

1-10-2025

## **Barbados Students' Perceptions Regarding Pursuing Tertiary Education**

Khaleid Holder  
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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Khaleid Holder

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2025

Abstract

Barbados Students' Perceptions Regarding Pursuing Tertiary Education

by

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MSc., The University of the West Indies, 2010

BSc., The University of the West Indies, 2007

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

February 2025

## Abstract

Despite the government of Barbados' 2018 resumption of full payment of undergraduate tuition, enrollment at the lone indigenous tertiary education institution has not fully rebounded to prior levels. Understanding potential students' decision-making processes regarding their intention to pursue tertiary education may help local tertiary education administrators and policymakers enact interventions to maintain and increase enrollment. Guided by the reasoned action approach, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore Barbadian students' perceptions about influences on their decision-making regarding their pursuit of tertiary education at the only local university in Barbados. Data were collected using one-on-one, semi-structured interviews from a purposeful sample of 13 Barbadian students, 18 years or older, eligible to enroll at the local tertiary education institution. Thematic data analysis with inductive coding was applied to determine findings from the data. Themes included affordability, career prospects, location, personal agency, and enrollment barriers. The implications for social change include providing insights to understand tertiary education enrollment intentions that could increase local enrollment in small island states universities. Increased tertiary enrollment and potential for degree completion over time may foster individual prosperity and consequently contribute to economic growth, development, and global competitiveness of small states.

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## Dedication

For their endless encouragement, support, and love, I dedicate this dissertation to my family and friends. Your belief in me has been a great source of strength. Your affection served as a light in times of need. To my parents, thank you for instilling in me the value of education and encouraging my siblings and I to dream big and to never, ever give up. To my brothers and sister, your unwavering support has been invaluable. Together, we have faced challenges, embraced changes, and celebrated triumphs. To my friends, thank you for your check-ins and the gift of your time. This dissertation reflects your love and endless support. I am excited for the future and the ability to create positive change. I hope this work encourages my niece, Athena, and others in her generation to lead change.

## Acknowledgments

I want to express my deepest gratitude to committee members for their time and expertise. A special thanks to Dr. Felicia Blacher-Wilson, my committee chair, and Dr. Kathleen Kingston for helping me elevate my dissertation drafts and for their guidance throughout this process. You pushed and encouraged me at every step of the way. Thank you, Dr. Tim Lafferty, for serving as university research reviewer and for feedback on my data alignment. Dr. Kevin Johnson, I am grateful for your check-in as I resumed my doctoral studies.

This doctoral journey was marked by several setbacks, but through it all I persevered and became more resilient. I am indebted to my parents for encouraging me to dream big and for the early teachings of hard work, perseverance, and the thirst for learning. A special thanks to my siblings and friends whose calls and texts helped me to persevere when the journey seemed rough. Thank you for your understanding and patience.

Finally, I express gratitude to the participants who agreed to participate in this study. Without your willingness to share your experiences, your openness, and honest feedback, I would not have completed this dissertation.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Globally, tertiary education institutions are coping with complex challenges including increased student mobility (Mlambo et al., 2020; Singh, 2016), changes in funding policies (Rosinger et al., 2022), greater global competition (Kettunen et al., 2022; Poutanen, 2022), and enhanced emphasis on the employability of graduates (Abbas et al., 2021; Lam & Tang, 2020). These challenges have driven researchers to explore students' perceptions regarding the influences on their decision to pursue tertiary education, especially in their choice of tertiary institution (Connie et al., 2022; Singh, 2016). Reviewing such studies provides individual, institutional, and national insights. At the individual level, these studies highlight factors that guide student choice in pursuing tertiary studies. In contrast, at the institutional level, they allow administrators of tertiary institutions to develop strategies for attracting and retaining students. Finally, at the national level, the studies help governments to develop or reanalyze their tertiary education funding policies.

Investment in tertiary education at the national level has transformed economies worldwide (Beckles & Richards-Kennedy, 2021; Cullinan et al., 2013; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020) including promotion of economic growth, development, and global competitiveness (Ministry of Education & Human Resource Development, 2012). Investments made toward education could help to develop cognitive skills, which can help individuals perform at optimal capacity and, consequently, improve their economic capacity (Woessmann, 2016). Research on human capital theory posited that investments in tertiary education can increase individuals' future earnings and positively affect a

country's productivity (Deming, 2022; Eide & Showalter, 2010). As such, tertiary education can lead to improved citizenship, increased job satisfaction, and enhanced decision-making (Borghans et al., 2008). Therefore, students pursuing tertiary education can benefit from individual prosperity, which is a major contributor to economic growth and development (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020). Overall, this development can lead to positive social change (Murray, 2009).

Since 2008, economic challenges at global and national levels have resulted in small island developing states, such as Caribbean states, dealing with increased costs of development by introducing new policies that reduce the level of state provision of social services such as tertiary education (Hinds, 2017). With the imposition of additional costs for tertiary education, other decision-making elements such as location and reputation will take on new importance in determining whether persons pursue tertiary education and where they choose to do so. Given the importance of tertiary education to Caribbean development, understanding the factors that influence student decision-making intention to pursue tertiary education has been growing during the past decade.

This chapter presents the study's background, problem statement, and purpose. Following this, I discuss the research question, an introduction to the conceptual framework, and the nature of the study. Next, I provide operational definitions of terms used in the study, along with the study's assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and possible significance. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a summary of the study.

## **Background**

Multiple interconnected factors appear to drive the complex decision-making process for tertiary education selection by prospective students (Callender & Melis, 2022, Marjanović & Križman Pavlović, 2018; Nuseir & El Refae, 2021). For many countries, the factors that influence the decision to pursue tertiary education vary. For instance, Mishra et al. (2020) found that placement opportunities were the top factor influencing tertiary education selection in India. Santelices et al. (2019) found financial and academic support to be the top factor influencing selection in Chile. Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) found that the intention to perform a behavior, such as the decision to pursue tertiary education, considers various background factors. These background factors influence beliefs regarding student attitudes toward tertiary education, the influence of key important others such as family, friends, or teachers, and the extent the student believes they can enroll. While there is consensus that there are factors influencing tertiary education selection, there is a lack of contextual information for these factors especially in a small island developing state context.

In Barbados, a major influencing factor has been the access to free tertiary education tuition for the citizens of Barbados, which resulted from a social contract. A social contract is an explicit or implicit agreement that members of a society agree to abide by for mutual benefit (Solomon, 1977, as cited in Brown & Davis, 2001). A social contract seeks to resolve conflicts, such as racial inequities and slavery, by fulfilling a societal good (Rousseau, 1923). Such a social contract has existed for over 50 years between the people of Barbados and their government. Since the 1960s, consecutive

governments in Barbados have maintained the practice of state-funded education for Barbadian nationals, which included paying the tuition of students pursuing undergraduate programs at the only indigenous university. This 60-year-old social contract between the state and nationals of Barbados initiated steps toward restructuring the socioeconomic landscape of Barbados (Beckles, 2001), allowing full access to tertiary education irrespective of socio-economic class (Hinds, 2017). In effect, the government introduced universal access to primary and secondary education, thereby influencing the indigenous decision-making process toward enrollment in tertiary education. State-funded education expanded access and made the decision to enroll easier. As a result of this social contract, Barbadian students have grown up with the idea of free access to state-funded tertiary education. This existing social contract has influenced Barbadian students' decision to participate in tertiary education (Hinds, 2017).

However, the 2008 global economic recession had a particularly negative impact on the economies of small island developing states such as Barbados (Altbach, 2013), which required a revisit of their development models and a review of the state-provision of social services, such as tertiary education, in the face of increased tuition costs and growing national deficits (Hinds, 2017), which ultimately predicated a disruption in the decision-making process for enrolling in tertiary education in 2013. In March 2013, the Barbados government announced a new tertiary education financing policy for study at the only indigenous university in the country. Under this policy, starting from the 2014 academic year, the government reduced its tuition contribution from 100% to 80% (Sinckler, 2013), with students being required to cover the remaining 20% of their tuition

costs. Moreover, this followed the placement of limits on the number of years of state-provided finance to support the completion of a bachelor's program, enacted in the previous year (see Sinckler, 2012).

Consequently, the government policy partially shifted the investment costs and ownership of a tertiary education degree from the state to the individual (Persaud & Persaud, 2016). Such restructuring of the social contract between the government and the people of Barbados appears to have led to a change in the decision-making process of many students regarding the continuation of tertiary education. A progressive decline in undergraduate student enrollment, full-time and part-time, at the local university followed the change in government policy. The total undergraduate enrollment of Barbadian students in the 2013/2014 academic year was 6,159 (The University of the West Indies Cave Hill, 2018b). In the subsequent years following the policy change, there was an annual decline in total enrollment until the 2017/2018 academic year which recorded a total enrollment of only 3,311, a decline of nearly 54% in three years (The University of the West Indies Cave Hill, 2018b).

In May 2018, general elections were held in Barbados with the result that in June 2018 the new Barbados government announced a resumption of the full payment of tuition fees starting from the September 2018 academic year, thereby shifting the investment costs of tertiary education back to the state and re-instating the previous social contract between the state and the people of Barbados. There is evidence that the decision-making process regarding attending tertiary education has started to change in a manner unrelated to financing alone. Since the resumption of the payment of tuition fees,

the undergraduate Barbadian student total enrollment for the academic year 2019/2020 was 4,225 (The University of the West Indies Cave Hill, 2020), still well below the benchmark enrollment year before the change in the social contract. Enrollment for the 2021/2022, 2022/2023, and 2023/2024 academic years stood at 4,791, 4,575, and 4,398 for undergraduate students respectively (The University of the West Indies Cave Hill, 2024) which is also still below the benchmark enrollment year.

Though there was a change in enrollment level based on the 2014 and 2018 changes in financial policy, enrollment has not returned to the pre-2014 levels. As such, several other factors may have been at play over the 104 years of the altered social contract. For example, several factors that influence student choice in pursuing tertiary education in other countries include access in Zimbabwe (Garwe, 2016), placement opportunities in India (Mishra et al., 2020), socioeconomic background in Germany (Obermeier & Schneider, 2015), lower cost and geographical access in Italy (Pigini & Staffolani, 2016), financial and academic support in Chile (Santelices et al., 2019), and graduate employability in Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2016). Moreover, while there is a myriad of research exploring factors influencing students' behavioral intent to pursue tertiary education in developed countries, there is a lack of research focused on developing countries, specifically small island developing states (Hovgaard, 2016). This study was necessary to understand Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decision-making intentions regarding pursuing tertiary education. The findings can be used to identify the factors influencing the selection of, and ultimately the enrollment in, tertiary education.

## **Problem Statement**

The problem guiding this study was that with full tertiary funding at the undergraduate level restored, enrollment levels have not fully rebounded. Five years after the policy change, enrollment reached 71% of the previous numbers. What factors are now influencing decision-making regarding pursuing tertiary education at the only indigenous university in Barbados is unknown. The consensus among current researchers that the problem of tertiary choice influencers is both relevant and locally significant is evidenced by the global nature of the research, including Angola (Gaspar & Soares, 2021), Bangladesh (Suppramaniam et al., 2019), Chile (Santelices et al., 2019), Hong Kong (Wut et al., 2022), Malaysia (Wickneswary et al., 2024), Taiwan (Chin et al., 2018), United Arab Emirates (Nuseir & El Refae, 2021), and Vietnam (Maheshwari, 2021). While all these researchers expressed the need for studies such as their own, not all went about it similarly.

Additionally, there is consensus that there are factors influencing the student decision-making process related to pursuing tertiary education; however, authors noted that there is no apparent consensus regarding how personal and social factors combine to influence one's beliefs and intention to pursue tertiary education (Garwe, 2016; Santelices et al., 2019). For example, Abbas et al. (2021), in the qualitative phase of their mixed method study, found six factors as high influences on student tertiary education choice of international students in Germany and the United Kingdom: academic reputation, social, personal, financial, career, and marketing; then during the quantitative phase of the study, academic reputation was the dominant factor with differences

observed among the other factors. Garwe (2016), in a qualitative study, noted that access was the number one factor influencing choice in Zimbabwe's private tertiary education institutions, while Santelices et al. (2019) and Najimudinova (2022) found that financial and academic support were the critical factors influencing tertiary education choice in Chile and Kyrgyzstan respectively. Other factors that influence student choice in pursuing tertiary education in other countries include placement opportunities in India (Mishra et al., 2020), socioeconomic background in Germany (Obermeier & Schneider, 2015), and lower cost and geographical access in Italy (Pigini & Staffolani, 2016). While these studies explored tertiary education decision factors, this study explored institution selection intention.

Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) noted that while factors contribute to the decision-making behavior process, the intention was considered the immediate antecedent of enacting a behavior. To attract students to the local university, it was important to understand the intentions underpinning the behavior motivating those seeking tertiary education. In the literature, there have been some discussions on factors and their impact on intent. Wagner and Fard (2009) identified factors that significantly influenced students' intention to study at tertiary institutions in Malaysia and underscored the importance of understanding the attributes that affect students' intention to pursue tertiary education. On the other hand, Chin et al. (2018) in a quantitative study reported that while sociocultural and school-related factors had the largest influence on decision to pursue tertiary education in Taiwan, selection factors did not impact the intention to pursue education although personal factors (e.g., socioeconomic background, family etc.)

did influence intention to pursue tertiary education. Marjanović and Križman Pavlović (2018) similarly sought to identify factors influencing the decision to enroll in a foreign tertiary-level institution and noted that there was little consensus about categorizing specific factors influencing student choice and an absence of literature exploring student's intention to study abroad. The authors however noted that some factors that influence studying at home overlap with factors related to the decision to study abroad. Garwe (2016) acknowledged that the results of her study may be useful to developing countries in Africa but recognized a need for future research in other countries related to factors that influence student choice to pursue tertiary education. Nuseir and El Refae (2021) recognized that the lack of consensus on factors influencing tertiary education selection represented a gap in the literature that should be addressed. In his study, Hung (2021) developed a model to illustrate how international students in Taiwan selected tertiary institutions. Still, he noted that the model may not apply to other Asian countries and called for future research on models for specific contexts.

While there is consensus that factors influence the decision-making process regarding pursuing tertiary education, there is a fundamental gap in studies exploring tertiary education aspirations and influences in small island developing states, such as those in the Caribbean region (Bovell, 2018). Other researchers focused on small states, exploring the entrepreneurial intentions of tertiary education students enrolled in Barbados and Jamaica (Devonish et al., 2010; Facey-Shaw et al., 2019) as well as the ethical intentions of tertiary education students in the Caribbean (Alleyne et al., 2014). Still, these studies did not explore the concept of tertiary enrollment intention. Therefore,

there is an obvious gap in the knowledge regarding the phenomenon of decision-making intention of tertiary education enrollment in small states which is manifested in a gap in the current literature as well. Using a qualitative method, I explored prospective student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding tertiary education in Barbados.

### **Purpose of the Study**

With full tertiary funding at the undergraduate level restored and enrollment levels not fully rebounding, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding their pursuit of tertiary education at the only local university in Barbados. The research paradigm used for this study was qualitative, a traditional approach that supports the exploratory nature of this study and the flexibility of the basic qualitative design that was used for the study. Authors such as Bazan et al. (2020) and Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) have discussed the importance of understanding the intent of those seeking to enact behaviors including tertiary education; however, there is no consensus regarding how personal and social factors combine to influence one's intention to pursue tertiary education locally, particularly in small islands and other developing states (see Abbas et al., 2021; Garwe, 2016; Wagner & Fard, 2009). Understanding a potential student's choice to locally pursue tertiary education is important in helping tertiary education administrators and policymakers in small islands and other developing states to maintain and/or increase enrollment levels.

### **Research Question**

Factors that influence the decision-making process regarding pursuing tertiary education have been examined. However, not much is known about student perception of tertiary education enrollment in small states. The following research question guided the data collection in the study.

RQ1: What are Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding pursuing tertiary education?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The focus of this study was the intention of qualified students in Barbados to enroll in the local tertiary education institution. Fishbein and Ajzen's (2015) reasoned action approach was used as the theoretical underpinning of the conceptual framework to address this study's research question and the subsequent behavior of enrolling in a tertiary education institution. The key concepts of the reasoned action approach are background factors that influence a set of beliefs namely, behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs, and perceived control beliefs (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015), which were applied to determine the factors that influence potential student's decisions to enroll at the local tertiary education institution. According to Fishbein and Ajzen, the stronger the students' intention to enroll, the more likely they will do so, as long as the decision is within their control. This study explored the internal and external factors that influence the beliefs and consequently the intention to enroll in tertiary education.

As a starting point for this theory of behavioral prediction, Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) explained that the behavior being examined must be clearly defined and

operationalized. To examine a behavior, Fishbein and Ajzen described the behavior as comprising four elements: the specific action the person will perform, the target at which the action is directed, the context in which the action is performed, and the time in which the action is performed. Applying this description for use with the current study, behavior includes the specific action of enrolling at an institution, the target was the local university, in the context of tertiary education, and within the 12 months after completing community college.

The reasoned action approach, which emerged from the theory of planned behavior and the theory of reasoned action, assumes that human behavior follows in a reasonable and often spontaneous way, from the information or beliefs that people hold about a specific behavior under consideration (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Elliott and Ainsworth (2012) found that while the reasoned action approach and the theory of planned behavior are comparable, the reasoned action approach possesses greater predictive validity than the one-component theory of planned behavior. Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) noted that once beliefs are formed, they help guide an intention that strongly motivates one's likelihood to perform or not perform the behavior.

The reasoned action approach suggests that intention is the best predictor of behavior and the stronger the intention, the greater the likelihood that the behavior will be enacted (Ajzen, 2002, 2020; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015; Sadaf & Gezer, 2020). Studies, such as Seddig et al. (2022), Sheeran and Conner (2017), and Zhuang et al. (2021), have successfully demonstrated how factors influence intention and have used intention as a proxy for behavior. Like these studies, I used background factors to demonstrate the

influence on intention and use intention as a proxy for behavior as it was not feasible to determine if or when each participant will or will not enroll at the local university.

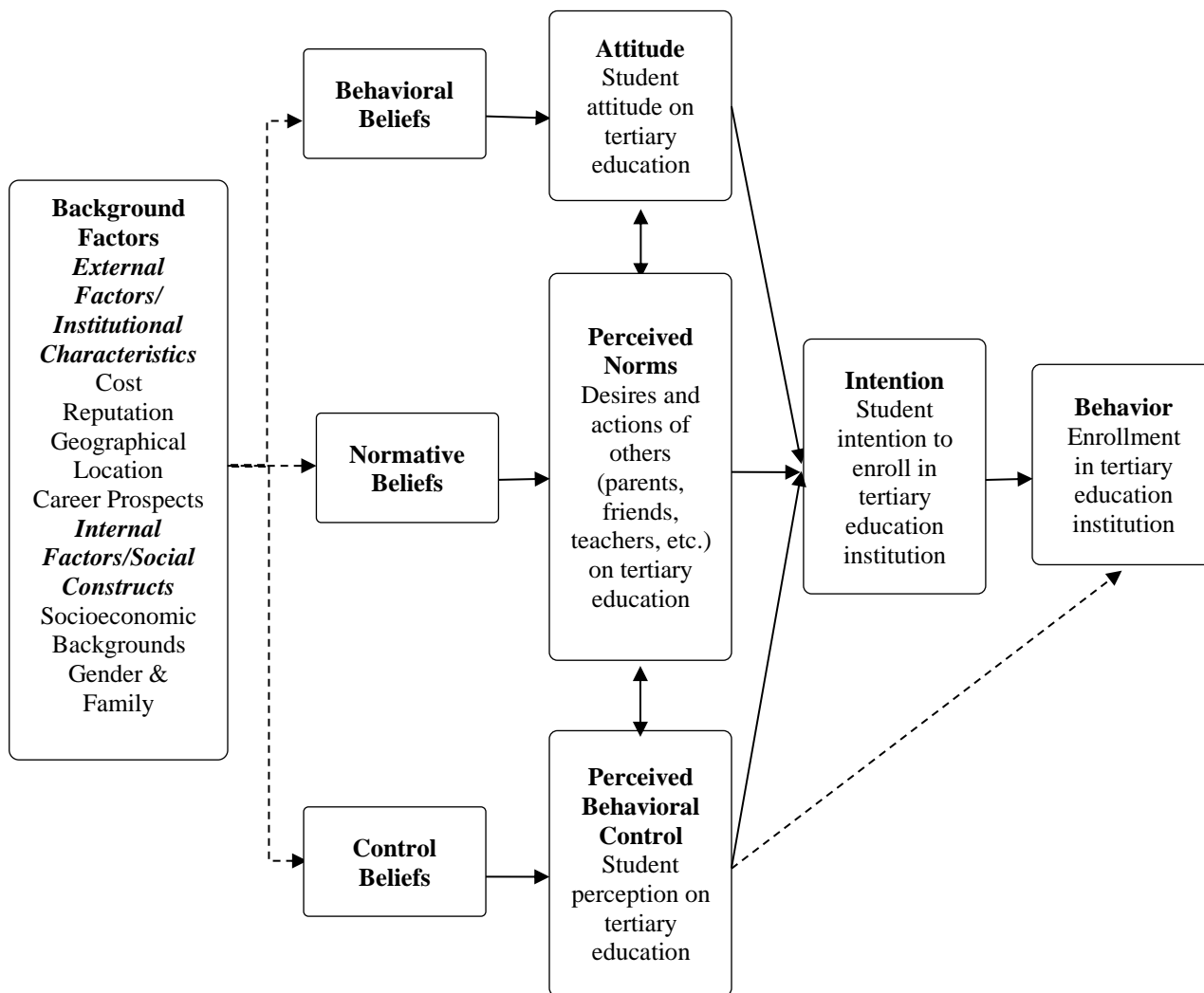
Fishbein and Ajzen's theory offers a way to understand, anticipate, and simulate human behavior in health, marketing, education, and leisure. In this research study, the reasoned action approach was used to understand how students' perceptions about their decisions to enroll in a tertiary education program are being influenced. Under this theory, beliefs provide insights into the ways persons think about enacting a specific behavior of enrolling or not enrolling in tertiary education (see Figure 1). I discuss the application of the reasoned action approach and how it relates to this study in more detail in Chapter 2.

The decision to pursue a tertiary education takes several steps which culminate in student's intention to enroll in, and the actual behavior of enrolling at, a specific university. As demonstrated in Figure 1, beliefs (behavioral, normative, and control) originate from various background factors (Ajzen, 1991). At the same time, the behavioral beliefs, typically derived from the positive or negative consequences a person might experience if they enact the behavior, influence the student's attitude toward where they might pursue a tertiary education program (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Normative beliefs are typically developed through accommodating the views of other people who are important to the individual such as family, friends, or teachers, along with the belief that important others will perform or not perform the behavior; these beliefs influence one's perception of current social norms (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Third, people form control beliefs, beliefs related to the personal and environmental factors that can aid or hinder their attempts to enact the behavior, resulting in perceived behavioral control or a

sense of self-efficacy (La Barbera & Ajzen, 2020).

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Model of Student Behavioral Intention to Enroll in Tertiary Education*



As shown in Figure 1, attitude toward tertiary education enrollment, the desires and actions of important others (perceived norms), and student perception of tertiary education (perceived behavior control) influence the student's intention to enroll in a

particular tertiary education institution. The effect that the background factors have on the individual's belief system is important as while these factors have no direct effect on intentions toward pursuing tertiary education, they can influence them indirectly by the proximal antecedents of intentions specified in the theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Consequently, the decision-making intention to enroll is the immediate antecedent of the actual behavior of enrollment in tertiary education (Ajzen, 2020) and, therefore, the phenomenon being studied.

### **Nature of the Study**

With full tertiary funding at the undergraduate level restored and enrollment levels not rebounding, this study was conducted to understand prospective students' perceptions about the influences on their decision-making intention regarding local tertiary education enrollment. For the study, I used a qualitative approach to understand better each participant's perceptions about tertiary education enrollment in relation to their decision-making influences regarding whether they will choose to pursue or not pursue enrollment. The approach for this research study was best supported through a basic qualitative design. Qualitative design is useful in solving practical problems (Patton, 2015). Basic qualitative inquiry is a qualitative design focused on exploring participants' shared experiences, describing a phenomenon, and ascertaining the meaning the researcher attributes to the participants' experience (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Sandelowski, 2000). As such, I selected this approach as the best way to explore Barbadian students' perceptions about the influences on their decision intentions to pursue tertiary education locally. The basic qualitative design provided the

methodological approach needed to explore the phenomenon using interviews to gain insights into the participants' attitudes and perceptions toward their decision-making intentions to enroll in tertiary education, and the desires of important others, enabling me to draw conclusions and make recommendations useful to academic administrators and tertiary education policymakers in Barbados and possibly, other small island states and countries.

To understand perceptions related to the purpose and research question associated with this study, the participants were invited to share experiences via one-on-one open-ended interviews. From a target population of prospective Barbadian tertiary education students, I collected data from a total of 13 participants. Access to prospective Barbadian students eligible to enroll at the local university was requested through the lone community college in Barbados.

The narratives emerging from the interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. In this study, I used descriptive coding, applying codes derived from qualitative data according to the topic (Saldaña, 2016) as first cycle coding methods to analyze data. The first cycle coding methods was followed by process coding (Saldaña, 2016) as the second cycle coding methods, to categorize human action and identify potential findings for the study.

### **Definitions**

*Attitude:* The favorable or unfavorable evaluation an individual hold regarding a specific object (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). This object may include a behavior or any distinguishable aspect of an individual's world. Attitudes are formed

spontaneously from behavioral beliefs (Seddig et al., 2022). Identifying behavioral beliefs may include understanding the advantages and disadvantages of performing a specific behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015).

*Behavior:* A clear action or set of actions performed by an individual (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Behavior comprises of four elements: the specific action the person will perform, the target at which the action is directed, the context in which the action is performed, and the time in which the action is performed (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015).

*Intention:* A person's readiness to perform a behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) noted that intention offers the best predictor of behavior.

*Perceived behavioral control:* A sense of self-efficacy (Seddig et al., 2022). The extent to which an individual feels they can perform a behavior and the extent an individual believes exercising this control will be easy or difficult (Ajzen, 2002). A high-perceived behavioral control is the largest predictor of behavior intent (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015).

*Planned behavior:* The result of a process that considers human attitudes, social norms, and the exercise of volitional control (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015).

*Self-efficacy:* An individual's belief in their capacity or confidence to enact behaviors to achieve specific goals (Bandura, 2018).

*Small island developing states (SIDS):* A unique cluster of developing countries, spread over three geographical regions namely, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and South China Sea, facing specific social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities (United Nations Office of the High

Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, 2015).

*Social contract:* An implicit or explicit agreement that all members of a society agree to abide by to benefit from public interest. While the contract may not have been signed in history, by choosing to remain a member of the society, everyone implicitly agrees to the agreement (Solomon, 1977, as cited in Brown & Davis, 2001).

*Subjective norms:* The social pressures perceived by an individual to perform or not perform a specific behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Subjective norms consider what important others think individuals should do and what important others have done or are likely to do. Subjective norms are also referred to as perceived norms.

*Tertiary education:* Also known as higher education. The formal education received from a recognized institution that leads to an advanced certificate or diploma such as associate, bachelor, or master's degree (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2020).

### **Assumptions**

There are several assumptions underpinning this research study. First, I assumed that the constructivist worldview I have adopted would enable me to understand and interpret the phenomenon to provide knowledge based on people's beliefs and experiences. Thorne (2016), who supports this assumption, noted that while there is a departure from the traditional positivist worldview and a search for absolute truths, in a constructivist approach there is an important value that some knowledge is formed as probable truth. Second, I assumed that I could assemble a local sample that will provide

generalizable data. Finally, I assumed that all persons who agreed to participate in the study will be available to share their honest experiences and views regarding perceptions of the influences on their decision-making intentions toward tertiary education.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

There is no consensus regarding how personal and social factors influence one's intention to pursue tertiary education locally, particularly in small islands and other developing states (see Abbas et al., 2021). Beginning with the 2014 academic year, the Barbados government announced a change in financing policy for Barbadian nationals pursuing studies at the only indigenous university in the country. While the politics of change can make for an interesting study, the unit of analysis for this study was participant decision-making intention regarding pursuing tertiary education. To keep the study manageable and feasible, first, I delimited the sample of participants in this study to prospective undergraduate Barbadian students eligible to enroll at the university located in Barbados. Second, the scope included male and female participants enrolled and in their final year of community college studies. My study did not include students already enrolled in bachelor's degree programs.

Finally, I delimited the set of parameters represented in the theory underpinning the conceptual framework. The reasoned action approach provided a conceptual framework for this study. This study was focused specifically on understanding the decision-making intentions of individuals regarding enrolling in tertiary education, other models or theories do not include decision-making intentions and were not included in

this study. Findings from the study may be transferrable to other small island developing states in the region and internationally.

### **Limitations**

As a qualitative researcher, I adopted a constructivist worldview that focuses on an emic position that seeks to understand detailed descriptions from multiple unique individuals' perceptions rather than an etic or nomothetic position of developing generalizations of cultural behaviors. The constructivist worldview is aligned with a qualitative approach which holds several limitations (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). One limitation of this study was that the small population, especially coupled with the constructivist worldview of the researcher, may limit the potential transferability to other populations and experiences. This study focused on a Barbadian student context and may not be applicable to other populations or contexts. I applied a purposeful sample selection using pre-established criteria to help mitigate this limitation.

I conducted all interviews via a video conferencing platform. The use of online interviews to collect information indicates that only participants with access to technology can participate in the study. Therefore, I expected the population of interest to have personal or institutional access to the Internet to participate in the interviews.

Another possible limitation is the research design, given that I am the only person who conducted these interviews. As such, there is the possibility of some bias in the way I may ask the interview questions or the times that the interviews are conducted. To address this limitation, I used a carefully constructed interview protocol to guide the interviews, including the probes, and I tried to schedule interviews around convenient

times for the choice of the participants. In addition, I assured participants that the information they share will be confidential and that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, I provided participants the opportunity to review, add, or delete responses.

### **Significance**

The results of this study may help to fill the gap in understanding how one's decision-making intention to pursue tertiary education locally, particularly in small islands and other developing states is being influenced. Several authors have provided insights into what factors influence student choice in selecting a tertiary institution. For example, Nuseir and El Refae (2021) found that facilities and services were one of the five main factors influencing student choice of selecting a tertiary institution in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Abbas et al. (2021) in the qualitative phase of their mixed method study, found six factors namely academic reputation, social, personal, financial, career, and marketing as high influences on student tertiary education choice of international students in Germany and the United Kingdom, while in the empirical phase, academic reputation was the dominant factor with differences observed with the other factors. Garwe (2016) found that access was one of six main factors influencing student choice of selecting a tertiary institution in Zimbabwe, Dearden et al. (2014) found that financial aid led to an increase in student enrollment in the UK, and Panigrahi (2015) concluded that a lack of financial aid might limit student choice in India. Although some studies have explored male under-participation in tertiary education in Barbados (Bovell, 2018), perceptions of the decision-making intentions of Barbadian students attending

tertiary institutions have not been investigated. Specifically, this study focused on prospective students' intention to enroll following changes in the social contract between the government of Barbados and university students. As such, the study results may provide insights on the constructs of prospective student decision-making intent to enroll at a local tertiary education institution.

The government's ability to maintain the financial contribution to the university has been compounded by the aftereffects of the global economic crisis, which increased the debt to the university to USD 105 million (The University of the West Indies Cave Hill, 2018a). Given the decrease in enrollment numbers coupled with the increasing debt, this study is significant as it might help tertiary education administrators and policymakers to understand why and how students choose to enroll or not at the local university within the context of the financing policy. This study focused on an area where little research currently exists for Barbados and other small countries and has become timely. This study's conclusions may help to inform policy at the national level as the findings may assist the government in repositioning funding models that include both state and individual contributions while reducing the potential negative impact on human development, productivity, and competitiveness.

The implication for a positive social change may be seen in the government's ability to maintain high levels of development (Bak, 2019; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020) and reduction in social problems such as unemployment and poverty (Marjanović & Križman Pavlović, 2018; Oketch, 2016). The positive social change implication may be observed by tertiary education institutions in Barbados and other small island states

and small countries in terms of their ability to adapt programs, costs, location, or other factors to align to the choice of prospective and current students, which may contribute to increasing student enrollment. With more students pursuing tertiary education, there is the potential increase in the individual's future earnings and prosperity, an assertion supported by Eide and Showalter (2010) in their analysis of the human capital theory. The implication of this can lead to graduates having a greater ability to care for themselves and their families, a personal social change implication. Moreover, the investments in tertiary education can help individuals to develop cognitive skills therefore enhancing their overall personal development (Woessmann, 2016).

### **Summary**

Recently, the factors that influence students' decision-making intention to pursue tertiary education studies have been discussed, especially given the importance of the tertiary education sector to the development of a nation (Bak, 2019; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020; Ioana et al., 2016; Oketch, 2016). In this study, I explored the perspectives of Barbadian prospective undergraduate students regarding the factors that influence their decision-making to pursue tertiary education studies. The findings provided insights into the factors influencing students' decision-making behavior from a developing state context. Additionally, the results may assist in efforts by the local university to recruit and retain students to the university.

This chapter included a background of the study where I briefly summarized the research literature related to student decision-making intention to enroll in tertiary education in Barbados. In this chapter, I included the problem statement and illustrated

evidence that the problem is relevant and that this research addresses a gap in the current literature. The research question and conceptual framework were included to illustrate the method for conducting the study. Lastly, I outlined the assumptions and limitations to share issues that I considered through the conduct of this study.

Chapter 2 contains the literature review, which describe studies related to the constructs and empirical studies that ground this study in existing research. I explain the conceptual framework in more detail to guide the research and interpretation of the results of the study. Lastly, I detail the apparent gap in the literature and explain how this study helps to fulfill this research gap.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem guiding this study was with full tertiary funding at the undergraduate level restored, enrollment levels have not fully rebounded. As such, the purpose of this study was to explore Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding their pursuit of tertiary education at the only local university in Barbados. Specifically, this research sought to understand prospective students' perceptions about tertiary education enrollment in relation to prospective students' attitudes, social norms (influence of key important others of prospective students), and perceived behavioral control or self-efficacy regarding the selection of a tertiary education institution.

The reasoned action approach underpinning my conceptual framework for pursuing this study posits that intention is the best predictor of behavior and the stronger the intention, the greater likelihood that the behavior will be enacted (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Under this theory, beliefs (behavioral, normative, and control) provide insights into how persons think about enacting a specific behavior of enrolling or not enrolling in tertiary education. These beliefs originate from various background factors. The effect that the background factors have on the individual's belief system influences the intent toward where one might pursue tertiary education. Having insights on the background factors, drivers, or constructs that influence student selection behavior are important to recruitment and retention efforts (Mishra et al., 2020). For example, Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) noted that an individual's background factor, such as demographic characteristics, is likely to influence the way the person may enact a specific behavior. In addition, there

is no apparent consensus regarding how personal and social factors influence one's intention to pursue tertiary education locally particularly in small island developing states (Abbas et al., 2021; Garwe, 2016; Nuseir & El Refae, 2021; Wagner & Fard, 2009). However, existing research leaves a gap in understanding the decision-making influences affecting a potential student's intention to locally pursue tertiary education in small island developing states, such as most Caribbean countries.

In this chapter, I began by restating the research problem and purpose of the study involving Barbadian prospective students' decision-making intentions regarding tertiary studies enrollment since the Barbados government's funding policy changes. This chapter also includes the literature search strategy used for researching this topic. Then I describe the conceptual framework in this study including an overview of Fishbein and Ajzen's reasoned action approach (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Next, I discuss research relating to the concept of the social contract, the importance of investing in tertiary education, understanding the construct of decision-making intentions, the debate on the construct of reasoned action planned behavior, and the drivers and conditions that trigger tertiary education selection behavior. Finally, I review and synthesize studies related to the research question to show why the approach selected was meaningful and how this study fits into and extends the current literature. At the conclusion of Chapter 2, I provide a summary of the sections that are vital to understanding the importance of the topic.

### **Literature Search Strategies**

The peer-reviewed articles used in this literature review were found using the Walden University Library database system. I used EBSCO Host, Education Search

Complete, ProQuest, PsychINFO, PsychARTICLES, SAGE, and Walden University Dissertations and Theses to search for and retrieve articles and books that were relevant to the research topic. I also used the Google Scholar search engine and government websites to access resources. In these databases and search engines, I used keywords to search for recent articles related to the topic. Initially, my keywords and phrases included *reasoned action approach, theory of planned behavior, factors of selection behavior in higher education, decision-making, decision-making theory, criticisms of planned behavior, behavior intention, drivers of selection behavior in higher education, student selection behavior, education selection behavior, state-financed education, and financial aid*. However, I realized that I needed to broaden my search terms to include *tertiary education* as an alternate term for *higher education*, as I noticed some articles used either *tertiary education* or *higher education* as keywords. The searches yielded scholarly journal articles, books, and past dissertations. I also searched for *social contract* and *small island developing states* as these two terms were introduced in Chapter 1 and were important terms that are unique to the study. Another helpful resource was the Walden University Librarians who were useful in finding resources on the reasoned action approach, theory of planned behavior, and decision-making theory. A final helpful tool was the databases that offered a tab to “find related articles.” This was useful in identifying additional articles included in this review.

Next, I established preliminary selection criteria to identify relevant research articles. To be considered for this literature review, a peer-reviewed, scholarly article would have to be published after 2019 and written in English. I also searched for original

seminal articles and books where appropriate, specifically related to Fishbein and Ajzen's reasoned action approach, Ajzen's theory of planned behavior, Rousseau's contract theory, and decision-making theory. While the seminal resources for Ajzen and Rousseau may have been older, they provided an important foundational perspective for the current research and were included. Inclusion criteria were refined to select articles that would best address the research question under investigation. To be retained, articles had to focus on tertiary, higher, or postsecondary education and focus on at least one of the following: reasoned action approach, drivers, or factors of selection behavior, student selection behavior or student decision-making intention. The most common reason for exclusion was a focus on primary or secondary education. Additional searches were conducted during the study to assess newly published articles using the search terms and criteria described above. Over 100 articles were selected for inclusion in the literature review.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The present study followed a qualitative approach to better understand factors that influence Barbadian student decision-making intention regarding their pursuit of tertiary education at the only local university in Barbados. Fishbein and Ajzen's (2015) reasoned action approach provided the foundation to build the conceptual framework for this research study. In this section, I describe the conceptual framework, the assumption and purpose of the theory, and the use of the theory in previous empirical research studies. A rationale for the choice of the selected theory in relation to the research question was provided.

## **The Reasoned Action Approach**

As explained in Chapter 1, Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) expressed that behavior must be clearly defined and operationalized. Behavior comprises four elements: the specific action the person will perform, the target at which the action is directed, the context in which the action is performed, and the time in which the action is performed (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). As such, in this study, behavior includes the specific action of enrolling at an institution, the target was the local university, in the context of tertiary education, and within the 12 months after completing community college.

The current theory of reasoned action was developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) and emerged from the theory of planned behavior, developed by Ajzen (1985), and the theory of reasoned action, which was developed earlier by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975). Elliott and Ainsworth (2012) reported an effective comparison of the theory of planned behavior and the reasoned action approach and noted that the reasoned action approach was superior in accounting for variance in intention and behavior, possessing greater predictive validity. Fishbein and Ajzen explained that the reasoned action approach must be viewed with the assumption that human behavior culminates reasonably and often spontaneously, from the information or beliefs that people hold about a specific behavior under consideration. The authors posited that human behavior is guided by three types of beliefs: behavioral, normative, and perceived control beliefs. The authors also found that these beliefs originate from a variety of background factors, and once beliefs are formed, they help guide an intention that strongly motivates one's behavior to perform or not perform a behavior. The reasoned action approach suggests

that intention is the best predictor of behavior and the stronger the intention, the greater likelihood that the behavior will be enacted. The reasoned action approach suggests that an individual's behavior provides a means to examine an individual's beliefs as influences that enhance the likelihood of executing and understanding a particular behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Conner & Armitage, 1998). Based on these three types of beliefs, the researcher using the reasoned action approach assumes the believer's attitudes toward the considered behavior, the subjective norm pertinent to the considered behavior, and their perception of behavioral control shape the believer's intentions and behaviors (Ajzen, 2002).

### ***Behavior***

In this study, behavior is considered the specific action of enrolling at an institution, the target is the local university, in the context of tertiary education, and within the 12 months after completing community college. Within the conceptual framework (Figure 1), the context of behavior (pursuit of tertiary education) is influenced by the beliefs associated with various background factors (internal/student characteristics and external/ institutional characteristics), the attitude toward the behavior, the subjective norm associated with the behavior, and the perceived behavioral control (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). These three belief constructs (attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control) then become influencers affecting the potential enrollee's intention to perform the behavior; an action more likely to occur if each of the three component belief systems is favorable. Therefore, a positive attitude toward tertiary education, the positive influence of important others (subjective norms), and a student's perception that they can

manage decisions related to enrolling in tertiary education (perceived behavior control) may have a favorable influence on the potential enrollee's intention to enroll in a tertiary education institution. Subsequently, the intention to enroll may influence the actual action of enrolling in tertiary education. Although the conceptual framework includes the behavior, the focus of the study is not on the behavior, which, occurring up to 12 months in the future would make conducting a study on such unfeasible, but rather the focus of the study is on the intention to perform the behavior. Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) explained that the behavior must be identified to determine the parameters for describing it.

### ***Intention***

Behavioral intent is considered a crucial determinant of the specific behavioral goal and a critical part of the reasoned action approach (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015), as the intention to perform the behavior is assumed to be the immediate antecedent of the behavior (Ajzen, 2002). Ajzen (1991) defined behavioral intention as an individual's effort required to perform a given behavior. Behavioral intentions are a person's self-instruction to act in a specific way (Conner & Norman, 2022; Sheeran & Conner, 2017). Behavioral intention is also the likely outcome based on planned behavior or planned actions (Sadaf & Gezer, 2020). Therefore, the factors that contribute to the performance of behavior (i.e., enrollment in tertiary education) are influenced by the behavioral intention construct. Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) noted that behavioral intention is a better predictor of the specific behavior, and this is the main reason for focusing on behavioral intention rather than the behavior itself.

Some studies have explored factors and how it influences intentions. For e.g., Mathieson (2005) conducted a mixed methods study based on the theory of planned behavior, a core proposition of the reasoned action approach. First, in the qualitative aspect of the study, Mathieson sought to identify the factors that students considered when they formed intentions. In the quantitative aspect, the author sought to predict student intentions about their enrolling in a philosophy course. The findings of the study showed that students identified with personal outcomes such as their ability to understand themselves and aspects of life as key factors. Results also showed that students had not considered the opinions of others such as parents, friends, or important others when deciding to enroll in the course. Therefore, like the Mathieson study, the stronger the intention to enroll at a given university, the more likely students will do so, if the decision is within their control (Ajzen, 1991). In this study, behavioral intention is the focus for achieving the purpose of the study.

Findings from some previous studies concluded that there is a gap between intentions and behavior. For example, Rhodes and de Bruijn (2013) reported in a meta-analysis of 10 studies exploring intention and the behavior to enact public health guidelines, that 42% of those who intended to complete the behavior completed the behavior while 36% of those who intended to complete the behavior were not successful in enacting the behavior. The non-intenders who did not enact the behavior represented 21% while the non-intenders who subsequently performed the behavior was 2%. The findings supported an emphasis on a volitional phase that includes self-regulation and motivation. As this study is within the context of tertiary education, the perceived

behavior control will account for volition which makes intent the important predictor of behavior in this study.

### ***Attitude toward the Behavior***

Attitude toward an individual's behavior is the favorable or unfavorable evaluation individuals hold regarding their specific behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Attitude toward the behavior includes the individual's behavioral beliefs and attitudes about performing the behavior (Ajzen, 2002). Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) defined behavioral beliefs as the subjective probability that performing a specific behavior will lead to a specific outcome. Behavioral beliefs are a major influence on the attitude toward the individual's behavior construct (Armitage & Conner, 2001) and attitude has a strong influence on the intended behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Jafarkarimi et al., 2016). Therefore, an individual will have a positive attitude about behavior if that individual believes that a positive outcome will result from performing the specific behavior; conversely, a negative outcome will result from performing a specific behavior if the person has a negative attitude about the behavior (Ajzen, 2002). In this study, attitude toward the behavior was operationalized as the behavioral beliefs of enrolling at an institution, the target being the local university, in the context of tertiary education, and within the 12 months after completing community college. Consequently, participants were invited to share the advantages and disadvantages of enrolling at the local tertiary education institution within 12 months after completing community college.

### *Perceived Norm*

Perceived norm refers to the social pressures perceived by an individual to perform or not perform a specific behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The normative beliefs of the individual and the motivation to comply with those social expectations influence perceived norms (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Under this construct, persons are concerned as to whether an individual or others important to them approve or reject the behavior (Ajzen, 2002) and if the majority of important others perform the behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). In this study, attitude toward the behavior was operationalized with reference to the normative beliefs of enrolling at an institution, the target being the local university, in the context of tertiary education, and within the 12 months after completing community college. Participants were invited to share the beliefs and actions of people or groups who would approve or disapprove of their enrolling at the local tertiary education institution within the 12 months after completing community college. Consequently, if a potential enrollee believes that an important or influential person or group would perform the specific behavior, or the influential person thinks that the potential enrollee should perform a specific behavior then the potential enrollee is motivated to meet that expectation. Conversely, a potential enrollee who believes that an important or influential person or group would not perform the specific behavior or thinks that the potential enrollee should not perform a specific behavior then the potential enrollee is not motivated to meet that expectation. Ajzen (2002) noted that an individual would adopt a neutral subjective norm if the individual is less motivated to comply with the opinions and actions of others they deem as important.

### ***Perceived Behavioral Control of the Behavior***

Perceived behavioral control is the third construct of the reasoned action approach. Perceived behavioral control examined the extent to which an individual can perform a behavior (Ajzen, 1991), consequently accounting for non-volitional behaviors that may predict behavior intent. The two aspects of this construct include the extent an individual believes he/she has control over the intended behavior and the level of confidence in the ability to perform or not perform the behavior (Francis et al., 2004). As such, perceived behavioral control accounts for the individual's belief that they can control the behavior and the extent to which exercising this control will be easy or difficult (Ajzen, 2002). Participants were invited to share their perceived capability of enrolling at the local tertiary education institution within 12 months after completing community college. In addition, participants were invited to share their beliefs about the likelihood that factors that may impede or facilitate performing the behavior will occur the moment they try to enroll at the local tertiary education institution. The reasoned action approach posited that high-perceived behavioral control is the largest predictor of behavior intent. Therefore, if individuals believe that they possess the resources to execute a behavior, there is likely to be a greater intent to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 2002).

### ***Background Factors Influencing Beliefs***

According to the reasoned action approach, the foundations of human action can be found in behavioral, normative, and control beliefs (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). As explained earlier, once beliefs related to a specific behavior are formed, they provide a

basis for the attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, which then leads to intentions to enact the specific behavior. Beliefs, the authors argued, were not innate but were acquired through daily interactions with the real world. Fishbein and Ajzen noted that differences in beliefs emerged because of different learning experiences. The authors added that background factors were therefore important if we consider that people have been exposed to different experiences and have formed different beliefs about the behavior. Moreover, exploring background factors can enhance the understanding of social, psychological, and sociological foundations of intentions (Seddig et al., 2022). While Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) did not identify the kinds of background factors that should be considered about a specific behavior, they recognized that the number of factors that could be considered was unlimited. Researchers have identified two broad background factors that influence a potential student's decision-making intention to pursue higher education: external (institutional characteristics) and internal factors (student characteristics) (Abbas et al., 2021; Munisamy et al., 2014).

### ***External Factors***

Four external factors, or institutional characteristics, are generally reported in the literature: institutional reputation (Abbas et al., 2021; Dowling-Heatherington, 2020; Garwe, 2016; Munisamy et al., 2014; Nuseir & El Refae, 2021), economic and financial issues (Abbas et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2013; Garwe, 2016; Munisamy et al., 2014; Najimudinova, 2022), campus attributes (Davis et al., 2013; Nuseir & El Refae, 2021; Simões & Soares, 2010), and career prospects (Abbas et al., 2021; Munisamy et al., 2014). Reputation includes name recognition, institutional achievements, standards,

program quality, and delivery. Economic and financial issues cover factors related to costs, availability of aid, financial risk, and value for money. Campus attributes include location, distance from home, setting, atmosphere, facilities, and social life. Career prospects include graduates' employment prospects, expected income, and employers' views of graduates. The cited research findings were used to identify background factors used in the framework of this study.

**Reputation.** Shah et al. (2013) identified student perception of the reputation of the institution as a key factor in influencing their selection behavior associated with private tertiary education institutions. Similarly, academic reputation and recognition were one of the six main factors influencing student selection behavior of private tertiary education institutions in Germany and the UK (Abbas et al., 2021) and in Zimbabwe (see Garwe, 2016). Academic reputation, specifically local or international accreditation was one of five main factors influencing student selection in public and private universities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Institutional ranking and accreditations were particularly influential in the decision-making to pursue studies at an Irish university with international campuses in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Sri Lanka (Dowling-Heatherington, 2020). Gong and Huybers (2015) found that university ranking, and destination safety were key drivers of the planned behavior of Chinese students as potential enrollees to pursue tertiary education at international institutions. In a case study conducted at a South African university, Angelopulo (2013) suggested that the reputation, credibility, and image of the university were key in determining potential student enrollment and retention. As such, higher-quality institutions attract more talented

students regardless of the enrollees' socio-economic status (Pigini & Staffolani, 2016).

This assertion differs from the finding by Ilgan et al. (2018), where the authors noted that potential enrollees from a lower-level socio-economic background considered the quality and popularity of education to be less important than other factors.

**Economic and Financial Issues.** When selecting a university, potential student enrollees often weigh the cost of tertiary education study, access to financial aid, and the financial risks, costs, and benefits to determine the value for the cost (Abbas et al., 2021; Kim & Nuñez, 2013; Najimudinova, 2022; Simões & Soares, 2010). Access to finance and financial aid is critical to providing access to tertiary education opportunities, particularly for low-income student enrollees and those in developing countries (Davis et al., 2013). For example, Strayhorn et al. (2013) found that access to financial aid was also an important determinant in pursuing tertiary education, particularly among black men. Panigrahi (2015) noted that a lack of financial aid has the potential to limit selection behavior while increasing inequality in access to tertiary education. In contrast, Davis et al. (2013) suggested that access to aid (through the Gates Millennium Scholarships) allowed potential students to select universities that are more prestigious or those with broader academic offerings. In the absence of financial aid, Stater (2011) suggested that there is a higher probability of students opting for majors in professional fields and a lower probability of them opting for sciences and humanities majors. External factors such as cost may influence the students' perceived ability to control whether they enroll at the university or not, however, it is anticipated that a students' intention to enroll will stimulate their planned behavior.

**Campus Attributes.** In a study of 1,641 first-year students at a Portuguese university, Simões and Soares (2010) noted that geographical proximity was the key factor for selecting a higher education institution. The proximity of the university to students' residences or workplaces was the main reason for selecting a university in the UAE (Nuseir & El Refae, 2021). In a national study involving a longitudinal analysis of factors influencing selection behavior of historical black colleges and universities (HBCUs) Strayhorn et al. (2013) found that both black male and female students identified proximity to home or work as one of three factors in influencing university selection behavior along with reputation and program access. However, in a Turkish study, Ilgan et al. (2018) found that familiarity with the cities in which the institution was located was the least important factor affecting potential student selection behavior in tertiary education. Brennan and Cochrane (2019) noted that the relationships between universities and the cities they are located included an emphasis on student recruitment, research, other sources of income, partnerships, identification of skills needs, and real estate development.

**Career Prospects.** Data from Hung (2021) illustrated that future career planning was a top factor influencing the decision-making intentions of international students to study in Taiwan. Munisamy et al. (2014) identified career prospects as one of the key factors in the planned behavior of Malaysian students in selecting a higher education institution. This finding was also similar for Turkish higher education institutions as noted by Ilgan et al. (2018). Abbas et al. (2021) identified the career factor as critical in the selection of a higher education institution for international students studying in the

UK and Germany. Gasper and Soares' (2021) study recorded similar findings of top factors which included to personal development, professional skills, and professional career as top factors for students in Angola. Wong et al. (2016) suggested that the rate of graduate employability or clear articulation pathways to prestige universities might influence student selection behavior. In a different study, which used the theory of planned behavior to understand the subject choices of students, Taylor (2014) found that students with a higher intent to study physics or media studies also had a more positive attitude toward choosing those subjects. Therefore, the likely expected positive outcomes, for example career prospects, from pursuing physics or media studies were important to students.

### ***Internal Factors***

Student characteristics that influence university choice include socioeconomic background, gender, and family (Abbas et al., 2021; Almeida et al., 2024; Garwe, 2016; Munisamy et al., 2014; Tsiplakides, 2018). Socio-economic background refers to the potential enrollee's personal economic situation and the parental/guardian economic situation for dependent potential enrollees. A family typically refers to the enrollee's parents, guardians, and siblings, while gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men. The findings of the cited research were used to design background constructs used in the framework of this study.

**Socioeconomic Background.** The socioeconomic background appears to be a factor that leads to higher education status, resulting in a higher representation of students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds in more prestigious institutions (Tsiplakides,

2018). Bowden and Doughney (2010) suggested that there was a gap between the number of potential students aspiring to pursue higher education and the resulting enrollment. This gap was larger for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Obermeier and Schneider (2015) suggested that German students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less risk-averse and consequently were less likely to pursue higher education. Similarly, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) suggested that fear of debt was an important determinant of choice for lower socio-economic classes. Conversely, family income was not among the top factors influencing university choice in Kyrgyzstan (Najimudinova, 2022). Almeida et al. (2024) concluded that while Brazilian policies like Quota Law have enhanced access of socioeconomic adversity students, these policies have not been vastly successful in promoting social mobility.

Critical thinking and social skills are two important skill sets that are positively correlated with higher levels of education (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). Critical thinking helps individuals to problem-solve or assess valuable information about an issue while social skills facilitate interaction with others to determine acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). Consequently, investments in tertiary education improve the decision-making abilities of individuals, especially regarding personal economic decisions (Kim et al., 2018). Additionally, persons with higher education levels are more active in society, for example through volunteering and participation in voting processes, and lead healthier lifestyles. Further, personal, and other demographic characteristics may make adults more likely to pursue tertiary education and civic involvement (Ma et al., 2016; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011).

However, Almeida et al. (2024) noted that gaining access to higher education does not guarantee social mobility or increased earning equality.

**Gender and Family.** Strayhorn et al. (2013) suggested that both black men and women agreed on proximity, reputation, and program quality as key factors in determining university selection behavior, more men than women factored work opportunities, access to financial aid, and tuition and fees into their planned behavioral process. In another study, by Ilgan et al. (2018), females gave more importance to future career expectations, facilities offered, and other campus attributes, compared to males. Ilgan et al. believed that this was due to cultural traditional structure where females have familial obligations and commitments. Najimudinova (2022) found that males selected a university based on teachers and university marketing strategies whereas females selected a university based on family/friends and university marketing. Davis et al. (2013) found that the family was the main factor influencing student selection of a tertiary institution while Abbas et al. (2021) found that parents and friends were the main factors influencing student selection of a tertiary institution.

#### ***Application of the Reasoned Action Approach to the Current Study***

Given the use of the reasoned action approach in previous research, this theory was considered appropriate for the current study. Applying the reasoned action approach to the current study, I intend to better understand human decision-making behavior intent in a particular context, as Ajzen (2005) supported. This study was designed to understand the planned behavior intent of prospective students pursuing tertiary education enrollment.

The divergence of findings in the studies discussed earlier (e.g., Mathieson, 2005; Taylor, 2014) underscores the importance of understanding the decision-making intentions of potential students, a key focus of this study. The reasoned action approach has not been used to investigate how student decision-making intent was formed in tertiary education selection in Barbados. While Mathieson or Taylor had not examined the factors that influenced a student to pursue studies at a particular university, they explored factors that influence students' decision to enroll in or pursue a specific course. This study used the reasoned action approach to explore factors that influence students' decision-making intention to enroll at a local university. Therefore, like the Mathieson (2005) and Taylor (2014) studies, the stronger the intention to enroll at a given university, the more likely students will do so, if the decision is within their control (Ajzen, 1991). Students' intention to enroll will stimulate their behavior of actually enrolling. There is a fundamental gap in studies exploring decision-making intention in tertiary education in small states. This study builds on the theory and previous research by identifying Barbadian prospective students' decision-making intention to pursue study at a local university in Barbados. This benefit is consistent with the conceptual framework for this study.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, external and internal factors, either individually or combined, influence a student's attitude toward pursuing a tertiary education (Ajzen, 1991). These factors are also influencing the three other beliefs-based theoretical constructs associated with behavioral influences: attitude, perceived norms, and perceived behavioral control. Subjective norms include the desires and actions of the

important others of students such as family, friends, or teachers (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). The perceived norms then become influencers affecting the potential enrollee's intentions to pursue tertiary education. External and internal factors influence the potential enrollee's perception toward pursuing a tertiary education, including learning site enrollment. The reasoned action approach posits that the behavior and behavioral intent are more likely to occur if each component is favorable. Therefore, a positive attitude toward tertiary education, the positive influence of important others (perceived norms), and a prospective student's positive perception of tertiary education (perceived behavior control) has a favorable influence on the potential enrollee's intention to enroll in a tertiary education institution and subsequently the actual behavior of enrolling in tertiary education. As such, using this theory, I accounted for external factors, student attitude regarding tertiary education, the influence of others (parents, friends, teachers etc.), and student perception of tertiary education. Through incorporation into my conceptual framework, this study provided an application of the reasoned action approach to tertiary education in small island developing states.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts or Variables**

In this section, I begin by introducing the topics that represent key variables and/or concepts upon which this study was based. These sub-sections are related to the research question, the selected approach and methodology for the study, and information supporting the use of the reasoned action approach and why it is meaningful. Each subsection is supported by specific, relevant, seminal, and contemporary published

research. Finally, I provide a summary of the section to underscore the importance of the topic.

### **Human Belief Systems**

Each human being has a belief system to interpret the world (Bhattarai, 2021; Usó-Doménech & Nescolarde-Selva, 2016). During the human lifespan, a person's experiences lead them to form beliefs about a myriad of events, actions, and objects. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) defined beliefs as the subjective probability that an object has a specific attribute. The authors noted the terms *object* and *attribute* describe any discriminable aspect of a person's world. Beliefs are formed by associating an object with various qualities, characteristics, and attributes (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015; Seitz & Angel, 2020). These beliefs may be formed through direct observation, generated by individuals through their inference process, or acquired indirectly by receiving information from important others (such as parents, friends, and teachers), the media, and other outside sources. Over time, some beliefs may persist, some may be forgotten, and new beliefs may be formed. Belief systems are the stories we tell.

The link and influence of beliefs on attitudes have been described in the expectancy-value model, a model discussed by seminal authors such as Carlson (1956), Feather (1959), and Fishbein (1963). Attitudes toward an object are expected to be formed automatically as new beliefs are formed about the object (Fishbein, 1963). For example, if a prospective student has a positive or negative evaluation of tertiary education, the new beliefs will automatically produce a subsequent positive or negative attitude toward pursuing tertiary education. Multiple interconnected factors appear to

drive the complex decision-making process for the selection of a higher education institution by prospective students (Marjanović & Križman Pavlović, 2018; Munisamy et al., 2014; Nuseir & El Refae, 2021; Simões & Soares, 2010). As noted earlier, beliefs associated with various background factors, the attitude toward the behavior, the subjective norm about the behavior, and the perceived behavioral control (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015) are influencing the decision-making process of selecting a tertiary institution. These three beliefs-based constructs (attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control) then become influencers affecting the potential student's intention to perform the behavior. To better understand this complexity, researchers have identified two main factors that influence a potential student's decision-making intention to pursue higher education: institutional characteristics and student characteristics (Abbas et al., 2021; Munisamy et al., 2014).

### **Predicting Behavior**

Fishbein and Ajzen (2015) considered behavioral intentions as the most important antecedent of behavior and a good predictor of the behavior. The authors describe behavioral intentions as the indications of an individual's readiness to act or perform a specific behavior. Previous research (e.g., Vilnai-Yavetz & Levina, 2018; Whitehill et al., 2020) has supported the findings that behavioral intentions can be used to predict behavior with considerable accuracy. In addition, this conclusion is supported by several systemic reviews and meta-analyses of empirical findings such as Schüz et al. (2017) and Armitage and Conner (2001).

A crucial element of predicting behavior is that the measure of intention must be compatible with the behavioral criterion (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Accordingly, an intention is compatible with the specific behavior if both intention and behavior involve the same action, target, context, and time criterion as elements. Fishbein and Ajzen explained that while this principle of compatibility is a prerequisite for predicting behavior, the enactment of the specific behavior may be prevented by factors outside of an individual's control. As a rule, the higher the subjective probability of the intention, the greater the likelihood of the person performing the behavior. If persons who intend to enroll in tertiary education have the required skills and ability to do so, and there are no external factors to prevent the behavior, they will likely act on their intentions to pursue tertiary education enrollment.

This study explored Barbadian students' decision-making intentions to pursue tertiary education enrollment at a local university. The reasoned action approach to decision-making behavior was an appropriate framework for this study. It has become one of the most widely researched theories of behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001). The relevance of this theory hinges on how likely it is for an individual to act out on their intent to perform a behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015).

The reasoned action approach has been applied and empirically validated in several previously conducted studies. For example, Armitage and Conner (2001) reviewed 161 articles that contained 185 independent empirical tests of the theory of planned behavior, the precursor to the reasoned action approach, to determine the effectiveness of each of the three beliefs-based constructs of this theory and the theory

itself. Overall, the findings illustrated that the theory was significant in predicting behaviors in numerous areas although the subjective norm-intent correlation was significantly weaker than the relationships of the other constructs regarding intent. The authors noted that this weak relationship did not present enough evidence to discard the construct. Armitage and Conner noted that the overall support for the reasoned action approach as a predictor of behavior was similar to previous meta-analyses.

Recent literature such as Jafarkarimi et al. (2016), Ness et al., (2021), Sam et al. (2022), and Sok et al., (2021), supported the significance of the reasoned action approach and its predecessor, the theory of planned behavior, in predicting behaviors. In addition, in a recent meta-analysis study based on the reasoned action approach, Schüz et al. (2017) reviewed 88 articles, which examined socioeconomic status as a predictor of intent in physical activity. The findings showed that education completion level was a significant indicator of intent to pursue physical behavior. This suggested the more educated individuals are, the more likely they are to translate intentions into behaviors (Schüz et al., 2017). Other fields of study where the reasoned action approach has been used include intent to drink or avoid alcohol and eat or avoid eating fast food (Ajzen & Sheikh, 2013), consumer fashion purchase (Chetioui et al., 2020), social media marketing (Vilnai-Yavetz & Levina, 2018), COVID-19 vaccine intentions (Chu & Liu, 2021; Guidry et al., 2021), ethics in social networking (Jafarkarimi et al., 2016), teachers' intention to teach in inclusive classrooms (Sharma & Jacobs, 2016), and use of leisure time among college students (Beville et al., 2014). These studies concluded that the reasoned action approach was effective in understanding and predicting the behavior

intentions of individuals. Therefore, the theory provides opportunities to comprehend, anticipate, and simulate human behavior in multiple situations (Ajzen, 1991; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013).

### **Higher Education in Small States**

Despite the substantial number of small states, research on aspects of higher education in small states has been limited (Baldacchino, 2011; Crossley & Sprague, 2014). Though they share some similarities, small states are varied in political, economic, geographical, and cultural features. The higher education sector in many small states has benefited from several changes and reform opportunities due to increased enrollments, the enhanced use of technology, diversification of the higher education offering, and the emergence of other institutions (Bray & Martin, 2011). However, small states possess a common constraint in relation to organizing a diversified and cost-effective higher education model largely due to the small pool of highly qualified human resources available and difficulties in achieving economies of scale in administration and management (Bray, 2011). Some regional higher education institutions in small states benefit from regional collaboration and government support for funding although Tewarie (2011) noted that this support does not guarantee a timely cash flow. Moreover, Chandra (2011) and Tewarie (2011) describe tensions that may arise between countries within the region regarding developmental priorities. Climate change, global economic recessions, and migratory patterns also have drastic implications for small states, and particularly island-developing states (Bray & Martin, 2011).

Investment in tertiary education has a net positive effect on growth, and economic development, and consequently leads to an increase in national human capital, particularly in developing low-income countries (Ioana et al., 2016; Mariana, 2015; Oketch, 2016). Further, Hanushek & Woessmann (2020) noted that investment in tertiary education can aid in the social development of a country. As such, recognizing its positive role in national development, governments often increase access to higher education through direct investments in national and regional universities (Csőke & Tóth, 2017; Persaud & Persaud, 2016). Therefore, the research suggests that high education levels are beneficial to national development. While the positive effect on growth and economic development is noted, Dellink et al. (2017) highlighted that high education levels coupled with low population growth are required for economic growth. However, the authors cautioned that drivers of economic growth are subject to uncertainties such as environmental damage, external shocks, and government barriers. Despite this, education, particularly tertiary education, is one of the most important factors of economic growth (Mariana, 2015).

### **Higher Education in Barbados**

In Barbados, the state covered the tuition fees and economic costs for undergraduate programs taken at campuses of the University of the West Indies for several decades. This state-funded education became part of the social contract that consecutive governments maintained (Hinds, 2017). However, in 2013, the government announced plans to remove the cover of tuition fees for students pursuing undergraduate programs at the University of the West Indies, with the government retaining the

economic cost. As such, with effect from the 2014 academic year the government reduced its contribution from 100 percent to 80 percent (Sinckler, 2013). The government also offers scholarships for top-performing students at the associate degree level (approximately 40 individuals or more annually) and national development scholarships usually at the postgraduate level for students engaging in higher education in national priority areas (approximately 15 individuals annually).

Despite challenges, there has been a gradual improvement in the number of persons leaving secondary schools and the community college with the requisite qualifications for entry into university. The local university has also significantly expanded its physical and open campuses to better cater to increasing demand. Combined, these approaches have resulted in a significant increase in demand and matriculation of students into the local university between 2001 and 2011. Consequently, the number of registered students (undergraduate and postgraduate) increased from 3,982 in the academic year 2001/2002 to 8,841 in 2011/2012 (The University of the West Indies Cave Hill, 2011). However, there has been a decline in enrollment from 7,427 in the 2012/2013 academic year to 4,669 in 2016/2017 following the change in financing policy (The University of the West Indies Cave Hill, 2018b). The total undergraduate enrollment in the 2023/2024 academic year was 4,398 (The University of the West Indies Cave Hill, 2024). In Barbados, investments in tertiary education have promoted economic growth, and enhanced the island's global competitiveness (Ministry of Education & Human Resource Development, 2012).

### ***Challenges of State Financing of Higher Education***

The approach to state financing of tertiary education has not been without challenges. Considering that the Barbados government covers the costs of each university-level student who pursues studies at the local university, the annual cost to the government has almost doubled from USD 34 million in the academic year 2005/2006 to USD 64 million in 2011/2012 (The University of the West Indies Cave Hill, 2011). The global economic crisis has significantly affected the government's ability to meet its financial obligation to the university, with the current debt to the university standing at USD 105 million (The University of the West Indies Cave Hill, 2018a). In response, the university has had to trim its overall operating expenses and refocus its admission policy. In the meantime, the government has been exploring options for settling its debt to the university, while introducing the new financing policy for tertiary education.

### ***Changes in Higher Education Policy***

The level of government contribution to the local university has been a contentious issue for over a decade. The government views tertiary education as an enabler of economic growth and has continually supported the university since its establishment (Hinds, 2017); however, the current economic climate has placed considerable strain on government funding resulting in accumulated government debt to the university of approximately USD 105 million. Whereas the university has sought to contain its overall operating budget through reprioritization of civil works and staff rationalization (The University of the West Indies Cave Hill, 2018a), there continues to be public resistance to increased fees or increased contributions from students. In the meantime, the government has sought to reduce leakage from the system by capping the

number of years that students can benefit from government financing within a particular degree program.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Intention offers the best predictor of behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015). Beliefs (behavioral, normative, and control) provide insights into how persons think about enacting a specific behavior of enrolling or not enrolling in tertiary education. These beliefs originate from various background factors. Having insights into the background factors, drivers, or constructs that influence student selection behavior are important to recruitment and retention efforts (Mishra et al., 2020) and background factors are likely to influence how the person may enact a specific behavior. Nevertheless, there is no consensus regarding how personal and social factors influence one's intention to pursue tertiary education locally particularly in small island developing states (Abbas et al., 2021; Garwe, 2016; Nuseir & El Refae, 2021; Wagner & Fard, 2009). Existing research leaves a gap in understanding the influences affecting a potential student's intention to locally pursue tertiary education in small island developing states, such as most Caribbean countries. In this study, I explored factors that influence Barbadian prospective students' decision-making intention regarding pursuing tertiary education through local enrollment. The new knowledge gained may help tertiary education institutions in Barbados to adapt programs, costs, location, or other factors to potentially increase student enrollment.

To understand prospective students' perceptions about tertiary education enrollment, it was useful to explore prospective students' attitudes regarding the selection

of a tertiary education institution, the influence of key important others on prospective students, and the influence of prospective students' perceived self-efficacy to handle enrollment. This study explored factors that influence student decision-making intention regarding pursuing tertiary education by interviewing Barbadian prospective students. Characteristics and associated themes in the literature provided a starting point to collect data and for coding during the analysis phase.

This chapter included an overview of the literature search strategy used for researching the topic, the conceptual framework used in this study, and a review and synthesis of studies related to the research question. Chapter 3 includes a description of the research design, methodology, data collection, and data analysis plan used for exploring prospective students' decision-making intention to pursue tertiary education. Chapter 3 also includes an explanation of trustworthiness and ethical procedures used in the study.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding their pursuit of tertiary education at the only local university in Barbados. In this chapter, I describe the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, and the data analysis procedures. I also address issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures that verify the quality of this research.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

To understand Barbadian prospective students' decision-making intention regarding pursuing tertiary education enrollment, the study centered on one main research question:

RQ1: What are Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding pursuing tertiary education?

#### **Central Phenomenon of the Study**

The central phenomenon of this study was the need to understand the factors that influence Barbadian students' decision-making intention regarding pursuing local tertiary education. The reasoned action approach (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015) provided a foundation for understanding and studying the phenomenon. The key concepts of the reasoned action approach, behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs, and perceived control beliefs (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015) were applied to determine the factors that influence the decision-making intention of potential students to enroll locally. Understanding participants' perceptions about an experience is a hallmark of qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016); as

such, a qualitative approach was employed in this study, whereby participants provided details about their beliefs concerning, and experience with, the phenomenon of this study and the meanings they attribute to them.

### **The Rationale for the Research Tradition and Design**

The study was qualitative and utilized a basic qualitative approach. A qualitative approach is an agreed-upon set of research protocols that allow the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study and to collect in-depth descriptive data from participants to address the research question (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The qualitative research tradition is ideally suited for understanding participants' experiences with a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). However, because understanding is often influenced by the researcher's worldview, it became apparent that I needed a methodological design from within the qualitative tradition that accommodated my social constructivist views. Studies with a social constructivist view focus on how participants interpret their experiences, how participants construct their understanding of their world, and what meaning participants attribute to their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2020).

Most of the studies conducted using the reasoned action approach, the theory underpinning this study, have been quantitative, which suggests there is probably no standard qualitative approach that easily accommodate the elements of the theory with which I worked with. However, in examining the multiple qualitative traditions described by qualitative researchers (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)—basic qualitative, case studies, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative analysis, and

phenomenology—the basic qualitative study and case study appeared to be the most applicable for this study.

In the basic qualitative inquiry, the researcher is focused on exploring participants' shared experiences, describing a phenomenon, and ascertaining the meaning the researcher attributes to the participants' experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Sandelowski, 2000). In this study, I planned to gain from participants an in-depth understanding of the influences on Barbadian students' decision-making intention to enroll in a local tertiary education institution. In contrast, case studies are largely used to develop or test theory, which was not my focus in this study. I have a more pragmatic expectation for my study; as such, I relied on the more flexible nature of the basic qualitative approach design enhanced by borrowing elements of case study design (e.g., a unit of analysis, a unit of observation, and bounding) to reach an outcome different from the direction of a traditional case study design. Being pragmatic and epistemologically social constructivist in nature, I used the basic qualitative design to better understand the problem and ultimately contribute to current practice including strategies, procedures, policy suggestions, or social change. The basic qualitative design has been used in past studies that sought to gather an in-depth understanding of how administrators of U.S. colleges regard tracking and predicting student retention (Mulhollen, 2021) and to understand nursing instructor perspectives on teaching social awareness in nursing education (Ramel, 2022).

In summary, I selected the basic qualitative inquiry as the research design for this study as this design was the most effective method considering the flexibility it provided

and its applicability in understanding the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, I explored the influences on potential student decision-making intention regarding the selection of tertiary education. As a social constructivist study, I acknowledged that potential students' experiences can be best described by the potential students themselves and the descriptions by these potential students can provide answers to the research question. The basic design provided the flexibility of interviewing prospective students without bounding to a single setting. In terms of applicability, the focus of my research study was to understand prospective student perceptions, looking for similar themes and patterns, which makes the basic qualitative design applicable to this study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role was an observer in which I collected data, determined findings, and reported the results adequately and honestly. Additionally, a key role was ensuring that participants were protected from harm. It was unlikely that participants would experience discomfort based on their participation in this study; however, I reminded participants that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point. I recorded the interviews, with the consent of the participants. Participants were informed that all data will be secured, and I will protect their identities.

I currently work at the lone indigenous university in the country. To avoid any issues of me having supervisory or instructor relationships involving power over the participants, persons who are current students at the university were excluded from participating in this study. The study participants were prospective Barbadian tertiary education students, and it is unlikely that I had any professional relationships with

potential participants as my current personal and professional relationships include current university students only. Therefore, I did not perceive that I had coercive influence or power relationships over participants in their decisions to participate in the study.

As a qualitative researcher, I adopted a constructivist worldview. The constructivist worldview is used to understand rich descriptions from varied unique individual perceptions relying on the participants' views of the situation being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). I recognized that my constructivist worldview, background, or previous experience with the phenomenon being explored in this study may shape my interpretation of the research. The interpretative nature of qualitative research and the researchers' experience are strengths of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). However, I did not want any bias to emerge through asking leading or ambiguous questions during interviews, asking questions in a specific order that may affect participant's responses to the next question, attempting to probe in only a single direction, or deductively analyzing data instead on inductively seeking generalizations. To manage potential bias, I practiced reflexivity by maintaining a reflexive journal (see Cope, 2014). Reflexivity is an examination of one's values, actions, and decisions that may influence the research process (Cope, 2014). I maintained a reflexive journal to reflect on and note thoughts and feelings that may arise after every interview. To manage further biases and to ensure consistency, I developed an interview protocol which was used in each interview. This ensured that I asked questions in the same way, without appearing to lead participants in any particular way.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The population for this doctoral study was prospective undergraduate Barbadian students from the community college that offers associate degree-level certification. These students were in preparation for completing their associate degree and therefore eligible to enroll at a university located in Barbados or at a university outside of the country. I considered that these people were best positioned to provide insights on their decision-making intentions to enroll at the local university and were more likely to provide rich descriptions about how their selection behavior is being influenced.

After I received IRB approval from Walden University, the community college whose students were qualified to enroll at the local tertiary education institution, was contacted via email and phone. I provided the principal of the college with an overview of the study, the significance of the study, and the data collection procedures being considered. I requested a participation invitation letter be shared with all final-year students enrolled in associate degree programs at the college. Each potential participant received an invitation that included my contact information along with a disclosure and explanation of the purpose, participation criteria, risks, consequences, and benefits associated with their making an informed decision to participate. Participants were invited to indicate their interest by email. Once a participant agreed to participate, they were required to respond, "I consent," which indicated their consent to participate in the study.

To create a useful sample from the population, I used a purposeful sampling

strategy. Purposeful sampling appeared to be the best option for this study as it allowed me to select from the target population a sampling frame of potential participants who might best provide rich descriptive data related to the research problem, interview questions, and the phenomenon being studied (see Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To be considered as a participant in the study, each potential participant had to be:

1. a Barbadian student,
2. eligible to enroll at the tertiary education institution,
3. 18 years or older, and
4. willing to participate in a recorded interview session.

Participants self-confirmed the criteria via the participant contact email and/or phone.

Using my knowledge of the study and my understanding of the needs of the study, I purposefully selected a working sample of approximately 14 whom I believe were best suited to provide sufficient depth and breadth of data required for addressing the research question of the study. I ensured that the interviewees represent a mix of genders.

For qualitative studies, Ritchie et al. (2014) advised that it is better to maintain the depth of data collection rather than the breadth of sample size. Saturation is not necessarily based on how many participants are interviewed (Fusch & Ness, 2015) but rather is based on the quality of data acquired (Thorne, 2016). In this study, saturation was achieved by carefully planning for and then collecting and analyzing good-quality data as close to the completion of each collection event as possible. Good quality data are useful data. For this study, good-quality data included rich (sufficient in quantity) and

thick (sufficient in quality) descriptive data related to subjective knowledge of participants' attitudes, perceived norms, and perceived control of tertiary education institution selection. This means that I needed to explore participants' decision-making intentions to pursue tertiary education enrollment. Data were collected using an interview protocol that was aligned to that purpose and described in the Instrumentation section.

### **Instrumentation**

A semistructured individual interview using open-ended questions provided the main source of data for this study. I used a personally developed interview protocol and guide (see Appendix A) to focus the interview questions on ascertaining from Barbadian prospective students their decision-making intent to pursue tertiary education. Sufficiency of the interview protocol was established through a rigorous research and development process that ensured alignment of the research question to each necessary interview question, which was supported by the relevant literature including the conceptual framework, and carefully constructed to address the data characteristics needs of the study; a few suggestive probes were also included to ensure appropriate management of the direction of the interview. Content validity related to the sufficiency of data collection for answering the research question was established by ensuring that all constructs of the reasoned action approach, the theory underpinning the conceptual framework of the study, and concepts from the literature review were adequately addressed in the instrument. The interview protocol was distilled into a simple interview guide (see Appendix A) that was used during each interview session to maintain the structure of the process and to capture important researcher notes.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

I used a videoconferencing platform to collect the data. Videoconferencing platforms provide participants the convenience of interviewing from the comfort of their preferred location. I considered conducting face-to-face interviews only if a participant was unwilling or unable to participate in the interview via videoconference. The interview question guide (see Appendix A) was used during each interview session to help maintain focus on the research question, maintain the structure of the process, and capture important researcher notes. I recorded the interviews using the videoconference record feature and used my phone recorder as a backup to capture the dialogue. All recordings were stored on a personal, password-protected computer and backed up on my OneDrive cloud storage, which is password-protected and only accessible to me. I informed each participant of the approximate duration of the interviews, that they would be recorded, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants' names were not recorded. Transcriptions and notes specific to participants were identified only by a pseudonym for each participant.

Debriefing procedures followed each interview data collection (see Appendix A). I transcribed all interview audio files within three days of completing the interview and provided a digital copy of the transcribed data to each respective interviewee for review. There were no additional interested participants, as such, there was no need to send communication to participants who were not shortlisted to participate explaining that the data collection period has ended (see Appendix B). I had hopes of completing the

interviews over 6 weeks, but this did not occur. The reason for this is explained in Chapter 4.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis involves intentional scrutiny of data at various stages (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), which was my strategy for this study as I collected, organized, and analyzed data simultaneously. Consequently, data analysis began with the collection of data, which was rigorously driven by a literature-supported interview protocol connecting specifically the data types and data characteristics being sought with the research question, interview questions, and potential sample probes. The data collection instrument was developed to provide useful data and insights into understanding the perceptions of participants related to the pursuit of tertiary education enrollment decision-making intentions.

Working from the foundation established by the interview protocol, the next step in the data analysis was to complete the transcription process. After each interview was completed, I transcribed it verbatim. I verified each transcribed interview through a participant review process. Each participant received their interview transcript via email and the participant was invited to check their responses for accuracy before I commenced the analysis. I intended to use the qualitative analysis software NVivo to analyze the collected data; however, I opted to use Excel instead. Using Excel allowed me to organize, categorize, and classify the data generated from responses to the interview questions.

Because data analysis is an iterative process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), I listened to each interview recording and read each transcript multiple times and noted my early

observations. The transcription was uploaded to Excel for further analysis. I began coding data during my opening observations following in which I used the descriptive coding method (see Saldaña, 2016) to segment data into meaningfully labeled topics. Descriptive coding is useful to reveal epistemological questions related to theories of knowing and understanding a phenomenon of interest, which is the focus of the research question in this study. The early use of descriptive coding in this study resulted in a summary of the main topics contained within the data. This topical summary combined with my field notes related to perceived meanings associated with those topics provided a useful foundation for category and theme construction.

Next, for the second cycle of coding, I applied the process coding method (see Saldaña, 2016) to reflect each participant's process related to their potential tertiary enrollment experiences. Saldaña (2016) explained that process coding is used to communicate and understand actions in the data that address the nature of participants' actions or situations. Therefore, process coding was the preferred second-cycle coding method as it is useful in qualitative studies such as this research endeavor.

Similar patterns of coded content were grouped into categories. I labeled each category to show convergent or divergent patterns. Once the categories were identified, I identified the characteristics that distinguished the content of one category from another. Categories then were condensed or expanded further into themes. I compared the codes generated from my general observations and the two coding methods to identify categorical commonalities, patterns, and possible discrepancies that appear. In summary, I applied an inductive process using my observation notes seeking codes, categories, and

patterns among coded elements as I worked to determine themes from the data. I made continuous comparisons of the observation notes with the codes generated from the first and second-cycle coding methods to uncover commonalities in key phrases that lead to potential findings.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

For this study, gaining participants' trust was critical as I needed their input to adequately address the research question. To enhance trustworthiness, I followed the advice Patton (2015) offered to qualitative researchers to provide transparency. This section of Chapter 3 elaborates on the strategies for ensuring trustworthiness through a clear description of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in this study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

#### **Credibility**

To establish credibility, I developed a rigorous interview protocol that presented the research question of the study, interview questions related to the research question, specific literature references supporting each interview question, clearly identified data characteristics being sought, and a few suggestive probes. This protocol was designed to provide rich and thick data to ensure the research question in my study can be logically and productively addressed, which underpins my efforts to demonstrate saturation in this study. Member checking is an important part of creating credibility in qualitative research (Birt et al., 2016; Candela, 2019; Sahakyan, 2023). Member checks may be defined as the process where study participants review, comment, and correct the transcript of the interview (Thomas, 2017). To ensure credibility, I shared the transcript response of each

participant back to the individual participant to allow them to provide feedback on my transcriptive rendering of their respective initial response.

To increase credibility, I used multiple coding methods to analyze data, a strategy used to demonstrate methodological triangulation in this study. Finally, I incorporated reflexive practices while developing the study. I maintained a reflexive journal to consider my own biases and preconceived notions related to my actions and understanding toward conducting the study. I used the journal to capture and critique my thoughts related to the phenomena and my approach to examining it. Identifying my thoughts and especially noting any potential bias is part of an audit process that can aid in improving the credibility of the research.

### **Transferability**

The key to whether the outcomes of this study can be transferred to other situations or contexts (see Houghton, et al., 2013) is my use of a purposeful sampling strategy. I selected 14 participants to be interviewed. To ensure variation, an effort was made to include participants representing different genders during the purposive selection of participants during sample development. Additionally, transferability was enhanced using a rigorous interview protocol aligned to the research question via the use of carefully interpreted supporting material from the extant literature.

### **Dependability**

To establish dependability, I aligned my research problem with the purpose of the study, research question, and conceptual framework. This alignment was addressed through the interpretation of the findings within the context of the literature review and

the application of the conceptual framework. Dependability was also established with an audit trail. An audit trail helps to confirm the rigor of the study (Wolf, 2003). I provided details of my participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and rationale for codes, categories, and themes. As suggested by Wolf, I used the audit trail to organize the conduct of the study to allow the reader or peer reviewer to follow my procedures. Additionally, carefully conceived interviewing, transcribing, coding, and re-coding of the data helped to obtain dependability and validity (see Patton, 2015)

### **Confirmability**

In this study, confirmability was recognized through reflexivity. As a researcher using reflexive journaling, I self-assessed my personal assumptions, beliefs, and goals, bracketing them as necessary (see Ortlipp, 2008). Reflection, in addition to reflexivity, was also important to confirmability; therefore, I kept a field notes journal detailing what occurred throughout the data collection and analysis process. In this manner, my journaling also provided a research trail (see Ortlipp, 2008).

### **Ethical Procedures**

As the sole researcher for this study, I planned for any ethical issues that may arise in the study. I sought and received approval from Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (10-03-23-0602710) before collecting any data. This IRB application considered ethical partnerships and the protection of human subjects including confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent. Once I received IRB approved, I sought approval from the principal of the community college to solicit adult students to participate in the study. I provided potential participants with an invitation to partake in

the study and collect their consent to participate. This invitation included the purpose of the study, the procedures used, and the process to collect and secure the data. In the invitation, I informed participants that their participation is voluntary, without compensation, and they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Participants were informed of the benefits of participating in the study. I communicated my intentions to maintain participants' confidentiality and anonymity in the study. Once participants agreed to participate in the study, they were required to respond "I consent" via email, indicating their informed consent to be interviewed and acceptance of the terms of the study.

Throughout the research process, I maintained participants' confidentiality and protected their identities by removing identifiable information and assigning codes to participant data. Electronic data were stored on a personal, password-protected computer and backed up on my OneDrive cloud storage which is password-protected and only accessible to me. I did not store data on paper. By Walden University's policy, all information obtained will be stored for 5 years and then properly destroyed once the 5-year period has ended.

In terms of other ethical issues, I did not conduct this research at the institution where I am employed, so there was no ethical consideration for doing this study within my own work environment. Throughout my professional work, I have not interacted with the institution or potential participants. I did not anticipate any conflicts of interest. Additionally, there were no ethical issues to consider from incentives, as no incentives were provided to participants in this study.

## Summary

I used the qualitative research tradition in this study, as this tradition is ideally suited for understanding participants' experiences about a phenomenon (see Creswell & Creswell, 2020). This research tradition was best suited for my study as my research question was designed to understand participants' experiences about the phenomenon related to tertiary education decision-making behavior. I used a basic qualitative approach to complete this research. The basic qualitative approach was the best approach for my study as I have a more pragmatic and epistemological social constructivist expectation for my study.

I used semistructured interviews to collect the data and a purposive sampling strategy to create a useful sample from the population. Purposeful sampling appeared to be the best option for this study as it allowed me to select from the target population a sampling frame of potential participants who might best provide rich descriptive data related to the research problem, the interview question, and the phenomenon being studied (see Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To analyze data, I used descriptive and process coding methods as my first and second-cycle coding methods, respectively. Descriptive coding is an elemental coding method that assigns basic labels to data and is useful to reveal epistemological questions related to theories of knowing and understanding a phenomenon of interest (Saldaña, 2016). Process coding was used to understand actions in the data that address the nature of participants' actions, situations, and experiences.

I established credibility by developing a rigorous interview protocol that presents the interview question and a few suggestive probes that are aligned with the research question of the study, specific literature references, and identified data characteristics being sought. The alignment of the interview protocol to the research question and supporting extant literature was used to demonstrate transferability in the study. I established dependability and validity through careful interviewing, transcribing, coding, and re-coding of the data. Confirmability was recognized through my use of reflexive journaling to self-assess my personal assumptions, beliefs, and goals. Ethical procedures followed Walden's IRB standards while maintaining the confidentiality of each participant at every stage of the study.

In Chapter 4, I provide descriptions of the setting, demographics, data collection and analysis practices, and evidence of trustworthiness. Discrepant cases will be described, and the results will be presented according to the themes in the analysis. Chapter 4 concludes with a summary of answers to the research question.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding their pursuit of tertiary education at the only local university in Barbados. I explored this phenomenon to understand the factors that influence prospective students' decisions to pursue tertiary education. The study was guided by the following research question: What are Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding pursuing tertiary education? In this chapter, I describe the interview setting, data collection, demographics, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results.

### **Setting**

Participants were asked to select a date and time for the interviews that was convenient to schedule an hour-long meeting via Zoom and Microsoft Teams communication platform. Based on the dates and times selected by the participants, I created a Zoom or Teams meeting and forwarded the invite to each participant. At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the interview protocol (Appendix A). The meeting was audio recorded using the Zoom or Teams platform recording feature and an external recording device. In this study, no organizational conditions influenced participants' experience of the study. As such, no influence in the interpretation of the study results was observed.

### Demographics

A total of 13 participants contributed to the study. Of the 13 participants, eight were female and five were male. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 22 years.

Demographic information on each participant is listed in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Research Participants*

Participants	Gender	Age
1	Male	18
2	Male	18
3	Female	18
4	Female	18
5	Male	18
6	Female	18
7	Female	20
8	Female	18
9	Male	19
10	Male	19
11	Female	18
12	Female	22
13	Female	23

### Data Collection

The data collection process commenced after I received approval from Walden University IRB and from the community college whose students are qualified to enroll at the local tertiary education institution. With the necessary approvals, I requested a participation invitation letter and promotional poster be shared with all final-year students enrolled in associate degree programs at the college. Each potential participant received a consent form that included my contact information along with a disclosure and

explanation of the purpose, participation criteria, risks, consequences, and benefits associated with their making an informed decision to participate. Fourteen participants replied and responded to my email with the words, “I consent.” Once consent was provided, I contacted each participant to set up a date and time to conduct the interview.

In this study, a total of 14 participants were recruited during the data collection period. However, one participant was excluded due to not meeting the inclusion criteria. The interview question guide (Appendix A) was used during each interview session to help maintain focus on the research question, maintain the structure of the process, and capture important researcher notes. Participants were reminded that they would be recorded and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Each interview was conducted virtually using videoconferencing software and was recorded using the software’s recording feature and the recorder on my phone. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. A transcript of each interview was produced by the videoconferencing software and saved as Word files. I transcribed each interview by listening to the audio recording and aligning the audio-recorded responses to the transcript. A digital copy of the transcribed data were sent to each respective interviewee for review. All the data collected were stored on my personal, password-protected computer and backed up on my OneDrive cloud storage, which was password-protected and only accessible to me. The interviews were conducted over 12 weeks. In Chapter 3, I noted my hope to conduct the interviews over 6 weeks; however, interviews were paused as prospective participants were completing exams in May and

some interviews at the end of June were rescheduled owing to the passage of a hurricane. No unusual circumstances were encountered during the course of the actual interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

In this qualitative study, data were collected through semistructured interviews driven by a literature-supported interview protocol. The data collection instrument provided useful data and insights that captured the perceptions of participants regarding the pursuit of tertiary education enrollment decision-making intentions. As data analysis is an iterative process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) and to increase my familiarity with the data, I listened to each interview recording, read each transcript multiple times, and noted my early observations. In Chapter 3, I noted my intention to use the qualitative analysis software NVivo to analyze the collected data; however, I opted to use an Excel spreadsheet.

### **Data Coding**

In data analysis, coding is a strategy used to organize data to identify themes (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I commenced coding data during my opening observations following, which I used the descriptive coding method to segment data into meaningfully labeled topics. The first cycle coding generated a total of 51 codes. The use of descriptive coding resulted in a summary of the main topics contained within the data. This topical summary combined with my field notes related to perceived meanings about the topics provided a useful foundation for category and theme construction.

Next, I performed a second-cycle coding technique called process coding to reflect each participant's process related to tertiary enrollment experiences. In the process

method, I grouped together the descriptive codes to communicate and address the nature of participants' actions or situations (see Saldaña, 2016). The second cycle of coding generated a total of 22 codes. Table 2 illustrates examples of first and second-cycle codes. Similar patterns of coded content were then grouped into categories. Once the categories were identified, I sought to identify the characteristics that distinguished the content of one category from another (see Table 3).

**Table 2**

*First and Second Cycle Codes*

First cycle codes	Second cycle codes
Local Comfort Familiar Social Circles	Preference for Familiarity
Low to middle economic background Financial Support from significant others. Economic Feasibility - local fees cheaper (Government tuition policy) Financial Barriers with Overseas University costs (tuition, housing etc.),	Economic Factors
Mentor Guidance and Family Support - encouragement from parents, family, past teachers etc.	External Motivations
Access to extra-curricular activities	Campus Life
Course Availability and Alignment - Career choice Career Aspirations	Educational and Career Alignment
Career Advancement Job Security	Personal & Professional Growth

**Table 3***Categories and Descriptions*

Category	Description
Financial Considerations	Factors related to the financial aspects of enrolling in tertiary education, including affordability and the financial burden on students and their families.
Expanded Opportunities	The potential for enhanced career prospects and job security that motivates students to pursue further education.
Educational Relevance to Career Goals	The alignment between educational programs and students' career aspirations, which influences their decision to enroll.
Institutional Benefits	The perceived advantages of attending a particular institution, such as its reputation and student life opportunities.
Comfort and Security	Factors related to the emotional and social support systems that help students feel secure and comfortable while pursuing their studies.
Support Systems	The role of family, mentors, teachers, and peers in influencing students' decisions to pursue higher education.
Educational Constraints	Barriers to enrollment, such as information gaps, institutional challenges, logistical issues, and cultural factors.

Lastly, the categories were condensed, merged, or expanded further into subthemes and themes (see Table 4). I identified five emerging themes namely: affordability, career prospects, location, personal agency, and enrollment barriers. Table 5 describes the main themes and subthemes. I found no discrepant cases in the findings that may factor into the analysis. The themes answered the research question in my study: What are Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding pursuing tertiary education?

**Table 4***Summary of Categories, Themes, and Sub-themes*

Categories	Themes	Sub-themes
Financial Considerations	Affordability	Socioeconomic Background
		Financial Burden
Expanded Opportunities	Career Prospects	Career Advancement and Job Security
Educational Relevance to Career Goals		Educational and Career Alignment
Institutional Benefits	Location	Institutional Reputation
		Student Life and Engagement
Comfort and Security	Location	Familiar Environment and Social Network
		Psychological Support
Support Systems	Personal Agency	Family and Mentor Support
		Peer Influence
		Personal Ambition
Educational Constraints	Enrollment Barriers	Personal Well-being
		Information Barriers
		Institutional and Academic Barriers
		Logistical Barriers

**Table 5***Description of Main Themes and Sub-themes*

Theme	Sub-Theme	Description
Affordability	Socio-economic Background	The perceived impact of economic and social background on the participant's ability to afford tertiary education.
	Financial Burden	The perceived financial pressure on the participants' families when considering enrollment in higher education.
Career Prospects	Career Advancement and Job Security	The perceived potential for tertiary education to lead to better job opportunities and increased job security.
	Educational and Career Alignment	How well the local university's program offering aligned with the participant's educational path, career goals, and aspirations.
Location	Institutional Reputation	The perceived prestige and reputation of an institution, which influences students' enrollment decisions.
	Student Life and Engagement	The availability of extracurricular activities and overall campus life, which can attract students to a particular institution.
	Familiar Environment and Social Network	The perceived comfort and security provided by being in a familiar environment, surrounded by a supportive social network.
	Psychological Support	The emotional and mental health support participants perceived to be available to help them manage anxiety and stress.
Personal Agency	Family and Mentor Support	The perceived influence of family members, mentors, teachers in guiding participant's decisions about higher education and their networks.
	Peer Influence	The perceived role of peers in shaping participant's aspirations and decisions regarding tertiary education
	Personal Ambition	Participant's own drive and ambition to achieve their educational and career goals.
	Personal Well-being	The perceived importance of maintaining a balance between personal well-being and academic demands.
Enrollment Barriers	Information Barriers	The perceived challenges faced in accessing the necessary information to make informed decisions about enrollment.
	Institutional and Academic Barriers	The perceived obstacles related to institutional policies, academic requirements, and the availability of desired programs.
	Logistical Barriers	The perceived practical challenges such as transportation, housing, and scheduling that can impede participant's ability to enroll.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

For this study, participant input was needed and valued, as such, gaining participants' trust was critical. Burkholder et al. (2020) described trustworthiness as the degree one can have confidence in the methods used to gather data. Therefore, to enhance trustworthiness, I followed Adler's (2022) advice to provide transparency as a qualitative researcher. To ensure trustworthiness in this research a clear description of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were assessed (see Adler, 2022; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

#### **Credibility**

Credibility refers to how data and data collection instruments are used in a study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As stated in Chapter 3, I developed a rigorous interview protocol that ensured alignment of the interview questions with the research question of the study and literature references. This protocol was designed to provide rich and thick data which ensured that the research question could be logically addressed. The interview protocol ensured consistency across all the interviews.

Transcript reviews were used to ensure credibility. To provide feedback on their transcribed interview, each participant was afforded an opportunity to review their transcripts. No changes were requested by participants. Triangulation was used to increase credibility. I used first and second-cycle coding methods to code analyze data, a strategy used to demonstrate methodological triangulation in this study. Finally, I maintained a reflexive journal to consider my own biases and preconceived notions

related to my actions and understanding toward conducting the study. I recorded notes on the interview protocol to capture my thoughts during the interview.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to whether the outcomes of this study can be transferred to other situations or contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In this qualitative study, I applied a purposeful sampling strategy where 13 participants were interviewed. To ensure variation, I included participants who represented different genders during the purposive selection of participants. Additionally, I enhanced transferability in this study by using a rigorous interview protocol aligned to the research question via the use of carefully interpreted supporting material from the extant literature.

### **Dependability**

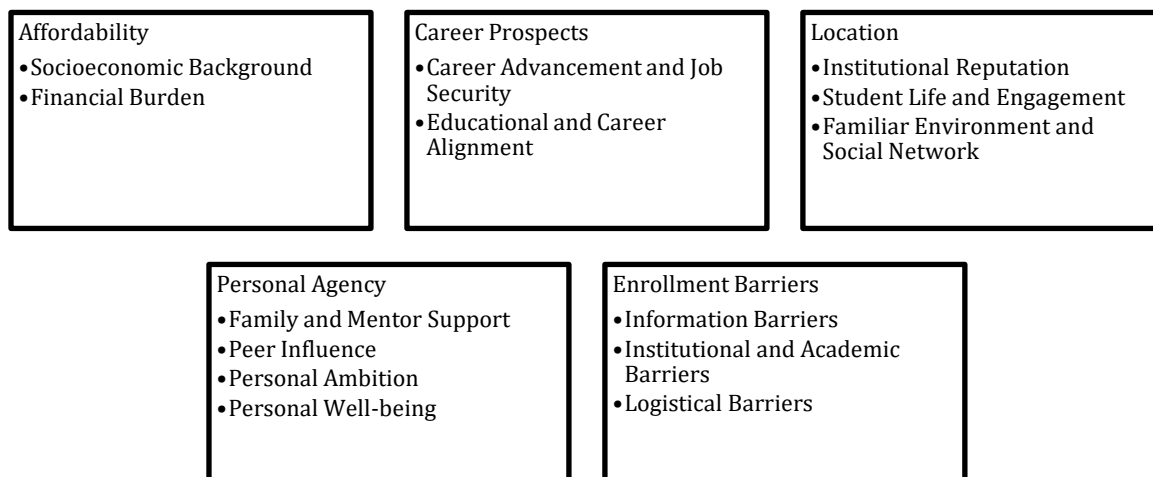
Dependability refers to the stability, reliability, and consistency of the data (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To establish dependability, I carefully aligned my research problem with the purpose of the study, research question, and conceptual framework. This alignment is addressed through the interpretation of the findings within the context of the literature review and the application of the conceptual framework. Dependability was also established with an audit trail (see Wolf, 2003). I have provided details of my participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and rationale for codes, categories, and themes to support an audit trail. Additionally, I carefully interviewed, transcribed, coded, and re-coded the data to aid in obtaining dependability and validity (see Patton, 2015).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability describes the extent findings and interpretations are grounded in the literature and free from biases or preconceptions of the researcher (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In this study, confirmability was recognized through reflexivity. I used reflexive journaling to self-assess my assumptions, beliefs, and goals, bracketing them as necessary (see Ortlipp, 2008). Reflection, in addition to reflexivity, is also important to confirmability; therefore, I kept a field notes journal detailing what occurred throughout the data collection and analysis process. In this manner, my journaling provided a research trail (see Ortlipp, 2008).

### **Results**

The results from this basic qualitative study were derived from the data collected during the interviews with the 13 participants who were eligible to enroll at the local tertiary education institution. The following research question guided the data collection: What are Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding pursuing tertiary education? All 13 respondents confirmed their interest in pursuing tertiary education. Five themes emerged from the interviews. Figure 2 represents the research themes and subthemes.

**Figure 2***Research Themes and Sub-themes***Theme 1: Affordability**

Of the 13 participants, 11 provided insights on the ways affordability influences their decision to pursue tertiary education. Data revealed instances where prospective students considered the financial aspects that influence their decisions to pursue tertiary education. It included considerations of socioeconomic backgrounds, the financial burden of higher education, and how these factors impact their ability to afford tuition and related costs.

***Socioeconomic Background***

Socioeconomic background refers to the perceived impact of economic and social background on the participant's ability to afford tertiary education. 10 out of 11 participants mentioned issues related to cheaper local tertiary education fees, high overseas university costs, low-middle-income households, and other financial barriers. P1 explained "Well, I come from a lower to middle-class society [household] and currently I

don't have a job. So, most of my, I would say fees, are covered by my mom and other close sources that try to help me, so while looking out for them and they are having my best interest at heart. I think it's best that I compromise and try to find the most, you know, feasible institution in terms of their financial support. So being that this is a local university, their fees on local students are way cheaper than those of international students". P7 noted that "it's just my mother providing for the household, so it would be a lot easier on her". P9 also cited similar household income challenge by noting that "I come from a low-income household, so being able to fund certain things is kind of difficult. So, I would also have a job or something that can generate an income while studying, which is kind of hard."

P3 commented that "As a Barbadian, the biggest factor is that the tuition is free for us. So, that would be the major thing that drives me towards looking at the local university as my first option". P4 agreed and added that "with the Government making education available at a reasonable price or cost, it would encourage anybody to further education". This comment was supported by P2 who compared local costs to the cost of overseas tuition with the statement "In terms of the economic standpoint, going to university here locally is far cheaper because I was given the opportunity to also go overseas as well, but tuition overseas is quite expensive".

### ***Financial Burden***

Financial burden refers to the perceived financial pressure on the families of prospective students when considering enrollment in higher education. Six out of the 11 respondents noted issues related to the financial burden on them or their families. P2

noted that “tuition overseas is quite expensive, so it will also be like a [financial] burden if I was to go overseas.”. The assertion of a financial burden was supported by P4 who noted “when it [tertiary education] is reasonable it would make learning easy. I don't have to stress about how I can pay college fees. I don't have to stress about being in debt as a student”.

## **Theme 2: Career Prospects**

Of the 13 participants, 11 shared insights on how the availability of career prospects influences their decision to pursue tertiary education. Data revealed instances where prospective students considered the career prospects and its impact on their personal and professional growth. Prospective students also considered the course/program availability and its alignment to future careers are influencing their decisions to pursue tertiary education.

### ***Career Advancement and Job Security***

Career advancement and job security explore the potential for tertiary education to lead to better job opportunities and increased job security. Of the 11 participants who cited career prospects as an influencer of their tertiary decision-making, 10 provided descriptions related to career advancement and job security. P3 noted “I actually like studying, and for my career path right now, which I'm looking to be maybe like a university professor at some point which might cause me to go to the highest level as well as the fact that you can't really get any sustainable job without a higher education.’ This theme was supported by P6 who explained “If I were to just keep my associate degree at [the local community college], I wouldn't have more job opportunities than if I were to

get my bachelor's in the same degree [at the local tertiary institution].” P11 illustrated the career advancement and the impact on earnings by stating “the higher level of degrees you have, the more money you would earn. So, I would like to get to the top of the line so that I can earn more money so I can have nice things, help my family, travel the world, and that’s it.”

### ***Educational and Career Alignment***

This subtheme examined how well the local university’s program offering aligned with the participant’s educational path, career goals, and aspirations. Seven of these 11 participants spoke of the availability of the programs being offered and its alignment to their careers. Four of these seven respondents cited the unavailability of the program they preferred to pursue. For example, P5 explained that “I wouldn’t enroll at the [local tertiary education institution], because as far as my research went, there's no journalism course being offered there. And if there was a course being offered then I would be more keen to enroll in that respect.” P6 supported this statement with the response “I did a language that's not really offered at the [local tertiary education institution] ...I did Spanish and German [at the local community college]. I wanted to progress in German, and now I can't as it is not offered at the local tertiary education institution, unless I do it, like out of my own free time”. P6 added “It would have made it so much easier to apply if it had both Spanish and German as a major. I have friends from the language center at the local community college who were deterred from it, because the programs that they offer at the local community college are Spanish, French, Italian, and German. They don't have Italian at [local tertiary education institution] as well.” P8 shared that “Although I've

chosen to go to the local tertiary education institution, the course I've chosen to pursue is not the one I wanted to do.”

### **Theme 3: Location**

Location emerged as one of the top factors influencing prospective student decision-making intention to pursue tertiary education. This theme addresses the significance of the institution's location in influencing students' enrollment decisions. It includes the institution's reputation, the quality of student life and engagement opportunities, and the comfort and security provided by being in a familiar environment with an established social network. It also touches on the psychological support available to students by having a convenient location, which can affect their sense of well-being. 10 of the 13 respondents cited location as an influencer on their tertiary education decision-making intentions.

#### ***Institutional Reputation***

Institutional reputation refers to the perceived prestige and reputation of an institution, which influences students' enrollment decisions. Participants considered the perceived reputation the local institution holds as observed by P8 who shared that the local tertiary institution “is taken seriously when it comes to university degrees here within the island. Most people do acknowledge them as an official degree”. P10 noted that the local tertiary education institution “is very highly rated as one of the top universities in the Caribbean so other foreign people, whether it is Caribbean or international, may come here and that could hinder my acceptance, especially if they have better grades or stuff than me.” This competitive academic environment statement

was echoed by P9 who declared “If I fail any courses [at the local community college] that means I would have to go back and redo them, so that would inhibit me from entering the [local tertiary education institution]”.

### ***Student Life and Engagement***

Student life and engagement refers to the availability of extracurricular activities and overall campus life, which can attract students to a particular institution. P5 explained that “the existence of a UCCF club will be a huge draw factor. UCCF stands for University and College Christian Fellowship. I, as a follower of Christ, would be more inclined to apply at the local university, if that is still an active organization within the University”. The accessibility to pursue extracurricular activities was supported by P8 who noted “I am an avid part of my archery team. Yes, I don't think the local university offers archery, but since it is on the island I can continue with my current team, while pursuing studies at the local university”. Overall, P3 stated “I find that living in Barbados in a general sense, you're not exposed very well to diversity. So, I'm definitely looking forward to going to the [local tertiary education institution], because I know that they have a very regionally diverse population there”.

### ***Familiar Environment and Social Network***

Five of the participants mentioned familiar environments and social networks as a factor influencing their decision-making intention to pursue tertiary education locally. Familiar environment and social network refer to the perceived comfort and security provided by being in a familiar environment, surrounded by a supportive social network. P12 explained that “enrolling at the local university is just more convenient for me

because it is in my hometown country Barbados. I wouldn't want to travel. I don't see myself traveling and studying because it just intimidating to go to a different country entirely to study. It's more convenient, as I live here. It's comfortable, it's generally easier. I have my own support team over here - my family. If I do study overseas, I don't have anybody with me. So, it's just generally easier here." This comment was similar to the comment from P3 who declared "it is easier to stay in Barbados for my undergraduate [degree], because I have a support system here, and I also have the privilege of living close enough to the [local] university". P2 added that one thing that would make it easy to enroll at the local university was "the fact that the majority of the people that I already know here will also be going to the same university". P1 added enrolling locally "is like my safe spot, and I don't really have to step outside my comfort zone. In terms of being most at ease and not having to worry about anxiety problems. I would be able to find a sense of comfort faster rather than if I were to travel abroad [to pursue tertiary education]".

#### **Theme 4: Personal Agency**

Personal agency delves into the role of individual and external influences in shaping students' educational choices. It considers the impact of family and mentor support, teacher influence, peer relationships, and students' own ambitions. It also encompasses students' efforts to balance their well-being with academic demands and the autonomy they feel in making educational decisions. All of the 13 respondents cited support for personal agency influencing their tertiary education decision-making intentions.

### ***Family and Mentor Support***

This subtheme explores the perceived influence of family members, mentors, and teachers in guiding participant's decisions about higher education and their networks. Nine of the respondents identified their family, mentors, or teachers as an influence. While participants perceived they had control over the decision to enroll, they also expressed support from family, mentors, or teachers. For e.g., P11 explained “it's better to get an education now that you are young and the brain is working fully and have your parents’ support, because, if I wait too late and my parents are retired, they may not have enough money to, you know, help me out to get there, to the local university.” P10 declared that “Caribbean parents would give you an option – either you do school or you look for work.”

### ***Peer Influence***

This subtheme explores the perceived role of peers and peer relationships in shaping participants’ aspirations and decisions regarding tertiary education. P2 described how friends might be influencing the decision to enroll by noting “I think that the friends aspect is me feeling more comfortable to ease into a new environment and not have to worry about how difficult it could be, because the friends, even though you all are going on this new journey together just having them along with you, makes it a bit more easier.” P2 elaborated further that “having friends around even though universities are painted as it can be stressful and it can worry you, I feel like just being surrounded by people that you know will make you feel you'll have a good time regardless is another driving factor to for me wanting to go to the local university.”

### ***Personal Ambition***

Personal ambition refers to participant's own drive and ambition to achieve their educational and career goals. 10 of the 13 respondents believe that they have control of the decision to enroll or not enroll at the local university. P13 noted that "I believe I have control of my decision to not to enroll." P12 was affirmative in the decision to enroll noting that "Yeah, it would be my decision [to enroll]. It's not anybody else's decision. Yes, it's my decision to make on what I want to enroll in at the local university."

### ***Personal Well-being***

Personal well-being describes the perceived importance of maintaining a balance between personal well-being and academic demands. P1 stated "I want to be able to manage my life in university and at home at the same time. I'm older now and I'm entering the adult world. So, while I'll be studying, I don't want to be like fully consumed with my studies. I still want to have like a source of income. So, that's what's on my mind like most of the time trying to be able to manage my time and pace myself. You know balance the world of work and studies at the same time and be diligent while doing it."

### **Theme 5: Enrollment Barriers**

This theme examined the various obstacles that may prevent prospective students from enrolling in higher education. It includes barriers related to access to information, institutional and academic challenges, logistical issues such as transportation and housing, and cultural factors that might influence prospective students' decisions. These barriers can significantly impact whether students are able to pursue their desired

educational paths. Seven of the respondents cited enrollment barriers that may influence their decisions to enroll at the local tertiary education institution.

### ***Information Barriers***

Information barriers explore the perceived challenges faced in accessing the necessary information to make informed decisions about tertiary education enrollment. Two respondents shared insights to support the informational gaps that may be influencing their decision to enroll. P2 shared that “recently, I've been finding out that if you really want to go overseas and study a degree you would need to like, pursue pure math and a math-based subject which I wasn't aware of beforehand. So, I think if I knew that I would have done the math, and I probably would have opted to go overseas instead of staying here locally. So, I think the fact that I didn't have that piece of information at the time is, and that was all of my control, is the reason that I'm really focusing all going to the local university”. P6 added that the application process can be difficult as “the local university's website is pretty hard to navigate through. I had to ask one of my friends, who is a student at the local university to help me navigate the website”

### ***Institutional and Academic Barriers***

This subtheme looks at the perceived obstacles related to institutional policies, academic requirements, and the availability of desired programs. Three respondents shared insights on the institutional barriers that may be limiting their intent to pursue tertiary education locally. P4 noted that “colleges can be very unreasonable at times in terms of the things that they want, the way they want it, and by the time they want it by. And I don't know the encouragement or the attitude of the tutors, if it is good, you will

feel like, yeah, I love to come to school every day, like to interact with my classmates and my teachers. Then, if it's not good, then they will be like 'these teachers ain't care for you' you know." P13 noted some gaps in local tutoring and explained that "tutoring overseas is a lot more practical. Yes, it's theory as well, but their theory and practical is mixed. Not saying that here [locally] it isn't mixed as well, but here they tend to stress more on the theory aspect than the practical aspect of things." P8 shared the limited resources and opportunities for collaboration locally compared to other international institutions, for e.g., there are some overseas universities that would have allowed for me to collaborate with museums as well as artists present in the field at the time that would have previously attended the university, and they would have more equipment to allow me to learn more techniques etc."

### ***Logistical Barriers***

Logistical barriers refer to the perceived practical challenges such as transportation, housing, and scheduling that can impede a participant's ability to enroll. Three respondents shared their insights. P5 explained "I would say that transportation is a huge issue, because the people I live with now may not be able to take me, though I have my driver's license, I do not currently have a vehicle. So, the commute from my house to the university, and from the University to home will be a huge problem." P6 supported this transportation barrier and added that "there's one bus, but it only passes through where I live. And some people don't have the opportunity to access to that bus."

## Summary

In this chapter, I analyzed the data for patterns, categories, emerging themes, and subthemes. The purpose of this study was to explore Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding their pursuit of tertiary education at the only local university in Barbados. The following research question guided the data collection: What are Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding pursuing tertiary education? I identified five emerging themes: affordability, career prospects, location, personal agency, and enrollment barriers. Each theme provided a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in the decision-making process for tertiary education. Affordability considers the socioeconomic backgrounds, the financial burden of higher education, and how these factors impact the ability of prospective students to afford tuition and related tertiary education costs. Career prospects considers how the course/program availability and its alignment to future careers are influencing student decisions to pursue tertiary education. Location addresses the significance of the institution's location in influencing students' enrollment decisions. Personal agency delves into the role of individual and external influences in shaping students' educational choices. Enrollment barriers considers the various obstacles that may prevent prospective students from enrolling in higher education.

In Chapter 5, I restate the purpose and nature of the study. Then, I compare the study findings with the peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2. I explain the findings in the context of the conceptual framework. I describe the limitations and

recommendations for future research. Lastly, I discuss the positive social change implications of the study and provide a conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding their pursuit of tertiary education at the only local university in Barbados. Qualitative research traditions are ideally suited for understanding participants' experiences with a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). There is a gap in the knowledge regarding the phenomenon of decision-making intention of tertiary education enrollment in small states which is manifested in a gap in the current literature as well. Using a qualitative method, I explored prospective student perceptions about the influences on their decision regarding pursuing tertiary education in Barbados, a small island developing state.

I conducted this study to understand the factors that influence prospective students' decisions to pursue tertiary education. Using a semistructured interview protocol with 13 participants, I sought to uncover the perceptions regarding the pursuit of tertiary education. I collected and transcribed data from the individual interviews. I analyzed the interview data by hand-coding each interview for emerging themes, which formed the basis for the findings. The key findings illustrated the importance of affordability, career prospects, location, personal agency, and enrollment barriers as key factors influencing Barbadian students' decision-making to pursue tertiary education. In this chapter, I describe the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implications for positive social change.

## **Interpretation of the Findings**

The reasoned action approach (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015) served as the conceptual framework for this study and as a reference to interpret the findings. The reasoned action approach was chosen for its relevance to understanding decision-making intentions about enacting a behavior, such as the behavior of enrolling in a tertiary education institution. The key concept of the reasoned action approach are background factors (internal/student characteristics and external/ institutional characteristics) that influence a set of beliefs which, in this study, was applied to determine factors that influence potential students' decisions to enroll in the local tertiary education institution. Prior studies, such as Seddig et al. (2022), Sheeran and Conner (2017), and Zhuang et al. (2021), have illustrated how factors influence the intention to enact behavior and have used intention as a proxy for behavior. By integrating this conceptual framework, I explored prospective student perceptions about the influences on their decision regarding pursuing tertiary education. I interpreted the findings in the context of the conceptual framework.

### **Theme 1: Affordability**

The theme of affordability emerged prominently in the study as participants highlighted the role it plays in their decision to pursue tertiary education. Researchers have found that potential student enrollees often weigh the cost of tertiary education study, access to financial aid, and the financial risks, costs, and benefits when selecting a university (Abbas et al., 2021; Kim & Nuñez, 2013). Affordability considerations included factors such as socioeconomic background, the financial burden of higher education, and costs of both local and overseas tuition.

The subtheme of socioeconomic background emerged as crucial with participants from low to middle-income households indicating the financial strain on their families to absorb the costs of funding their tertiary education. The financial burden subtheme also emerged as important. Participants expressed that the tuition fees at the local tertiary education institution were free for Barbadian students, making it more feasible to pursue local education. Conversely, participants noted that high overseas tuition costs were a barrier, and the financial burden concern affected their decisions about whether to study abroad or pursue tertiary education locally. Additionally, participants consistently articulated that financial burdens, whether present or potential, heavily influence their tertiary education selection behavior. This underscores the critical role that affordability plays in their tertiary education decision-making. The findings of this study suggest that reducing the financial burden of tertiary education through affordable costs, government support, part-time job opportunities, or scholarships can positively influence decision-making to pursue tertiary education.

Research indicated that a fear of debt was an important determinant in pursuing tertiary education for persons of lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). As such, there is a higher representation of students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds in more prestigious tertiary education institutions (Tsiplakides, 2018). Access to finance and financial aid is critical to providing access to tertiary education opportunities, particularly for low-income student enrollees and those in developing countries (Davis et al., 2013)—an assertion supported by Panigrahi (2015),

who noted that a lack of financial aid has the potential to limit selection behavior while increasing inequality in access to tertiary education.

### **Theme 2: Career Prospects**

In line with the peer review literature in Chapter 2 (for e.g., Abbas et al., 2021; Ilgan et al., 2018; Munisamy et al., 2014), the career prospects theme emerged as a top factor influencing participants' decision-making intention to pursue tertiary education. The data emerging from this study suggest that prospective students are concerned with the role tertiary education plays in facilitating their personal and professional growth, with an emphasis on career advancement and job security, and the alignment of program offerings with their career aspirations. The career advancement and job security subtheme signified participants' recognition that tertiary education is a pathway to better career prospects and job stability. Specifically, participants emphasized the relationship between tertiary education and improved job opportunities. Participants believed that improved job opportunities can potentially lead to higher income which may enable them to support their families and improve their quality of life. The educational and career alignment subtheme underscored the availability of programs and its alignment with participants' career goals. Participants emphasized the importance of finding degree programs that were aligned to their intended career paths. Some participants cited the absence of their preferred program at the local institution as a barrier to pursuing education locally, which consequently limits their ability to achieve their intended career goal. The findings illustrate that career prospect is a top factor and plays a critical role in the decision-

making intention to pursue tertiary education with program limitations posing a barrier to enrollment for some prospective students.

Overall, participants viewed tertiary education as critical for career and economic progression. Munisamy et al. (2014) and Ilgan et al. (2018) identified career prospects as one of the key factors in the planned behavior of students selecting a higher education institution in Malaysia and Turkey respectively. Abbas et al. (2021) identified the career factor as critical in the selection of a higher education institution for international students studying in the UK and Germany.

### **Theme 3: Location**

In the complex tertiary education decision-making intention process, location emerged as one of the top factors. This theme encompasses the geographical proximity of the institution, its reputation, student life and engagement opportunities, and the psychological comfort, support, and security associated with a familiar environment and established social networks. This finding was similar to the findings by Nuseir & El Refae (2021) and Simões and Soares (2010) who noted that geographical proximity was the key factor for selecting a higher education institution in the UAE and Portugal respectively.

The perceived prestige and reputation of an institution play a critical role in enrollment decisions. Participants valued the credibility of the local tertiary education institution and recognized its strong standing in Barbados and the Caribbean region. Research indicated institutional reputation was a top factor influencing student selection behavior in Germany and the UK (Abbas et al., 2021) and in Zimbabwe (Garwe, 2016).

Student life and engagement, including the availability of extracurricular activities, contribute to an institution's appeal and subsequent selection. Participants noted that the availability of clubs and student organizations enhances their interest in enrolling locally. A recent study by Sá (2023) supported student perception of extracurricular activities and other forms of out-of-classroom involvement as critical to their educational experience. The comfort and support of a familiar environment, combined with existing social networks, emerged as an influential factor influencing decision-making intention to pursue tertiary education locally. Participants conveyed a preference for the local tertiary education institution, citing familiarity, having a local support system, and a sense of security. Research from Nuseir & El Refae (2021) and Strayhorn et al. (2013) illustrated that the proximity of the university to students' home or work was a main factor in selecting a university in the United Arab Emirates and historical black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States of America.

#### **Theme 4: Personal Agency**

The theme of personal agency emerged as an important factor in students' decision-making intention regarding pursuing tertiary education, capturing the role of individual motivations and external influences. This theme explores how students navigate tertiary education selection through family and mentor support, peer influences, personal ambition, and personal well-being. Overall, participants expressed a strong sense of personal ambition and autonomy over the decision to pursue tertiary education, highlighting personal agency in decision-making. While participants perceived they had control over the decision to enroll, family members, mentors, and teachers play a critical

role is shaping potential students' choices about tertiary education. Participants expressed various levels of support including guidance, financial, or emotional support that they receive from these individuals and how this support enhances their decision to enroll locally. Peers also play a significant role in shaping participants' decisions regarding pursuing tertiary education. Participants typically cited the encouragement to transition to tertiary studies and companionship while pursuing tertiary studies makes the decision to enroll more enjoyable and encouraging. Finally, balancing personal well-being and academic demands emerged as another significant factor in deciding whether to pursue tertiary education locally. Participants aimed to maintain a healthy balance between studies and campus life with an emphasis on self-care and time-management. The research supports personal agency as a critical factor influencing student selection of a tertiary institution. For e.g., Abbas et al. (2021) found that parents and friends were the main factors influencing student selection of a tertiary institution while Davis et al. (2013) found that the family was the main factor influencing student selection of a tertiary institution.

### **Theme 5: Enrollment Barriers**

The theme of enrollment barriers explores the obstacles that may hinder prospective students from enrolling in higher education, focusing on information access, institutional and academic requirements, and logistical challenges. These barriers appear to limit potential students' perception of the feasibility of pursuing tertiary education. Prospective students cited information barriers they encountered in obtaining crucial information to make informed enrollment decisions locally or internationally.

Institutional and academic barriers were expressed by participants as factor that may limit their decision to enroll in tertiary education program. This barrier includes issues such as rigid institutional policies, academic requirements, and limited program offerings.

Moreover, participants cited concern with the competitive academic enrolment standards of local and international institutions and how this might affect their eligibility for entry.

Logistical barriers pertain to practical challenges such as transportation, housing, and scheduling that may hinder a prospective students' ability to attend classes consistently and thus enroll in a tertiary education program. Research from Eckhardt et al. (2017)

indicated that a lack of knowledge and advice about tertiary education application processes presented a barrier for refugees seeking to pursue tertiary education in Europe.

While reducing information asymmetries may lead to more efficient tertiary education selection, Herbaut and Geven (2020) explained that information sessions should not only include costs, curricula, and reputation, but also personalized assistance and guidance with the application process.

### **The Reasoned Action Approach**

The theoretical lens allowed for a detailed exploration of how external and internal factors shape tertiary educational choices. Despite limitations, the study highlights the relevance of the reasoned action approach in guiding future research and strategies that may improve access to tertiary education in the local context. The literature review supported the relevance of the reasoned action approach in understanding tertiary education decision-making, particularly in the context of affordability, career prospects, location, personal agency, and enrollment barriers.

According to Fishbein and Ajzen (2015), the stronger the students' intention to enroll, the more likely they will do so, as long as the decision is within their control. The reasoned action approach suggests that intention is the best predictor of behavior and the stronger the intention, the greater the likelihood that the behavior will be enacted (Ajzen, 2002, 2020; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2015; Sadaf & Gezer, 2020). The results illustrated that participants perceived that they had control over enacting the behavior or the decision to enroll, as described in the personal agency result above.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation was the challenge of completing the interviews process over a 6-week period due to participants having final exams and preparations for a storm. Once those events were passed, I conducted the remainder of interviews with potential students. Potential limitations related to data collection were addressed by utilizing digital audio recording and speech-to-text transcription feature of the video-conferencing platform used to conduct the interviews. The sample size in this study was 13 participants, which was sufficient for a study of this nature; however, the findings cannot be generalized to populations that vary from the sample used in this study. Potential limitations related to research design and uncertainty about the study's transferability to other educational settings, were addressed through the use of a carefully constructed interview protocol including probes, which guided the interviews. Interviews were scheduled around convenient times provided by the participants. I did not work at the research site, as such, any potential bias was reduced since I had no connection with potential participants.

### **Recommendations**

This qualitative study explored Barbadian student perceptions about the influences on their decisions regarding their pursuit of tertiary education at the only local university in Barbados. The current study mainly focused on prospective students at the lone community college. This research scope could be broadened for future research by including other pre-tertiary level institutions where prospective university students may attend. Future research may also consider other small island developing states to ascertain if there are any similarities or differences on prospective student perceptions regarding pursuing tertiary education in other county contexts. This recommendation is because of the lack of generalizability of the results to other contexts and settings.

Another recommendation is to replicate this study using a quantitative lens. A quantitative study could be used to determine if there's a relationship between variables such as gender and the factors influencing student choice, if one factor carries greater significance over another, or relationships between socio-economic background and factors that influence tertiary education choice in small states. Future research could also explore current student perceptions about the influences on their decisions to remain enrolled at the local tertiary education institution in Barbados.

### **Implications**

This qualitative study may have implications for positive social change in the higher education leadership, policy, and management landscape in Barbados. As a result of the social contract between the government of Barbados and Barbadian students, there appears to be a concerted effort by policymakers on the importance of investing in

education. The implications of the findings may assist the government in repositioning funding models that include both state and individual contributions that enable access, while maintaining high levels of human development, productivity, and overall global competitiveness (as described in Bak, 2019; Marjanović & Križman Pavlović, 2018).

A positive social change implication may be observed by tertiary education institutions in Barbados and other small island states and small countries in terms of their program offering, costs, location, student engagement opportunities, future career prospects and barriers that may limit access, which may contribute to increasing student enrollment at local tertiary institutions. The implication for social change on individuals and their families can be observed in personal agency and increase in future earnings, an assertion supported by Eide and Showalter (2010). Increased earning potential can lead to graduates having a greater ability to care for themselves and their families.

### **Conclusion**

Globally, the factors that influence students' decision-making intention to pursue tertiary education studies have been discussed, especially given the importance of the tertiary education sector to the development of a nation. Through this study, I explored the perspectives of Barbadian prospective students regarding the factors that influence their decision to pursue tertiary education studies. The findings from this study revealed a range of factors that influence students' decision-making behavior. The results may assist in efforts by the local university to recruit new students to the university and has implications for retaining current students. Increased tertiary enrollment and completion rates may foster individual prosperity, and consequently contribute to economic growth,

development, and global competitiveness of small states. Acknowledging limitations, the study recommends future research, especially studies that explore diverse settings.

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## Appendix A: Interview Question Guide

## Interview Question Guide

Name	
Email	
Introduction Script	<p>Hello. Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. This research focuses on the perceptions regarding enrolling at the local tertiary education institution.</p> <p>To assist my notetaking, I would like to record our conversation today as indicated in my previous email. Do I have your permission to proceed? As a reminder the audio recordings will be maintained securely for a period of 5 years. You may stop the interview at any time. The interview should last for approximately 60 minutes. OK? Let's get started.</p>
Interview Question:	Researcher Notes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Have you considered pursuing tertiary education studies?</li> <li>2. What do you perceive are the things that are influencing your decision-making intention regarding pursuing (or not pursuing) tertiary education after completing your community college certification? Probe: What are the circumstances that would make it easy to enroll or prevent you from enrolling at the local university after completing community college?</li> <li>3. Describe how these things you mentioned earlier, are influencing your decision to enroll/not enroll at the local tertiary education institution?</li> </ol>	

<p>Probe: What do you believe is the reason for this factor influencing your decision to enroll/not enroll?  How does this factor influence your decision to enroll/not enroll at the local tertiary education institution?  Why would these factors enable you to enroll? Why would these factors prevent you from enrolling?</p>	
<p>4. Do you believe that you have control over the decision to enroll or not enroll at the local university?</p>	
<p>5. So, we've discussed your perceptions regarding the pursuit of tertiary education, what else comes to mind when you think of enrolling at the local tertiary education institution?</p>	
<p>6. What is your gender?  7. How old are you?</p>	
<p>Closing Script</p>	<p>Thank you for sharing your experience with me today. Do you have any additional thoughts you'd like to share?</p>
	<p>As we close the interview, if you have any additional thoughts, you may contact me via my Walden email. Once the study is completed and published, I will forward a link to review the report.</p>
<p>Reflections</p>	<p>To be recorded immediately after the interview ends.  Were the interview pace and timing appropriate?  Describe your feelings during the interview?  What could be improved for the next interview?</p>

## Appendix B: Letter to Participants who were not Shortlisted

Hello,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study which seeks to explore Barbados students' perceptions regarding pursuing tertiary. All active participant slots are filled, but I would like to hold your name as a reserve should a case arise where another participant is needed. I sincerely appreciate all your efforts.