

Global Perspectives of Socio-economic Status Determinants and Academic Performance in Higher Education: A Systematic Review

Dawit Tefera¹, Berhanu Abera² and Daniel Desta³

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Abstract: This seminar paper aims to conduct a systematic literature review on global perspectives of socio-economic determinants and academic achievement in higher education institutions (HEIs). To this effect, the reviewers consulted three databases, namely ERIC (n= 3, 671), Google Scholar (n= 2, 460), and Taylor and Francis (n= 1, 267), and obtained a total of 7,398 articles in the initial searches. Of these, 7,190 articles were excluded using automation tools, and 203 records were eliminated by the reviewers strictly following pre-established eligibility criteria. Finally, five studies were included in the review from 18 records that were assessed for eligibility. The excluded records were two duplicates, seven quantitative records, four records that studied subjects other than higher education, two meta-analyses, and three systematic reviews. The reviewers used backward snowballing to ensure literature saturation and a summative content analysis method to determine the global perspectives of socio-economic status (SES) determinants in higher education (HE) and to understand the relationship between SES and AP in higher education. This method enabled the reviewers to understand the underlying meanings and track trends. The findings revealed that contemporary HEIs are perceived as instruments of economic development, which is the predominant perspective on higher education. In addition, the findings indicated that socio-economic and political factors hamper this core mission of the HEIs. The findings also revealed that the level of income, educational status, social status or class, and the university internal environment itself are the most dominant determinants of SES in HEIs. It was also found that SES affects students' choice of university and selection of programme and has a moderate impact on higher education students' academic performance, because students' motivation and determination for a purpose-driven life are boosted as a result of maturity and resilience. Besides, the literature has noted that global flows such as internationalization, AI, mental health, institutional instability, center-periphery logic, or attracting global talent, and school-level socio-economic factors are some of the dominant socio-economic status determinants that affect the academic performance of students in higher education.

Keywords: Globalization, Socio-economic Status, Global Perspectives, Internationalization

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¹ PhD Candidate, Department of Educational Planning & Management, College of Education and Language Studies, Addis Ababa University, Email: teferadawit114@gmail.com

² Associate Professor, Testing Center, Addis Ababa University, Email: berhanu.abera6@aau.edu.et

³ Associate Professor, Department of Special Needs and Inclusive Education, College of Education and Language Studies, Addis Ababa University, Email: dandestad@gmail.com

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Immense efforts have been made by individual scholars to study determinants of socio-economic status (SES) in higher education. In addition, scholars such as Felipe et al. (2020), Rodríguez et al. (2019), and others have conducted a systematic review on socio-economic status and academic performance (AP). However, to the knowledge of the reviewers, it is probably the case that an article review has not been conducted in the last five years on global perspectives of socio-economic determinants in higher education using summative content analysis.

In this systematic review, the phrase global perspectives refer to universal trends and interconnected ecosystems that could influence higher education. It also refers to the manifestation of systematic economic inequalities and their impacts across different regions. In light of this, Knight (2008) stated that globalization refers to the flow of ideas, resources, people, economy, values, and technology across borders.

The literature provides contradictory views regarding the determinants of academic performance in HE. For instance, Bailey and Dynarski (2011) argued that family income is a significant determinant of students' academic success, whereas Yigiter (2025) claimed that school-level socio-economic factors often outweigh individual family income in predicting academic success. On the contrary, Marginson and Rhoades (2002) argued that students' success is tied to global flows such as internationalization, national policies, local or institutional culture, SES, and leadership. In the same fashion, Altbach (2016) claimed that SES is a primary determinant of higher education (HE), describing it as a center-periphery logic where Western universities attract global talent and resources at the expense of developing nations.

Despite the existence of some differences, the scholars noted that global perspectives in HE refer to the impact of such flows on students' academic performance. In this regard, Marginson and Rhoades (2002) stated that global economic policies such as austerity or neoliberalism affect national funding, which in turn impacts local learning resources that affect academic performance, but not family income.

On top of these, Kitil et al. (2025) suggested the need to move toward context-specific activation models and further research on SES and academic achievement gaps reshaped by new global flows such as AI, mental health, and institutional instability. Therefore, conducting a systematic literature review on the global perspectives of SES determinants and academic performance in HE could be worth doing, and the findings could contribute to the continuum of scientific community efforts.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Scholars have studied cross-cutting issues and their impacts on education in general, and their effect on students' academic performance (AP) in particular. For instance, Nagaraju et al. (2019) conducted a systematic literature review and identified six major variables that determine SES. They also state that income, expenditure, poverty, indebtedness, health, and education expenditures are main status indicators.

Similarly, Hernandez et al. (2019) suggested that SES is measured through education, occupation, income, home resources, and neighborhood resources. Conversely, they added that achievement, competencies, and persistence are the variables used to measure academic performance in higher education. They further asserted that a systematic review conducted on socio-economic status and academic performance in higher education revealed that prior academic achievement, university experience, and work status were more strongly

related to academic performance than SES. Finally, they concluded that there was a weak positive relationship between SES and academic performance in higher education.

Likewise, Felipeet et al. (2020) stated that prior academic achievement, university experience, and work status are more strongly related to academic performance than SES. Contrary to the above findings, Munir et al. (2023) highlighted that socio-economic position appears to affect academic performance and suggested a focused treatment for low-income students.

Although the aforementioned and other studies have explored the relationship between SES and AP, the global perspectives of higher education determinants of SES and AP need to be studied thoroughly because higher education study is a different phenomenon that requires intensive investigation, since it is affected by different factors such as students' maturity, the shift from pedagogy to andragogy and heutagogy, and emerging technologies. Besides, to the reviewers' knowledge, the global perspective of socio-economic determinants in higher education has not been adequately studied.

The reviewers claim that the dominant determinants of socio-economic status that might impact higher education students' academic performance should be discovered through a systematic review. In this regard, Hernández et al. (2019) recommended that the relationship between SES and AP in higher education still deserves a comprehensive examination.

1.3. Objective of the Review

This systematic review aimed to explore the global perspectives of socio-economic status determinants in higher education institutions. In this regard, this systematic literature review aimed to explore global

perspectives of socio-economic status, dominant determinants of socio-economic status, and the impacts of socio-economic factors on students' academic success in higher education.

1.4. Research Questions

The reviewers answered two basic questions intended to address the objective set in this systematic literature review.

1. What are the dominant global perspectives of socio-economic status in higher education?
2. Does socio-economic status affect the academic achievement of students in higher education?

1.5. Significance of the Review

This systematic review may add to the body of knowledge by examining the global perspectives of socio-economic status in higher education. It also shows the way forward for higher education institutions' decision-makers, and it could enhance higher education students' academic performance. The findings of this review may help higher education institutions, education experts, department heads, deans, and lecturers realize the significance of socio-economic status in higher education. In addition, the findings of this study will reveal the recent developments and contradictory research findings on global perspectives of SES determinants on HE students' AP. Moreover, the findings may provide insights for policymakers on the global perspectives of SES that enhance quality standards and promote internationalization of HE. Furthermore, HEIs' students and faculty could use this review as an insight for further study.

1.6. Operational Definition of Key Terms

Globalization: the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, and ideas... across borders (Knight, 2004).

Internationalization: the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of higher education (Knight, 2004).

Center-periphery logic: it is a structural model describing an unequal relationship between a dominant, industrialized "core" and a dependent, resource-supplying "periphery" (Raul Prebisch, 1950).

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. The Concept of Socio-Economic Status and Academic Performance

Compared to topical issues, cross-cutting issues were given less priority by the scientific community until the 20th century. However, cross-cutting is a potential issue that could affect higher education students' academic achievement. In this regard, socio-economic status plays a significant role, and it is worth studying the global perspectives of socio-economic status determinants.

The American Psychological Association (APA, 2021) defines socio-economic status as an individual's or group's social standing, or class, as determined by a mix of education, income, and occupation. In the same fashion, Oxford Reference (2019) defines socio-economic status as a combination of occupational, economic, and educational criteria that are closely related to the position of persons in society. Similarly, in sociology, the term refers to a social position as determined by income, wealth, occupational position and prestige, and educational attainment (Selvitopu & Kaya, 2021). Based on these definitions, it is vital to

understand the distinctions between social class, social background, and SES. According to Soheilan et al. (2023), SES refers to a person's current economic and social situation that could be changed, unlike social class or social background, which are stable across generations.

Academic performance, on the other hand, refers to the measurement of student achievement across various academic subjects in an instructional environment, usually expressed with a cumulative grade point average (ME, 2012).

2.2. Constructs of Socio-Economic Status and Academic Performance

Socio-economic factors are major variables that influence education. According to Edirisinghe et al. (2021), the global education system is influenced by socio-economic and geopolitical factors such as parental levels of education, household income, financial status, parents' involvement in education and material support, peer groups, and higher education settings. Furthermore, they add that socio-economic factors have a significant effect on students' choice of tertiary education programmes. This clearly implies that socio-economic status is the dominant determinant of higher education affairs. Similarly, APA (2021) explains that socio-economic status reveals inequities regarding access to resources, privilege, power, and control. Furthermore, Selvitopu and Kaya (2021) state that parental occupation, income, and educational attainment are the most common indicators of SES among students. Munir et al. (2023) also contend that SES refers to a composite of measures that reflects individuals' relative position in a social hierarchy comprising several key components such as income, education, occupation, and wealth. Generally, it could be inferred that income, educational status, and occupation are the most commonly accepted constructs of SES in a higher education environment.

Academic performance, on the other hand, can be expressed through students' achievements against a predetermined set of standards or

objectives. In line with this argument, Munir et al. (2023) asserted that AP is measured by test scores, grade point averages, and educational attainment.

2.3. The Relationship between Socio-Economic Status and Academic Performance

Results obtained from studies on the effect of socio-economic status on the academic performance of higher education students are inconclusive. For instance, Neupane & Kumar (2022) state that parental socio-economic status and educational level have insignificant effects on college students' academic performance. They add that the occupation of parents, residence of the students, and family expenditure level are the most significant determinants of students' academic achievement. Similarly, Pant (2020), as cited in Neupane & Kumar (2021), conducted a qualitative case study and concluded that students with low socio-economic status have poor academic achievement. In addition, a meta-analysis review by Selvitopu & Kaya (2021) on the 'Effect of Socio-economic Status on Academic Performance' considered that SES variables such as parental income, level of education, and occupation play a significant role in students' academic performance in higher education. Their findings are consistent with those of Neupane & Kumar (2022). Similarly, Munir et al. (2023) indicated that SES creates gaps in academic achievement between students from high and low socio-economic backgrounds. However, a meta-analysis by Liu et al. (2019) on the relationship between SES and AP revealed that the relationship between the two variables gradually decreased in the past several decades. Therefore, it can be concluded that the relationship between SES and AP is inconclusive and requires further investigation.

2.4. Global Perspectives in Higher Education

The contemporary trends in the internationalization of higher education aim to equip university graduates with global competences through the provision of standardized and equitable higher education. In this regard, Kromydas (2017) stated two rival perspectives: instrumental, which views higher education as an investment with particular financial yields, and theoretical, which views higher education as a place to provide a context for human development. The fundamental difference between these views is that the former has an instrumental purpose that seeks economic benefits from higher education, while the latter aspires to social wellbeing.

In line with this, Bourdieu (1977) considers HE as a machine that reproduces social inequality, rather than equalizing. Likewise, Marginson (2002) described HE as a system designed as a competition for elite status. In the same way, Kromydas (2017) stated that social inequality in higher education occurs as a result of a shift in global perspective from considering higher education as an entity for human development to a commodity for economic development. This clearly indicates that students from a better socio-economic status have a greater chance of attaining tertiary education and succeeding in life than academically eligible students from poor socio-economic backgrounds, unless they have received scholarships from prospective governments or international awards.

3. Methods

3.1. Introduction

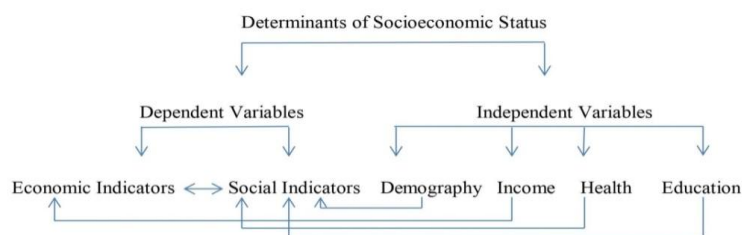
Socio-economic status (SES), a determinant or predictor of academic outcomes, has been given attention in higher education studies, as these predictors have an impact on students' academic and career development. The reviewers searched for peer-reviewed articles published in higher education and selected five of 28 peer-reviewed

articles published in the past five years, since 2019, based on the alignment of the titles, abstracts, and conclusions with the research question stated in the introduction section. In general, this paper systematically reviewed five peer-reviewed articles that address the global perspectives of socio-economic status determinants and academic achievement in higher education.

3.2. Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The conceptual framework clarifies the relationships among socio-economic status variables, whereas the theoretical framework highlights the theory that governs this systematic review. The reviewers examined studies that took rational choice theory (RCT) into account. This theory assumes that individuals are capable of making rational decisions regarding their interests by considering potential rewards and risks (Burns & Roszkowska, 2016). The reviewers also considered social capital theory (SCT), which emphasizes connections.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Determinants of socioeconomic status slightly adapted from Nagaraju, V., Mani, N., & Reddy, M. (2019). Determinants of the Socio-Economic Status (SES) – Literature Evidence.

Boudon stated that SES determines students' specific choice of study in HE and inequality is driven more by the choices made than by actual ability. In relation to this, Tareke et al. (2024) indicated that there is a direct link between field choice and SES-driven labor market return in Ethiopia. On the contrary, Matsuoka (2026) & Lou et al. (2024) argued that socio-economic disparities and rational expectations are affected by environmental threats. Similarly, Jansen et al. (2024) argued that rational choice is affected by perceived risks, academic self-efficacy, and labor market returns. The literature indicated that RCT is determined by the level of family income, stability, and academic self-efficiency

3.3. *Materials*

The reviewers used three educational databases: Taylor and Francis, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The reviewers selected these databases based on their convenience and availability of peer-reviewed articles that fit the review objective. Other databases such as PsycNet, PubMed, and Embase were excluded because they are discipline-specific, and the articles found did not align with the scope of this systematic review.

The reviewers used socio-economic status determinants or factors and academic achievement in higher education, university or college, or TVET as key terms in searching for articles. The reviewers searched the three selected databases with the research question "What are the global perspectives of the dominant determinants or factors of socio-economic status in higher education and their impacts or effects on university or college and TVET students' academic performance?"

Initially, 3,671 articles from ERIC, 2,460 articles from Google Scholar, and 1,267 articles from Taylor and Francis were identified. Then, the reviewers limited the search to peer-reviewed, full text, and articles published in the last five years. This reduced the number of articles to 94 from ERIC, 104 from Google Scholar, and 82 from Taylor and Francis. Next, by examining the title and reading the abstract, the

number of articles was reduced to 22 from ERIC, 25 from Google Scholar, and 17 from Taylor and Francis. Following that, by examining the methodology, results, and discussion sections of each article, the number was further cut down to 12 articles from ERIC, 10 from Google Scholar, and 6 from Taylor and Francis. Then, all 28 were imported into the EndNote data management software <https://endnote.com/>.

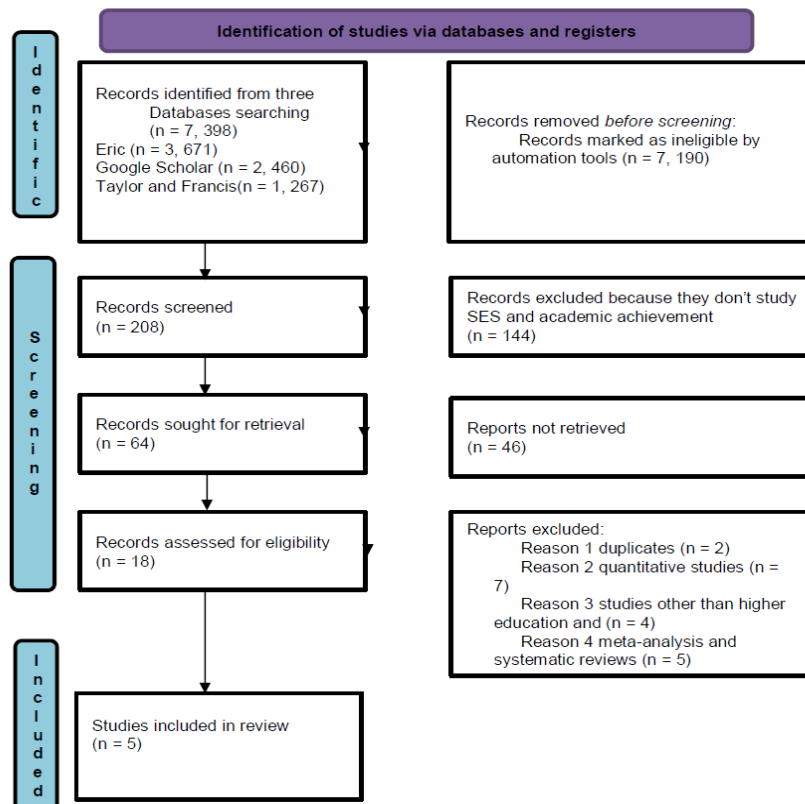
After further scrutiny, 25 articles were excluded: 4 were duplicates, 4 were study reports, 9 were on areas other than higher education, 2 were in a non-English language, 2 were meta-analyses, and 4 were systematic reviews.

Finally, three articles from ERIC, one article from Google Scholar, and one article from Taylor and Francis were selected for analysis. To get to this stage, the reviewers carefully examined the articles using some eligibility criteria. A qualitative approach and summative content analysis were used to analyze the content of each study (Hernández et al. al, 2020). This systematic review was confined to the formal modality of higher education. Hence, modes of HE other than formal channels were not considered in this review.

Eligibility Criteria

The reviewers used eight inclusion and six exclusion criteria, mainly based on the PICOS approach, review design, and date of publication, to delimit the scope of the systematic review.

Figure 2. PRISMA systematic review report guideline



Adopted from Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

3.3.1.1. Inclusion Criteria

The reviewers used the following inclusion criteria. The articles should be published in peer-reviewed journals within the last five years; focus only on higher education settings; have their source in one of the three reputable education databases; have no restrictions pertaining to geographic location; align with the research objectives and questions;

and be those that employed qualitative and mixed research methodologies with qualitative data analysis. For articles that used mixed methods, the qualitative part was particularly analyzed in the review. Furthermore, peer-reviewed articles on both undergraduate and postgraduate students were considered. The final inclusion criterion was the impact factor (IF).

3.3.1.2. Exclusion Criteria

Articles published before 2019, gray literature, works conducted using quantitative research designs, articles published in a language other than English, articles that focused on high school and other disciplines, and duplicate articles, book chapters, conference papers, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and articles without available full text were excluded.

3.4. Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

The reviewers employed a reflexivity journal to monitor personal biases and ensure the findings remained grounded in the data.

3.4.1. Procedure of the Review

The reviewers searched for relevant education databases and retrieved peer-reviewed journal articles following the eligibility criteria. Then, they used both automation and human reviewers to exclude records based on predetermined criteria, followed by summative content analysis to determine the global perspectives of HEIs and identify the dominant determinants of SES in HE. Finally, the reviewers systematically analyzed the themes to understand the relationship between SES and AP in higher education.

Table 1: Articles selected for analysis

Author and Publication Date	Journal	Title of the Article	Purpose	Design and Methodology	Sample and Data Collection	Key Findings
Macauley et al. (2023)	Higher Education Research & Development	Successful university students from low socio-economic backgrounds' perspectives on their academic success: a capital-based approach	Understanding students' awareness of their strengths, and how they utilized and exchanged resources (i.e., capital) to leverage these strengths for success.	Single-site case design	Ten participants, semi-structured one-on-one interviews	Through a strong sense of identity and motivation, HE students developed strategies to succeed.
Solomon (2022)	Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education	'Race' and Academic Performance in International Higher Education: Black Africans in the U.K.	Investigating how "race" shapes academic performance and achievement by exploring the experiences of 21 BAIS undergraduates studying in ten universities in England.	Qualitative	21 black African international students (BAIS), semi-structured qualitative interviews,	Race, ethnicity, or racial identity and cultural background jeopardize the perception of their academic ability or competence as legitimate and valid.
Yang (2023)	London Review of Education	Choice of international branch campus: a case study	Examining the choice of a British IBC, using a combined model as the conceptual framework.	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews	Academic achievement and family income are necessary but not sufficient conditions for students to choose IBCs.
Soheil et al. (2023)	Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship	Mimicking the psychological effects of capitalism in the classroom: Using StarPower to demonstrate unconscious bias, privilege, and oppression.	Providing students with an experiential learning opportunity to raise their awareness of how structural inequalities exist across the socio-economic system	Qualitative Consensual Qualitative research-modified (CQR-M)	46 participants	Diversity efforts on campus tend to focus more on race and gender and less on other cultural variables such as social class and socio-economic status.

Duong, et al. (2023)	International Journal of Education and Practice	Influence of socio-economic status and university's internal environment factors on university choice decisions of postgraduate students in Vietnam	Evaluating the reasons for pursuing postgraduate education and investigating how family's socio-economic status and the university's internal environment factors influenced postgraduate students' university choice decisions.	Mixed	5 participants were interviewed using semi-structured interview questions	Factors such as socio-economic status (family income) and the university's internal environment (such as curricula, facilities, admissions, marketing and communication, service attitude, and learning environment) also have different positive and negative effects on their judgments about which universities to select.
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4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results and Discussion

This systematic review aimed to explore the global perspectives of socio-economic status in higher education, the dominant socio-economic status determinants in higher education, and the relationship between socio-economic status and academic performance based on peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2023.

4.1.1. The Global Perspectives of Socio-economic Status in Higher Education

Table 2: Global perspectives of socio-economic status in higher education

No.	Author and publication date	Higher education perspective reflected
1.	Macaulay et al. (2023)	Depicted that students from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds are underrepresented.
2.	Solomon (2022)	Black international students were represented as ethnic minorities
3.	Yang (2023)	Students from better socio-economic status join the international branch campus (IBC).
4.	Soheilan et al. (2023)	Higher education becomes more accessible to students from all cultural backgrounds.
5.	Duomg et al. (2023)	Viewed as a vehicle for socio-economic development.

As illustrated in Table 2, the most dominant global perspective of SES in HE is one that views HEIs as a business commodity. Therefore, legible students from low socio-economic status backgrounds will have little chance to join higher education because they cannot afford the

expensive tuition fees of most prestigious universities reserved for students from economically privileged families.

This shows that elite communities get a better chance for quality higher education as a result of a perspective shift from the view of HEIs for human development into an instrument for economic development. In this regard, Yang (2023), Duong et al. (2023), Macaulay et al. (2023), and Solomon (2022) highlighted that higher education is considered an instrument for economic development rather than social development. Therefore, students from the LSES and low social classes are marginalized groups, as world-class universities are meant to serve the interests of the elites. Quite the opposite, Soheilan et al. (2023) argued that higher education becomes more accessible to students from all cultural backgrounds with different SES.

In fact, it is a sound claim that nations work aggressively on the massification of higher education. However, as Yang (2023) stated, students from higher SES backgrounds obtain quality higher education experiences from prestigious universities found in the world, but few eligible students from lower SES receive scholarships.

4.1.2. The Dominant Determinants of Socio-economic Status in Higher Education

Table 3: Determinants of socio-economic status in higher education

No.	Author and Publication Date	Dominant Determinants of SES in HE
1.	Macaulay et al. (2023)	Cultural, economic, identity, social, psychological, and human capital
2.	Solomon (2022)	Demography, race/ethnicity, mode of assessment, higher education system, and stereotype (poor people lack intellectual ability and intelligence.)

3.	Yang (2023)	Motivation, parental social status, level of income, score, institutional characteristics
4.	Soheilan et al. (2023)	Diversity education, multiculturalism, social class, economic situation, race, demography, lifespan, physical and mental health, dominance and stereotype (poor people are lazy.)
5.	Duong et al. (2023)	Family income, educational status, occupation, university internal environment

Table 3 demonstrates that economic, psycho-sociocultural, and demographic aspects are the most dominant determinants of SES in HE. Specifically, income level, psychological makeup, demographic background, and sociocultural status are the major determinants of SES that govern higher education. In line with this, APA (2007), as cited in Eysell & Farley (2023), stated that socio-economic status, social class, lifespan development, and physical and mental health are critical determinants of social power. Likewise, Yang (2023) stated that economic, political, and cultural capital, college costs, geographical location, education system, teaching quality, reputation, programme availability, facilities, and transition play a significant role in joining prestigious higher education in China.

Correspondingly, Duong et al. (2023) stated that student selection of universities was either positively or negatively affected by the socio-economic status and internal environment of universities, including curricula, facilities, service delivery, and a favorable learning environment. On the other hand, Solomon (2022) stated that race, ethnicity, and cultural background influence international higher education students' experience.

Moreover, Yang (2023) used a combined econometric and sociological model to explore college choice research. The results obtained through interviews with informants indicated that they were admitted by IBC mainly because of their parents' high level of income, parental

educational attainment, and parental occupational status, but not prior academic achievement or *gaokao* score, to enroll in prestigious HEIs.

Generally, cultural capital, economic capital, identity capital, social capital, psychological capital and human capital, demography, race/ethnicity, mode of assessment, prior students' score, higher education system, stereotype, motivation, parental social status/class, lifespan, physical and mental health, dominance, diversity, and multiculturalism are words and phrases used to describe SES in HEIs. In summary, the most commonly used terms to refer to the determinants of SES in HE are family income, level of parents' education, social status or class, and the university internal environment itself.

4.1.3. The Relationship between Socio-economic Status and Higher Education Students' Academic Achievement

Table 4: The relationship between socio-economic status and academic performance

No.	Author and publication date	Impacts of SES on HE students' AP
1.	Macaulay et al. (2023)	University 'know-how' and identity awareness play a great role in the academic success of HE students.
2.	Solomon (2022)	Stereotypes regarding ethnic minority like black African international students (BAIS), influence students' academic progress and performance.
3.	Yang (2023)	Family income, parental educational attainment, and parental occupational status shape students' success at IBC.
4.	Soheilan et al. (2023)	Cultural variables such as social class, socio-economic status, power, and privilege in a capitalist economy have impacts on AP.
5.	Duomg et al. (2023)	It impacts either positively or negatively

Table 4 shows that SES and AP are related, but SES could affect AP either directly or indirectly. In this regard, Macaulay et al (2023) asserted that students' habits established through their previous socio-cultural, economic, and experiential background, as well as the field that refers to social practices such as family, education, politics, culture, norms, etc., could influence their AP.

Solomon (2022) uses critical race theory (CRT) to investigate the effects of race on the lived experiences of ethnic minorities in the UK. The results obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews revealed that the level of academic preparedness, unfamiliarity with the assessment methods, and discrimination are the main factors affecting their academic performance. In addition, race and ethnicity mediate AP because their identity and cultural background jeopardize the perception of their academic competence. Moreover, Solomon (2022) added that they were questioned, doubted, and unwelcome as insidious and were graded down.

Soheilan et al. (2023) used a star power educational game with third-year undergraduate students to investigate the influence of social stratification and socio-economic hierarchy on attributions, equity, engagement, and power. The results obtained from the participants who had played the game showed that students in the low social class were less motivated in the strategic game for dominance as compared to middle- and upper-class students. Those who belonged to the low social class did not struggle for dominance because they admitted "half-blindness to privilege," meaning they acknowledged social inequality and considered dominance normal.

On the contrary, the results obtained by Macaulay, Webber, and Fraunholz (2023) showed that higher education students from low socio-economic status (LSES) were successful because of their university culture and strong sense of identity. They used a capital-based approach to explore the perspectives of academically successful students from LSES in Australian universities. The findings revealed that cultural

capital, or university know-how, and identity capital, or identification of one's own strengths and limitations, played a more significant role in the success of LSES students in higher education than economic, human, psychological, and social capital.

In summary, the results obtained from this systematic review revealed two rival global perspectives that oversee SES in HEIs and have their own impacts on students' choice of higher education, selection of programmes, and academic achievement. Moreover, the results revealed that income, health, demography, social class, and education were dominant socio-economic status indicators. The final result has shown that the relationship between SES and AP is inconclusive, since there are two contradicting perspectives that indicate a significant and a non-significant impact of SES on the academic performance of higher education students. For instance, the results obtained from Soheilan et al. (2023) indicated that SES in a capitalist economy has an impact on AP. Their findings were in line with the findings of previous studies that concluded that the relationship between socio-economic status and academic performance is multidimensional, and SES is one of the dominant factors that contribute to higher education students' academic attainment. On the other hand, Macaulay et al. (2023) stated that students from the LSES could be successful as long as they have university knowledge or knowledge of university culture and have good self-awareness that includes strengths, limitations, and challenges. However, they admitted that this requires the development of strategies to overcome limitations and cope with dynamic challenges.

4.2. Findings

The main purpose of this systematic review was to explore the global perspectives of the determinants of socio-economic status and academic achievement in higher education institutions. The findings revealed that the most influential perspective of higher education in the contemporary world is the view that considers HE as an instrument for

economic development rather than human development. This predominant view of HE as a means of creating a workforce for the market deviates from the essence of its purpose. Moreover, it best serves the interests of funding sectors and communities with the highest SES, disregarding marginalized sections of society at large. The findings also revealed that level of income, educational status, social status or class, and university internal environment are the most dominant determinants of SES in HEIs. In addition, they showed that occupation, socio-cultural capital, identity capital, psychological capital and human capital, demography, race/ethnicity, students' prior scores, mode of assessment, stereotype, motivation, physical and mental health, diversity, and multiculturalism are determinants of SES in HEIs.

Finally, the findings indicated that SES affects students' choice of university and selection of programme and has a moderate impact on higher education students' academic performance. This might be due to students' motivation and determination for a purpose-driven life being boosted as a result of maturity and resilience. In light of this, Deci and Ryan (2017) stated that developmental maturity enables students to integrate their academic pursuits with their core values, fostering an internal sense of purpose. Likewise, Duckworth (2016) argued that age is associated with heightened resilience, which cultivates the persistence required to maintain a purpose-driven academic trajectory. The findings are in line with the findings of Liu et al. (2019) and Selvitopu & Kaya (2021) but contradict those of Soheilan et al. (2023), who considered higher education classrooms as exact reflections of structural inequalities that existed across the socio-economic system.

The findings also contradict the findings of Kitil et al. (2025) that contend SES and academic achievement gaps are reshaped by global flows such as AI, mental health, and institutional instability. Marginson and Rhoades (2002) also argued that students' success is tied to global flows such as internationalization, national policies, and local or institutional culture; SES, leadership and global economic policies such as severity or neoliberalism affect academic performance, but not family income.

5. Conclusion and Implications

5.1. Conclusion

This systematic review revealed that the two rival perspectives of higher education are the view of HEIS as an institution for economic and human development. The former view perceives higher education as an instrument for creating a workforce for the market and meeting the demands of funding sectors and communities with the highest SES. This view disregards the marginalized section of society at large, unlike the latter that emphasizes human development.

Moreover, this review discovered that parents' income, education, social class, and the internal environment of universities are the predominant determinants of SES in HEIs. In addition, occupation, sociocultural capital, identity capital, psychological capital, human capital, demography, race/ethnicity, prior students' scores, mode of assessment, stereotype, motivation, physical and mental health, diversity, and multiculturalism are other determinants of SES in HEIs.

Furthermore, SES has a moderate impact on higher education students' academic performance because of the students' motivation and determination to pursue a purpose-driven life resulting from maturity and resilience. However, SES affects students' choice of university and programme selection.

Generally, global flows such as internationalization, national policies, institutional culture and leadership influenced by funding, SES, AI, mental health, and institutional instability, center-periphery logic, or attracting global talent, and school-level socio-economic factors are some of the dominant factors suggested in the literature.

5.2. *Implications*

The research findings obtained from different scholars have revealed that the impact of SES on the AP of higher education students is inconclusive. Likewise, the findings of this systematic review are aligned with those of a previously conducted literature review. Nevertheless, some of the findings contradict those of other studies. Therefore, it would be relevant to conduct a more comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis to ensure transferability and generalizability of the findings.

5.3. *Limitations of the Review and Future Research Directions*

This systematic review was designed to examine the global perspectives of SES determinants in a formal higher education system by using a qualitative approach. The findings might not apply to distance and continuous education, online education, and hybrid education contexts. Moreover, different findings might be obtained if quantitative and mixed methods were used in a more comprehensive manner. Therefore, conducting a systematic review and meta-analysis focusing on informal higher education is a potential research area.

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