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NAVIGATING ACADEMIC TRANSITIONS: A CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE ON FACTORS INFLUENCING DIPLOMA ACCOUNTING STUDENTS' INTENTION TO PURSUE A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

The shift from diploma to bachelor's degree programs constitutes an important educational pathway for accounting students in Malaysia. However, the existing literature provides limited explanation on why diploma accounting students choose to pursue a bachelor's degree, especially at the diploma-to-degree transition point. This conceptual paper therefore proposes a conceptual framework that integrates the Human Capital Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory to explain the intention of diploma accounting students to pursue a bachelor's degree. The framework includes six proposed factors: financial

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considerations, academic achievement, career aspirations, family influence, institutional support and perceived employability. Human Capital Theory explains how students weigh the costs and expected educational, employment and career benefits of pursuing studies, while Social Cognitive Career Theory explains how self-efficacy, goals, outcome expectations and environmental support can affect educational choices. The novelty of the framework lies in its ability to integrate these complementary perspectives and to apply them specifically to diploma accounting students in the Malaysian context. Such an approach links the economic considerations with psychological, social and institutional influences at a critical transition point in academic life. The framework provides practical guidance for universities in terms of targeted academic advising, career guidance, financial support and clearer articulation pathways, and a basis for future empirical testing.

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Academic Transition; Accounting Education; Diploma Accounting Students; Higher Education; Intention To Pursue A Bachelor's Degree; Malaysia.



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Introduction

Higher education is important for human capital formation, upgrading the skills of the labour force and promoting economic growth. Education is an investment that allows people to acquire knowledge, skills and competencies which generate future economic and social benefits (Becker, 1964). Therefore, moving to a higher level of education, particularly from diploma to bachelor's degree programs, is a significant academic decision that might influence students' professional development and career paths.

This transition is especially important in professional fields such as accounting, where the nature of the profession is constantly changing due to technological advancements, digitalisation, sustainability reporting and changing employer expectations. Modern accountants are expected to possess not only technical accounting expertise, but also strategic thinking, technological competencies, communication skills and analytical skills (Boulianne, 2016; Apostolou et al., 2022). The International Federation of Accountants (IFAC, 2021) indicated that future accounting professionals would need to develop a broader set of competencies including professional judgement, technological awareness and lifelong learning skills. Consequently, a bachelor's degree has become increasingly important for accounting students seeking career mobility, professional development, and the pursuit of professional accounting qualifications.

Diploma programs play a very important role in the Malaysian higher education system. They give students the chance to develop their academic further by acquiring basic academic knowledge and practical skills. The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), 2015 has promoted the development of flexible learning pathways in the Malaysian higher education system such as credit transfer mechanisms and articulation arrangements which allow diploma graduates to continue their study into bachelor degree programs. These initiatives are aligned with the national agenda of improving the quality of graduates, their employability and the development of a highly skilled workforce. But despite these pathways for progression, not all diploma graduates choose to continue their education. Some graduates go straight into the workforce but others stop their education due to money problems, not knowing if the benefits will be worth it, personal problems or not enough help with the transition to college.

Diploma courses provide an excellent stepping stone into accounting education, allowing students to develop hands-on skills and basic accounting knowledge before progressing to higher qualifications. This progression is especially relevant as the accounting profession is moving toward demanding from accounting graduate's wider capabilities beyond technical knowledge such as continuing learning orientation, professional judgement, digital competency and analytical ability (IFAC, 2021; Apostolou et al., 2022). Diploma qualifications give students the core accounting skills required to enter professional pathways, managerial roles and specialised accounting jobs. Further progress through bachelor degree programs may allow access to these opportunities. However, there is a lack of research that has examined the process by which diploma accounting students make an assessment and decide to continue their academic study, especially in the Malaysian higher education context.

Therefore, the choice to pursue a bachelor's degree is based on a variety of factors beyond just academic aptitude. Previous studies have found that students' academic choices are shaped by academic ability, financial resources, expected career outcomes, social influences, and institutional experiences (Tinto, 1993; Perna, 2006). One such factor is academic achievement, as students with better academic performance are more likely to have more confidence, self-efficacy, and readiness to pursue higher-level education (Richardson et al., 2012). However academic ability alone may not be enough to guarantee progression as financial barriers still present an important factor in students participation in higher education. The costs of tuition fees, accommodation, transport and other educational requirements may affect the decision of students, especially those students with limited financial resources (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Students' educational choices are influenced not only by academic and financial considerations, but also by students' future career goals. Lent et al. (1994) proposed the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) that the educational and career choices of the individuals are determined by their self-beliefs, environmental factors, and expected outcomes. Students who think that a bachelor's degree will help them achieve their career goals are more likely to pursue higher education. This relationship is especially relevant for accounting students who, given their higher qualifications, might have greater opportunities for professional development and career progression. Similarly, students' perceptions of employability shape their evaluation of the value of higher education. According to Jackson and Bridgstock (2021) employability development influences students' motivation to invest in higher education. Tomlinson (2017) highlighted that graduates develop different types of capital that increase their competitiveness in the labour market.

In addition to individual factors, social and institutional contexts shape students' decisions about their academic transitions. Family expectations, encouragement, and financial support may influence students' educational aspirations, particularly in Asian contexts (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). Family influence remains significant. Likewise, institutional support can facilitate successful transitions and can be provided through academic advising, mentoring, career counselling, and student development initiatives. Such support can help to improve students' academic adjustment, engagement, and confidence (Afzal et al., 2024; Tinto, 2017).

Although previous studies have explored the determinants of student persistence, engagement in higher education, career development and graduate employability, the literature synthesised in this study does not address several important gaps in the transition of accounting students in Malaysia from diploma to degree programs. However most of the existing literature has been based on general university populations rather than diploma students who are making a specific decision to pursue a bachelor degree. The unique transition context of diploma accounting students has not therefore been well articulated. Second, existing research generally examines educational participation, persistence, employability, or individual determinants separately, with little focus on the particular decision moment of a diploma accounting student to go for a bachelor's degree. Thirdly, the literature reviewed does not provide a holistic explanation that integrates academic capability, financial feasibility, career aspirations, family influence, institutional support and perceived employability into one framework for the Malaysian accounting education context. The main issue is a theoretical gap: the economic investment logic of Human Capital Theory and the psychosocial and environmental mechanisms of Social Cognitive Career Theory have seldom been articulated to explain this particular academic transition. Thus, there is a lack of a context-specific, theory-integrated framework that explains the extent to which these complementary dimensions may collectively influence the intention of diploma accounting students to pursue a bachelor's degree in Malaysia.

Therefore, the objective of this conceptual paper is to fill these gaps by proposing a theory-informed framework to explain the potential factors that may influence diploma accounting students to pursue their bachelor's degree in Malaysia. The framework is consistent with the Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and the Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994), which are integrated to explain the economic, individual, social and institutional dimensions of the transition decision.

This conceptual paper seeks to achieve the following:

1. Identify the proposed factors affecting diploma accounting students' intention to pursue a bachelor's degree.
2. Develop a conceptual framework to explain the relationship between the proposed factors and diploma accounting students' intention to pursue a bachelor's degree.
3. Provide theoretical and practical recommendations on improving pathways for academic transition and encouraging diploma accounting students to pursue their studies toward a bachelor's degree.

The contribution of this conceptual paper is twofold. Theoretically, it integrates Human Capital Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory to provide a more holistic account of the diploma-to-degree decision by linking the perceived value and cost of further education with students' self-beliefs, goals, outcome expectations, and social and institutional milieus. This incorporation is particularly applicable to diploma accounting students in Malaysia, as the

choice to persevere may necessitate the assurance and backing required to follow a structured professional trajectory and to contemplate investments. In practice, the framework could help universities to identify different transition needs and to design specific strategies such as early academic advising, career guidance, accessible financial assistance, family-oriented communication and clearer articulation and credit-transfer pathways into bachelor's degree programs.

Theoretical Foundation

Having a strong theoretical foundation is important to build a conceptual framework, which is needed to explain the reasons why particular factors influence students' academic decisions. The present study uses Human Capital Theory (HCT) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as complementary theoretical lenses to explain diploma accounting students' intention to pursue bachelor's degree programs. Social Cognitive Career Theory explains how educational and career choices are informed by personal beliefs, social environments, and expected outcomes. Human Capital Theory explains education as an investment decision based on expected future benefits. The integration of these theories through the consideration of both economic and psychological-social aspects leads to a more holistic understanding of academic transition decisions.

Human Capital Theory

The Human Capital Theory, introduced by Becker (1964), proposes that individuals should invest in education and training to enhance their knowledge, skills, productivity, and future economic earnings. Thus, education is seen not only as an individual achievement, but rather as a long-term investment, which brings benefits such as higher income potential, better employment opportunities and career promotion.

Human Capital Theory recommends that students assess the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing further education in the context of higher education progression. Diploma accounting students who believe that a bachelor's degree is useful for enhancing their professional prospects tend to continue their studies. A bachelor's degree can offer broader career pathways within the accounting profession, professional recognition and technical knowledge.

In accounting education, this viewpoint is especially pertinent due to the fact that professional accounting careers frequently necessitate ongoing education and enhanced qualifications. While diploma programs give learners the basic knowledge of accounting, degree-level education may improve students' competencies in areas like financial reporting, auditing, taxation, management accounting, data analytics and strategic decision-making. Degree qualifications also can lead to leadership positions and professional accounting certifications.

Previous studies have employed Human Capital Theory to explain educational participation and career choices. For example, Marginson (2019) noted that people continue to invest in higher education because they perceive qualifications as vital assets which increase their future potential. Tomlinson (2017) similarly argued that higher education leads to the development of graduate capital resulting in students more competitive in the labour market.

In this sense, the choice of diploma accounting students to pursue further studies to a bachelor's degree may be dependent upon their evaluation of the benefits of further education. It is

expected that the stronger the conviction that a degree qualification will significantly improve career prospects, the stronger the inclination to continue one's education will be among students. Therefore, Human Capital Theory helps explain the association between perceived employability and career aspirations and the intention to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994) developed the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) to explain the development of academic and career interests, the pursuit of career goals and educational decision making from a psychological perspective. The theory focuses on the interaction between behavioural outcomes, personal factors and environmental influences, thus, expanding on Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory.

SCCT suggests that there are three primary factors that influence educational choices: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals. Self-efficacy is defined as the confidence of individuals in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks, while outcome expectations are the beliefs about the consequences of their own behaviour. Personal goals are a measure of the commitment and intention of people to achieve the desired results.

In the context of diploma accounting students, SCCT elucidates the reasons why students with comparable academic backgrounds may make inconsistent decisions regarding the pursuit of a bachelor's degree. A student who is confident in their academic ability, has positive expectations for their future career outcomes, and receives strong support from their family or institutions may be more likely to pursue a bachelor's degree.

SCCT also emphasises the role of environmental factors in the development of academic decisions. The social support from family members, peers and educational institutions may boost the confidence and motivation of students to continue their educational pursuits. Research has shown that academic support environments and social encouragement positively affect students' educational aspirations and persistence (Tinto, 2017; Eccles & Wigfield, 2020).

Therefore, SCCT provides theoretical support to recognise academic achievement, family influence, and institutional support as important factors that influence students' academic transition decisions. Students' self-efficacy may increase with academic success, and family and institutional support may influence students' confidence and expectations of obtaining a bachelor's degree.

Integration of Human Capital Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory

Human Capital Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory offer complementary explanations of the same educational decision. In Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) the decision to undertake further education is mostly modelled as a choice of the expected value of additional knowledge, skills, employability, career advancement, and economic returns against the costs of further study. Conversely, Social Cognitive Career Theory takes into account the effect of personal goals, environmental supports, outcome expectations, and self-efficacy on educational decision making (Lent et al., 1994). Thus, the combination of the two theories allows the framework to understand that students do not only see further education as an economic investment; they also see whether the degree is aligned with their goals, whether they feel

capable of succeeding in it, and whether their family and institution offer the support required to pursue it.

The importance of the proposed integration is that two students with similar academic backgrounds can come to different conclusions about the same educational opportunity. A student may know that a bachelor's degree will benefit them in the long term, in terms of career and employability, but if the financial cost is perceived as too great, or if they feel unsupported and lacking in confidence, they may not continue with their studies. Conversely, strong self-efficacy, clear career goals, supportive family members and effective institutional guidance may improve the intention to persist even when the transition is associated with extra costs and academic demands.

The integration also provides a strong theoretical justification for each of the six proposed factors. Social Cognitive Career Theory is the main support of academic achievement. The main reason for this is that previous academic performance can increase self-efficacy and confidence in dealing with degree level study. Financial factors are largely derived from Human Capital theory, as students might weigh the expected returns of more education against the costs of tuition, living costs, transport and lost income. Students are more likely to invest in education if they believe that it will help them get better jobs in the future, as suggested by Human Capital Theory. SCCT links educational choices to personal goals and outcome expectations that are linked to career interests. SCCT supports family influence and institutional support as environmental factors that may impact the perceived feasibility, expectations and confidence of undertaking a degree. Finally, the last two foundations of perceived employability are based on Human Capital Theory and SCCT, that is the expected labour-market value of further qualifications and the students' expectations about the outcomes of further education.

The novelty of this framework is not only in the inclusion of six frequently debated factors, but also in their expression through two mutually reinforcing theoretical lenses and their application to the specific diploma-to-degree pathway for accounting students in Malaysia. The factors are treated in a cumulative manner. Human Capital Theory explains why further study may be perceived as a good investment, while Social Cognitive Career Theory explains how students' beliefs, goals, and social and institutional contexts may facilitate or hinder that investment decision. The framework posits that the intention of diploma accounting students to pursue a bachelor's degree is jointly influenced by academic achievement, financial considerations, career aspirations, family influence, institutional support and perceived employability.

Conceptual Framework Development

This study proposes a conceptual framework to explain the intention of diploma accounting students to continue their study to bachelor's degree based on the integration of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994). This framework operationalises the complementary theoretical mechanisms into six proposed factors of academic capability, economic feasibility, career motivation, social influence, institutional conditions, and expected labour-market value.

According to the Human Capital Theory, people can decide to make investments in education based on expected future benefits such as gaining knowledge, skills, being more employable,

and getting better jobs (Becker, 1964). According to the Social Cognitive Career Theory, educational decisions are also influenced by personal beliefs, expected outcomes, goals, and environmental support (Lent et al., 1994). Combining these viewpoints strengthens our understanding of why students with comparable academic backgrounds might decide to pursue bachelor's degrees in different ways.

Previous studies have demonstrated that higher education decisions are multidimensional and influenced by individual characteristics, economic conditions, social environments, and institutional factors (Perna, 2006; Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). Building on these insights, the present framework proposes six factors and explicitly links each factor to the theoretical mechanism most relevant to the diploma-to-degree decision: academic achievement to self-efficacy; financial considerations to educational cost-benefit evaluation; career aspirations to goals and expected career returns; family influence and institutional support to environmental support; and perceived employability to expected labour-market outcomes.

The proposed conceptual framework is presented as follows:

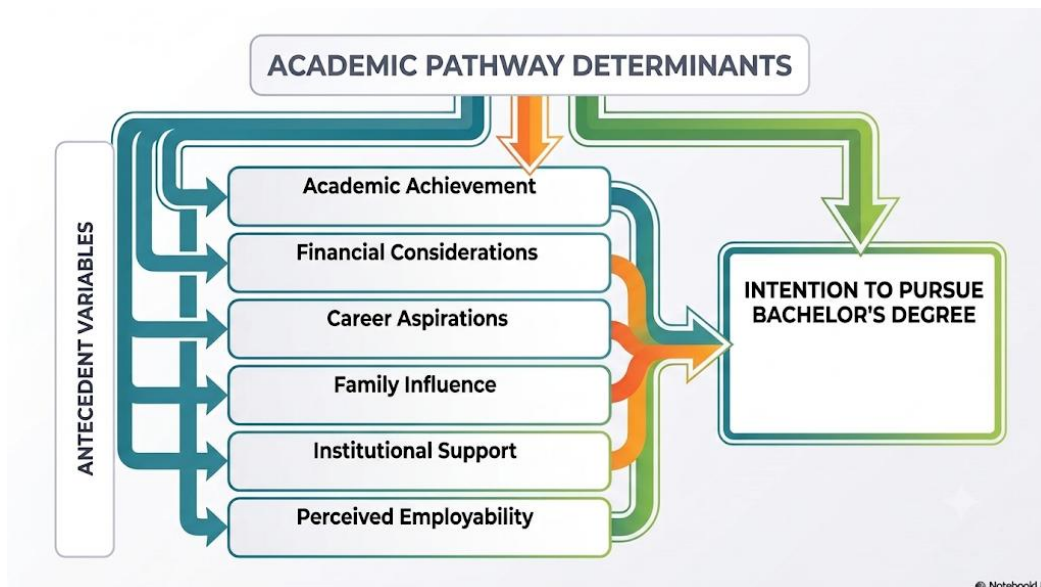


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

Academic Achievement and Intention to Pursue a bachelor's degree

Academic achievement refers to students' academic performance, learning capability, and preparedness to undertake higher-level education. Academic achievement is an important consideration in academic transition because it reflects students' ability to cope with increased academic demands and their confidence in succeeding at the next level of study.

From the perspective of Social Cognitive Career Theory, academic achievement contributes to students' self-efficacy beliefs. Students who perform well academically are more likely to develop confidence in their ability to overcome academic challenges and pursue further education (Lent et al., 1994). Previous research has shown that academic performance is positively associated with academic self-belief, motivation, and persistence in higher education (Richardson et al., 2012).

Scholarly research further suggests that successful academic transition requires not only prior academic performance but also students' ability to adapt to new learning environments, manage academic expectations, and develop effective learning strategies (Broadbent & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2018; Credé & Niehorster, 2012). For diploma accounting students, strong academic achievement may increase their confidence in managing degree-level accounting courses that require higher analytical ability, independent learning, and problem-solving skills.

Therefore, students with stronger academic achievement are expected to demonstrate greater willingness to continue their education at bachelor's degree level.

Proposition 1: Academic achievement positively influences diploma accounting students' intention to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Financial Considerations and Intention to Pursue a Bachelor's Degree

Financial considerations refer to students' perceptions regarding the affordability and economic feasibility of continuing their education. Although higher education provides long-term benefits, students must evaluate the financial implications associated with tuition fees, living expenses, transportation costs, and potential income opportunities forgone during further study.

Human Capital Theory suggests that individuals make educational decisions by comparing the expected benefits of education with the associated costs (Becker, 1964). While students may recognise the value of obtaining a bachelor's degree, financial barriers may prevent academically capable students from continuing their studies.

Previous studies have identified financial constraints as one of the major factors influencing higher education participation and persistence (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Existing literature indicates that economic uncertainty, increasing education costs, and concerns regarding financial burden continue to influence students' decisions about whether to pursue further education (Czarnecki et al., 2021; Usher, 2021).

Financial considerations are still important in the Malaysian context, especially for students who have to balance their educational expenses with their family's financial situation, despite the availability of various financial assistance programs like scholarships, education loans, and institutional support. As a result, students who consider the pursuit of a bachelor's degree to be financially challenging may demonstrate lower intention to continue their studies.

Thus:

Proposition 2: Financial considerations influence diploma accounting students' intention to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Career Aspirations and Intention to Pursue a Bachelor's Degree

Career aspirations refer to the future professional goals and expectations of the students in terms of their career development. Students with clear career goals are much more likely to study the extra qualifications that will help them to pursue their chosen career.

The Social Cognitive Career Theory states that people's educational decisions are impacted by their expected outcomes, self-efficacy, and career goals (Lent et al., 1994). Students are likely to invest more time and resources in postsecondary education if they believe that a bachelor's degree is important to attaining their career aspirations.

The relationship is particularly significant for accounting students, as career advancement in the field frequently depends on continuing education and enhanced qualifications. A bachelor's degree can open up more opportunities to progress toward professional accounting qualifications, auditing, taxation, financial management and consultancy.

Previous studies have shown that career expectations and future-oriented thinking are strong predictors of students' motivation to pursue higher education and develop professional competencies (Caballero et al., 2022). Consequently, the likelihood of diploma accounting students with higher career aspirations entering into bachelor's degree programs is predicted.

Hence:

Proposition 3: Career aspirations positively influence diploma accounting students' intention to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Family Influence and Intention to Pursue a Bachelor's Degree

Family influence is the encouragement, expectations, financial support and guidance family members provide to students in relation to their educational decisions. Family is still a significant source of social support in many Asian societies such as Malaysia, which directly influences students' academic aspirations and career choices.

Environmental factors affect individuals' confidence, expectations and behavioural decisions according to Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994). Family encouragement by removing perceived barriers and providing emotional reassurance may have the potential to increase students' motivation to study.

Eccles and Wigfield (2020) found that students' educational aspirations are significantly shaped by their family background and parents' support, especially during key academic transitions. In addition, previous studies have demonstrated that social support networks enhance students' persistence by boosting their motivation, confidence, and dedication to their educational objectives (Xin et al., 2022). Furthermore, empirical research demonstrates that students' academic engagement and resilience are increased in critical educational transitions when students experience emotional and informational support from their family and peers (Butler et al., 2022; Maluenda-Albornoz et al., 2022). Thus, family influence is expected to be an important factor driving diploma accounting students to pursue bachelor's degree programs. Thus:

Proposition 4: Family influence positively influences diploma accounting students' intention to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Institutional Support and Intention to Pursue a Bachelor's Degree

Institutional support is the academic, administrative, and developmental support provided by institutions of higher education to assist students in their academic success and transition. Such support may include academic advising, mentoring, career guidance, financial counselling and transition programs.

Tinto's student persistence perspective places value on institutional environments in students' academic integration and continuation decisions (Tinto, 1993, 2017). Institutional support is used to further clarify the function of universities in helping students make successful academic transitions, though it is not the primary theoretical basis in this study.

Institutional support may help reduce the uncertainty of diploma students entering bachelor's degree programs by informing them about degree requirements, career pathways, and available resources. Research by Emekako and van der Westhuizen (2021) and Tinto (2017) has shown that formal academic advising, mentoring, and student support programs play a crucial role in student adjustment, engagement, and retention.

Therefore, institutions that provide effective transition support may encourage diploma accounting students to continue their studies.

Hence:

Proposition 5: Institutional support positively influences diploma accounting students' intention to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Perceived Employability and Intention to Pursue a Bachelor's Degree

Perceived employability (PE) can be conceptualised as students' perceptions regarding their ability to secure desirable employment opportunities after graduation. It shows the importance students attach to higher education for boosting chances in their future careers.

According to the Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), people pursue further education if they expect that it will increase their productivity and employment opportunities by obtaining additional qualification. Therefore, the bachelor's degree is more likely to be seen as a valuable investment by students who think it will improve their career prospects.

Previous studies have shown that students' skills development, academic experiences, personal attributes, and institutional support influence employability perceptions (Bennett & Ananthram, 2022; Byrne, 2022). The focus on perceived employability is particularly salient when considering accounting education as the degree qualification may provide enhanced entry to professional positions and opportunities for career advancement.

Hence, diploma accounting students who perceived higher employment benefits of getting a bachelor's degree are expected to have higher intention to continue studying.

Thus:

Proposition 6: Perceived employability positively influences diploma accounting students' intention to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical Implications

This conceptual paper adds to the higher education and accounting education literature by proposing a theory-integrated framework to explain the intention of diploma accounting students to pursue a bachelor's degree. The framework addresses the stated research gap by focusing on a specific academic transition that is less prominent in the literature on general higher education participation, persistence, graduate employability or professional development. Moreover, the merging of Human Capital Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory provides a connection between two complementary aspects of educational decision making: the perceived costs and future returns of more education, and the self-beliefs, goals, outcome expectations, and environmental support that determine students' behaviours in response to these investment considerations.

Thus, the theoretical contribution is more specific than a mere application of two known theories independently. The Human Capital Theory explains the expected career value of continuing education, as well as the logic behind financial considerations and perceived employability. Social Cognitive Career Theory provides the rationale for academic achievement through self-efficacy, career aspirations through goals and outcome expectations, and family influence and institutional support through environmental factors. The combined perspective explains how these six proposed factors may operate as interconnected dimensions of the same transition decision and provides a clearer theoretical basis for future empirical testing among diploma accounting students in Malaysia.

Furthermore, this study contributes to accounting education research by shifting attention from the outcomes of accounting graduates to the earlier decision stage at which students determine whether to continue their education beyond diploma level. This is important because the changing competency expectations of the accounting profession make the transition into degree-level education a meaningful point for understanding students' longer-term educational and career pathways. The proposed framework addresses this gap by bringing academic, financial, career, social, and institutional considerations together within a single context-specific model.

The conceptual framework also provides a foundation for future empirical research by offering clearly specified relationships that can be tested across Malaysian higher education institutions. Future research can examine whether the six proposed factors significantly impact the intention to study for a bachelor's degree and whether the relative importance of these factors differs across student groups or institutional contexts. The framework thus moves the discussion away from a full account of the possible influences to a grounded account of the diploma to degree transition.

Practical Implications

The proposed framework has practical implications for higher education institutions, especially universities that provide diploma and bachelor's degree accounting programs. Developing more

robust transition support strategies requires institutions to look beyond academic eligibility and consider the factors that influence students' decisions to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Early identification of students' academic preparedness and the provision of structured academic advising, mentoring and progression-awareness activities before student's graduate can improve the support for academic transition from the beginning. Academic achievement may have an impact on self-efficacy and confidence, and targeted advising may help students learn what is expected at the degree level, assess where there are academic gaps, and plan appropriate preparations. Institutions can also use the framework to distinguish between students that need academic preparation and students whose primary needs are financial, career-oriented or informational.

Secondly, it is important for institutions to provide more explicit career guidance linking a bachelor's degree to accounting career pathways, professional qualifications, industry expectations and long-term employability. Career sessions, alumni sharing, employer engagement and individual career counselling can help students comprehend the potential outcomes of continuing education and to clarify their career aspirations. This is particularly relevant when students recognise the general worth of a degree but do not have a clear understanding of how degree level study contributes to their intended career in accounting.

Third, communication of financial support should be a fundamental part of academic transition planning, not a general student welfare issue. To develop more effective transition support strategies, institutions need to look beyond academic eligibility and consider factors that influence students' decision to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Fourthly, it is important for universities and policy makers to improve the articulation pathways between diploma and bachelor's degree programs. At the transition point this uncertainty may be alleviated through the provision of clear information on entry requirements, credit transfer, exemptions, program duration, progression routes and degree options available. Institutions can use structured progression agreements, dedicated articulation advisers and, where appropriate, transition briefings to ensure diploma accounting students have a clear and manageable pathway from their current qualification to degree-level study. Collectively, these measures would transform the proposed framework into a transition-support system that is more precisely matched to the academic, financial, career, social, and institutional needs.

Limitations of the Study

This conceptual paper provides a thorough framework in understanding the intention of diploma accounting students to pursue bachelor's degree programs; however, several limitations should be highlighted. First, the proposed framework is based on existing theoretical perspectives and previous literature, so the relationships among the proposed constructs are not empirically validated. Future empirical studies are required to explore the strength and significance of the proposed relationships amongst academic achievement, financial considerations, career aspirations, family influence, institutional support, perceived employability and intention to pursue bachelor's degree.

Secondly, this study is on diploma accounting students in the Malaysian higher learning system. The focus adds contextual relevance, but the proposed framework may not be representative of students from other disciplines, educational systems or cultural backgrounds

where decisions about academic progression may differ. Further research could extend the framework to other professional disciplines and examine the differences in factors for academic transition in different institutional and national contexts.

Third, the framework suggests six variables that are evaluated, but the determination of students to pursue the bachelor's degree may depend on other variables. Factors such as academic self-efficacy, socioeconomic background, peer influence, personal motivation and institutional reputation may contribute to our understanding of students' academic transition decisions. Future research could incorporate these factors to better understand decisions for diploma-to-degree transition.

Future Research Direction

Given the conceptual nature of this study, further research is needed to empirically validate the proposed framework among diploma accounting students in Malaysia. Quantitative research methods such as surveys and structural equation modelling (SEM) can be used to explore the relationships between academic achievement, financial variables, career aspirations, family impact, institutional assistance, perceived employability, and the intention to pursue a bachelor's degree. Methodologies applicable to the analysis of complex relationships among multiple constructs in a conceptual model (Hair et al., 2022).

Further research may also explore if specific factors strengthen or weaken the association between the proposed factors and students' decisions about academic transition or even abolish this relationship. For example, possible moderating variables, such as gender, type of institution, academic self-efficacy, socio-economic background or previous educational experiences, may influence students' decisions to continue their education.

Additionally, qualitative research methods, like interviews or focus groups, could provide more in-depth understanding of the individual experiences, motivations, and challenges that students face when transitioning from a diploma to a degree. Quantitative methods may not be able to fully capture contextual factors that can be revealed through an understanding of student perspectives.

Furthermore, this model provides a potential for extension to include academic transition decisions of students from other professional disciplines such as business, engineering, information technology and healthcare in future research and outside of the accounting education domain. Comparative studies across disciplines might be able to provide a broader understanding of whether the determinants of entering a bachelor's degree vary by field-specific characteristics.

Conclusion

The transition from diploma to bachelor's degree is an important academic pathway that may affect students' professional development and career prospects. In addition to academic eligibility, the intention of diploma accounting students to pursue a bachelor's degree may be influenced by financial feasibility, career aspirations, family and institutional support, and perceptions of future employability.

This conceptual paper contributes to the literature by filling a specific gap and integrating Human Capital Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory to explore the decision-making process of accounting students in Malaysia during their diploma to degree transition. The logic of investment behind the perceived costs and future returns of further education is captured by Human Capital Theory; the role of self-efficacy, goals, outcome expectations, and environmental support is captured by Social Cognitive Career Theory. These perspectives are synthesised to offer the theoretical rationale for six proposed factors: academic achievement, financial consideration, career aspiration, family influence, institutional support, and perceived employability.

The primary contribution of the framework is the integration of these two complementary theories and the application of the framework to a specific educational transition that has received less focused attention in the accounting education literature. The framework does not claim empirical validation but rather presents a theoretically based set of relationships for future testing. In practice, this means that universities can help students achieve their goals of earning a bachelor's degree through coordinated academic advising, career counselling, accessible financial aid, family-oriented support, and more transparent credit-transfer pathways. The framework provides a more accurate basis for enhancing the transition from diploma to degree in Malaysian accounting education by linking these interventions to the various elements of the transition decision.

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