

## FACTORS INFLUENCING MALAYSIAN STUDENTS' CHOICE OF MAJOR IN UNIVERSITIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Ismail Latifah

Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, Malaysia

[latifah@um.edu.my](mailto:latifah@um.edu.my); [latifahismail@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:latifahismail@yahoo.co.uk)

**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to identify factors that influence students' choice of academic majors such as Medicine, Engineering, Law, Architecture and Accountancy, which students believe will lead them towards a better life. These professional majors will change the students' future position in terms of social stratification. This study attempts to determine which social background variables predominantly influences the students' major by examining which social background was most successful in enrolling in universities in the United Kingdom. This study is also meant to investigate students' intentionality of enrolling into British universities and specializing in particular areas. A survey garnering the response of a total of 360 students was administered to assess factors that influence the choice of their majors. The study designed was cross-sectional and comparative in nature, and the instruments used were a self-administered questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The findings show that the level of education attained by fathers and mothers have strong relationship with the choice of major. For instance, the father's income has strong associations with the choice of major while the level of the mother's qualification plays the most significant role in 'having a proper plan towards higher education' and 'seeking information regarding further studies'. The findings reveal that majority of Malaysian students studying abroad come from those of higher socio-economic statuses. The effort to narrow this widening income disparity between the various income groups between urban and rural households have yet to succeed.

**Keywords:** Socio Economic Status, choice of major, professional courses, social stratification

### INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has sent about 15,015 students to universities in the United Kingdom universities in 2012 (HESA Student Record, 2012/2013). The purpose of sending students abroad is to expose students to scientific and technological advancements with the hope that these students will turn up to be a professional workforce that can help develop the nation. Therefore, the Malaysian government allocated a substantial amount of financial capital for the purpose of sending students abroad, particularly to the United Kingdom. According to United Nations, Malaysia ranked first for education spending at 8.1% of its GDP amongst emerging market in 2002 (<http://www.NationMaster.com/InternationalStatistic/2014>).

Higher education has been valued as an avenue for individuals to improve their socio-economic status, and it becomes an instrument for the achievement of national development objectives, especially the promotion of social cohesion among its multiethnic population and the creation of a dynamic workforce.

In the Malaysian society, tertiary education is highly valued as one of the channels for self-advancement. A degree is regarded as a passport to lifelong security, comfort and status. Sarjit Singh (1987) wrote that higher education in Malaysia had been valued as an avenue for individual and group socio-economic advancement as well as an instrument for the achieving national development objectives, especially the promotion of social cohesion among its multi-ethnic population and the creation of a dynamic workforce. Overseas training is viewed as an appropriate education investment for the human capital needs especially in developing countries where high-level skilled work force is in demand (Altbach et al., 1984). Studying overseas is also a 'process of developing essential human capital' (Goodman, 1985), especially in highly specialized fields that developing countries were unable to supply but urgently require. The development of any society lies in the improvement of its population, through the contribution of education, which provides the force necessary for industrial development and economic growth (Fagerlind; Saha, 1983). The vast majority of students graduate from high school and aspire to achieve much higher educational goals (Schneider; Stenvenson, 1999). Dalton Conley

(2001) emphasizes that parents' educational level affects the socioeconomic outcomes of offspring, particularly the offspring's educational attainment.

Socioeconomic attainment is strongly linked to educational attainment (Sewell et al, 1970). Trajectory through an educational system might be one of the key issues to understanding the pathways by which social and economic background lead to future inequalities in education. Institutionalized cultural capital, e.g. formal education, plays a crucial role, but appears to be strongly dependant on the availability of sufficient incorporated cultural capital (an affinity for higher education, the motivation to invest in educational degrees), which is provided by parents via transmitting the attitudes and knowledge needed to succeed in the existing educational system. Educational aspirations or educational expectations might be a good proxy measure of a more hidden element of cultural capital. Therefore, understanding the role of educational aspirations in the social reproduction of education inequalities might be an important clue for strategies aiming to reduce inequalities in education. Evidence on the association between socioeconomic background and educational aspirations of offspring are somewhat conflicting, indicating direct as well as indirect pathways. The strong influence of socioeconomic background (parents' education, occupation, family income) on educational expectations was reported by Trusty (1998) in his study of American adolescents.

Meanwhile, Carpenter and Hayden (1987) and Dalton Conley (2001) have concluded a similar finding, that parental education affects the offspring's educational attainment. Furthermore, Tinklin et al. (2003) claimed that there was a strong relationship between social advantage and high attainment. Those with fathers in non-manual occupations, who were more educated, owned homes and attended independent schools were more likely than others to leave school with high educational achievement. In contrast, Demie et al. (2002) confirms that schools with a higher number of disadvantaged families do less well than schools where, a smaller proportion of their pupils come from disadvantaged families.

In Marjoribanks's (2002) analysis on the relationship of family background entitled "Individual and Environmental Influences on Adolescents' Aspiration" in Australia indicated that girls tend to have educational aspirations that are higher than those boys whereas boys have higher occupational aspirations.

In a series of studies, Stevenson and Stigler (1992) proposed that a major difference between the United States and Asian countries (China, Japan, and Taiwan) was that Asian parents generally have much higher academic expectations than American parents. In contrast, Asian American parents have high educational expectations of their children at school. Hence they push their children to attain as high an education as possible. Like Asian American parents, Malaysian parents have similar educational expectations of their children too. Parental support is further emphasized by Sherri Turner et al. (2002) who suggested that in order to participate in an intentional and self-directed means of developing one's own career, young adolescents need both the support and involvement of their parents in a comprehensive school-based guidance programme that develops confidence around career-related competencies such as through career planning and occupational exploration.

A study conducted in Malaysia by Swee (2000) identified the level of career maturity in the urban and suburban schools. She found that students in urban schools are more equipped with information about the world of careers and would therefore, be more vocationally matured. It also indicated that students with parents who are more highly educated and earned higher incomes then to be more vocationally matured.

Proficiency in English is an important factor in determining educational attainment. In investigating the relationship between educational inequality and academic achievement in England and France, Lees (1994: 81) suggests that doing well at the upper levels of both systems usually requires the acquisition of sophisticated patterns of speech and literary culture most which are easily acquired in high-status families.

The main concern that became a key question of the research is regarding the influence of students' social class on their majors because specializing in prestigious majors will lead individuals to professional careers. The profound impact when students work in professional careers will further affect many aspects of people's lives such as labour market outcomes and social mobility (Sarjit Singh, 1989; Breen, & Goldthorpe, 1997). Also it improves the standard of living or at least the continuation of individuals into the social class that is similar to their parents (Bourdieu, & Passeron, 1977) but above all it contributes for strong implications for policy making (Alasdair Forsyth, & Andy Furlong, 2003). From the exploration of past research, it can be concluded that education has been one of the routes to succeed in the world of employment as educational attainment provides students access to particular jobs.

The purpose of this study is to explore the association between socioeconomic background, parents' educational aspiration, school-related factors, English proficiency, and gender factors that influence students' choice of academic major such as in Medicine, Pharmacy, Engineering, Law, Architecture and Accountancy, which students believe will lead them towards a more stable and better life. These professional majors will change the students' future position in terms of social stratification. This study also attempts to determine which social background variables predominantly influences students' choice of major and also to examine which social background is most successful in enrolling students to universities in the United Kingdom. Moreover, this study also investigates students' intentionality of coming to British universities to specialize in particular areas. It was found that different social backgrounds that led to different choice of academic majors was influenced by parents' knowledge on students' educational aspirations and also by policy makers such as the Ministry of Higher Education in planning the social reproduction over educational inequalities among students.

Based on Bourdieu's theories on cultural and economic capital constraints on achievement (Bourdieu, 1977), together with Gambetta's model of educational choices and intentionality (Gambetta, 1987), this study hypothesized that students' educational attainment which determines students' choice of major consist of inter-related factors as shown in Figure 1.

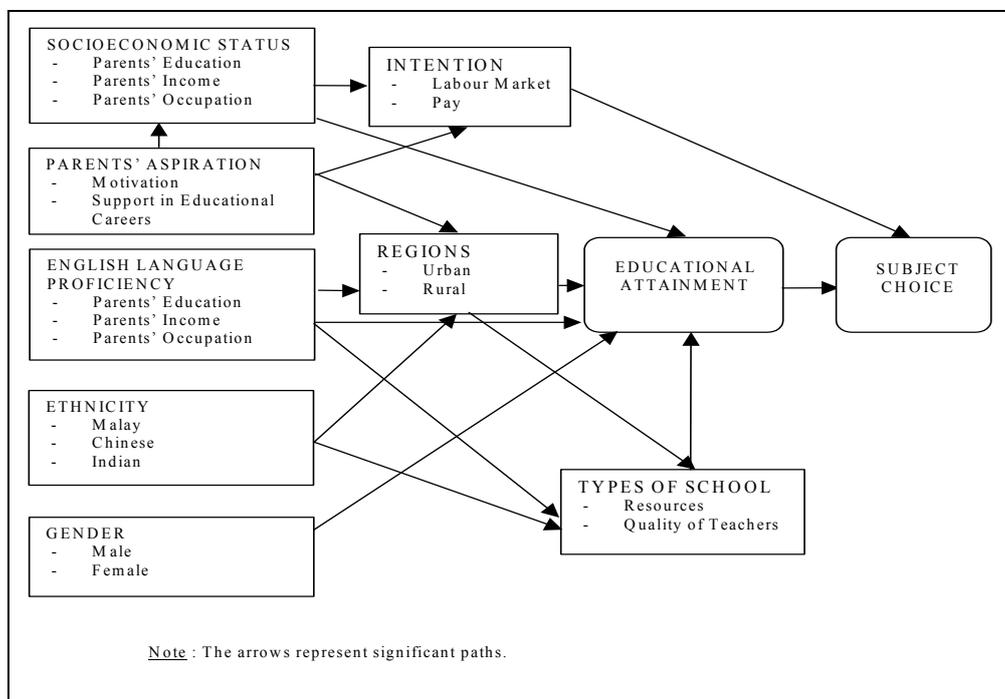


Figure 1: Research Framework of Factors Affect Students' Choice of Majors

## METHODS

### Sample

The sample for this study comprises of Malaysian undergraduate and postgraduate students who were pursuing their studies at six universities in the East Midlands areas of the United Kingdom. Three hundred and sixty (360) students were randomly selected from the target population. The sample consists of all the ethnic groups who were pursuing various courses at different faculties or departments. To ensure that the coverage of the study was extensive, different ethnic groups were represented in the study, and resulted in a sample population comprising of 248 (68.9%) Malays or Bumiputeras, 87 (24.2%) Chinese, and 25 (6.9%) Indians students. The data was collected in the winter of 2006.

The six universities in the East Midlands area was selected to ensure a representative sample. The six universities are

as follows: the University of Nottingham, the University of Leicester, the University of Loughborough, Trent Nottingham University, De Monfort University and Derby University. In Nottingham University alone in 2006, there were over 350 Malaysian undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The degree of reliability (Cronbach alpha) of the instruments used in this study was  $\alpha = 0.87$ . This research used a descriptive statistical percentage, frequency, mean and standard deviation and inferential statistics, including Pearson-r. The study designed is cross-sectional and comparative in nature, and the instruments used are in the form of: (a) a self-administered questionnaire or survey (b) semi-structured interviews of the Malaysian students in the United Kingdom.

Data analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Science Program Version (SPSS for Windows Version 14). Descriptive statistics was used to determine the respondents' demographic data in the study. In this research, the analysis utilizes statistical tools - frequency, percentage, mean, T-test and Pearson- correlation r or Chi-square distribution.

### **Choice of Major**

The eight main categories of choices of major are: Accounting, Architecture, Education, Engineering, Law, Medicine, Science and Food Science, Social Science and Arts.

### **Measuring Instruments**

This study attempts to examine the effects of eight main independent variables, namely the parents' Socio-economic Status (also known as SES - which includes income, occupational status and academic qualification of parents), ethnic group, urban-rural distribution, gender, types of school, parents' aspiration, English language proficiency and the intentionality of undertaking the specialisation as a major.

### **The Eight Student's Background Variables**

The Socio-Economic Status (SES) variables, that is parental income, qualification and occupation chosen in this study requires the Interval Scale for the ordinal level of measurement. Parental income is measured on a monthly basis and it is assumed that the gross income comes from father. The values 1 to 7 are given with 7 being the 'highest income', and 1 for 'no income'. The three educational levels that were highlighted are university education, secondary school education and primary school education. The educational level of the parents had a scale of 1 - 7. '1' meant "no schooling", '6' equated to having a university degree while 7 meant owning higher qualifications such as a post-graduate (master's or doctoral) degree or other professional qualifications such as being a member of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA) or others.

Respondents were also asked to indicate whether their father and mother were in the professional and managerial group; skilled or semi-skilled workers; and either unemployed or if their mothers were housewives. The researcher went through all 360 responses and gave each a value of 1 to 6, 1 being the highest. The measure of parents' occupational status included six pre-coded response categories: (1) Professional, (2) Managerial, (3) Skilled Worker, (4) Trade and Commerce, (5) Semi-skilled or (6) Unskilled workers. The parents' occupational categories were also simplified from 6 categories to 5 categories, which were 'Professional and Managerial'; 'Skilled Worker'; 'Trade and Commerce'; 'Semi-skilled' and 'Unemployed'.

From the student's questionnaires, information about the possession of wealth and other means of income from other sources such as bonuses or the rental of properties was obtained through the Nominal Scale of 'Yes' or 'No' questions. The scale for parental level of wealth was constructed through an Interval Scale whereby students were required to specify their financial background as very poor, poor, average, above average and rich. Different individuals have a different perception of defining parental wealth. This scale portrays how each individual chooses to indicate level of parents' wealth.

The 'Urban-Rural' distribution of the area of residence was designed to explore the relationship of this variable to the preference in choice of major. In the urban-rural scale, 1 represents urban living conditions while 2 represents rural living conditions. It is worth noting that the Urban-Rural area distribution variable was determined by the place of residence before the respondents entered universities in the United Kingdom. Respondents were asked to classify the

urban-rural areas themselves through open-ended question. Furthermore, they were asked to add details of their residential area by giving the names of their villages, hometowns and cities. The sample in the study was made up of 74.4% urban areas and 25.6% rural areas.

There are three main ethnic groups in Malaysia – the Bumiputera or Malays, Chinese and Indians. The question for ethnicity was designed in the form of nominal scale and this ethnic group variable was coded as follows: 1 for Bumiputera, 2 for Chinese and 3 for Indians.

The gender variable was coded 1 for males and 2 for females in the original study. This dichotomous variable, which comprises of only 2 categories, employed the Mann-Whitney statistical test to see its correlation with the choices of majors. The sample in the study comprised of 54.2% male students and 45.8% female students.

Different types of school provide different educational resources. Among school-related variables, the researcher measured school library books, school buildings, laboratories and ICT facilities. Respondents were asked to assess their schools educational resources as (1) excellent, (2) very good, (3) good, (4) fairly good or (5) bad. In Malaysia, ambitious but culturally ill-equipped parents would prefer their children to go to a certain type of school, as Gambetta (1987) said “if not accompanied by an adequate amount of ‘cultural-capital’, may lead the children to a high risk of failure and of abandoning high school before completion.”

The parents’ aspiration and educational strategies that they have for their children’s achievement in their career choice is manifested in different forms and ways, and at varying degrees of intensity. Higher parents’ aspirations would of course mean more readiness to spend capital investment on the child’s education. In this questionnaire design, the parents’ aspiration was measured in two stages. First, the strategies used by parents to keep track of school progress were measured. This included strategies like frequency of consultation between parents and teachers, providing educational material like books, computers and managing the children’s homework. The second stage that was measured was parents’ educational motivation and encouragement towards higher education. The motivation could be in the form of giving advice and support, seeking information regarding further studies, having proper planning towards higher education and having interest in children’ school progress. The parents’ aspiration for their children’s higher education was measured using a Likert scale, with scores from 1 to 5. Respondents were asked to assess their schools educational resources as (1) most important, (2) very important, (3) important, (4) lesser important (5) not important at all.

English proficiency is examined through English usage with family and community. Students who speak English at home with their family or even with their surrounding community would have a better foundation in English. The English proficiency variable is considered in the study because it is an important medium of instruction that can lead to higher academic progress.

The intentionality of undertaking a particular major was considered in the design to see if there is an association between the students’ intention to specialise in a specific area and their choice of major. Open-ended questions were designed for students to explain why they have decided to come to the United Kingdom to specialise in a particular major. The students for example may intend to meet the market demand after considering the prospects of employment once they have completed their studies and gone back to Malaysia. Financial rewards and career benefits may also be taken into consideration. Details of their intentions and reasons for choosing a particular area was further asked in the form of a Likert Scale of 1 to 5.

### **The Interview Survey**

The Interview data-gathering technique was used to comprehend and supplement the questionnaire mode of enquiry. It was also intended to support the questionnaire survey project since certain aspects of the research inquiry might not have captured the initial survey adequately. It is expected that this interview survey would provide additional evidence to assess the reasons for their choice of major. Via the semi-structured interviews, useful information regarding the reasons for the selection of major was attained from 38 interviewees, while the sponsors provided information on the scholarships policy, and the preferences of courses and methods of selecting the students.

## RESULTS

Three hundred and sixty students participated in this survey. The specialization or majors that show a high percentage score are Engineering 92(25.6%), Accounting 66(18.3%), Medicine 52(14.4%), Law 40(11.1%), Education 28(7.8%), Sciences 25(6.9%), Architecture 17(4.7%), Social Sciences 16(4.4%), Food Science 12(3.3%) and Arts 12(3.3%). More than half of the sample population (58.9%) were from the 21-25 age groups, the second largest group (6.4%) were undergraduate students below the age of 20. The third largest group, whose age ranged from 36 to 40 were the post-graduate students. There were 195 (54.2%) male students and 165(45.8%) female students.

**Table 1: Demographics of University Students Who Participated in the Study to Identify Factors Influencing Choice of Major**

Variable	Frequency	%
Sex of Respondent		
Male	195	54.2%
Female	165	45.8%
Area of residence		
Urban	265	73.6%
Rural	94	26.1%
Ethics Groups		
Malay	248	68.9%
Chinese	87	24.4%
Indians	25	6.9%

More than 75% of the population are Malay or Bumiputera students. Most of the Bumiputera students specialise in Accountancy (26%), Engineering (17%) and Medicine (14%). The Chinese students prefer Engineering (45%), Law (21%) and Medicine (16%). The Indians prefer Engineering (40%), to Education & TESL (20%) and Law (16%). The relationships between each ethnic group and SES, type of schools, financial support and sponsorships have different significant values.

**Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Major Choice and Fathers' Income**

Choice of Major	Mean	Std. Dev	Frequency (%)
For Entire Population	4.5284	1.7368	335
Law	6.2368	.9982	40(11.1%)
Medicine	5.0714	1.5266	52(14.4%)
Engineering	4.6279	1.7852	92(25.6%)
Architecture	4.5714	1.8273	17(4.7%)
Accounting	4.2031	1.3003	66(18.3%)
Social Science & Arts	3.6875	1.8154	16(4.4%)
Food Science	3.6667	.8876	12(3.3%)
Sciences	3.6400	1.6299	25(6.9%)
Education	3.5926	1.4212	28(7.8%)

Table 2 provides an interesting way to compare group means and standard deviation for major choice and the fathers' income variable. The highest mean is for Law (6.24) followed by Medicine (5.07), Engineering (4.63), Architecture (4.57), and Accounting (4.20). Highest mean for Law students reveal that the fathers earning the highest income amongst the sample of population.

### Socio-Economic Status as Determinant of Major Choice

Socio-economic status (SES) was selected as a variable for analysis because a number of studies have suggested that it is the most important influence on students' educational attainment (Burnhill *et al.*, 1990; Paterson, 1991; Sammons, 1995; Biggart, 2000). High SES is associated with high levels of education and job attainment (Sewell *et al.*, 1976). The four prestigious major choices, which are popular among Malaysian students in the six universities in the East Midlands of the United Kingdom, are medicine, law, engineering and accountancy. In

this study, the SES measured is composed of a combination of factors: parents' education, parents' occupation, parents' income, as well as wealth.

The majority of the students who gained entry into the universities came from higher SES backgrounds. Major choices such as medicine, law, engineering and accountancy have strong associations with SES. Although all relationships are statistically significant, the strength of association varies for each factor.

Fathers' income and subject choice is strongly associated at  $p < 0.0000$ . The study notes that 32% of the fathers, whose income is more than RM3001, have 28% of their children specialising in Law, 25% in Engineering, 17% in Medicine and 15% in Accountancy. This finding clearly answers the hypothesis of the study that fathers' income has a significant influence on students' subject choice. It is found that mothers' income has a negligible relationship with major choice as more than 56% of the mothers are housewives.

The level of education attained by fathers for the whole population is considered high. There is a statistically high significance between parents' education and major choice. 25% of the fathers have tertiary education or have obtained professional qualifications. The fathers with tertiary education have their children specialising in Engineering (28%), Law (25%), Medicine (20%) and Accounting (13%). Apparently, the frequency and percentage of the four prestigious major choices are higher for fathers in the professional and managerial groups. It is important to note that for law, there are no students with fathers in the unemployed or lower occupational category.

Parents' aspiration influences students' subject choice. Parents' qualification is the most important variable in enforcing strategies to keep track with the school progress of their children. The parents' aspiration towards their children's education and future career is seen through two academic strategies. The first strategy is by providing material possessions such as books, computers and other educational resources. The second strategy is the constant visitation of parents to their children's schools' to consult with the teachers regarding the progress of their children.

The level of mothers' education is crucial in inspiring the career choices of their children. Mothers' level of education has the most significant role in giving motivation and encouragement to their children in their pursuit of higher education. Two most effective ways of giving motivation are 'having proper planning towards higher education' and 'seeking information regarding further studies'.

More than 75% of the population are Bumiputera students. Most of the Bumiputera students specialise in Accountancy (26%), Engineering (17%) and Medicine (14%). The Chinese students prefer Engineering (45%), Law (21%) and Medicine (16%). The Indians prefer Engineering (40%), Education & TESL (20%) and Law (16%). The relationships between each ethnic group and SES, type of schools, financial support and sponsorships have different significant values.

In examining the SES within the ethnic groups, the study observes that the majority of fathers (69%) from the three ethnic groups worked as professionals and in managerial capacities. In terms of income, the Chinese fathers earn better compared to the Bumiputera and Indian fathers. The level of fathers' education among the three ethnic groups is high. The reason why 82% Bumiputera students receive grants from the government is related to the government's employment restructuring which is one of the National Economic Policy targets. These sponsorships have enabled Bumiputera students to come to the UK universities to pursue various courses even though their parents' income is the lowest among the three ethnic groups.

#### **Urban-Rural Distribution and English Usage with the Family**

The urban-rural distribution factor affects the level of English proficiency among the Malaysian students. Students who live in urban areas have better opportunities to communicate in English through their daily activities, with urban communities and through the multi-media. The majority of the students in this study are from the urban areas and the association between urban-rural distribution and English usage does exist.

**Table 3: Urban-Rural Distribution and English Usage with the Family**

REGION	Speak English English “Yes”	Do Not Speak English “No”	ROW TOTAL
Urban	193 72.9%	72 27.2%	265 73.8%
Rural	54 57.4%	40 42.6%	94 26.2%
COLUMN TOTAL	247 68.8%	112 31.2%	359 100%

Pearson  $\chi^2 = 7.89$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.01927$

Table 3 shows the cross-tabulation between urban-rural regions and students' English usage at home. Among the urban students, 193 (73%) speak English at home compared to 72 (27%) who do not. For students in rural areas, 54 (57%) speak English and 40 (43%) do not. The data reveals that the urban dwellers speak more English than their rural counterparts. Therefore, it is not surprising that more urban students qualify to enter professional courses.

Of the total population, 74% of the sample in this study comes from urban areas. Nearly 95% of the students who specialise in Law and 81% who are Architecture students come from urban areas. Therefore, there is an obvious urban-rural distribution on subject choice. The level of parents' SES is higher in urban areas than in the rural areas. Parents with high SES are found in urban areas. Therefore, more urban students are eligible to specialise in the four professional prestigious courses.

#### Key Personal Role in Students' Educational Career from School to University

The question in the questionnaire on “who plays the most important role in determining the success in the students' educational career”, pans throughout their schooling and their current university life. Who exactly was the most influential person in their life that helped them to achieve well in their educational career?

**Table 4: Key Personal Role for Educational Career**

KEY PERSON	Value of Score	Frequency	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Myself	5	257	4.668	.628
2. Mother	5	196	4.320	.915
3. Father	5	184	4.176	1.102
4. Teacher	5	125	3.574	1.098
5. Friends	5	103	3.470	1.070
6. Siblings	5	66	3.400	1.244
7. Community	5	37	2.956	1.215

Students themselves play the key role for their achievement in their educational career with the mean score of 4.668, the highest score. Mothers are second in importance with mean score 4.320 and fathers third with the mean score of 4.176. Besides the social background factors, the students themselves and their mothers are the two strongest factors in determining their major choice.

### Factors Influencing Students' Choice of Major

Among the factors listed are Type of School, Family Background, Parents' Interest towards Higher Education, School Resources, Availability of Finance, Own Aspiration, Own Ability and Peer Group Influence. However, this question investigates the students' own judgement of the impact of these factors on their choice of major.

The frequency for the item 'own aspiration' is the highest, 285, with a mean of 4.759. When one has the aspiration to achieve something, one has the ability to excel or to qualify for certain subjects. 'Own ability', has the second highest score, 227 students and with a mean of 4.545. The parents' interest plays an important role in their educational progress. For example, parents may have shown their interest in their children's progress in school, in their child's higher education options or in their choice of major. The frequency score for the item parents' interest is 146 and with a mean of 4.017. The respondents claim that family background is the fourth factor in pursuing their subject choice. The frequency score for respondents who rated family background as 5 in the scale is a total of 139, with a mean of 3.994. The availability of finance is the fifth most important factor that has enabled them to pursue a particular subject. This is because without the finance, even students who qualify for entry are unable to further their studies in the United Kingdom. The frequency score for respondents who rated availability of finance at 5 is 131, with a mean of 3.911.

**Table 5: Factors Influencing Student's Major Choice**

FACTORS	Value of Score	Frequency	Mean	Std. Dev.
1.Own Aspiration	5	285	4.759	.517
2.Own Ability	5	227	4.545	.693
3.Parents' Interest	5	146	4.017	1.042
4.Family Background	5	139	3.994	1.068
5.Availability of Finance	5	131	3.911	1.074
6.Type of School	5	110	3.801	1.102
7.Peer Group Influence	5	77	3.655	1.063
8.School Resources	5	66	3.449	1.131

### Factors Influencing Students' Major Choice

Among the factors listed are Types of School, Family Background, Parents' interest towards Higher Education, School Resources, Availability of Finance, Own Aspiration, Own Ability and Peer Group Influence. However, this question investigates the students' own judgement of the impact of these factors on their major choice.

**Table 6: Factors Influencing Student's Major Choice**

FACTORS	Value of Score	Frequency	Mean	Std.Dev.
1.Own Aspiration	5	285	4.759	.517
2.Own Ability	5	227	4.545	.693
3.Parents' Interest	5	146	4.017	1.042
4.Family Background	5	139	3.994	1.068
5.Availability of Finance	5	131	3.911	1.074
6.Type of School	5	110	3.801	1.102
7.Peer Group Influence	5	77	3.655	1.063

The frequency for the item 'own aspiration' is the highest, 285, with a mean of 4.759. When one has the aspiration to achieve something, one has the ability to excel or to qualify for certain subjects. 'Own ability', has the second highest score, 227 students and with a mean of 4.545. The frequency score for the item parents' interest is 146 and with a mean of 4.017. The respondents claim that family background is the fourth factor in pursuing their subject choice. The frequency score for family background at rate 5 in the scale is 139, with a mean of 3.994. The availability of finance is the fifth most important factor that has enabled them to pursue a particular major. The frequency score for the item availability of finance is 131 at rate 5 with a mean of 3.911.

## Students' Intentionality and Major Choice

**Table 7: Reasons Why Students Decided to Go to Universities in the UK  
Reasons Why Students Chose a Particular Major**

and

REASONS FOR CHOOSING MAJOR	Score Value	Frequency	Mean
1.To get a qualification	1	287	1.244
2.To help me get a job	1	231	1.443
3.To learn something new	1	207	1.531
4.It interests me	1	197	1.541
5.To give me more confidence	1	157	1.808
6.To benefit my parents	1	140	1.980
7.Because of labour market prospects	1	117	2.081
8.It is sponsored	1	105	2.345
9.To get a better job than the present one	1	86	2.542

The most important reason that the respondents rated among the 10 reasons is 'to get a qualification.' The intention in pursuing a particular subject 'to get the qualification' was important with a mean score of 1.244, which means that the average score is close to 1 or Very Important. The second most important reason is 'to get a job' with a mean of 1.443. Students rated 'to learn something new' as the third most important. The frequency score for students under this category is 207 for the value of 1 with a mean of 1.541.

Like mothers, the variable of fathers' qualification have a significant relationship with items like 'Parents provided material possessions such as books and computer' and 'Parents provided educational in-house activities' (Table 8), where the strength of association are at probability levels  $p < 0.00003$  and  $p < 0.00005$  respectively. Therefore, it can be said that the higher the parents' qualification, the more the provision of material possessions such as books and computers for their children. Moreover, it was found that highly educated parents also organized in-house activities such as extra coaching, revision or homework.

**Table 8: Level of Significance between SES Variables and  
Parents' Strategies to Keep Track of School Progress**

VARIABLES	ITEMS ON PARENTS' STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL PROGRESS	LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE
Mothers' Qualification	Parents provided material possessions e.g. books & ICT	0.00000
Fathers' Qualification	Parents provided material possessions e.g. books & ICT	0.00003
Fathers' Qualification	Parents provided educational in house activities	0.00005
Mothers' Qualification	Parents used to visit schools	0.00001
Mothers' Qualification	Parents used to consult teachers	0.00150
Mothers' Qualification	Parents provided educational in-house activities	0.00251
Mothers' Income	Parents provided materials e.g. books, IT	0.00215
Fathers' Qualification	Parents used to consult teachers	0.00566
Fathers' Occupation	Parents provided material possessions e.g. books, computers etc.	0.00079
Mothers' Income	Parents provided educational in-house activities	0.05562

### Relationship between Socio Economic Status (SES) Variables and Parents' Motivation towards Higher Education

The association between parents' SES and the motivation variables towards higher education is presented in Table 9. Among all the relationships, level of mothers' education played the most significant role in providing motivation and encouragement towards their children's higher education. The most effective way of giving motivation was achieved through 'having proper planning towards higher education' and at the same time by 'seeking information regarding further studies' with Chi-sq.  $p < .0000$  and  $p < .0000$  respectively. Both educated mothers and fathers motivated their children in the same way.

**Table 9: Relationship between SES Variables and Motivation towards Higher Education**

VARIABLE	ITEMS IN PARENTS' MOTIVATION	SIGNIFICANT LEVEL
Mothers' Qualification	Having A Proper Planning Towards Higher Education	0.00000
Mothers' Qualification	Seeking Information regarding Further Studies	0.00000
Fathers' Qualification	Seeking Information regarding Further Studies	0.00000
Fathers' Qualification	Having A Proper Planning Towards Higher Education	0.00000
Fathers' Income	Seeking Information Regarding Further Studies	0.00004
Fathers' Qualification	Having Interest In School Progress	0.00009
Fathers' Income	Giving Advice and Support Towards Higher Education	0.00010
Fathers' Occupation	Having A Proper Planning Towards Higher Education	0.00001
Fathers' Income	Having A Proper Planning Towards Higher Education	0.00025
Mothers' Income	Seeking Information regarding Further Studies	0.00068

## DISCUSSION

The findings obtained from the analyses of the data are:

Socio Economic Status or the professional class are more likely to enter the prestigious fields of medicine, law, engineering and accountancy compared to children of unskilled manual workers. The higher SES groups represent the majority of the students qualified to enter the six universities in the East Midlands of the UK. Furthermore, students whose parents are doctors and lawyers may be more likely to be inspired to do medicine and law since this would allow them to maintain the social class status of their parents. No working-class children were found to do law in this study. Specialising in the four professional majors would more or less determine one's place in the social strata.

The socioeconomic status of parents does have a significant influence on subject choice. There is a stark relationship between the income of fathers and subject choice. The majority of students who were successful in gaining admittance into universities in the UK came from families whose fathers' income is high. The study observes that the higher the fathers' income, the greater the tendency for the children to specialise in the four aforementioned professional courses. Financial resource or *economic capital* that comes solely from the father is crucial to bear the

rising cost of educational resources as well as the high fee of any one of the professional courses especially the cost to study Medicine.

With that being said, the qualification of a mother is as equally important as fathers' income. An educated mother plays a significant role in investing in the *cultural capital* of her child's schooling management. Professional mothers also have a higher percentage of enrolling their children to study the abovementioned professional courses.

Parents' aspiration is crucial in motivating and supporting their children towards educational success. Among the SES variables, parents' level of qualification is the most important variable with regard to parental motivation towards higher education. Mothers' level of education remains the most important variable in 'keeping track of the children's school progress'. Professional mothers have higher expectations on the inspiration of their children's educational careers.

Accounting is the main choice of major among the Bumiputera students because they are mainly government sponsored students. The strategy of the government is to increase the number of Bumiputeras in the commercial and business sector. Engineering is popular among the Chinese and Indians as they are mostly self-sponsored students and are free to choose their subjects. The Chinese and the Indian students who attend the Twinning Programmes that are franchised with universities in the UK find such courses affordable.

More males specialise in engineering while more females do the same in medicine and law. Male students fare better than females in Physics and Mathematics. Hence, most of them are capable of specialising in engineering. Medicine seems to befit the nature of women. Overall, girls outperformed boys in public examinations and this academic excellence has qualified them to take up medicine and law. Nevertheless, due to the expansion of educational opportunities for women and equal career opportunities in Malaysia, some females have started to specialise in male dominated careers such as civil engineering.

The majority of the sample population come from urban areas. Since these students reside in urban areas, they come mainly from the higher SES group and in turn are able to specialise in the four aforementioned prestigious subjects. They have benefited from a better *economic and cultural capital* provided by their parents which eventually affects their educational outcomes. They are also well equipped with educational resources and facilities found in the urban areas.

Types of schools have a significant influence on subject choice. The majority of the students attended schools in urban areas. Hence, they are more likely to specialise in the four prestigious subjects. Most Malay students attended boarding schools while most of the Chinese and Indian students attended day schools.

Proficiency in English has a significant impact on subject choice. Students from professional groups speak English more frequently and use English with their families. Mothers' level of qualification and fathers' income also has a significant relationship with English language proficiency. 98% of law students and 54% of medical students communicate in English with their families.

The students' intentions for specialising in their subject choices are to get the necessary qualifications, to get jobs in the labour market, and to learn something new.

### **Contributions of the Study**

This research contributes the latest statistics and information regarding Malaysian students pursuing their tertiary education overseas particularly at universities in the UK.

Material and research on Malaysian students abroad is scarce. This study enriches to the pool of documented literature on the subject and further enhances the understanding of the social background of Malaysian students in universities in the UK. It also enriches the study on the disciplines of education and sociology and provides new perspectives for a developing country such as Malaysia.

This study provides information and guidelines for students as well as parents on higher education prospects in universities in the UK. In short, this study could provide some knowledge for students to develop interest in specific

subjects as well as the pursuit of their ambitions. This study also provides guidance for parents on how to enforce effective strategies in preparing for their children's future education. It enlightens them of their role in seeking information and how they can successfully ensure their children's tertiary education. The findings of this study clearly indicates that a parent's ability to plan in advance significantly influences their children ability to specialise in professional courses.

Most importantly, this study provides recommendations and implications for policy makers in implementing the education policy with fair education opportunities for all.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the evidence discussed in this study, it can be concluded that a student's subject choice is determined by his/her family's socio-economic position. Professional parents from higher socio-economic status (SES) provide better *economic and cultural capitals* for their children and hence affect their choice of majors e.g. medicine, law, engineering and accountancy. Specialising in these four professional courses in turn determine more or less a Malaysian's place in the social strata. The most outstanding result is the level of parents' qualification. Mothers' education particularly plays a significant role in inspiring their children towards higher education.

The findings of this research contribute to enrich the academic literature in education. It could probably help with the formulation of new ideas in the process of implementing educational policies. Undoubtedly, this study provides valuable information to policy makers in the Ministry of Higher Education. It would create awareness as to the need for equal opportunities in higher education overseas for students from all walks of life. The study has important implications for the authorities and policy-makers as it reveals which status group of students benefit most from a tertiary education from universities in the UK.

Malaysia would need to urgently build a critical mass of creative and innovative professionals. The education system had been reviewed to produce the required skilled professionals. A system of lifelong learning and skills had been introduced upgraded and strengthened to support the development of a learning society. A coordinated program to attract highly skilled and talented Malaysians living abroad must be initiated.

## REFERENCES

- Alasdair, F., and Furlong, A. (2003) "Access to higher education and disadvantaged young people." *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol.29, No.2.
- Bourdieu, P. (1973) 'Cultural reproduction and social reproduction', in: Brown, R. (ed.), *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change*. London : Tavistock.
- Bourdieu, P. (1973) 'The Algerian sub-proletariat', in: Zartman, W.I. (ed.) *State and Society in the Contemporary Maghrib*. London: Pall Mall Press.
- Breen, R., and Goldthorpe, J.H. (1997) "Explaining educational differentials: towards a formal rational action theory." *Rationality and Society*, 9, pp. 275-305.
- Carpenter, P., and Hayden, M. (1987) "Girls academic achievements, single-sex versus co-educational school in Australia", *Sociology of Education*, Vol.60. 3,pp.156-167.
- Dalton Conley (2001) "Capital for college: Parental assets and postsecondary schooling", *Sociology of Education*, Vol.74 (January), pp 59-72.
- Fagerlind, I.(1983) "Education and national development", *A Comparative Perspective*. Pergamon.
- Gambetta, D. (1987) *Were They Pushed or Did They Jump? Individual Decision, Mechanism in Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goodman, J. "What students learn from early field experiences: A case study and critical analysis", *Journal of Teacher Education*, Nov-Dec, 36(6), pp.42.

HESA Student Record (2012/2013) <http://www.NationMaster.com/InternationalStatistic/2014>

Jasbir Sarjit Singh (1987) "Malaysia." *International Higher Education*, pp.511-523.

Lee, Daniel, Coladanci, Theodore, Donalson, Gordan A. Jr. (1978) *Effects of School Choice on Academic Commitment*. US Maine.

**S**

Schneider, B., and Stevenson, D. (1999) *The Ambitious Generation: America's teenagers, motivated but directionless*. New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press.

Sewell, William H., Robert, Hauser M., and Fearthman, D.C. (1976) *Schooling and Achievement in American Society*. London: Academic Press.

Sherry, T., and Richard T. Lapan (2002) "Career Self-Efficacy and Perceptions of Parent Support in Adolescent Career Development." *The Career Development Quarterly*, (September), Vol.51, pp.44-55.

Tinklin, T. Croxford, L., Ducklin, A., and Frame, B. (2001) *Gender and Pupil Performance in Scotland's Schools*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh