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EXPLORING STUDENTS' LEARNING INTEREST: AN ANALYSIS OF AWARENESS, ATTENTION, WILLINGNESS, AND POSITIVE AFFECT

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Abstract

Students' learning interest is a fundamental psychological driver that determines the depth of cognitive involvement, mental concentration, and overall engagement in higher education settings. While academic performance is often evaluated through external factors, empirical studies about student learning interest as a single variable is limited in local higher education contexts. This study aims to examine the empirical profile and distribution of students' learning interest across its four core constituent dimensions: awareness, attention, willingness, and positive affect. This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design involving 322 students at Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Indragiri. Data were collected using questionnaires and subsequently analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS 26. The findings indicate that overall students' learning interest is remarkably high. Categorically, 44.72% of students achieved a "very high" interest level, 45.65% were categorized as "high", 8.07% as "moderate", 1.24% as "low" and 0.31% as "very low". Among the four specific sub-indicators, students' willingness attained a "very high" classification, whereas awareness, attention, and positive affect were categorized as "high". The study concludes that students possess a strong intrinsic drive and goal-directed willingness toward learning, though active instructional strategies are required to continually sustain attention, awareness, and positive affect during lectures.

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INTRODUCTION

Students' learning interest represents a fundamental psychological construct that dictates the quality and persistence of meaningful cognitive engagement in higher education (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). In contemporary academic environments, higher education students face increasingly complex learning demands, making intrinsic orientation and active mental involvement indispensable prerequisites for academic success (Bakker & Mostert, 2024; Passeggia et al., 2026). Learning interest is more than a temporary preference. It helps students focus, develop curiosity, and stay engaged in learning to achieve their goals without external pressure (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). When students exhibit a strong learning interest, they process complex material more deeply, demonstrate enhanced problem-solving capabilities, and maintain academic resilience despite instructional challenges (Schiefele et al., 2012).

From a structural perspective, learning interest is operationalized through four primary, interconnected dimensions: awareness, attention, willingness, and positive affect (Arvianto et al., 2025). Awareness reflects the student's conscious recognition of the inherent relevance, functional utility, and academic necessity of the course content. Attention refers to the intentional allocation of executive cognitive resources toward instructional tasks, shielding the student's mind from peripheral distractions. Willingness represents the inner goal-directed determination and personal agency driving students to undertake study activities autonomously. Finally, positive affect encapsulates the emotional satisfaction, joy, and psychological well-being derived from academic pursuits. Educational research underscores that these cognitive and emotional dimensions act synergistically; elevated personal awareness sparks curiosity, which subsequently channels cognitive attention and reinforces emotional satisfaction during classroom interactions (Renninger & Hidi, 2016).

The functional urgency of cultivating student learning interest is particularly evident in its capacity to mitigate pervasive academic issues such as cognitive fatigue, disinterest, and passive classroom attendance (Fryer & Bovee, 2021). Furthermore, when instructional activities evoke positive emotional responses and

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voluntary participation, academic boredom is minimized, leading to higher levels of classroom participation and self-regulated study habits. Conversely, an absence of learning interest often manifests in mental emptiness, superficial surface-level studying, and elevated drop-out rates in tertiary education settings.

Despite the recognized importance of learning interest, further empirical research is needed to establish a clearer descriptive profile of learning interest among higher education students. Previous studies have examined interest using different conceptual and measurement approaches, including multidimensional frameworks that capture various aspects of the construct (Rowland et al., 2019; Lee & Durksen, 2021). However, examining the overall level of learning interest alongside its individual dimensions may provide a more detailed understanding of students' learning experiences in specific institutional contexts. In particular, examining dimensions such as awareness, attention, willingness, and positive affect can help identify aspects of learning interest that may require greater attention. Such a descriptive profile can provide useful information for lecturers and curriculum designers when considering learning activities that respond to students' needs and experiences.

To address this empirical gap, the present study examines students' learning interest as a single variable through four dimensions: awareness, attention, willingness, and positive affect. The study aims to describe the overall level and distribution of students' learning interest and identify differences across the four dimensions. The findings are intended to provide a descriptive basis for considering students' learning experiences and potential instructional needs in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework and Evolution of Learning Interest

In educational psychology, learning interest is conceptualized as a multidimensional psychological construct that combines cognitive engagement, affective alignment, and goal-directed behavioral orientation toward an academic subject (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). Rather than being a static personal trait or a

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fleeting state of arousal, interest represents a dynamic, evolving relationship between the learner and specific instructional content. Modern motivational theory categorizes interest into two distinct forms: situational interest and individual interest. Situational interest refers to short-term, environmentally-triggered emotional and cognitive focus generated by novel or engaging instructional stimuli. Conversely, individual interest reflects an enduring, relatively stable predisposition to re-engage with specific domains over time (Fryer & Bovee, 2021).

Hidi and Renninger's (2006) Four-Phase Model of Interest Development describes four phases in the development of interest: (1) triggered situational interest, (2) maintained situational interest, (3) emerging individual interest, and (4) well-developed individual interest. In higher education, supporting the transition from situational interest to more sustained individual interest is important for encouraging students' continued engagement in learning. Well-developed individual interest is associated with focused attention, persistence, and a tendency to re-engage with particular content over time (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Such interest may also support students' sustained involvement when they encounter challenging learning tasks.

Constituent Dimensions of Student Learning Interest

To operationalize learning interest systematically, educational literature identifies four core sub-dimensions: awareness, attention, willingness, and positive affect (Arvianto et al., 2025).

Awareness represents the cognitive recognition of the functional value, professional relevance, and personal utility of learning tasks. When students consciously recognize that course material connects directly to their future career competencies or personal growth, their cognitive valuation elevates, creating a fertile foundation for sustained motivation (Fryer & Bovee, 2021).

Attention refers to students' ability to focus on relevant learning materials and limit distractions during learning activities. Students' interest can help direct their attention toward learning content and support information processing. Recent research suggests that interest is related to attentional processes that contribute to

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comprehension, although the relationship may depend on how attention is maintained during learning (Gericke et al., 2025). In addition, a meta-analysis found that interest-based personalized learning was associated with lower cognitive load and better retention and transfer, suggesting that aligning learning materials with students' interests may support learning processes (Lin et al., 2024).

Willingness refers to students' readiness and voluntary intention to participate in learning activities, take initiative, and make an effort to achieve their learning goals. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, willingness can be understood in relation to autonomous motivation, which develops when students engage in learning activities because they find them interesting or personally meaningful (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This perspective emphasizes the importance of students' sense of autonomy and ownership in making learning decisions. When students are willing to participate actively, they may be more likely to initiate learning tasks, contribute to classroom activities, and take responsibility for their learning progress. Supporting this view, Yang et al. (2025) found a positive association between students' motivation and learning engagement in self-directed e-learning. Therefore, willingness is an important dimension of learning interest because it reflects students' readiness to translate their interest into active participation and sustained involvement in learning.

Positive affect refers to the positive emotional experiences students feel during learning activities, such as enjoyment, interest, and satisfaction. These emotions can contribute to students' engagement in learning and encourage them to participate in similar activities again. Research suggests that positive affect is associated with greater academic engagement and lower disengagement (Tobin et al., 2015). Furthermore, positive emotional experiences can contribute to the development of individual interest by encouraging students to re-engage with learning content over time (Renninger & Hidi, 2022). Therefore, positive affect represents an important dimension of learning interest because it reflects the enjoyable emotional experiences that may sustain students' engagement and interest in learning.

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Cognitive and Affective Interplay in Interest Development

Contemporary research on learning interest highlights the close relationship between cognitive processes and affective experiences (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). The cognitive aspect involves students' perceptions of their abilities, evaluations of learning tasks, and judgments about the value and difficulty of learning activities. The affective aspect concerns the emotions students experience during learning, including enjoyment, excitement, anxiety, and boredom. These emotional experiences can influence students' engagement and academic outcomes (Pekrun et al., 2017).

Cognitive and affective processes may jointly contribute to the development and maintenance of learning interest. When students perceive learning activities as meaningful and experience positive emotions, they may be more willing to participate and remain engaged over time. Conversely, negative emotions such as anxiety and boredom may interfere with attention and learning engagement. Longitudinal evidence indicates that positive achievement emotions can predict subsequent academic performance, while negative emotions are associated with poorer performance (Pekrun et al., 2017). These findings highlight the importance of considering both cognitive evaluations and emotional experiences when examining students' learning interest.

Functional Role and Academic Impact in Higher Education

The role of learning interest in higher education can be understood through its cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Cognitively, interest is associated with deeper engagement with learning materials and can encourage students to process information beyond rote memorization (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). Emotionally, positive academic emotions, such as enjoyment, can support learning, whereas negative emotions, including anxiety and boredom, may be associated with poorer academic outcomes (Pekrun et al., 2017). Behaviorally, learning interest may encourage students to participate in classroom discussions, engage in independent study, and persist in completing academic tasks. These dimensions provide a useful basis for understanding students' learning experiences and identifying instructional approaches that support their

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engagement. Therefore, examining the different dimensions of learning interest can help educators design learning environments that respond more effectively to students' needs.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to systematically measure and describe students' learning interest without experimental manipulation. The research was conducted at Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Indragiri. The target population consisted of 1,827 students from the institute. Using simple random sampling techniques, a sample of 322 students was selected to ensure representative data. Data collection was carried out using questionnaire administered to the sample. The research instrument employed a five-point Likert scale designed to measure student learning interest as a standalone single-variable construct.

Data analysis procedures were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS 26. The analysis generated overall summary metrics, including an empirical mean score and a standard deviation to describe students' learning interest. The scores were also classified into five levels of learning interest using predetermined score intervals. The classification criteria were established for the purposes of this study. In addition, a dimensional analysis was conducted to examine students' learning interest across the four sub-indicators individually. The interpretation of the scores was guided by established principles for categorizing and interpreting composite scores in educational research (Alkharusi, 2022).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study examined learning interest among 322 undergraduate students at Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Indragiri. The descriptive analysis showed a mean score of 87.84, a standard deviation of 7.56, and a score range of 58.00 to 100.00. The findings indicate that students at Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Indragiri generally reported a high level of learning interest. This result suggests that most students expressed a positive orientation toward their learning activities. Learning

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interest is important because it is associated with students' attention, emotional involvement, and willingness to engage with learning content. Harackiewicz et al. (2016) explain that interest plays an important role in directing attention, supporting learning, and encouraging students to continue engaging with academic subjects. From this perspective, the high level of learning interest reported by students provides a positive descriptive profile of their orientation toward learning activities. However, the findings do not establish whether this interest translates into actual classroom participation or better academic performance.

The findings can also be interpreted through the multidimensional nature of learning interest. Hidi and Renninger (2006) explain that interest develops through different phases, beginning with triggered situational interest and potentially progressing toward more sustained individual interest. This perspective suggests that students' positive responses to learning should not be understood only as a general attitude toward academic activities. Their interest may also be reflected in their attention, willingness to engage, and positive feelings during learning. Therefore, the four sub-indicators examined in this study provide a more detailed picture of how students experience their learning.

Among the four sub-indicators, willingness achieved the highest category, classified as very high, whereas awareness, attention, and positive affect were classified as high. This finding suggests that students' willingness to participate in learning may be a relative strength within the overall profile of learning interest. Students appear to demonstrate a positive orientation toward completing academic tasks and participating in learning activities. Nevertheless, because the study used a descriptive questionnaire, this result should be interpreted as students' reported willingness rather than direct evidence of their actual learning behaviour or intrinsic motivation.

The differences between willingness and the other three sub-indicators are also noteworthy. Although willingness was classified as very high, attention and positive affect remained in the high category. This pattern suggests that students' readiness to engage in learning does not necessarily correspond to equally high

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levels of concentration and enjoyment. A student may be willing to complete academic tasks while still experiencing difficulties maintaining attention or finding learning activities consistently enjoyable. This interpretation is consistent with research describing interest as a construct involving both attentional and affective processes (Harackiewicz et al., 2016). However, the present study did not directly investigate why these dimensions differed. Further research would therefore be needed to examine whether teaching practices, learning materials, classroom interaction, or other contextual factors contribute to these differences.

Awareness was also classified as high, indicating that students generally reported a positive level of awareness in relation to their learning. This dimension may reflect students' recognition of the relevance or importance of learning activities. Such awareness can provide a foundation for sustained engagement, particularly when students can connect course content with their academic needs and future goals. Nevertheless, awareness alone does not guarantee continuous attention or positive emotional experiences. These dimensions may develop differently depending on students' experiences and the learning environment. Consequently, the findings support the importance of examining learning interest through its individual dimensions rather than relying exclusively on an overall composite score.

The findings have practical implications for lecturers and higher education institutions. The generally high level of learning interest provides a positive starting point for maintaining student engagement. At the same time, the differences among the four sub-indicators suggest that learning activities should not focus exclusively on encouraging students to complete academic tasks. Lecturers may also consider providing meaningful learning activities, opportunities for active participation, relevant examples, and opportunities for students to connect course content with their academic and professional goals. These approaches may help support students' attention and positive learning experiences. However, their effectiveness would need to be examined through further empirical investigation rather than assumed from the present descriptive results.

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Overall, this study contributes a descriptive profile of learning interest among undergraduate students at Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Indragiri. Its main contribution lies in showing that overall learning interest and its constituent dimensions do not necessarily present an identical pattern. Although the overall results indicate high learning interest, the sub-indicator analysis identifies areas that may benefit from further attention. These findings can inform future studies investigating the relationship between learning interest, classroom experiences, student engagement, and academic outcomes in higher education. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted within the context of the participating institution and the self-reported nature of the questionnaire data.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that undergraduate students at Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Indragiri generally reported a high level of learning interest. Students showed a positive orientation toward their learning activities, as reflected in the overall descriptive results. However, the analysis of the four sub-indicators revealed differences in the levels of learning interest. Willingness was the strongest dimension, while awareness, attention, and positive affect were classified at the high level.

These findings suggest that students' willingness to engage in academic activities is an important strength, but learning interest should also be considered in terms of students' awareness, attention, and emotional experiences. Lecturers may therefore consider designing relevant, engaging, and participatory learning activities to support these dimensions. Further research involving multiple higher education institutions could provide a broader understanding of students' learning interest across different educational contexts.

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