

EXPLORING THE MOTIVATION OF STKIP MUHAMMADIYAH SOUTHWEST ACEH STUDENTS RETURNING TO COLLEGE AFTER ACADEMIC LEAVE

Novia Sriha Ayu¹, Sukri Adani²

STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya

Email: noviasrihaayu@gmail.com¹, sukri.adani@stkipmuabdaya.ac.id²

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi motivasi yang mendasari keputusan mahasiswa untuk kembali kuliah setelah menjalani cuti akademik di STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya, dengan menggunakan kerangka Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Penelitian ini menggunakan desain fenomenologi kualitatif, dengan data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap lima mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris yang sebelumnya pernah mengambil cuti akademik dan kemudian melanjutkan studinya kembali. Transkrip wawancara dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik enam tahap dari Braun dan Clarke, dengan bantuan perangkat lunak NVivo 12, sehingga menghasilkan tiga tema utama, yaitu motivasi mahasiswa untuk kembali kuliah, pemaknaan terhadap keputusan untuk kembali kuliah, dan faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi keputusan tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keputusan partisipan untuk melanjutkan pendidikan didorong oleh kombinasi motivasi intrinsik, dukungan keluarga dan teman sebaya, serta keinginan untuk menyelesaikan gelar yang belum tuntas dan meraih peluang karier di masa depan. Meskipun pada awalnya partisipan mengalami keraguan diri dan kesulitan penyesuaian akademik, kepercayaan diri mereka berkembang secara bertahap melalui keterlibatan aktif dalam perkuliahan serta hubungan yang suportif dengan dosen dan teman sebaya. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa terpenuhinya otonomi, kompetensi, dan keterhubungan sebagai tiga kebutuhan psikologis dasar dalam SDT berperan penting dalam menjaga motivasi dan ketahanan mahasiswa setelah mengalami masa jeda studi. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam mengenai kembalinya mahasiswa ke perguruan tinggi sebagai sebuah proses pendidikan yang bermakna, bukan sekadar peristiwa administratif, serta memberikan implikasi praktis bagi institusi pendidikan tinggi dalam merancang sistem dukungan yang lebih responsif bagi mahasiswa yang kembali kuliah.

Kata Kunci: Cuti Akademik, Mahasiswa Kembali Kuliah, Motivasi Mahasiswa.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the motivations underlying students' decisions to return to college after academic leave at STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh, framed through Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with five undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program who had previously taken academic leave and later resumed their studies. The interview transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, assisted by Nvivo 12, generating three major themes: students' motivation to return to college, meaning-making of the decision to return, and factors influencing return to college. The findings reveal that participants' decisions to resume their education were driven by a combination of intrinsic motivation, family and peer support, and the desire to complete an unfinished degree and secure future career opportunities. Although participants initially experienced self-doubt and academic readjustment difficulties, their confidence gradually developed through active engagement in coursework and supportive relationships with lecturers and peers. The study confirms that the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness the three basic psychological needs proposed by SDT plays a crucial role in sustaining students' motivation and persistence after interruption. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of academic return

as a meaningful educational process rather than merely an administrative event, and offer practical implications for higher education institutions in designing more responsive support systems for returning students.

Keywords: *Academic Leave, Returning Students, Student Motivation.*

A. BACKGROUND

Student persistence in higher education has become a major concern worldwide because completing a university degree is closely associated with improved employment opportunities, economic mobility, and personal development (Lira et al., 2023). Despite increasing participation in higher education, many students experience interruptions during their academic journey due to financial constraints, employment responsibilities, health problems, family obligations, and declining motivation (Realinho et al., 2022). Consequently, educational trajectories are often non-linear, with students moving between periods of enrolment, temporary withdrawal, and re-enrolment rather than progressing continuously toward graduation. In Indonesia, this issue is particularly relevant because educational participation is strongly influenced by socioeconomic conditions and family responsibilities. Although institutional records generally document students who formally apply for academic leave, many students temporarily disengage from their studies without completing official procedures, creating discrepancies between administrative records and actual educational participation (Interview with Academic Staff, 2026). Therefore, student persistence should be understood as a dynamic process shaped by continuous interactions between personal aspirations and contextual circumstances.

Previous studies have extensively investigated factors contributing to student dropout and educational persistence. Student withdrawal has consistently been associated with low academic confidence, financial hardship, limited institutional support, weak academic integration, and psychological challenges (Alban & Mauricio, 2019). Tinto's theory of academic and social integration argues that students are more likely to persist when they successfully integrate into the academic and social environment of higher education institutions (Tinto, 2017). Complementing this perspective, Bean and Metzner emphasized that environmental factors such as employment, family obligations, and financial pressures play a particularly important role among non-traditional students (Coca et al., 2022). More recent research has further suggested that withdrawal should not be viewed as a single event but rather as a gradual process resulting from cumulative academic, personal, and contextual pressures (Şanal et al., 2025).

Within this broader discussion, academic leave represents a unique form of educational interruption. Academic leave, commonly referred to as a leave of absence (LOA), allows students to temporarily suspend their studies while maintaining the possibility of returning to complete their degree (James et al., 2024). Unlike permanent dropout, temporary withdrawal preserves students' academic status and provides opportunities for educational re-engagement (Acapulco & Acapulco, 2025). Previous studies have shown that students who successfully return after temporary interruption often achieve better long-term educational and employment outcomes than those who permanently discontinue their studies (Gaulke, 2022). Nevertheless, although academic return has become increasingly recognized, existing literature continues to focus predominantly on predicting dropout and improving retention rather than understanding why students choose to return after an interruption (Coca et al., 2022).

Recent qualitative research has highlighted that students who return after academic interruption often experience complex processes of reflection, negotiation, and renewed commitment (Antonio et al., 2024). Returning students frequently reconstruct their educational goals while balancing family expectations, employment responsibilities, financial

limitations, and personal aspirations (Lazarowicz & McGill, 2022). These findings suggest that returning to higher education is not merely an administrative decision but also a meaningful psychological and social process. However, much of the existing research has concentrated on institutional interventions, re-enrolment policies, or statistical predictors of persistence, while relatively little attention has been given to how returning students themselves interpret their experiences and motivations, particularly in developing-country contexts.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding these motivational processes. SDT proposes that motivation is shaped by the fulfilment of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When students experience a sense of personal choice, believe they are academically capable, and feel socially connected, they are more likely to develop autonomous motivation, which supports persistence and academic engagement (Gaulke, 2022). Conversely, frustration of these psychological needs may contribute to disengagement and withdrawal (Xavier et al., 2026). Although numerous higher education studies have applied SDT to explain student motivation and persistence, most have focused on continuously enrolled students rather than those who interrupt and subsequently resume their studies. Consequently, relatively little is known about how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are reconstructed during students' return to higher education following academic leave.

This limitation is particularly evident in the Indonesian higher education context. Educational decisions are closely intertwined with cultural values, family expectations, financial conditions, and regional characteristics (Palomino & Ortega, 2023). In Aceh, these contextual influences may be even more pronounced because educational participation is shaped by strong family relationships, religious values, and local socioeconomic conditions. Although previous Indonesian studies have examined student resilience, persistence, and motivation (Yusof et al., 2023), limited qualitative research has specifically explored the experiences of students returning after academic leave, particularly within Islamic higher education institutions. As a result, the motivational processes underlying academic return remain insufficiently understood from students' own perspectives.

Based on this review, the scientific novelty of the present study lies in shifting the analytical focus from explaining why students leave higher education to understanding why and how they return after academic leave. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize dropout prediction, institutional retention strategies, or quantitative determinants of persistence, this study explores returning students' lived experiences through the perspective of Self-Determination Theory. By examining how autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape students' decisions to resume their studies, the research contributes a more comprehensive understanding of academic return as a process of motivational reconstruction rather than simply educational continuation. Furthermore, this study extends existing knowledge by providing evidence from STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh, an Islamic higher education institution situated within a unique sociocultural context that remains underrepresented in international literature.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What motivations influence students to return to college after academic leave at STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh? (2) How do students make sense of their decision to resume their studies after academic leave? and (3) What internal and external factors shape students' return to college after academic leave? Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the motivations and lived experiences of students returning to higher education after academic leave through the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of academic persistence, motivational re-engagement, and educational recovery in Indonesian

higher education.

This study aims to explore the motivations of students who return to higher education after academic leave at STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh through the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Specifically, it seeks to examine how students interpret their decision to resume their studies following a period of academic interruption and to identify the internal and external factors that influence their academic re-engagement. By investigating students lived experiences, this study intends to provide a deeper understanding of the motivational processes underlying educational return and to contribute to the growing body of research on student persistence and academic re-engagement in higher education.

B. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the motivations and lived experiences of students returning to college after academic leave at STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of how students interpret their experiences after temporarily discontinuing their studies. Academic leave refers to a formally approved suspension of academic registration for up to one year (two semesters) (STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh, 2022), while return refers to re-enrolling and resuming academic studies after the leave period. The participants were five undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program who had taken academic leave for at least one semester before returning to their studies. Using purposive sampling, participants were selected based on varied reasons for taking leave, including employment, physical illness, mental health challenges, and religious education. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted over one month, with each interview lasting approximately 7–11 minutes at either the participants' homes or on campus. The interviews explored participants' motivations for returning, experiences during academic leave, the meaning of their decision to return, and the factors influencing their academic reintegration. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis in NVivo 12, which generated 44 initial codes, thirteen categories, three main themes, and thirteen sub-themes. NVivo 12 was used to organize the data and manage the coding process, while the interpretation and naming of themes remained the researcher's responsibility. Ethical approval was ensured through informed consent, confidentiality using pseudonyms (P1–P5), and participants' right to withdraw at any stage. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed source and method triangulation, member checking with two participants, and peer debriefing with the research supervisor.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants profiles

The participants in this study were five students from the English Education Study Program at STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh. All participants had experienced academic leave before returning to continue their studies and were selected purposively based on their relevant experiences. Their reasons for taking academic leave varied, including work commitments, physical and mental health challenges, religious education at an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*), and academic leave during the final stage of their studies when only the undergraduate thesis remained to be completed. These diverse experiences provided rich and varied perspectives that contributed to a deeper understanding of the factors influencing students' decisions to return to college after academic leave.

Data analysis process

Interview process

The interviews were conducted over a period of one month. Each participant attended one interview session, with follow-up questions asked when clarification was needed. In total, five participants from the English Education Study Program were interviewed to obtain rich qualitative data. The interviews were scheduled flexibly based on the participants' availability and were conducted in locations that were convenient and comfortable for them, including their homes or other mutually agreed places. This approach helped create a relaxed atmosphere, allowing participants to share their experiences openly regarding their decision to return to college after a period of academic leave.

Table 1. Interview process

Participant Names	Duration of Interview (in Minutes)	Amount of Words (in Indonesian)
P1	07.00 (Minutes)	676
P2	11.00 (Minutes)	1.250
P3	08.00 (Minutes)	869
P4	07.00 (Minutes)	749
P5	07.00 (Minutes)	747
Total	40.00 (Minutes)	4.291

Based on Table 1, the interview process was conducted face-to-face with each participant at a location that was convenient for them, either at their homes or on campus. The duration of each interview varied, ranging from approximately 7 minutes to 11 minutes per session. The total duration of all interviews was 40 minutes , with a total of 4.291 words spoken in Indonesian. On average, each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and were subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data. Each participant participated in one semi-structured interview, allowing the researcher to explore their experiences of returning to college after academic leave in depth. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, their real names were replaced with codes or pseudonyms. This ethical procedure ensured that all data remained anonymous and that participants could not be identified in the research findings.

Data cleaning and preparation

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the participants' original responses and ensure the trustworthiness of the data. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian, and the transcripts were carefully reviewed several times to verify their completeness and accuracy. During this process, spelling, punctuation, and formatting were standardized to maintain consistency across all interview transcripts. Minor corrections, such as the removal of repeated words, filler expressions, and grammatical inconsistencies, were made without changing the intended meaning of the participants' responses.

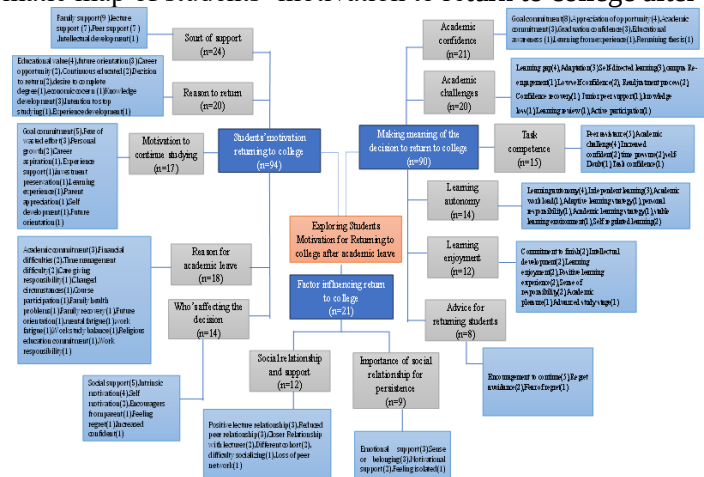
During the data-cleaning process, repeated words, filler expressions, and minor grammatical inconsistencies were corrected to improve readability while preserving the participants' intended meanings. For example, one participant originally stated:

"It was my own decision to return to college because I knew I would regret it if I did not continue. I was also encouraged by my parents. "was revised to" I decided to return to college on my own initiative because I knew I would regret not continuing my studies. In addition, I received encouragement from my parents."(P1, personal communication,01:32:25).

After the transcription process was completed, each transcript was carefully reviewed while listening to the original audio recordings to ensure transcription accuracy. Minor

corrections, including punctuation, spelling, and obvious grammatical errors, were made only to improve readability without changing the meaning of the participants' responses. The finalized transcripts were then prepared for thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of students' motivation to return to college after a period of academic leave, the interview data were systematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The participants' responses were coded, categorized, and organized into several main themes and subthemes based on recurring patterns identified across the interviews. These themes represent the participants' experiences, motivations, and the internal and external factors that influenced their decision to resume their studies. The following table presents an overview of the main themes and subthemes identified from the analysis, providing a clear summary of the findings that are discussed in the subsequent section.



Theme 1: Motivation to Return to College

Sub-theme 1: Source of Support

When participants were asked who supported their decision to return to college, one participant stated:

Interviewer : Who has the most influence or support for you to return to college? (family, lecturers, or others).

P2 :“ The most influential factor in supporting my university studies is certainly my family, especially my parents. (P2, personal communication,05:07:56)”

The participant explained that the encouragement received from significant others increased their confidence and motivated them to continue pursuing their education despite previous challenges.

Similar views were expressed by other participants, who also emphasized that support from people around them played an important role in helping them make the decision to return to college.

Interviewer :”Who supported your decision to return to college after academic leave?”P3:“ Family comes first, as they are the most influential; they always provide me with support and encouragement. (P3, personal communication 04:04:35).”

These findings indicate that Source of Support was an important motivational factor for students returning to college after academic leave. Feeling supported by significant others helped participants overcome uncertainty, rebuild their motivation, and remain committed to completing their studies.

Sub-theme 2: Reason to Return

This sub-theme explores the reasons that motivated participants to return to college after taking academic leave. The thematic analysis revealed that participants decided to resume their studies for various reasons, including the desire to complete their degree, achieve personal goals, improve future career opportunities, and avoid feelings of regret. Despite having different life experiences during their academic leave, all participants expressed a strong determination to continue their education and complete their undergraduate studies.

When participants were asked about their reasons for returning to college, one participant stated:

Interviewer : What made you finally decide to go back to college after taking academic leave?

P1 :“ I decided to retake this course to continue my bachelor's degree studies. (P1, Personal communication,01:03:94).”

The participant explained that the decision to return to college was driven by a personal desire to complete an unfinished degree. The participant believed that discontinuing their education permanently would lead to regret in the future and limit opportunities for personal and professional development.

Similar perspectives were expressed by other participants, who also emphasized that completing higher education was an important life goal.

Interviewer: “ What made you decide to return to college after academic leave?”

P4 :“ I want to finish what I started so that I can move on to the next phase. (P4, Personal cummication,00:57:18).”

These findings suggest that Reason to Return was a key motivational factor influencing students’ decisions to resume their studies after academic leave. Participants viewed returning to college as an opportunity to complete an unfinished academic journey, achieve personal aspirations, and build a better future.

Sub-theme 3: Motivation to continue studying

This sub-theme explores the motivations that encourage participants to continue their studies after returning to college following academic leave. The thematic analysis revealed that participants were motivated to persist in their studies by various factors, including the

desire to graduate, achieve academic success, fulfill personal aspirations, make their families proud, and build a better future. Although participants faced different challenges after returning to college, they demonstrated a strong commitment to completing their education and avoiding another interruption in their academic journey.

When participants were asked about what motivated them to continue studying after returning to college, one participant stated:

Interviewer : What keeps you motivated to continue studying after returning to college?

P5 :“ because I want to grow, expand my knowledge, and secure a better and brighter future.(P5, Personal Communication,05:29:01).”

The participant explained that the motivation to continue studying came from a strong determination to graduate and accomplish personal goals. Returning to college was viewed as a second opportunity that should be utilized wisely, encouraging the participant to remain committed despite academic and personal challenges.

Similar views were also expressed by other participants, who emphasized that their motivation to continue studying was strengthened by their determination to finish what they had started and achieve meaningful life goals.

Interviewer: “What keeps you motivated to continue studying after returning to college?”

P3 :“ primarily because I want to make my parents happy, and I also want to develop my potential, earn a bachelor's degree, and secure better career opportunities for my future. (P3, Personal Communication,06:07:12).”

These findings suggest that Motivation to Continue Studying was an important factor supporting students' persistence after returning from academic leave. Participants described their motivation as being driven by meaningful personal goals, aspirations for graduation, and the desire to create better opportunities for their future. This motivation helped them remain committed to overcoming obstacles and continuing their academic journey.

Sub-theme 4: Reason for Academic Leave

This sub-theme explores the reasons that caused participants to take academic leave before returning to college. The thematic analysis revealed that participants' decisions to take academic leave were influenced by various factors, such as personal circumstances, family responsibilities, financial difficulties, health-related issues, and other challenges that affected their ability to continue their studies. Although these challenges became barriers to their academic progress, participants explained that the reasons behind their academic leave had changed after they returned to college, as some problems had been resolved while others were managed through new strategies and personal adjustments.

When participants were asked about the reasons why they previously took academic leave and whether those reasons still existed after returning to college, one participant stated:

Interviewer : What was the reason you took academic leave before? After returning to college, does that reason still exist or has it changed?

P4 :“ I previously took a break due to health issues, financial problems, and mental exhaustion, but now the situation is far more stable and under control. (P4,personal communication, 05:47:35).”

The participant explained that the decision to take academic leave was influenced by certain circumstances that made it difficult to continue studying at that time. After returning to college, the participant experienced changes in those conditions, which allowed them to resume their academic journey with greater readiness and commitment.

Similar experiences were also shared by other participants, who explained that academic leave was not a decision made without consideration but rather a temporary solution to overcome personal challenges. After returning, participants mentioned that some previous obstacles were no longer present, while others required adaptation and better management.

Interviewer: What was the reason you took academic leave before? After returning to college, does that reason still exist or has it changed?

P2 :” Initially, I felt I could balance work and my studies, but over time, it became difficult to manage especially with night shifts that left me exhausted and made it hard to focus on my coursework. Now that I’ve returned to my studies, my priorities have shifted; I want to focus on completing my education and thinking more about my future.(P2, personal communication, 09:36:64).”

These findings indicate that Reason for Academic Leave played an important role in understanding students’ academic interruption and their decision to return to college. Participants viewed academic leave as a response to challenging circumstances rather than the end of their educational goals. The changes in their personal situations and their ability to manage previous barriers contributed to their readiness to continue their studies.

Sub theme 5:Who’s affecting the decision

This sub-theme explores the individuals who influenced participants’ decisions to return to college after taking academic leave. The thematic analysis revealed that participants’ decisions were influenced by both personal and social factors. Although the final decision to resume their studies was generally perceived as a personal choice, support and encouragement from significant others played an important role in reinforcing their determination. Family members, particularly parents, were the most frequently mentioned source of influence, followed by friends and lecturers.

When participants were asked who had influenced their decision to return to college, most explained that their families were the primary source of encouragement.

Interviewer : When you decided to go back to college, was it mostly because of your own desire, or was there influence from others?

P2 :“ I also received support and encouragement from my parents who always supported me to continue my education.(P2, Personal communication.01:44:61) ”

In addition to family support, several participants reported that friends and lecturers also contributed to their decision to resume their studies. Friends encouraged them to remain optimistic and reassured them that it was never too late to continue their education, while lecturers provided advice, motivation, and academic guidance that increased participants’ confidence in returning to the university. These interpersonal relationships created a supportive environment that facilitated participants’ transition back to academic life.

Interviewer : When you decided to go back to college, was it mostly because of your own desire, or was there influence from others?

P4 :“ It was 80% my own desire; my family was supportive, certainly, but the biggest push came when I saw my peers starting to graduate and enter the workforce.(P4,Personal Communication,01:30:67)”

Despite receiving encouragement from different individuals, participants emphasized that the final decision to return to college ultimately came from their own willingness to continue their education. They viewed completing their degree as a personal responsibility and an important step toward achieving their future aspirations. Therefore, external support functioned as reinforcement, while intrinsic motivation remained the foundation of their decision.

Interviewer : When you decided to go back to college, was it mostly because of your own desire, or was there influence from others?

P3 :“ For the most part, I returned to college because it was my own desire. However, I also received support and encouragement from family and friends to resume my studies. (P3,Personal communication,01:19:28)”

These findings indicate that students' decisions to return to college were shaped by the interaction between personal determination and social support.

Theme 2: Making Meaning of the Decision to Return to College

Theme 2 was generated from 42 initial codes and 90 coded references, which were categorized into 6 sub-themes. The sub-themes consist of Academic Confidence, Academic Challenges, Task Competence, Learning Autonomy, and Advice for Returning Students. These codes describe how participants interpreted and gave meaning to their experiences after returning to college. Overall, this theme demonstrates that participants' experiences during and after academic leave shaped their academic confidence, learning behaviors, and commitment to successfully complete their studies.

Sub-theme 1: Academic Confidence

This sub-theme explores participants' academic confidence after returning to college following academic leave. The thematic analysis revealed that although participants initially experienced self-doubt and concerns about readjusting to academic life, their confidence gradually increased as they became actively involved in lectures and successfully completed academic tasks. Returning to college allowed them to recognize that they were still capable of learning and achieving their academic goals.

Several participants explained that they initially felt uncertain about their ability to keep up with coursework after being away from university. However, as they adapted to the learning environment and participated in academic activities, they became more confident in their abilities.

Interviewer : When you returned to university, did you feel more confident about graduating? Why?

P2 :“ There is definitely a sense of falling behind after taking a break from college. At first, I also felt a bit confused and lacked confidence, as I had to readjust to the academic environment and the coursework that was already underway. (P2,Personal communication.03:11:68)”

Other participants reported that completing assignments, understanding course materials, and receiving encouragement from lecturers strengthened their confidence and motivated them to continue their studies.

Interviewer : When you returned to university, did you feel more confident about graduating? Why?

P3 :“ Yes, I initially lacked confidence, but the help and guidance from the lecturer enabled me to complete the task successfully. (P3,Personal communication.04:22:50)”

These findings suggest that academic confidence developed through participants' successful readjustment to university life.

Sub-theme 2: Academic Challenges

This sub-theme explores the academic challenges experienced by participants after returning to college following academic leave. The thematic analysis revealed that participants encountered various difficulties during their readjustment to academic life. The most common challenges included keeping up with course materials, adapting to academic routines, managing assignments, and balancing academic responsibilities with personal commitments. Despite these difficulties, participants viewed these challenges as part of the process of continuing their education.

Several participants explained that they initially struggled to follow lectures because they had been away from the academic environment for an extended period. They felt that they needed time to readjust to the learning process and catch up with the course content.

Interviewer : After taking a break, did you feel like you had fallen behind in terms of skills or knowledge? How did you catch up or regain your confidence?

P4 :“ There certainly are, especially regarding the material covered during lessons. The way to catch up is by reviewing old notes—specifically those from the first week—and not feeling embarrassed to ask junior students for help. (P4,Personal communication.02:24:97)”

Other participants reported that managing assignments, meeting academic deadlines, and balancing their studies with work or family responsibilities were among the main challenges they faced after returning to college. Nevertheless, they gradually adapted to these demands and remained committed to completing their studies.

Interviewer : After taking a break, did you feel like you had fallen behind in terms of skills or knowledge? How did you catch up or regain your confidence?

P5 :“ I missed some of the material. I am studying independently, constantly asking friends questions and looking for additional references. (P5,personal communication.02:43:88)”

These findings suggest that academic challenges were an inevitable part of participants’ transition back to higher education.

Sub-theme 3: Task Competence

This sub-theme explores participants’ perceived competence in completing academic tasks after returning to college following academic leave. The thematic analysis revealed that participants gradually developed confidence in their ability to complete academic responsibilities. Although they initially experienced difficulties in adjusting to coursework, they became more capable of managing assignments, participating in classroom activities, and meeting academic expectations as they gained experience.

Several participants explained that completing assignments and understanding course materials gave them a sense of accomplishment and reassured them that they were capable of succeeding academically. These experiences encouraged them to become more active and responsible in their studies.

Interviewer : Tell us about a time you faced a difficult assignment after returning to college. Did you feel capable of completing it? What helped you complete it? (For example, from a lecturer or a friend)

P2 :“ Yes, sometimes there are tasks that feel difficult and make me doubt whether I can complete them. However, I usually try to work on them gradually to the best of my ability; if I’m still confused, I’ll ask a friend or seek an explanation from the lecturer. (P2,personal communication,04:23:39)”

Other participants reported that their ability to organize study time, complete assignments on schedule, and adapt to lecturers’ expectations reflected their academic progress after returning to college. These achievements strengthened their commitment to continue their studies despite the challenges they encountered.

Interviewer : Tell us about a time you faced a difficult assignment after returning to college. Did you feel capable of completing it? What helped you complete it? (For example, from a lecturer or a friend)

P1 :“ When I was working on this assignment, I received encouragement from my lecturer and friends, so it didn't feel too difficult to complete.(P1,Personal communication.03:26:51)”

These findings indicate that participants’ sense of task competence developed through their successful engagement with academic responsibilities.

Sub-theme 4: Learning Autonomy

This sub-theme explores participants’ learning autonomy after returning to college following academic leave. The thematic analysis revealed that participants became more independent in managing their learning. Their previous experiences encouraged them to take greater responsibility for their studies by organizing their study schedules, seeking additional

learning resources, and completing academic tasks without relying heavily on others.

Several participants explained that after returning to college, they became more disciplined in managing their study time and preparing for lectures. They realized that independent learning was necessary to keep up with academic demands and successfully complete their degree.

Interviewer : In your opinion, does the current campus atmosphere give you more freedom to organize your own learning style, or does it feel more limited?

P5 :“ In my opinion, it offers more freedom because I can better manage my study methods and schedule. (P5, personal communication.02:23:04)”

Other participants reported that they actively searched for learning materials, reviewed lecture content independently, and sought help only when necessary. These experiences reflected a greater sense of responsibility for their own learning and academic progress.

Interviewer ; In your opinion, does the current campus atmosphere give you more freedom to organize your own learning style, or does it feel more limited?

P3 :“ In my opinion, the current campus atmosphere gives me the freedom to manage my own study methods. I am also less dependent on my friends, as I take greater responsibility for my own learning process. (P3, personal communication.01:53:54)”

These findings suggest that participants developed greater learning autonomy after returning to college.

Sub-theme 5: Advice for Returning Students

This sub-theme explores the advice participants offered to other students who are considering returning to college after academic leave. The thematic analysis revealed that participants encouraged returning students to remain confident, stay committed to their goals, and not be discouraged by previous setbacks. They emphasized that academic leave should not be viewed as the end of one's educational journey but rather as an opportunity to begin again with greater determination.

Several participants advised students who had taken academic leave not to be afraid of returning to college despite the challenges they might face. They believed that persistence, consistency, and a positive mindset were essential for successfully completing their studies.

Interviewer : You took a leave of absence before, and what was the reason? Now that you're back, is that reason still the same or has it changed?

P4 :“ Don't overthink it; feeling anxious before heading back is inevitable, but once you set foot on campus again, everything will just naturally fall into place. (P4, personal communication.06:13:44)”

Other participants encouraged returning students to seek support from family, friends, and lecturers whenever they encountered difficulties. They emphasized that asking for help and maintaining strong relationships with others could make the transition back to university easier and more manageable.

Interviewer : You took a leave of absence before, and what was the reason? Now that you're back, is that reason still the same or has it changed?

P2 : “If a friend is thinking about returning to college after a break, I would tell them not to be too afraid or insecure about starting again. It will certainly feel awkward at first, and there might be a sense of falling behind, but that is perfectly normal; what matters is having the determination and a goal for the future.(P2, personal communication,10:17:64)”

These findings suggest that participants' experiences after academic leave shaped the advice they shared with others. Consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), confidence, supportive relationships, and autonomous commitment contribute to sustaining students' motivation and persistence in completing higher education.

Theme 3: Factors Influencing Return to College

Theme 3 was developed from 10 initial codes and 21 coded references, which were grouped into 2 sub-themes. The sub-themes include Source of Support and Importance of Relationships. These codes reflect the internal and external factors that influenced participants' decisions to return to college after academic leave. Overall, this theme highlights that the interaction between personal motivation and social support played a significant role in strengthening participants' persistence and commitment to completing their higher education.

Sub-theme 1: Social Relationship and Support

This sub-theme explores the forms of support participants received from friends and lecturers after returning to college following academic leave. The thematic analysis revealed that participants received various forms of support, including emotional encouragement, academic guidance, motivation, and practical assistance. Such support helped participants readjust to university life and strengthened their determination to continue their studies.

Several participants explained that their friends provided encouragement by motivating them to attend classes, complete assignments, and remain optimistic throughout their academic journey. The presence of supportive peers made participants feel more confident in continuing their studies

Interviewer : Compared to before your leave, do you feel closer or more distant from your campus friends or lecturers now? Do you ever feel supported or alone?

P1 : “I feel closer to the lecturers now, but since my friends have already graduated, I don't feel quite as close to them anymore. (P1, personal communication.04:27:80)”

Other participants reported that supportive relationships with friends and lecturers made them feel accepted and encouraged throughout their academic journey. These relationships provided emotional reassurance and practical guidance, helping participants remain engaged in their studies despite the challenges they faced.

Interviewer : Compared to before your leave, do you feel closer or more distant from your campus friends or lecturers now? Do you ever feel supported or alone?

P2 :“ Compared to before after taking a break from my studies I feel a bit more distant from my friends, mainly because we are no longer in the same cohort. So, it was a bit difficult to socialize at first. However, whenever I do try to reach out or mingle, they are still welcoming. As for the lecturers, I find it easier to adjust because the atmosphere remains the same, and they continue to be supportive. (P2, personal communication.06:44:06)”

These findings indicate that social relationships contributed not only to participants' decision to return to college but also to their persistence in completing higher education.

Sub-theme 2: Importance of Social Relationships for Persistence

This sub-theme explores why social relationships with friends and lecturers were important to participants after returning to college. The thematic analysis revealed that positive relationships fostered a sense of belonging, acceptance, and emotional security, which encouraged participants to remain committed to their studies. Beyond receiving support, participants valued these relationships because they helped them feel connected to the university community.

Several participants explained that having supportive friends reduced feelings of isolation and increased their motivation to participate in academic activities. Positive peer relationships also encouraged them to share experiences and overcome challenges together.

Interviewer : How important do you think it is to have relationships or friends on campus to keep you going in college?

P5 :“ In my opinion, it is very important, because having friends can boost my enthusiasm for studying and provide motivation throughout my time at university. (P5, personal communication, 04:40:89)”

Other participants emphasized that maintaining positive relationships with lecturers made them feel respected, understood, and comfortable seeking academic guidance when needed. These relationships strengthened their confidence and persistence throughout their educational journey.

Interviewer : How important do you think it is to have relationships or friends on campus to keep you going in college?

P3 :“ In my opinion, friendships on campus are very important because they provide me with motivation, academic assistance, and support when I face difficulties and challenges in my studies. (P3, personal communication, 05:08:27)”

These findings suggest that social relationships were not only a source of support but also an important factor in sustaining participants’ persistence after returning to college.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that students’ decisions to return to college after academic leave were shaped by the interaction between personal motivation, academic experiences, and social support. Participants demonstrated that their persistence in continuing higher education was strengthened by a strong personal desire to complete their studies, increasing confidence in their academic abilities, and supportive relationships with family, friends, and lecturers. These findings are consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which proposes that the fulfillment of the three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—fosters autonomous motivation and strengthens students’ persistence in achieving their academic goals. Therefore, the findings highlight the importance of creating supportive academic environments that promote students’ autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby facilitating their successful return to college and persistence in completing higher education after academic leave.

A. KESIMPULAN

This study examined the motivations of students returning to college after academic leave at STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh through a qualitative phenomenological approach grounded in Self-Determination Theory. The findings show that students’ decisions to resume their studies emerged from an interplay of intrinsic motivation, the desire to complete an unfinished degree, and support from family, peers, and lecturers. Rather than being viewed as a sign of failure, academic leave was understood by participants as a temporary response to personal, financial, health-related, or religious circumstances, which they were later able to overcome or manage more effectively. Upon returning, students initially faced challenges related to academic readjustment, including self-doubt and gaps in course knowledge; however, these difficulties gradually diminished as students became more engaged in coursework, developed greater learning autonomy, and built supportive relationships within the campus community.

The findings affirm that the fulfillment of the three basic psychological needs identified in Self-Determination Theory—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—was central to sustaining students’ motivation and persistence after interruption. Family encouragement and peer and lecturer support functioned as external reinforcement, while students’ own determination to avoid regret and to secure a better future formed the intrinsic foundation of their persistence. These results suggest that academic return should not be treated as a marginal administrative matter but rather as a meaningful educational process that reflects students’ capacity for resilience and self-reconstruction of motivation.

This study is limited by its small sample size of five participants from a single study program at one institution, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader student populations. Future research is encouraged to involve a larger and more diverse

sample across different study programs and institutions, and to consider longitudinal designs that capture how returning students' motivation evolves over time. Practically, the findings suggest that higher education institutions, particularly STKIP Muhammadiyah Southwest Aceh, should strengthen academic advising, peer mentoring, and family engagement programs to better support students during the transition back to college life, thereby reducing the risk of repeated interruption and dropout.

DAFTAR PUSTAKA

- Acapulco, C., & Acapulco, C. (2025). RETENTION IN THE FIRST YEAR OF UNIVERSITY : EVIDENCE FROM A. 23, 640–653.
- Alban, M., & Mauricio, D. (2019). Predicting University Dropout trough Data Mining: A systematic Literature. *Indian Journal of Science and Technology*, 12(4), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.17485/ijst/2019/v12i4/139729>
- Coca, V., Feygin, A., Miller, T., Poole, J., Choi, L., Hatcher, M., & Goldrick-rab, S. (2022). Five Lessons to Consider When Supporting Returning Students. (December).
- Gaulke, A. P. (2022). Returns to bachelor's degree completion among stopouts. *Economics of Education Review*, 86(February). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2021.102218>
- James, L., Noor, M., Halim, A., & Fox, C. (2024). Students' perceptions and experiences of taking a Leave of Absence (LOA) during their degree. *Open Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 3(2), 102–119. <https://doi.org/10.56230/osotl.105>
- Jasper Antonio, R. G., Rungduin, D. C., & Buenaventura-Fulgengio, A. (2024). A Phenomenological study on the experiences of stop-out students input for the reintegration in state university and colleges in the Philippines. *Philippines. International Research Journal of Science*, 4(4), 22–35.
- Lazarowicz, T., & McGill, C. M. (2022). Agents of Support for Community College Transfer Students: A Qualitative Study. *NACADA Journal*, 42(1), 35–52. <https://doi.org/10.12930/nacada-20-34>
- Lira, M. M., Acevedo, E. B., Jorquera, S. M., & Apablaza, C. G. C. (2023). Conceptualizations of school dropout and retention from Chilean educational actors' perspectives. *Participatory Educational Research*, 10(2), 216–235. <https://doi.org/10.17275/per.23.37.10.2>
- Realinho, V., Machado, J., Baptista, L., & Martins, M. V. (2022). Predicting Student Dropout and Academic Success. *Data*, 7(11). <https://doi.org/10.3390/data7110146>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2020). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and future directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860>
- Şanal, S. Ö., Sanal, O., Guler, D., & Theory, T. E. S. (2025). Examining Self-Determination Theory in the Context of Higher Education and Distance Education To cite this article : Examining Self-Determination Theory in the Context of Higher Education and Distance Education.
- Tinto, V. (2017). Reflections on Student Persistence. *Student Success*, 8(2), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v8i2.376>
- Véliz Palomino, J. C., & Ortega, A. M. (2023). Dropout Intentions in Higher Education: Systematic Literature Review. *Journal on Efficiency and Responsibility in Education and Science*, 16(2), 149–158. <https://doi.org/10.7160/eriesj.2023.160206>
- Xavier, M., Meneses, J., & Fiuza, P. J. (2026). Dropout, stopout, and time challenges in open online higher education: A qualitative study of the first-year student experience. *Open Learning*, 41(1), 24–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2022.2160236>
- Yusof, R., Mohamed Harith, N. H., Lokman, A., Abdul Batau, M. F., Mohd Zain, Z., & Rahmat, N. H. (2023). A Study of Perception on Students' Motivation, Burnout and Reasons for Dropout. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(7). <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v13-i7/17187>