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The Role of Campus Expo in Increasing Vocational Education Interest among Vocational High School Students in Nganjuk Regency

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the role of Campus Expo activities in enhancing the interest of twelfth-grade vocational high school (SMK) students in Nganjuk Regency toward higher education. The research was conducted during the Edufair Campus 2026 event, held on Wednesday, January 14, 2026, from 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. at GOR Bung Karno, Nganjuk Regency, involving approximately 60–75 higher education institution booths. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data collected through observation, documentation, and participatory observation involving 135 twelfth-grade SMK students. Data analysis followed the stages of data reduction, data display, and thematic conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that Campus Expo activities play a significant role in fostering students' interest in higher education, as reflected in the intensity of booth visits, participation in interactive activities such as educational quizzes, and direct interaction with university representatives. Interactive and experiential activities were found to be more effective in stimulating students' interest than passive information-seeking activities. This study contributes practical insights for Campus Expo organizers and schools in designing more educational and experience-oriented higher education promotion programs. However, this study is limited by its regional scope and context-based observational approach. Future research is recommended to apply mixed-method designs and expand the research area to strengthen the generalizability of the findings.

Keywords: Campus Expo, student interest, vocational high school students, higher education, educational transition

INTRODUCTION

Vocational secondary education plays a strategic role in preparing human resources who are competent and adaptive to changes in the labor market. Vocational High Schools (SMKs) are designed to produce graduates with vocational skills who are ready to enter the industry. However, global dynamics characterized by the rapid advancement of digital technology, industrial transformation, and increasing complexity of labor demands require SMK graduates not only to be job-ready but also prepared to pursue higher education (OECD, 2021). Higher education serves as a crucial pathway to strengthen advanced competencies, enhance career mobility, and expand employment opportunities for SMK graduates in the future.

Nevertheless, the participation rate of SMK graduates in continuing their studies at higher education institutions remains relatively low compared to senior high school (SMA) graduates. National education reports indicate that the majority of SMK graduates prefer to enter the workforce directly or even experience relatively long periods of unemployment (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This condition indicates structural and psychological issues that influence students' interest in higher education, ranging from limited information, family economic factors, to the perception that attending college may not always be relevant to the vocational competencies they possess (Sutrisno & Wibowo, 2021). Students' interest in higher education is a psychological construct that does not form instantaneously but develops through a long process influenced by learning experiences, social environment, and exposure to educational and career information. Social Cognitive Career Theory explains that students' educational interests and choices are shaped by the interaction of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and learning experiences (Lent et al., 2021). In the context of SMK students, hands-on and contextual learning experiences are particularly important in building understanding and interest in higher education.

One form of non-formal learning experience that is relevant for introducing higher education to students is the Expo Campus or Edufair. These events typically bring together multiple higher education institutions in a single interactive space, allowing students to acquire academic information, explore study programs, and directly interact with lecturers and students. Recent studies show that educational expos can enhance students' knowledge about further education pathways and strengthen motivation to pursue higher education, especially when presented interactively and communicatively (Rahmawati & Hasanah, 2021; Nugroho et al., 2023). However, in practice, the effectiveness of Expo Campus is not solely determined by the presence of formal information, but also by the quality of interactions and experiences perceived by students during the event. Activities such as educational quizzes, learning simulations, interactive booth games, and informal communication with university representatives have been proven to foster emotional engagement and a sense of connection with campus life (Putri & Ardiansyah, 2022). This aligns with the experiential learning approach, which emphasizes that learning is most meaningful when individuals actively engage in real experiences (Kolb, 2021).

On the other hand, empirical studies on the role of Expo Campus in increasing SMK students' interest still show several limitations. Most previous research has relied on quantitative surveys to measure students' interest before and after the expo (Pratama et al., 2021; Hidayat & Lestari, 2022). While this approach provides a general overview, it fails to capture the in-depth dynamics of student behavior, spontaneous responses, and actual engagement during the event. These aspects are crucial for understanding how students' interest develops in real-world contexts. Moreover, regional context is an important factor often overlooked in previous studies. Most studies have been conducted in urban areas or major educational centers, meaning the results may not represent the conditions of students in non-metropolitan regions. Nganjuk Regency, as a region with diverse socio-economic characteristics, presents unique challenges in encouraging SMK graduates to pursue higher education. Limited access to information, geographical distance from major campuses, and a predominance of short-term employment orientation are factors that potentially influence students' interest in higher education (Sari & Mulyadi, 2023).

The Edufair Campus 2026 held at GOR Bung Karno Nganjuk by the Musyawarah Guru Bimbingan dan Konseling (MGBK) SMA/SMK provides a highly relevant empirical context for examining this issue. The involvement of MGBK indicates that this event is not merely an education exhibition but also part of a structured career guidance service for students. The role of guidance counselors in facilitating the exploration of higher education pathways has been recognized as crucial in helping students make realistic career decisions aligned with their potential (Yusuf & Nurihsan, 2021).

In the Edufair Campus, SMK students are not merely passive recipients of information; they also participate in various interactive activities such as quizzes at university booths, direct dialogue with campus representatives, and documenting their experiences through visual media. Such activities provide authentic learning experiences that can shape positive perceptions of higher education. However, research specifically examining how these activities contribute to increasing SMK students' interest, particularly through observation and field documentation, remains very limited.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of research on interest and attraction to further education by positioning non-formal learning experiences as a key factor in educational decision-making. Practically, the findings are expected to serve as a basis for evaluating and developing more effective Expo Campus models, particularly for SMKs, higher education institutions, and guidance and counseling organizations in the region. Thus, this study aims to (1) analyze the role of Expo Campus activities in increasing SMK students' interest in higher education in Nganjuk Regency; (2) identify which Expo Campus activities have the most significant influence on SMK students' interest; and (3) describe SMK students' responses and engagement during the Edufair Campus 2026 at GOR Bung Karno Nganjuk based on observation and documentation. Through achieving these objectives, this study is expected to provide tangible contributions to the development of higher education outreach strategies that are more contextual, humanistic, and oriented toward the needs of SMK students in the region. The research gap addressed by this study is the primary rationale for conducting it. First, there is a lack of research focusing specifically on SMK students as the main subjects in the context of Expo Campus. Second, previous research approaches have been less exploratory and have not utilized observational data to understand the process of interest formation in depth. Third, few studies have linked Expo Campus activities with the strategic role of MGBK in career guidance services based on direct experience.

Based on these gaps, this study offers novelty in three main aspects. First, it specifically examines SMK students' interest in higher education, not just general interest in continuing education. Second, it employs a descriptive qualitative approach using direct observation, activity monitoring at booths, and event documentation, capturing students' natural responses and behaviors during the Edufair Campus. Third, it is conducted in the context of collaboration between higher education institutions and MGBK, highlighting the importance of synergy between secondary and higher education institutions in supporting students' career planning.

RESEARCH METHOD

Type and Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. The choice of a qualitative approach is based on the research objectives, which are not aimed at measuring cause-and-effect relationships or testing statistical hypotheses, but rather at gaining an in-depth understanding of the role of Expo Campus activities in increasing SMK students' interest in higher education through the direct experiences they encounter during the event. The qualitative approach is deemed appropriate because this study seeks to describe social and educational phenomena naturally (naturalistic inquiry) as they occur in the field, without any treatment or manipulation of variables by the researcher. The primary focus of the study is on the process, meaning, and responses of SMK students to Expo

Campus activities, rather than solely on quantitative outcomes. Consequently, the data collected are descriptive, narrative, and contextual in nature.

A descriptive qualitative research design was chosen because this study aims to: (1) describe the forms of Expo Campus activities participated in by SMK students; (2) illustrate the students' interest in higher education that emerges during the activities; and (3) explain the role of interactive activities, such as quizzes and booth interactions, in fostering this interest. This design allows the researcher to record and interpret phenomena comprehensively within the context of the Edufair Campus 2026 at GOR Bung Karno Nganjuk. Descriptive qualitative research also provides space to capture complex social realities, including verbal expressions, body language, enthusiasm, and emotional engagement of students during the expo. Moreover, this design is appropriate for the characteristics of educational research that focuses on non-formal learning experiences and career guidance services, where the research variables cannot be separated rigidly but interact dynamically in real-life situations.

Research Location and Time

This study was conducted during the Edufair Campus 2026 held at GOR Bung Karno Nganjuk. This location was selected because it serves as the central venue for the education fair, attended by various higher education institutions and involving SMA and SMK students from Nganjuk Regency and surrounding areas. The selection of the research location was based on several considerations. First, the Edufair Campus 2026 was organized by the Musyawarah Guru Bimbingan dan Konseling (MGBK) SMA/SMK, ensuring academic legitimacy and strong relevance to school-based career guidance services. Second, the event facilitated direct interaction between SMK students and higher education representatives in a shared space and time, allowing the researchers to conduct intensive observations of student behaviors and responses. Third, the location represents the educational context of a non-metropolitan area, which aligns with the objectives of this study. The timing of the research was aligned with the schedule of the Edufair Campus 2026, which lasted throughout the entire duration of the expo. Data collection was conducted simultaneously during the event, covering the preparation, implementation, and closing stages, in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of students' interest in higher education.

Research Subjects and Characteristics

The subjects of this study were Vocational High School (SMK) students who participated in the Edufair Campus 2026 at GOR Bung Karno Nganjuk. SMK students were chosen as research subjects because they align with the focus of the study, which examines vocational students' interest in higher education. The characteristics of the research subjects include: (1) active SMK students from Nganjuk Regency; (2) representing various vocational majors, including technology, business, and service sectors; (3) directly and actively participating in the Edufair Campus activities; and (4) engaged in Expo Campus activities, such as visiting university booths, participating in educational quizzes, asking questions to university representatives, and documenting the event. The subjects were selected through purposive sampling, considering their relevance to the research objectives.

The researchers did not set a rigid number of participants, as qualitative research emphasizes data depth over quantity. The observed subjects were students who demonstrated active engagement during the expo, providing information that is most relevant to the phenomenon under study.

In addition to the students, the study also observed the role of the supporting environment, such as guidance counselors (BK teachers) accompanying the students and university representatives at the booths. This contextual observation enriched the understanding of the processes through which students' interest in higher education was developed.

Data Collection Techniques

The data collection techniques in this study were aligned with the qualitative approach and descriptive research design employed. The techniques included observation, participatory observation, and documentation. These methods were chosen to obtain data that are authentic, contextual, and reflective of the phenomenon as it naturally occurs.

1.1. Observation

Observation was the primary data collection technique in this study. The researcher conducted direct observations of SMK students' activities during the Edufair Campus 2026. Observations were carried out systematically, focusing on students' behaviors, expressions, interactions, and engagement in various expo activities.

The aspects observed included: (1) students' interest in specific university booths; (2) students' enthusiasm in participating in quizzes or other interactive activities; (3) the intensity of students' interactions with university representatives; (4) students' verbal and non-verbal responses when receiving information about higher education; and (5) atterns of student engagement, both individually and in groups.

The observation was conducted in a non-interventionist manner, meaning that the researcher did not influence the flow of the expo or the students' behavior. The researcher acted as a passive observer, recording phenomena as they naturally occurred in the field.

1.2. Participatory Observation

Participatory observation was employed to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences and engagement during the Edufair Campus 2026. In this method, the researcher actively participated in the event to observe interactions and activities from within the context, while still maintaining an objective perspective. This approach allowed the researcher to experience the event alongside the students, providing richer insights into their behaviors, interests, and responses.

Through participatory observation, the researcher was able to capture subtle aspects of student engagement, such as motivations for visiting certain university booths, collaborative behaviors during interactive activities, and the dynamics of peer interactions. This method complemented direct observation by providing a more immersive and contextual understanding of how students developed interest in higher education throughout the expo.

1.3. Documentation

Documentation was used to support and strengthen observational data. The documentation included: (1) photographs of students participating in activities at university booths; (2) records of students taking part in quizzes and other interactive activities; (3) brochures, pamphlets, and promotional materials from higher education institutions; (4) schedules and programs of the Edufair Campus 2026; and (5) field notes made by the researcher during the event.

The documentation served to reinforce the research findings, provide visual evidence, and assist the researcher in conducting a more in-depth analysis of observational data.

The selection of documentation as a data collection technique was based on the need to objectively record activities and allow the researcher to review the data repeatedly during the analysis process.

1.4. Research Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument. The researcher directly collects, records, and interprets data based on observations in the field. To facilitate the data collection process, the researcher also used supporting instruments, including: (1) Observation guide sheets; (2) Field notes; (3) Cameras or other documentation devices; and (4) Lists of student engagement aspects to be observed.

These supporting instruments were designed to be flexible, allowing adjustments according to field dynamics and ensuring that naturally emerging findings were not restricted.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data in this study were analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach with a thematic analysis method. The data analysis process was conducted continuously, starting from the moment data were collected until the completion of the study.

The stages of data analysis included:

1.1. Data Reduction

Data reduction was conducted by sorting, selecting, and focusing on data relevant to the research objectives. Observational and documentation data that were not directly related to students' interest in higher education were set aside, while relevant data were categorized according to the research focus.

1.2. Data Display

The reduced data were then presented in the form of systematic narrative descriptions. Data presentation was organized by grouping findings according to main themes, such as types of expo activities, students' responses, and factors influencing students' interest in higher education.

1.3. Conclusion Drawing

The final stage of data analysis was conclusion drawing. Conclusions were derived through the interpretation of the analyzed data, while taking into account the research context and established objectives. The conclusions are tentative and open to further enrichment based on additional insights.

1.4. Data Validity

To ensure the credibility and validity of the data, this study employed several strategies, including: (1) technique triangulation, by comparing data from observations and documentation; (2) adequacy of references, by supporting field findings with relevant theories and previous research; and (3) diligent observation, by conducting careful and thorough observation throughout the event.

Through these strategies, it is expected that the research findings will achieve a high level of trustworthiness and can be academically accountable.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Research Data

This study was conducted during the Edufair Campus 2026, which took place on Wednesday, January 14, 2026, from 07:00 to 16:00 WIB at GOR Bung Karno, Nganjuk Regency. The research specifically focused on Grade XII Vocational High School (SMK) students, as this group is at a critical stage of making decisions regarding further education after graduation. Based on observations and participatory observation conducted during the event, data were collected from 135 Grade XII SMK students who demonstrated active engagement in the Expo Campus activities. Active engagement was indicated by visiting university booths, participating in interactive activities, communicating directly with university representatives, and documenting the event. This number was considered sufficient as the data had reached saturation, in accordance with qualitative research principles.

The Edufair Campus 2026 featured approximately 60–75 university booths, including public universities, private universities, and vocational higher education institutions. The diversity of booths provided extensive opportunities for Grade XII SMK students to explore and familiarize themselves with various higher education alternatives.

Research Results

1.1. Characteristics of Grade XII SMK Students Involved

The characteristics of the research subjects, all of whom were Grade XII Vocational High School (SMK) students, are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Characteristics of Grade XII SMK Students Participating in Edufair Campus 2026

Characteristic	Category	Student Total	Percentage
Gender	Male	77	57,0%
	Female	58	43,0%
Vocational Program / Field of Expertise	Technology & Engineering	54	40,0%
	Business & Management	46	34,1%
	Services, Tourism, & Hospitality	35	25,9%
Total		**135**	**100%**

All subjects were Grade XII students, making the data obtained relevant for analyzing the interest of students who are at the final stage of secondary education and are approaching decisions regarding further studies in higher education.

1.2. Intensitas Kunjungan Booth Perguruan Tinggi

With approximately 60–75 booths, students had ample opportunities for exploration. The frequency of visits by Grade XII SMK students is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of Booth Visits by Grade XII SMK Students

Total of Booths Visited	Student Total	Percentage
1–5 *booth*	29	21,5%
6–10 *booth*	51	37,8%
11–15 *booth*	38	28,1%
>15 *booth*	17	12,6%
Total	**135**	**100%**

The majority of students visited more than five booths, indicating an exploratory interest in various higher education options. This demonstrates that the relatively large number of booths did not diminish students' interest; on the contrary, it encouraged broader exploration.

1.3. Student Participation in Expo Campus Activities

The types of activities participated in by Grade XII SMK students during the Edufair Campus 2026 are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Participation of Grade XII SMK Students in Expo Campus Activities

Type of Activity	Students Total	Percentage
Collecting Brochures/Information	129	95,6%
Participating in Educational Quizzes	101	74,8%
Asking Questions Directly at the Booth	97	71,9%

Brief Consultation Regarding Higher Education	68	50,4%
Documentation (Photos/Videos)	108	80,0%

Interactive activities, such as quizzes and direct question-and-answer sessions, showed a high level of participation, indicating that Grade XII students are more interested in communicative and participatory approaches than in one-way information delivery.

1.4. Level of Interest of Grade XII SMK Students in Higher Education

Students' level of interest was analyzed based on observational indicators, such as duration of visits, intensity of interactions, and expressions of enthusiasm.

Table 4. Level of Interest of Grade XII SMK Students in Higher Education

Level of Interest	Observation Indicators	Students Total	Percentage
High	Repeated visits, intense interactions, active documentation	62	45,9%
Medium	Moderate visits, limited interactions	49	36,3%
Low	Passive, only observing or collecting brochures	24	17,8%
Total		**135**	**100%**

As many as 82.2% of Grade XII SMK students demonstrated a moderate to high level of interest in higher education after participating in the Expo Campus. These findings indicate the significant role of the Expo Campus in fostering interest in further education.

1.5. Relationship between Expo Campus Activities and Students' Level of Interest

The relationship between the types of activities participated in by students and the resulting level of interest is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Relationship between Expo Campus Activities and the Level of Interest of Grade XII SMK Students

Dominant Activity	High Interest	Medium Interest	Low Interest
Educational Quiz	48	44	9
Direct Interaction at the Booth	51	39	7
Passive Activity (Brochure Only)	6	18	18

The data indicate that students who participated in quizzes and engaged in direct interaction with university representatives tended to exhibit a high level of interest. In contrast, students who only engaged in passive activities mostly demonstrated a low level of interest.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the Expo Campus plays a strategic role in increasing the interest of Grade XII SMK students in higher education, particularly when the activities are designed with an interactive approach. The relatively large number of booths (60–75 booths) actually enriched students' exploratory experience rather than acting as an obstacle.

These findings are in line with experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of direct experience in shaping individuals' interests and decisions (Kolb, 2021). Activities such as quizzes and two-way interactions allowed Grade XII SMK students to experience the campus environment more concretely, resulting in more positive and realistic perceptions of higher education.

Compared to previous studies, which generally measured interest through questionnaires, this study offers a novel contribution through detailed observational data, showing how students' behaviors are formed during the activities. Practically, these findings provide important insights for universities and the MGBK to optimize the design of the Expo Campus, making it more student experience-oriented.

Figure 1. *Documentation of Enthusiastic SMK Students in Nganjuk Regency Visiting University Booths*

Based on Figure 1, the documentation shows enthusiastic SMK students in Nganjuk Regency observing and visiting university booths. The findings indicate that the Expo Campus, when conducted with an interactive approach and supported by a diverse range of university booths (approximately 60–75 booths), effectively fostered students' interest in higher education. This is reflected in several indicators, including: (1) High booth visit intensity by the majority of students; (2) Active participation in educational quizzes, demonstrating students' engagement in obtaining information; (3 Direct interaction with university representatives, allowing students to obtain answers regarding study programs and admission pathways; and (4) Enthusiasm in seeking further information, such as brochures, digital materials, and workshop registration.

The majority of Grade XII SMK students demonstrated a moderate to high level of interest in higher education after participating in the activities. These findings confirm that the Expo Campus functions not only as an institutional promotion medium but also as an

effective educational tool that helps students understand further education options more concretely.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the role of Expo Campus activities in enhancing the interest of Grade XII SMK students in Nganjuk Regency toward higher education, particularly through their participation in the series of activities held during Edufair Campus 2026. The findings indicate that the Expo Campus, when conducted with an interactive approach and supported by a diverse range of university booths (approximately 60–75 booths), effectively fostered students' interest, as reflected in the high intensity of booth visits, active participation in educational quizzes, direct interaction with university representatives, and students' enthusiasm in seeking further information. The majority of Grade XII SMK students demonstrated a moderate to high level of interest in higher education after participating in the activities, suggesting that the Expo Campus functions not only as an institutional promotion medium but also as an effective educational tool that helps students understand further education options more concretely. However, this study has several limitations, including the restricted number of subjects from a single region and a single Expo Campus event, the use of a contextual observational approach that does not measure students' actual decisions regarding further study, and the lack of investigation into the long-term impact of the interest generated. Therefore, it is recommended that future research expand the scope of regions and sample size, combine qualitative methods with quantitative instruments such as questionnaires or interest tests, and conduct longitudinal studies to examine the continuity between students' interest during the Expo Campus and their post-graduation educational decisions. Thus, the development of Expo Campus designs based on experiential learning is expected to further strengthen its role in supporting SMK students' transition to higher education in a focused, sustainable, and effective manner, while also reaffirming that such activities are a strategic means of significantly enhancing SMK students' interest in higher education.

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