

**EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' INTEREST IN PURSUING
HIGHER DEGREES DURING TIMES OF
ECONOMIC RECESSION**

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

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Engaging in higher education is a complex decision shaped by financial, social, and psychological factors. This research explores the interest of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in pursuing postgraduate studies during an economic downturn, focusing on 70 fourth-year students from UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh. Utilizing a quantitative descriptive approach, data was collected through a close-ended questionnaire with 10 yes/no questions and 10 Likert scale statements, analyzed with descriptive statistics. The results of the survey revealed that 77,1% of students felt the economic downturn influenced their educational choices, while 87,1% believed that pursuing an advanced degree would improve their job prospects. Financial constraints were significant for many, with 55,7% of students reporting reduced family support for education. Nevertheless, 82,9% of students considered scholarships or financial aid crucial to continuing their studies. Despite these challenges, 90% of the students remained optimistic, driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Additionally, 92,9% of students highlighted the importance of mentorship in their academic journey, and 97,1% of students emphasized the value of support from family and friends. Concerns about educational quality persisted, prompting a call from students for improved financial aid and academic support systems.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

Education is a cornerstone of economic growth and societal stability, offering both direct and indirect benefits. Directly, it enhances workforce skills, fosters innovation, and attracts foreign investments, driving GDP growth and job creation. Indirectly, it empowers individuals to make informed decisions, strengthens governance, and supports global collaboration, ensuring a sustainable and prosperous future in an interconnected world (Zhang et al., 2024). Beyond direct economic impacts, education improves governance, public health, and family planning. Educated individuals make informed decisions, leading to societal stability and sustainability. Investments in education yield both tangible (e.g., GDP growth, job creation) and intangible (e.g., societal stability, better governance) benefits.

Nobanee and Dilshad (2021) explored the relationship between higher education and financial crises, revealed that universities worldwide have increasingly become market-driven entities due to the financial pressures posed by economic recessions. The financial crisis has led to fluctuations in enrollment patterns, with universities witnessing decreased enrollments during recessions. However, certain institutions are strategically responding by attracting international students to sustain their revenue from higher tuition fees. These institutions are adopting strategies like internationalization and enhancing competitiveness to attract students and sustain growth amidst fluctuating global

markets. Despite these efforts, challenges persist in balancing local educational needs with global demands, necessitating more adaptive policies to support higher education's long-term viability.

A study by Al Maalouf and Al Baradhi (2023), Lebanon's economic crisis, marked by hyperinflation and rising unemployment, negatively impacts its education sector, especially concerning student enrollment, education quality, and teacher motivation. Findings reveal significant adverse effects on these aspects, underscoring the need for targeted interventions, such as financial aid programs and teacher support measures, to preserve the educational system and human capital development. Financial difficulties, including the devaluation of the Lebanese pound and increased tuition fees, have made education less accessible, particularly for lower-income families. Teachers also face motivational challenges due to the crisis, exacerbating the deterioration of the education system. The study calls for urgent policy interventions to support both students and educators during the ongoing crisis.

Dilshad (2024), explores the impact of the 2008–2009 financial crisis on higher education (HE) in the UAE, drawing comparisons with G7 countries like the US, Canada, and France. Similar effects were observed in G7 countries, though Canada's policies enabled resilience, including increased enrollment due to government support. By contrast, other countries, such as the UK, saw adverse effects on research and development functions in their HE systems. The study identifies challenges such as funding cuts, increased tuition fees, and declining enrollment while emphasizing the UAE's need for strategies similar to those of G7 countries to enhance resilience in HE during economic downturns.

Ryan, (2019) indicated that pursuing additional education in or after the recession was driven by factors linked to various points in the life course, with persistence in adolescence being a significant predictor. Persistence during adolescence was a significant predictor for individuals deciding to pursue education during the Great Recession. Pre-recession education level also influenced decisions, with individuals with higher degrees being less likely to pursue additional education. Persistence as a personality trait from adolescence demonstrated its influence across the life course, particularly during challenging economic periods like the Great Recession.

"Majority of students acknowledged the importance of learning styles on their learning experiences. The fact that they asked for feedback and assistance from both their peers and lecturers indicates that they appreciate the diversity in the way they learn. It means that students acknowledged that learning style was an important factor in learning due to the activation of students' senses." (Muluk et al., 2020, p. 163).

Indonesia's higher education system has experienced rapid growth, enrolling over 8 million students as of 2018, with 58% in private higher education institutions (HEIs). Indonesia's higher education system has made significant strides in expanding access and addressing regional disparities. However, challenges such as inequities in quality, geographic concentration of resources, and insufficient funding persist (Welch & Aziz, 2023).

This study aims to explore EFL students' interest in pursuing higher degrees during times of economic recession, focusing on the period of economic

downturn between 2019 and 2024. By surveying students at the English Language Education Department of UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, this research seeks to identify the barriers and motivations that affect students' educational aspirations during times of economic recession. The research will provide valuable insights into how economic factors shape students' perceptions of higher education and their decision-making processes in uncertain economic climates. Additionally, it will examine how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations interact with financial constraints during such periods.

The findings of this study will contribute to the understanding of how economic recessions influence higher education decisions, particularly in the context of developing countries like Indonesia. Moreover, it will offer practical recommendations for policymakers, educational institutions, and financial aid organizations to better support students during economic hardship and ensure access to education in times of financial instability.

The economic recession that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 onwards exacerbated existing inequalities in access to education. Despite economic challenges, there appears to be a paradox: some EFL students remain highly motivated to pursue higher degrees, often driven by aspirations for better economic outcomes or personal growth. However, how these students navigate financial and systemic barriers during times of crisis remains unclear. This gap in the literature underpins the need for this study. By focusing on EFL learners' interests, motivations, and barriers, this research aims to shed light on how economic factors influence educational aspirations and decisions.

B. Research Question

In consideration of the aforementioned background, it can be posited that students evince a proclivity to pursue advanced degrees. Nevertheless, numerous factors associated with this interest require careful consideration by students. This is because students are required to prepare extensively in either case, whether they intend to pursue further studies or seek employment upon graduation. As previously stated, the research questions of the study can be formulated as follows:

1. Do EFL students perceive the economic recession as a barrier to pursuing higher degrees?
2. What motivates EFL students to pursue higher degrees during an economic recession?

C. Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to determine whether students express an interest in pursuing a higher degree during times of economic recession subsequent to their graduation from an undergraduate program. Moreover, the researcher sought to ascertain the factors that motivate students to pursue higher degrees during times of economic recession. Explore the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of EFL students pursuing higher degrees during economic downturns. Analyze how perceptions of higher education's value influence decision-making during recessions.

D. Scope and Limitations of the Study

Given the multifaceted nature of students' motivations for pursuing higher degrees, it is crucial to narrow the focus of this study in order to facilitate a more

nuanced examination of the pertinent variables. To ensure the efficacy of the research, it is necessary to define the scope of the study in a manner that allows for a focused examination of the problem at hand. Thus, this study is limited to an exploration of EFL students' interest in pursuing higher degrees during times of economic recession.

This study will not address other contexts or issues not directly related to the research question. To ensure consistency and minimize bias, each respondent is provided the same set of questionnaires. The findings from this study are specific to the sample of respondents and should not be generalized to a larger population. The primary source of data is the self-report questionnaires developed by the researcher. This study focuses on EFL students in Indonesia, specifically those enrolled in undergraduate or graduate programs at English language departments. The research timeframe covers the economic recession from 2019 to 2024, encompassing the global economic impacts of the COVID- 19 pandemic.

E. Significance of the Study

1. Theoretical Significance

The present research employs a series analyses, based on the responses of a cohort of students in the English Language Education Department of UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, to examine their interest in pursuing higher degrees, focusing on the cohort of students who began their studies in 2021. It is hoped that this research will prove useful to those engaged in further studies related to students' interests in pursuing higher degrees, particularly in the context of providing data to support validation processes. It contributes to the body of knowledge on educational aspirations during economic downturns, with a specific focus on EFL

learners. Understanding these dynamics can guide strategies to ensure equitable access to education, even during economic challenges.

2. Practical Significance

a) For Students

The findings may provide motivation for students to continue their studies at a more advanced level, highlighting the potential merits of such an endeavor. Every student has the desire to continue their studies in order to gain knowledge. In the future, students will be better equipped to navigate the challenges that life may present specially when related to economic recession.

b) For Lecturers

The results of this study may be utilized by all lecturers as a reference point to assess each student's interest in pursuing higher degrees, particularly in view of the paramount significance of English language proficiency in the contemporary era. It is notable that the majority of lecturers at universities have completed their studies at the postgraduate level, including doctoral degrees and even professors.

c) For English Language Education Department

The university is anticipated to intensify socialization and promotional activities pertaining to the significance of lifelong learning and professional competence in the contemporary labor market. This strategy is designed to cultivate greater interest among students in pursuing advanced education in the English Language Education Department of UIN Ar-Raniry. In light of the findings of this study, the university may wish to persevere with the strategies that

have been employed thus far, with a view to fostering greater interest among students in pursuing higher degrees during times of economic recession beyond the bachelor's degree upon graduation. Findings can inform policymakers and educational institutions in designing support systems, such as financial aid programs, tailored to the needs of EFL students.

F. Terminology

1. Students' Interest

Learners who exhibit less pronounced interests require augmented support compared to those who demonstrate more pronounced interests. These learners are capable of re-engaging with their interests independently, voluntarily, frequently, and with an advanced level of knowledge and understanding (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). Consequently, interest is not regarded as a fixed personality trait. Conversely, interest can be modified by the surrounding environment (Quinlan & Corbin, 2023). Khadijah et al.'s (2017) defined interest in continuing higher education as a tendency comprising elements of pleasure, attention, desire, need, encouragement, and willingness to pursue further education beyond the completion of secondary education.

2. Higher Degrees

The term "higher degrees" refers to processes undertaken by students over a specific period of time. This may entail the continuation of study in a specific field, which may be the same as or distinct from the field of the previous degree. Higher degrees can be considered the subsequent stage of the preceding degree that students have completed. This study considers higher degrees to be those

beyond the master's level, as the research was conducted at the undergraduate level.

Universities serve as both intellectual and social institutions, preparing students to actualize their academic potential and to subsequently lead fulfilling lives as members of civil society (Arum & Roksa, 2014). Education can facilitate the nurturing of existing interests, while simultaneously exposing students to new areas of potential interest, thereby enabling them to transcend the familiar through other life domains (Akkerman, 2017).

3. Economic Recession

Economic recessions can be analyzed as system "failures," in which the economy undergoes corrections via market adjustments, fiscal stimuli, and policy reforms (Tadeu, 2020). These adjustments aim to restore or improve the state of the economy following downturns. This perspective highlights the dynamics of recovery and how they influence the onset of subsequent recessions. This definition emphasizes that recessions are not solely defined by GDP contraction but involve complex economic shifts across various sectors.

When economies contract, public and private funding for education often diminishes, creating a significant barrier for students aiming to continue their education. This effect can be especially pronounced in developing countries like Indonesia, where financial constraints can limit students' access to higher education, including postgraduate studies.