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# Between Interest and Decision: Analysis of Academic Study Preferences of Islamic Religious Education Students

**Tesa Mariska[1], Albertos Damni[2]**
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kerinci, Indonesia [1,2]
tesamariska8@gmail.com[1]

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Decision-Making; Student Interests; Study Preferences; Study Program Selection.

***Abstract***

This study aims to analyze the gap between students' initial interests and their final decisions in choosing the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) study program at IAIN Kerinci, as well as to identify the factors influencing students' academic preferences. The study employs a qualitative approach using a multi-method design, specifically a literature review and phenomenology. A systematic literature review serves as a conceptual and empirical foundation for understanding the phenomenon based on prior research, while Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is used to generate empirical insights rooted in the participants' subjective experiences. The subjects of this study are seven students from the 2023 cohort of the PAI program. Data were collected via Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The data were analyzed using the PRISMA flow diagram and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The results indicate a discrepancy between students' initial interests and their ultimate decisions. Some students chose the PAI program based on personal aspirations, religious motivation, parental encouragement, career prospects, or economic considerations. Conversely, some students discovered new interests after beginning their studies, shaped by their engagement with specific courses and learning activities. These findings suggest that academic experiences can reshape student preferences, although such shifts do not occur for every student. Consequently, the findings reveal a dynamic and non-linear relationship between interests, preferences, and academic decision-making.

*Kata kunci:*
*Ketertarikan Mahasiswa; Pendidikan Agama Islam; Pengambilan Keputusan; Preferensi Studi.*

***Abstrak***

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kesenjangan antara ketertarikan mahasiswa dan keputusan mereka dalam memilih program studi pendidikan agama islam IAIN Kerinci dan mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi preferensi akademik mahasiswa dalam memilih program studi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode multi-method, yaitu metode literature review dan fenomenologi. Tinjauan literatur sistematis berperan sebagai landasan konseptual dan empiris untuk memahami fenomena berdasarkan penelitian terdahulu, sedangkan IPA berperan untuk menghasilkan pemahaman empiris berdasarkan pengalaman subjektif para partisipan. Subjek penelitian ini adalah mahasiswa PAI Angkatan 2023 berjumlah 7 orang. Data dikumpulkan melalui google scholar, ScienceDirect, observasi, wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dokumentasi. Data dianalisis menggunakan PRISMA flow diagram dan Analisis Fenomenologi Interpretatif (IPA). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa terdapat perbedaan antara apa yang diminati mahasiswa dengan apa yang akhirnya menjadi keputusan. Sebagian mahasiswa memilih Program Studi PAI berdasarkan cita-cita, motivasi keagamaan, dorongan orang tua, prospek karier, serta pertimbangan ekonomi. Namun, sebagian mahasiswa mulai menemukan ketertarikan baru setelah mengikuti perkuliahan melalui pengalaman mendalami mata kuliah dan aktivitas pembelajaran. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman akademik dapat membentuk ulang preferensi mahasiswa, meskipun tidak seluruh mahasiswa mengalami perubahan ketertarikan. Dengan demikian, temuan ini memperlihatkan hubungan yang bersifat dinamis dan non-linear antara ketertarikan, preferensi, dan keputusan akademik.*

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Corresponding Author:
Tesa Mariska
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kerinci, Indonesia; tesamariska8@gmail.com

## Introduction

Education today plays a very crucial role for individuals in improving quality of life (Putri Nabila et al., 2025). Education serves as a means for individuals to develop various potentials they possess in order to prepare themselves to face the workforce in the future (Lusianti & Santoso, 2023). Therefore, as a step in preparing oneself to face the working world, there are things to consider, one of which is which study program can help and support the development of one's potential.

Based on the Republic of Indonesia Law No. 12 of 2012 concerning study programs, a study program is a unit of educational and learning activities that has a specific curriculum and learning methods within one type of academic education, professional education, and/or vocational education. According to (Pramudiyanto et al., 2024) Study programs are the first step to acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes that align with educational goals. In line with this, (Khasanah & Kardiyem, 2022) also emphasized that choosing a study program is an important decision that will greatly affect the academic and career future of prospective students.

During the study program selection process, many factors are considered, especially the suitability between abilities and interests with the chosen study program. Because study programs are very important in helping the process of developing the abilities or skills possessed, so that they can produce graduates who are comprehensive in their fields (Rusandry & Samsuddin, 2023). However, the fact is that currently many students still choose study programs that do not match their interests and talents, but rather because of external considerations such as suggestions from parents, friends, relatives, and also job opportunities in the study program. In line with these (Lusianti & Santoso, 2023) revealed that suggestions from parents have a very significant influence. This is because parents themselves have the ability to guarantee the child's education costs, so the child does not have a strong bargaining position to choose a study program that matches their interests.

In understanding the phenomenon of study program selection, students' interest and decisions are two closely related aspects but have different conceptual meanings

(Samijayani et al., 2022). Interest can be understood as an individual's initial tendency to like, pay attention to, or have curiosity about a particular field. In the context of education, interest can arise from the alignment between the student's characteristics and the field of study they are interested in, as well as motivation and expectations that are to be realized both during and after completing the education (Harahap et al., 2025). Students who are interested in the study program they ultimately choose will be more responsible for their choices. This is also supported by studies conducted by (Fischer & Golenia, 2021) indicates that students' interest has a significant correlation with learning activities and their involvement in the academic activities undertaken. Nevertheless, initial interest does not always directly determine students' final choices because the study program selection process is also influenced by other considerations that can limit or change the direction of students' choices.

Besides interest, academic preference is also an important concept in understanding the study program selection process. Academic preference refers to students' tendency to determine the field of education that is considered most suitable based on considerations related to interests, abilities, needs, expectations, and experience. Thus, preference is not entirely the same as initial interest because preferences can form and develop through the process of consideration and student experience. Meanwhile, academic decision is the act of deciding on a study program choice from a number of available options after considering various conditions and possible consequences. The difference among these three concepts shows that students who have an initial interest in a field do not necessarily make that field their final preference or academic decision. Conversely, students can choose study programs that initially were not the most favored field but then develop new interests after undergoing the educational process.

Essentially, decision-making can be defined as a series of activities choosing one among several available action options, with the aim of obtaining the most rational and beneficial outcome for the individual or group involved (Jannah et al., 2025). In practice, a person usually utilizes the data or information collected to weigh various possibilities before finally deciding on one option as the final decision. This decision-making process does not rely solely on intuition or habit but involves structured reasoning to assess the advantages and disadvantages of each existing alternative (Sitanggang et al., 2021). Rationality is an important aspect in every decision-making process, because choosing the right alternative requires logical consideration and thorough analysis of every available option (Harahap et al., 2025). However, academic decisions are not always shaped by rational considerations entirely based on personal desires. Personal values, experience, economic conditions, family support, social environmental pressures, and availability of information also play important roles in making choices (Charisma, 2025). As (Pramudiyanto et al., 2024) stated that students'

decisions in choosing study programs are not only based on personal desires but also consider job prospects, social environment, and family support. This shows that academic decisions are the result of a consideration process between individual preferences and various internal and external conditions they face.

The problem becomes more complex when the decisions made by students do not fully align with their initial interests. These discrepancies do not always mean that students experience dissatisfaction or failure in making choices. Students may have various reasons for accepting the decision, for example considering the family's economic capacity, following parental guidance, seeing job opportunities, or adjusting to existing educational opportunities. Conversely, decisions that were initially not based on personal interests may change meaning after students participate and undergo the course process. Experience participating in the learning process, understanding lecture materials, interacting with lecturers and peers, and being involved in academic activities can generate new understanding and interest related to fields of study that were previously less favored. On the other hand, academic experiences that do not match initial interests can also cause students to reevaluate their preferences and decisions already made. Thus, educational experience is not only a consequence of choosing a study program but can also reshape how students view and interpret their academic choices.

This phenomenon needs attention because the mismatch between initial interest and the chosen study program can cause various problems in the student's academic journey. Lack of information about the characteristics of the study program and lack of knowledge about interests or talents can cause students to have difficulty adjusting to the study program they are pursuing. (Milla & Febriola, 2022). These problems include the quality of universities/study programs not meeting expectations, being unable to attend lectures well due to lack of interest in their chosen field. In certain conditions, these issues can even result in delays in completing studies or decisions to leave lectures (Fischer & Golenia, 2021). Nevertheless, students' experiences when undergoing study programs that do not match their initial interests cannot be understood solely through the possibility of negative impacts. It is also important to pay attention to how students adapt, build acceptance attitudes, and develop new academic orientations through the experiences gained during higher education.

Several previous studies have explained various aspects related to the selection of study programs. (Rusandry & Samsuddin, 2023) emphasizing the importance of alignment between study programs and individual competencies and abilities. (Lusianti & Santoso, 2023) reveals the influence of parental advice in determining study program choices, while (Samijayani et al., 2022) discussing the relationship between students' interests and decisions in determining the direction of education. Then, (Fischer & Golenia, 2021) reveal the correlation between student interest and

student involvement in learning activities. Other studies also show the role of rational consideration, family support, social environment, and job prospects in the academic decision-making process (Sitanggang et al., 2021; Anggraini et al., 2022; Pramudiyanto et al., 2024; Jannah et al., 2025). These studies provide the foundation that choosing a study program is a process involving various considerations from internal and external factors. However, based on the research focus that has been explained, there is still room to delve deeper into how students interpret decisions that do not fully align with their initial interests and how academic experience during college reshapes student preferences.

This gap shows that the issue of choosing study programs is not sufficiently understood by merely knowing the factors influencing students' decisions or measuring the alignment between interests and final decisions. A deeper understanding is needed to explain the process that occurs after academic decisions are made, especially when those choices differ from the students' initial interests. How do students accept or evaluate the decisions they have made? How are the influences of family, social environment, and economic conditions interpreted in the decision-making process? How can experiences during attending lectures maintain, change, or even form new interest in the study program undertaken? These questions highlight the importance of examining study program selection as a dynamic process, which does not stop at decision-making but continues through students' experiences and meanings during higher education.

In the context of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Study Program at IAIN Kerinci, this issue becomes relevant to study because students may have different backgrounds of interest, considerations, and experiences before finally deciding on the study program. The decision to choose the PAI study program can be based on interest in religious knowledge and education, but it can also be influenced by considerations of family, social environment, job opportunities, or other conditions faced by students. These differences in background allow for the emergence of diverse academic experiences, whether in accepting the choices made, adapting to new situations, changes in interests, or evaluating initial decisions. Therefore, it is important to understand how PAI students at IAIN Kerinci shape the meaning of the academic decisions they have made and how their experiences during their studies shape their academic orientation and preferences.

Based on the above explanation, this study aims to understand and analyze the gap between students' initial interest and decisions in choosing the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) study program at IAIN Kerinci. Specifically, this study seeks to identify and describe students' initial interest before choosing a study program, understand the process of consideration and the interaction of internal and external factors underlying the final decision, and analyze how students interpret these

decisions based on their experiences and perceptions during their studies. This study is also aimed at understanding how academic experience shapes, maintains, or changes students' preferences toward the chosen study program.

Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the study of program selection, particularly in understanding the relationship between initial interest, academic preferences, educational decisions, and the meaning of students' experiences. This research is also expected to provide insight into the dynamics of changes in academic preferences after students undergo higher education. Practically, the research results are expected to serve as evaluation material for the PAI study program and IAIN Kerinci in understanding students' backgrounds and experiences, so they can be used as considerations for developing academic guidance services, student mentoring, and policies for admissions and student development. In addition, this research is also expected to serve as a reference for future researchers who examine the educational decision-making process and the dynamics of students' academic experiences.

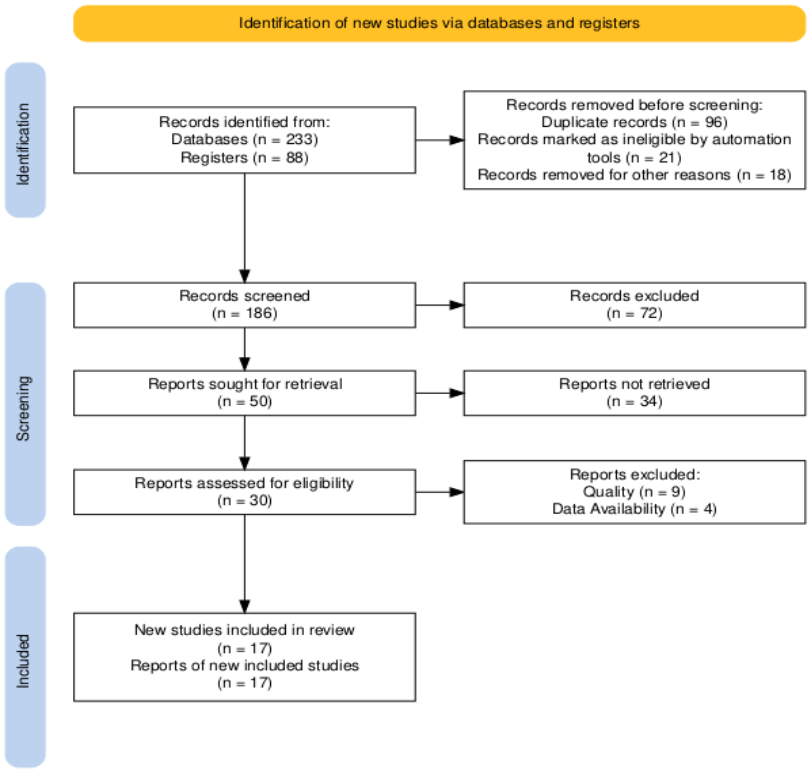
**Method**

This study uses a qualitative approach with two complementary methodological components, namely *Systematic Literature Review* (SLR) and *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA), which are called multi-method. The use of these two methods is intended to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of differences between students' initial interests and final decisions in choosing Islamic Religious Education study programs. The *Systematic Literature Review* method is used to identify and examine various theories, concepts, and previous research results relevant to factors influencing students' preferences and decision-making in determining study programs. Meanwhile, Science is used to explore students' subjective experiences, particularly regarding the process of initial interest formation, factors influencing choice changes, as well as the meanings students give to the final decisions made.

These two methods have different functions but complement each other in the research process. Systematic literature review serves as a conceptual and empirical foundation to understand phenomena based on previous research, while science plays a role in producing empirical understanding based on the participants' direct experiences. The integration of both methods is carried out at the stage of interpreting research results, which is by comparing findings in the literature with interpretative themes obtained from participants' experiences. This comparison is conducted to identify suitability, differences, and new findings that can enrich understanding of the phenomena studied. Thus, the literature review results are not used to determine or limit participants' experiences, but rather as a conceptual context in interpreting phenomenological findings.

**Systematic Literature Review with the PRISMA Framework**

The literature review process in this study was conducted following the *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses* (PRISMA) framework. The use of the PRISMA framework aims to provide a clear reporting framework on how the literature study is conducted, from the initial search stage, the article selection process, to the final results presented. The article selection process is documented through the PRISMA flow diagram so that each stage of scientific source selection can be traced systematically.




Literature searches were conducted using two databases, namely Google Scholar and ScienceDirect. The articles used were limited to the 2021–2026 time frame using several keywords, namely "Students' Academic Study Preferences," "Students' Interest in Study Programs," and "Determining Factors in Students' Decision to Choose Study Programs." These keywords were used to obtain publications discussing academic preferences, student interests, and various factors influencing decisions in choosing study programs. Based on the initial search, a total of 321 articles were obtained from both databases. Next, articles were selected through several stages, including duplicate checks, screening titles and abstracts, and feasibility assessment based on the suitability of the article content with the research objectives. Articles that do not have direct relevance to the research focus or do not provide adequate information regarding student preferences and decision-making are excluded from the selection process.

The inclusion criteria for article selection include: (1) articles published between 2021–2026; (2) articles discussing students' interests, preferences, motivation, or decision-making in choosing study programs or higher education; (3) articles having conceptual or empirical relevance to the research focus; and (4) articles providing adequate information to support analysis and synthesis of literature. Meanwhile, exclusion criteria include: (1) duplicate articles; (2) articles not relevant to the research focus; (3) publications that do not meet the research year limits; and (4) publications that do not provide substantive information according to the needs of the study. In addition to articles obtained through Google Scholar and ScienceDirect, the researcher also identified relevant publications from other sources used as complements to the literature review. Based on the overall selection process, 17 relevant articles were obtained, consisting of 12 articles from Google Scholar, 3 articles from ScienceDirect, and 2 articles from outside these two databases.

All selected articles were then analyzed based on the study focus, research objectives, methodological approach, research results, and their contribution to understanding the factors influencing students' study program choices. These analysis results were used to identify trends in previous research findings while also building an interpretive context for participant experience analysis.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Approach**

The phenomenological components in this study use the *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Science). This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply understand the subjective experiences of individuals related to the differences between initial and final interest in choosing study programs. The research focuses on how students form initial interest, factors influencing changes in choices, experiences during the decision-making process, and how they interpret the final decisions made. Science is based on three main characteristics: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Phenomenological characteristics emphasize studying individual life experiences, hermeneutics relates to the process of interpretation related to the meaning of experience, while idiography emphasizes in-depth analysis of each individual's experience before identifying patterns between cases (Willis & Harvey, 2025).

In accordance with the science requirements related to small and homogeneous samples to allow for in-depth idiographic analysis, this study involved 7 students from IAIN Kerinci. Research participants were determined using *purposive sampling* technique with criteria including: (1) Islamic Religious Education students from the 2023 cohort; (2) students actively enrolled at IAIN Kerinci at the time this study was conducted; and (3) experiencing phenomena of initial interest different from and final decisions in choosing study programs. These criteria were established to ensure that all participants had a direct experience related to the phenomenon being studied.

Sampling was stopped when thematic adequacy was achieved, ensuring that each individual's narrative was explored in depth.

Primary data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with a duration of approximately 48-56 minutes. The interviews focused on several main aspects, namely students' experiences when first deciding on a study program, the reasons underlying the initial interest, internal and external factors influencing the change in choice, experiences during the decision-making process, and students' interpretation of the final decision made. Interview data were analyzed using *the stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA), which include: (1) repeatedly reading and understanding the interview transcript, then making initial notes; (2) developing emerging themes; (3) searching for relationships between emerging themes; (4) moving from case-by-case analysis to cross-case analysis; (5) developing the final interpretation. To maintain credibility and interpretive validity, this study used member examination, where participants recheck their transcripts to verify data accuracy. Source triangulation was achieved by comparing interview data with observational notes and document analysis. To ensure reliability, a clear audit trail was created, documenting every stage from the raw transcript to the final thematic framework.

## Results And Discussion

### Results

### Students' Initial Interest in the PAI Study Program

Interview results with PAI students at IAIN Kerinci show that interest in the academic field arises from different experiences. Some students already have the desire to become teachers before entering university, while others choose PAI due to their previous educational background or certain considerations when deciding on a study program.

One participant revealed:

> "*At first, I was not interested in choosing the PAI major, but from the beginning I wanted to become a teacher. So I felt that any major related to education and teaching style was more suitable for my desires, even though it was not a major I was interested in.*" (A1)

This expression shows that the aspiration to become a teacher was formed before students chose a study program. Although they had no initial interest in Islamic Religious Education, professional orientation became a more prominent consideration in making academic choices.

Meanwhile, students considering their previous educational backgrounds stated:

> "*At first, I did not intend to choose the Islamic religious education major, but since I failed my first choice, I considered that I had previously studied at a madrasah, so I felt it was necessary to improve the religious understanding I already had.*" (A2)

This statement shows that the students' previous educational experiences serve as the basis for their considerations when choosing PAI. Students view that the

religious knowledge gained during school can still be developed through higher education.

**Factors Influencing Students' Academic Decisions**

Students' decisions in choosing PAI study programs are influenced by various factors related to personal conditions and social environment. Interviews with PAI students revealed that these factors include aspirations, motivation, parental encouragement, job prospects, and economic conditions.

One participant stated:

> "*I chose the Islamic religious education major because of my parents' wishes. My parents said that besides studying education to become a teacher, I also learned religious knowledge that is useful for my own life. Moreover, my mother is also an Islamic religious education teacher, so she wanted me to take the Islamic religious education major to follow in her footsteps*." (A3)

This statement illustrates that parents have a role in guiding students' academic decisions. Based on the experience of one parent who works as an Islamic Education teacher, it also influences the family's expectations regarding their child's academic choices.

Besides parents, job prospects are also considered by students in making academic decisions.

One participant stated:

> "*I feel that the Islamic religious education major has quite good job opportunities; besides having opportunities in formal education, I also have opportunities in non-formal education such as at TPA or even as a preacher. Therefore, I finally chose this major to prepare for my future career*." (A4)

These results indicate that students' academic decisions are the result of calculations that are both personal and social. Students consider personal desires, but at the same time, they also pay attention to the expectations of their families, environment, and future life.

**The Gap Between Interest and Decision**

The research results found that students' initial interest does not always align with their final decision in choosing a study program. There are several conditions faced by students that require them to reconsider their academic choices.

One participant stated:

> "*Actually, I was more interested in other academic fields, but because the academic fees in those fields were inadequate, I ended up choosing an academic field that supported my academic expenses.* " (A5)

These results show that economic conditions can influence students' academic decisions. Their interest in certain fields is not always realized because students must consider the alignment between their desires and economic ability.

In addition, the opposite condition was also found. Students who initially chose PAI due to parental encouragement or certain considerations then found a new interest in the chosen academic field after attending lectures.

As one participant revealed:

> "*At first, I chose this major because of my parents' advice, but after attending college, I started to like the field of Education related to courses on teaching methods and the like.* "(A6)
>
> "*I began to feel that what was studied in this major was not only about religious knowledge. There was also learning about how a teacher manages the classroom, delivered material and information, and dealt with students' differences in abilities. Because of that, I became interested in and liked this major.*" (A6)

These findings show that the relationship between interest and decision is not linear. Interest does not always form the same decision, and decisions do not always start from previously established interest. However, in some cases, academic decisions even become the beginning of new interest.

Overall, the results show that the academic preferences of PAI students at IAIN Kerinci lie in a dynamic relationship between interest, consideration, and decision. Students can choose based on interests, but those decisions may change or be faced by other factors. Conversely, decisions that were initially not entirely based on interest can grow into interest after students gain academic experience.

**Academic Study Preferences of PAI Students at IAIN Kerinci**

Based on the grouping of experiences and interview statements, three academic preference tendencies were found among PAI students at IAIN Kerinci. These three categories were formed from shared orientations and experiences expressed by participants.

1. **Educational orientation and teaching profession**

   Students who tend to be interested in the field of Education generally choose their academic study program because they want to become teachers. They show attention to activities related to the learning process, teaching methods, direct teaching experience, and improving competence as prospective teachers.

   Participants stated:

   > "*In my opinion, being a teacher requires the ability to understand the differences in each student's character. I am interested in the process of how a teacher delivers material so that students who initially did not understand can eventually grasp the lessons. Therefore, I want to learn how to teach properly and correctly during lectures.*" (A7)

   This statement shows that the desire to become a teacher has become the basis for students to consider before making their academic decisions. In this tendency, interest in education relates to aspirations, teaching activities, and the desire to improve skills as prospective teachers.

2. **Orientation in deepening religious knowledge**

   This tendency shows that students view Islamic Religious Education as a means to enhance their religious knowledge and understanding.

One participant stated:

> "*During my time at the madrasah, I have studied quite a lot of religious subjects, but I think that knowledge still needs to be deepened. When considering college majors, I feel that PAI is still related to my previous educational experiences. I want to understand religion with broader discussions in lectures and not just from the material I have studied at school.*" (A2)

These experiences indicate that previous educational backgrounds can influence students' orientation in making academic choices. Students view Islamic Education as a field related to previous educational experiences while also providing opportunities to enhance their religious knowledge.

3. **Preferences developed through college experience**.

Besides these two tendencies, there are also students who initially do not have a clear understanding of the academic field they are interested in. Their preferences begin to form after participating in the learning process, interacting with lecturers, completing assignments, participating in teaching practice, and gaining other academic experiences.

Participants stated:

> "*Previously, I didn't know which major I was interested in, but after attending lectures for several semesters, I began to realize that I liked courses related to education such as learning strategies, learning methods, or things like that.*" (A4)

These results indicate that academic experience can become a means for students to discover their field of interest. Interests that were previously not formed began to develop after students attended lectures.

These findings indicate that there are various types and types of academic preferences among students. Although all informants are in the same study program, each student has different tendencies, experiences, and visions in determining the academic field they want to develop.

**Changes and Developments in Student Preferences after Attending Lectures**

Experience during lectures gives students the opportunity to reevaluate their academic decisions and identify which fields they are interested in. Based on interview results, learning activities can be experiences that help students discover new interests in the field of Education through the courses they take.

Participants revealed:

> "*When I took the learning design course, I started to enjoy it because inside I learned how to plan an engaging learning process. Previously, I only understood that a teacher's duty is only to teach, but after taking that course, I realized that teaching requires preparation and methods that suit the students' conditions.*" (A4)
>
> "*The experience of participating in activities related to learning made me better understand how to be a good teacher. I began to realize that to be a good teacher, besides mastering the subject matter, I also had to be able to explain the material in a way that was easy for students to understand.*" (A4)

This experience shows that students' interest develops through the understanding they gain during their studies. Students now begin to view education not only as a choice of study program but as an academic field with various activities and skills they want to improve or develop.

Overall, changes in students' preferences can be seen from the differences between their initial interests and their experiences after attending college. Some students already have a professional orientation before entering college, while others begin to find fields of interest after participating in the learning process. Thus, lectures become an opportunity for students to recognize, evaluate, and develop their academic preferences.

**Discussion**

The results show that the academic study preferences of PAI students at IAIN Kerinci are not formed based on a single single reference of consideration, but rather through the interaction between personal desires, previous educational experiences, and the social conditions faced by the students. The finding of three preference tendencies, namely educational orientation and teacher profession, deepening religious knowledge, and preferences developed through college experience, indicate that students have different starting points and academic orientations when making university choices. These differences indicate that academic preferences are not merely interested in an educational field but also related to professional goals, personal identity, previous experience, and considerations about the future.

These findings align with research (Harahap et al., 2025) which indicates that students' decisions to choose the PAI Study Program are influenced by self-motivation, parental encouragement, religious motivation, job opportunities, social environment, and spiritual goals. (Charisma, 2025) It also explains that students' choices of PAI are influenced by internal factors such as aspirations to become teachers, the desire to deepen religious knowledge, and passion, as well as external factors such as family, the quality of the study program, the university's reputation, and job opportunities. Nevertheless, research on PAI students at IAIN Kerinci emphasizes further that these factors not only play a role in determining initial choices but also relate to how students build relationships with the academic fields they have chosen.

In the first tendency, the desire to become a teacher shows that professional orientation can be more prominent than interest in study programs. Students who aspire to become teachers from the start tend to consider study programs that can provide educational knowledge and skills. In fact, some participants admitted that initially they had no interest in choosing PAI but still chose that program because they wanted to become a teacher. This illustrates the difference between orientation towards the profession and preference towards scientific disciplines. Students may have relatively clear career goals, but may not necessarily have the same strong interest in the academic field that leads to achieving those goals.

This condition can be explained through *Social Cognitive Career Theory* (SCCT), specifically the relationship between career goals, expectations and outcomes (*outcome*

*expectations*), and confidence in one's own abilities (*self-efficacy*) (Dianto et al., 2025). Within this framework, educational choices are not only determined by what individuals like but also by the belief that an educational field can help achieve the desired goals. The desire to become a teacher encourages students to consider PAI as an educational path that aligns with their professional aspirations. Thus, academic choices can be formed based on students' views on the usefulness of a study program for achieving career goals, even if their initial interest in the field of education is not yet strong.

The second tendency shows that previous educational experience can also be the basis for forming academic preferences. Students with a madrasah educational background consider PAI as a means to enhance the religious understanding they have previously acquired. However, the findings of this study show that this interest is not always the initial interest. In one participant's experience, the choice for PAI emerged after failing the previous option and then considered the suitability between their educational background and the available field. This means that past experience is not only a source of interest but also a basis for evaluation when students must determine their choices.

This condition explains that academic preferences can be formed through an evaluation process of available possibilities. Students do not always choose based on highly desired fields, but can consider fields seen as related to the experience and abilities they already have. In this context, the choice of PAI is the result of an adjustment process between desires, previous educational experiences, and options considered possible.

Meanwhile, the third tendency illustrates that not all students enter university with clearly established academic preferences. Some students actually begin to understand their field of interest after attending lectures. This finding provides an understanding that academic preferences can be formed gradually through learning experiences. Thus, the three tendencies found not only show differences in reasons why students choose PAI but also show variations in the process of forming preferences, ranging from orientation formed before college to interest that arises after students undergo their education.

Besides personal desires, students' decisions to choose PAI are also influenced by external factors, especially job opportunities, parental encouragement, social environment, and economic conditions. The findings of this study show that students do not always make personal interests the main basis for decision-making. In some cases, decisions are more determined by considerations of educational benefits, family expectations, and economic ability to finance higher education.

Job opportunities are one of the factors influencing students' considerations. Participants view that PAI graduates have the opportunity to work in both formal and non-formal educational institutions, including becoming teachers and involved in religious education activities. These findings are consistent with the research (Anggraini et al., 2022) which shows that job opportunities and evaluation of study

programs can influence students' interest. (Rusandry & Samsuddin, 2023) It was also found that job opportunities and the quality of education can strengthen students' interests and decisions. Meanwhile, (Khasanah & Kardiyem, 2022; Samiun & Hanna, 2024; Milla & Febriola, 2022) show the importance of job opportunities in considering study program selection.

However, in this study, job opportunities can be understood not only as a factor that motivates students to choose PAI but also as a source of interest in the study program. When students see the relationship between the field they study and the potential for future employment, the study program begins to be seen as having instrumental value for their lives. This means that interest can develop not only because students like the learning material, but also because they understand the practical benefits of the knowledge gained.

From the SCCT perspective, this condition relates to *outcome expectations*, which are individual expectations about outcomes to be obtained through an educational or career choice. Students who estimate that PAI can provide opportunities to become teachers, non-formal educators, or engage in da'wah activities will have reasons to maintain that choice. Expectations for these outcomes can serve as a link between personal goals and academic decisions. In other words, students not only consider the suitability of the study program with current interests but also estimate the benefits that may be gained after completing their education.

Besides job prospects, family influence also shows that academic decisions take place within social environments. Participants who chose PAI due to parental encouragement, especially because one parent works as a PAI teacher, indicated that family experiences and expectations can serve as references in determining educational choices. These findings align with research (Putri et al., 2025), as well as (Milla & Febriola, 2022), which places parental support as one of the external factors in the decision to choose a study program.

However, family influence must be understood more deeply because not all external urges have the same meaning for students. Initially, advice from parents is often the main reason someone chooses a particular major. However, over time, students begin to understand and accept these choices because of the experiences they gain. Thus, family influence can be the initial cause in making academic decisions, while personal experience then helps students understand and interpret those decisions.

Economic conditions show the impact of various external factors. Students who actually prefer other fields of study but ultimately choose PAI because of limited funds indicate that choosing a major is also influenced by their financial condition. This finding is consistent with the research (Wijaya, et al., 2025) about the experience and location of the university, as well as (Sitanggang et al., 2021) which states that location and tuition fees are considerations when choosing a study program. In such conditions, choosing the PAI major does not always mean students have found the field that best matches their interests. On the contrary, the decision may indicate the

choice considered the most reasonable, depending on economic conditions. This shows the difference between the desired needs and the choices that can be realized. Students may be interested in a particular field, but due to limited resources, they must look for other options.

Therefore, preferences and academic decisions need to be understood as two related but not identical processes. Preferences show a tendency or interest in a particular field, while decisions are the act of choosing based on various available considerations. When the two are not aligned, students may experience a process of adjustment to the choices they have made. This condition becomes important because decisions that were initially pragmatic can still develop through academic experience but can also remain accepted choices due to limited options.

One important contribution of this research lies in the finding that students' academic interest does not always form before the decision to choose a study program but can develop after the students undergo the educational process. These findings provide a different perspective from the general understanding of study program selection, which tends to place interest as the main basis for decision-making. Among PAI students at IAIN Kerinci, there is experience when academic decisions are made first based on external considerations, while interest in the chosen field only arises after students gain direct learning experience.

This change is evident in students who previously chose PAI on parental advice but later became interested in education-related courses, especially teaching methods. Initially, the choice of study program often depended on family expectations and did not fully reflect personal desires. However, after college, students began to understand the characteristics of the field of education and found learning areas that suited them. This experience showed that there is a process of reviewing and re-understanding academic decisions previously made.

This change occurs due to the relationship between learning experiences and the formation of beliefs in SCCT theory. Learning experiences not only provide new knowledge but also help students assess their abilities, discover fields they like, and shape expectations about their educational future. When students attend lectures on learning strategies or teaching methods, they gain direct experience of activities related to a teacher's work. These experiences can strengthen the belief that the field of education is related to the abilities and goals they want to develop.

Within the framework of SCCT, such experiences can relate to development *self-efficacy*, which is an individual's belief in their ability to perform certain activities (Dianto et al., 2025). Students who previously did not have an understanding of teaching skills can begin to build confidence through experiences working on assignments, participating in discussions, and learning strategies. When that experience results in understanding or success in completing academic activities, students have the potential to have a more positive assessment of the field studied. This means that learning experience can act as a bridge between the academic decisions made and the growing preference for the field of study.

However, changes in interest cannot be explained solely by increased experience or the length of time students attend lectures. What is more important is how students give meaning to those experiences. Two students can take the same course but produce different responses. One student may find interest because the material studied matches their aspirations, while another student may only participate in learning as part of their academic obligations. Therefore, college experience should be understood as an opportunity that allows for a change in preferences, not as an automatic cause of interest.

Findings about students who initially did not know the academic field they are interested in also reinforce this explanation. Before attending lectures, students did not have a sufficient understanding of the field they wanted to develop. After studying learning strategies and methods, students began to recognize courses they considered interesting. In this context, the lecture process acts as a space for exploration that allows students to discover preferences through direct experience. Interests that were previously not formed then develop based on knowledge and experience gained during higher education.

In contrast, students who choose PAI due to failure in the first choice or economic limitations face a process of meaningfulness that is not always the same. Failure in the previous choice can encourage students to reevaluate the available educational alternatives, while economic limitations can make students make more realistic decisions than decisions that fully align with their desires. In both situations, college experience can provide an opportunity to reassess the choices made. However, acceptance of these choices does not necessarily prove that academic interests have changed. Thus, changes in academic interest in this study can be understood as a process involving three elements: initial decision, learning experience, and personal meaning of the field studied. Initial decision determines the student's position in the academic environment; learning experience provides an opportunity to recognize the field of study, while personal interpretation determines whether the experience develops into a new interest. This explanation shows that academic preferences are not completely fixed, but can develop after students have made educational decisions.

Findings regarding students who initially chose PAI due to family pressure, economic considerations, or failure in the first choice need to be further analyzed through *Self-Determination Theory* (SDT). This theory explains how motivation initially originating from external factors can undergo internalization so that individuals begin to accept the values and goals of the activities they undertake. In the context of this study, motivational internalization can be used to understand changes in students' relationships with the PAI study program after attending lectures.

At the initial stage, students who choose study programs based on parental wishes show that their academic decisions are influenced by external motivation sources. Students may attend lectures because they want to meet family expectations, follow parental advice, or consider the experiences of parents who have professions related to the field. At this stage, the reason for choosing PAI does not necessarily

reflect personal interest in their academic field. However, when students start attending lectures and understand the benefits of the courses studied, there is a possibility that these reasons change. Students who previously chose PAI because of parental wishes may begin to understand that education has benefits for developing their abilities and achieving personal goals. If students begin to accept these educational values as important to them, this process can be understood as a form of internalization of motivation.

In SDT, this process can be explained through the different types of extrinsic motivation regulation. Initially, students' decisions may be at the *level of external regulation*, which are actions taken due to external urges or expectations. Furthermore, if students begin to understand and recognize the benefits of education for their personal goals, that motivation can develop toward *identified regulation*. At this level, students engage in academic activities not merely to meet the demands of others, but because they realize that these activities have value and benefits for themselves.

This difference is important because students who initially choose PAI due to family influence do not necessarily automatically experience internalization of motivation. If students only persist because they feel they must follow their parents' decisions or because they have no other alternatives, their motivation can still be dominated by external pressure. Conversely, if students begin to view PAI learning as something valuable for life goals and self-development, there is an indication that the motivation has become more internalized. The internalization process can also be linked to three basic psychological needs in SDT, namely autonomy, competence, and *relatedness*. Autonomy relates to students' experiences when they begin to feel that the academic choices they pursue can be accepted as meaningful decisions for them. Competence relates to experiences when students feel capable of understanding material, completing assignments, or developing teaching skills. Meanwhile, connectedness relates to the experience of gaining support and positive relationships with lecturers and friends during lectures.

In the context of PAI students at IAIN Kerinci, these three needs can help explain motivational development. For example, students who gain positive experiences in learning learning methods may begin to feel capable of developing skills as prospective teachers. When these abilities are felt relevant to personal aspirations, students potentially have stronger reasons to continue and deepen their education. However, such experiences need to be proven through interviews about students' feelings, assessments, and reasons, not just based on the fact that they attended lectures. On the other hand, this study also found conditions that need to be distinguished from the internalization of motivation, namely acceptance of academic choices. Students who choose PAI due to economic limitations, for example, may try to adjust to the available options. They continue to attend lectures and complete academic obligations, but do not necessarily find interest in the field studied. In such conditions, the continuity of students in pursuing education cannot be directly interpreted as the development of preferences.

To clarify these differences, changes in interest can be identified through the emergence of a desire to study a particular field more deeply, the feeling that a particular course matches personal interests, and awareness that the field is relevant to future goals. Meanwhile, acceptance of academic choices is more evident through willingness to follow the decisions made even though interest in that field may not necessarily develop. Not all students who initially are less interested then experience a change in interest. Some may find a field they truly like, while others only build adjustments to the choices they have made. Therefore, internalization of motivation and changes in interest need to be understood as possible different processes, although both can occur simultaneously.

Conceptually, these findings show that academic decisions are not always the end of the selection process, but can be the beginning of the process of forming meaning for the field of study. SCCT helps explain how career goals, outcome expectations, confidence in one's abilities, and learning experiences relate to academic choices. Meanwhile, SDT provides an explanation of how external reasons in choosing study programs can be accepted and interpreted more personally. The simultaneous use of these two theories allows this study to explain not only the factors that motivate students to choose PAI but also how students build more meaningful relationships with their academic choices after attending lectures.

Based on the overall findings, this study offers an understanding that academic preferences of PAI students at IAIN Kerinci are formed through a dynamic process and do not always follow the order that interest must arise first before an academic decision is made. For some students, interest becomes the basis for determining the choice of study program. However, for others, the decision arises first due to family influence, economic limitations, failure of previous choices, or job prospect considerations. After these decisions are made, academic experience can provide space for students to evaluate and reinterpret their choices.

Based on these findings, there is a relationship between three main stages in forming academic preferences. First, the initial decision-making stage, which is influenced by personal aspirations and external conditions. Second, the academic experience stage, which allows students to recognize the characteristics of the field of study through the learning process. Third, the stage of reinterpreting academic choices, which determines whether students develop new interests, strengthen previous preferences, or simply accept the choices they have made. In the first stage, students have different initial conditions. Some already aspire to become teachers, some desire to deepen their religious knowledge, and others do not yet have an understanding of the academic field they are interested in. These conditions then interact with various external factors, resulting in academic decisions that do not always match their initial interest. In the second stage, students begin to gain direct experience through courses, assignments, discussions, interactions with lecturers, and other academic activities. These experiences allow students to recognize fields that were previously not deeply understood. At this stage, learning experiences have the

potential to build confidence in their abilities and clarify students' expectations regarding the benefits of the study program for their future. In the third stage, students give new meaning to the academic choices they have undertaken. Some students begin to find interest in certain fields and develop more personal motivation. Others further strengthen the academic orientation they have had from the beginning. However, there is also the possibility that students simply accept and adjust to the choices made without experiencing significant changes in interest.

Thus, the dynamics of students' academic preferences can be understood through the relationship between decisions, experiences, and interpretation. Decisions provide initial direction for students to enter an academic field, college experience provides opportunities to recognize that field, while meaning determines how students build interest and motivation toward the choices they pursue. These findings contribute conceptually that academic preferences not only function as a factor that precedes educational decisions but can also be the result of experiences after decisions are made. In other words, the relationship between preferences and academic decisions is two-way. Interest can drive students to make decisions, but the decisions made can also be the starting point for the development of new interests through higher education experiences.

**Conclusion**

Based on the research results, there is a gap between the interest and academic decisions of PAI students at IAIN Kerinci. Students' interest in a field does not always lead to the decision to choose that field, and likewise, the decision to choose a study program is not always based on pre-existing interests. Some students choose the PAI Study Program based on their aspirations to become teachers, the desire to deepen their religious knowledge, family encouragement, and consideration of job opportunities. Meanwhile, there are students who have an interest in other academic fields but make different decisions due to economic limitations or the conditions they face. This study also found that academic interest can develop after students undergo lectures through learning experiences, interaction with lecturers, and involvement in academic activities. Conceptually, these findings show that the decision to choose a study program is not always preceded by strong preferences, but in the experience of some participants, it actually becomes the starting point for new interest to form. Nevertheless, changes in interest need to be distinguished from acceptance of academic choices, because not all students who pursue study programs then develop a stronger interest in the field. Thus, the dynamics of academic preferences in this study are interpretations of the experiences of seven participants and are not intended to be generalized to all PAI students.

The findings of this study have implications for the management of the PAI Study Program, especially in developing academic guidance services and student mentoring from the beginning of their studies. The study program needs to help students identify their interests, abilities, academic and professional goals through consultation with academic advisors. In addition, professional introductions through career seminars,

discussions with alumni, field experience practice, and information about job opportunities in formal and non-formal education need to be strengthened so that students understand the relevance of their field of study to their future careers. Special mentoring is also needed for students who choose study programs not based on initial interests, so they have the opportunity to explore academic fields, develop competencies, and evaluate the suitability of their study choices. Therefore, study program management is not only oriented towards the student admission process but also on efforts to help students build interest, interpret academic choices, and develop professional orientation during higher education.

This study has several limitations that need to be considered in understanding the results. First, the study focuses on PAI students at IAIN Kerinci, so the findings cannot yet show the preferences of PAI students at universities. Second, the use of *literature review* and interview methods makes the research results depend on the suitability of literature sources and the information provided by the informants. Third, this study has not compared student preferences based on semester level, age, gender, and educational background. Therefore, future research is expected to expand the literature study, involving more varied informants from various cohorts and universities to gain a deeper understanding of changes in students' interests, preferences, and academic decisions.

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**Ethical Statement**

This study involved seven university students who participated in qualitative research concerning their academic interests, educational choices, and personal experiences. Ethical considerations relevant to the study included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' identities. Participant quotations were presented using identification codes to reduce the risk of personal identification. The authors should confirm and disclose the actual procedures for obtaining participant consent, institutional permission, and any applicable ethical approval before publication.

**Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Statement**

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to assist with language editing, grammatical correction, and improving the clarity and readability of the manuscript. AI was not used to conduct literature searches, screen or select articles, collect interview data, analyze participant experiences using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), perform thematic interpretation, or formulate the research findings and conclusions. All scholarly arguments, interpretations, references, and substantive content were reviewed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

Author Contributions

Tesa Mariska contributed to the conceptualization, research design, systematic literature searching, study selection, participant recruitment, interviews, data collection, phenomenological analysis, interpretation of findings, and preparation of the original manuscript. Albertos Damni contributed to the conceptualization, methodological development, research supervision, validation of the literature review and phenomenological analysis, theoretical interpretation, and critical review and revision of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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The authors declare that they have no financial, professional, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the conduct, analysis, interpretation, or publication of this research.

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