive academic experience that encompasses both personal and collectivist notion. In particular, state policy papers, institutional documents, curriculum design and activities, and public-facing materials, among others should continue to uphold these intrinsic, educational purpose associated with the attainment of university credentials.

The data of this study points to the students' cognisance of the several reasons that they anchor to their academic aspirations to pursue a formal qualification through a university education. While the findings and discussion stemming from the research data appear cursory, these offer some preliminary insights in how these students' may perceive their identities as they foresee themselves enrolling into higher education institutions and experiencing university education first-hand. Secondly, these findings are useful in exploring further how these personal reasons are interconnected with their course and institution of choice that consequently impact their life trajectories upon completion of higher education studies.

In brief, the study adds to the existing literature on the topic by presenting the contemporary reasons as to why students from different socio-economic and generational status backgrounds aspire to pursue higher education. While a contrast between socio-economic or generational status may not be sharply evident from the study findings, this suggests the importance of further exploration on the perspectives and motives of young people in light of the normalisation of higher education, particularly those who are from lower-income or first-generation backgrounds who wish to progress into higher education.

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