An Exploratory Study of Academic Readiness and Educational Concerns in the Fast-Track SPM Program: Perspectives of Parents of Private Tahfiz Graduates

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ABSTRACT

Fast-Track Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) programs provide an alternative pathway for students from private Tahfiz institutions to obtain a recognized secondary-school qualification. These students previously attended full-time Tahfiz institutions that focused mainly on Quranic memorization without following the mainstream secondary-school curriculum. As a result, preparing for SPM within approximately one year may present challenges, particularly in terms of academic readiness and the ability to manage intensive learning. This study examined parents' and guardians' perceptions of their children's academic readiness, ability to manage the program workload, and concerns about Fast-Track SPM programs. Data from 139 parents and guardians whose children were enrolled in these programs were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings showed that most parents perceived their children as academically ready (74.8%) and capable of managing the program workload (73.4%). However, their main concerns included financial burden (69.8%), the short program duration (61.2%), and academic pressure (52.5%). Parents who rated their children's current academic performance positively were more likely to consider them academically ready. In contrast, parents who expressed concerns about the short program duration were less likely to perceive their children as ready. Both relationships remained statistically significant after adjustment for multiple comparisons. These findings suggest that although parents are generally confident in their children's academic abilities, they remain concerned about the challenges of intensive SPM preparation. Educational institutions should therefore consider assessing students' academic readiness before enrolment, providing appropriate learning support, and clearly communicating program requirements to parents. Future studies involving larger and more diverse samples, as well as students' actual academic performance and SPM results, are recommended.

Keywords: Academic readiness; Fast-Track SPM; Private Tahfiz Institutions; Parental Perceptions; Educational Concerns.

INTRODUCTION

Tahfiz education has an important place in Malaysia, where many families value the opportunity for their children to study and memories the Quran. Parents may choose this form of education because of its religious aims, learning environment and contribution to their children's personal development. Research involving Malaysian Tahfiz students has identified parental encouragement as an important source of motivation for Quranic memorization (Nik Abdullah et al., 2021). At the same time, families may wish their children to have

opportunities for further academic study and employment after Tahfiz education. These aspirations make the relationship between Quranic education and mainstream academic qualifications an important consideration for educational planning.

Malaysia provides different pathways for students interested in Quranic education. The Ministry of Education Malaysia introduced the *Kurikulum Bersepadu Tahfiz* (KBT), which integrates Quranic memorization with mainstream secondary education. The Ministry's guidelines outline the implementation and management of this curriculum within the national education system (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2023, 2024). However, not all students follow an integrated program. Some parents choose to enroll their children in private full-time Tahfiz institutions that focus primarily on Quranic memorization without offering the conventional secondary-school curriculum. These institutions provide an alternative for students who wish to concentrate on Quranic memorization before pursuing academic qualifications. Parents may choose this pathway based on their children's interests, learning abilities, educational needs, and the availability of suitable programs.

For students who have focused on full-time Tahfiz learning, the next stage of education may present a practical challenge. Some complete memorizations of all 30 *juz* of the Quran, while others complete part of their memorization before seeking further study. Both groups may need a recognized academic qualification to access post-secondary opportunities. In Malaysia, the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) is an important secondary-school qualification for entry to further education. Students who did not follow the conventional academic curriculum during their Tahfiz years may therefore need a separate route to SPM preparation. The term *'Tahfiz graduates'* is used in this study because not all students can be assumed to be huffaz, a term generally used for individuals who have memorized the entire Quran.

Fast-Track SPM programs provide an opportunity to prepare for the examination through an intensive course lasting approximately one year. By comparison, mainstream secondary education in Malaysia normally progresses from Forms 1 to 5 over five years. The fast-track route offers a shorter preparation period (a year program), although the subjects, entry requirements and teaching arrangements may vary between providers. Students may have different levels of familiarity with mathematics, science, languages, examination techniques and classroom assessments. They may also need to develop new study routines while maintaining their Quranic memorization. A short preparation period does not necessarily mean that the program is ineffective; rather, it highlights the importance of students' academic foundations and the learning support provided.

Parents and guardians play an important role in decisions about Fast-Track SPM participation. Enrolment may reflect the hope that religious education can be followed by further academic progression. Nevertheless, families may question whether students have sufficient academic foundations, can manage an intensive workload and will receive appropriate support. They may also be concerned about fees, teaching quality, facilities, social influences and opportunities to continue Quranic revision. Parents' confidence in their children's abilities should therefore not be interpreted as an absence of concern about the program.

Research in Malaysia has discussed the integration of Tahfiz and academic education, as well as the challenges faced by students managing both commitments (Abdullah et al., 2024; Mohd Fakhruddin et al., 2019). However, an integrated program differs from a sequential pathway in which students first attend full-time Tahfiz education and then prepare intensively for SPM. Students following the latter pathway may have had less continuous exposure to mainstream academic subjects. Limited research has directly examined how parents view academic readiness in this specific context or whether their confidence is associated with their assessment of their children's academic performance and concerns about the program's short duration.

This study aims to examine parental perceptions of academic readiness and educational concerns among Tahfiz graduates enrolled in Fast-Track SPM programs in Malaysia. Specifically, it assesses parents' and guardians' perceptions of their children's academic readiness and ability to manage intensive learning, identifies their main programme-related concerns, and examines associations between perceived readiness, parent-rated current academic performance and selected concerns. The findings may help educational institutions understand parental expectations and identify areas where additional academic support and clearer communication are needed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The wider development of Tahfiz education in Malaysia reflects the importance that families and institutions place on Quranic learning. Mohd Nawi et al. (2021) reviewed parental choice within the Malaysian Tahfiz education system and highlighted the significance of religious education to families' educational priorities. In a qualitative study of Tahfiz students, Nik Abdullah et al. (2021) found that parents, teachers and students themselves contributed to the motivation to memorize the Quran, with parental guidance and advice playing a prominent role. These findings help explain why Tahfiz education can be a valued choice even when it differs from conventional schooling. However, the motivations for choosing Tahfiz education are not necessarily the same as the considerations that arise when graduates later seek an academic qualification.

The Malaysian education system provides different ways of combining Quranic learning with mainstream study. The Ministry of Education Malaysia (2023) outlines KBT as an integrated curriculum. Research by Che Hassan et al. (2015) found that admission to selected Tahfiz schools may involve assessments of Quranic recitation, memorization ability, academic performance, interests and attitudes. These findings illustrate differences in student entry requirements and educational pathways. They do not mean that all students entering full-time Tahfiz institutions were unable to enter KBT. The present survey did not ask why families chose a particular Tahfiz pathway. The relevant distinction for this study is whether academic subjects were studied alongside Quranic memorization or pursued more intensively after full-time Tahfiz education.

Research on integrated Tahfiz programs provides useful, but incomplete, evidence for understanding Fast-Track SPM. Abdullah et al. (2024) examined an arrangement linking Tahfiz memorization and academic education within a higher education context and discussed how the two educational aims could be organized together. Their study supports the possibility of combining religious and academic aspirations, although its institutional context differs from a short SPM preparation course. Similarly, Mohd Fakhruddin et al. (2019) interviewed 11 students in selected government-funded religious schools and identified challenges involving the home environment, memorization, gadgets and peers. Participants also described support from teachers, parents, friends and schools as important. These studies show that educational pathways involving Tahfiz depend on learning conditions and support, rather than on the effort of individual students alone.

Maintaining Quranic memorization while undertaking academic study can create an additional demand. Ahmad et al. (2022) surveyed 67 university students in UiTM's Plus Tahfiz program and reported that demanding academic timetables were a common challenge. This university-level program differs from Fast-Track SPM, but it helps explain why families may be concerned about the time available for Quranic revision during intensive academic preparation. The present survey measures parents' concerns about maintaining memorization; it does not measure changes in students' memorization.

Academic readiness should be considered in relation to what the receiving program expects students to know and do. An intensive SPM course may require a basic understanding of academic subjects, regular independent study, examination skills and the ability to work through unfamiliar material at a rapid pace. Such competencies cannot be inferred simply from years spent in another educational setting. Educational psychology offers a useful explanation for this concern. Sweller et al. (2019) show that learning unfamiliar or complex material places demands on limited working-memory resources and that instructional design and prior knowledge affect how those demands are managed. This does not mean that short programs necessarily overload students; rather, it suggests that pacing and teaching support should take account of what students already know.

The quality of learning also depends on how students use the time available. Dunlosky et al. (2013), in a review of learning techniques, identified the value of effective study practices and highlighted differences in the usefulness of common learning strategies. For students preparing for SPM in a limited period, structured revision, opportunities to practice and timely feedback may be especially relevant. However, the current dataset contains no direct measures of instructional methods, total teaching hours or individual study strategies. The literature therefore informs possible educational implications rather than supplying variables that can be tested in the present analysis.

Parents' judgements are another important part of educational transitions. A systematic review by Morawska et al. (2026) identified readiness, family emotions, practical concerns and school communication as themes in parents' experiences of children moving into formal schooling. Jun et al. (2025) similarly described the broad range of academic and other considerations present in parental views of school readiness. Both reviews mainly concern younger children beginning school, not adolescent Tahfiz graduates preparing for a national examination. Their relevance here is therefore limited to the broader point that parents consider several dimensions of preparedness and that confidence, uncertainty and practical concern can occur together. Evidence from these earlier educational stages should not be treated as direct evidence of Fast-Track SPM outcomes.

In Fast-Track SPM, perceived academic readiness should be distinguished from measured academic competence. Parents may judge a child as ready because of discipline, effort or their assessment of the child's current academic performance. Such beliefs, however, may not reflect the child's actual ability to answer SPM-level questions. Concern about the short preparation period can also arise even when parents are confident in the child's abilities. Because both academic performance and readiness were rated by the same respondent, these assessments may partly reflect a common positive or negative impression. Their association is therefore informative about parental perceptions, but it does not replace academic placement tests or examination results.

There is thus a specific empirical gap between the general literature on integrated Tahfiz education and the needs of graduates who seek SPM after full-time religious study. Previous studies have examined motivations for Tahfiz learning, the challenges of managing academic and religious subjects, and broader parental experiences of educational transitions. Less is known about how parents whose children are already enrolled in intensive SPM preparation assess academic readiness, workload capacity and the program conditions they find most concerning. Addressing this gap may help providers understand what families expect and which aspects of program delivery deserve closer attention. The present study contributes a descriptive and exploratory quantitative account of these perceptions without claiming that its findings represent all Tahfiz families in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional design and non-probability voluntary-response sampling. Data were collected between February and April 2025 using a structured questionnaire administered through Google Forms. With assistance from Akademi Lembah Ilmu (AKLI), the questionnaire link was distributed through WhatsApp groups for parents and guardians at several private educational institutions offering Fast-Track SPM programs for Tahfiz graduates in Malaysia. Participation was voluntary.

The questionnaire covered demographic characteristics, program awareness, financial considerations, educational benefits and concerns, parent-rated current academic performance, perceived academic readiness and ability to manage the program workload. The original data 143 records. Three blank records and one misaligned record were excluded during data screening, leaving 139 valid responses for analysis. The study focuses on parental perceptions of academic readiness and program-related concerns.

The primary outcome was the parent's or guardian's response to whether their child was academically ready for the Fast-Track curriculum (*YE', 'NO'* or *'UNSURE'*). A separate item measured perceived ability to manage the program workload. The questionnaire asked parents to rate their child's academic performance at the time of the survey as *EXCELLEN*T, *GOOD, AVERAGE* or *BELOW AVERAGE*. Educational concerns were recorded using a multiple-response question. For exploratory comparisons, affirmative readiness (*YES*) was compared with non-affirmative responses (*NO'* or *'UNSURE*), and parent-rated academic performance was grouped as '*GOOD/EXCELLENT'* versus '*AVERAGE/BELOW AVERAGE'*. This grouping was adopted for analysis and does not imply that being *UNSURE* is equivalent to answering *no*. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize parental responses. Exploratory associations between affirmative readiness, parent-rated current academic performance and seven educational concerns were examined using Fisher's exact test. Odds ratios (ORs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated to describe the direction and uncertainty of these associations. Adjusted p-values below 0.05 were considered statistically significant. These unadjusted bivariate analyses do not establish causal relationships or independent predictive effects.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. REC/01/2025 (ST/MR/13)), valid from 23 January to 30 April 2025. Data collection took place within the approved period. The questionnaire provided information about the purpose of the study and confidentiality, and participation was voluntary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents parents' perceptions of their children's academic readiness, current academic performance and ability to manage the program workload. Most respondents believed that their children were ready for the Fast-Track SPM curriculum: 104 (74.8%) answered *Yes*, 32 (23.0%) were *Unsure* and 3 (2.2%) answered *No*. A similar pattern was observed for workload capacity: 102 (73.4%) answered *Yes*, 35 (25.2%) were *Unsure* and 2 (1.4%) answered *No*. Although few parents gave a negative response, nearly one-quarter were unsure about their children's academic readiness, and a similar proportion were unsure about their capacity to manage the workload.

Parents' ratings of their children's current academic performance were more varied than their readiness assessments. 68 respondents (48.9%) rated performance as *Good* and 12 (8.6%) as *Excellent*, while 51 (36.7%) selected *average* and 8 (5.8%) selected *below average*. In total, 80 of 139 parents (57.6%) rated their children's current academic performance as *good* or *excellent*, compared with 74.8% who reported affirmative academic readiness. As these measures were based on parental assessments, they should not be treated as independent evidence of students' academic competence.

Table 1. Parent-reported academic readiness, current performance and workload capacity

Measure	**Response**	**%**
Academic readiness	Yes	74.8
	Unsure	23.0
	No	2.2
Current academic performance	Excellent	8.6
	Good	48.9
	Average	36.7
	Below average	5.8
Workload capacity	Yes	73.4
	Unsure	25.2
	No	1.4

Note. Percentages are based on 139 valid responses. All measures are based on parental assessments, not independent tests of student competence.

The concerns reported by respondents provide further context for these positive readiness assessments (Table 2). Financial burden was the most frequently selected concern (97 respondents, 69.8%), followed by the short program duration (85, 61.2%) and academic pressure (73, 52.5%). Other concerns included inadequately trained

teachers (57, 41.0%), insufficient educational facilities (56, 40.3%), possible neglect of Quranic memorization (49, 35.3%) and negative social influences (48, 34.5%). Because respondents could choose more than one option, the percentages represent overlapping concerns rather than separate groups of parents.

Concern about the short program duration is particularly relevant to this educational pathway. Students who previously concentrated on Tahfiz learning may be expected to prepare for a SPM within approximately one year. Parents may therefore question whether there is sufficient time to build academic foundations, learn examination subjects and receive feedback. Research on instructional design highlights the importance of prior knowledge and appropriate learning support when students encounter unfamiliar material (Sweller et al., 2019).

Financial burden also deserves attention, although the main focus of this paper is academic readiness. Fees and other learning costs may influence families' decisions about educational progression. Nevertheless, the frequency of a reported concern does not, by itself, demonstrate an association with perceived academic readiness.

Table 2. Concerns about Fast-Track SPM reported by parents and guardians (n = 139)

Concern	n	%
Financial burden	97	69.8
Short program duration	85	61.2
Academic pressure	73	52.5
Inadequately trained teachers	57	41.0
Insufficient educational facilities	56	40.3
Possible neglect of Quranic memorization	49	35.3
Negative social influences	48	34.5

Note. Respondents could select more than one concern; therefore, percentages do not total 100%. Categories are based on the original Malay-language response options.

Table 3. Factors significantly associated with parent-perceived academic readiness (n = 139)

Factor and category	Parents reporting readiness, n/N (%)
Current academic performance: Good/Excellent	71/80 (88.8%)
Current academic performance: Average/Below average	33/59 (55.9%)
Short program duration: Concerned	56/85 (65.9%)
Short program duration: Not concerned	48/54 (88.9%)

Note. Values show the proportion of parents answering yes to the readiness item within each category. Adjusted p-values are from Fisher's exact tests with Benjamini–Hochberg adjustment across eight comparisons.

Table 3 shows two statistically significant associations with parent-perceived academic readiness. Among parents who rated their children's current academic performance as good or excellent, 88.8% believed that their children were ready for Fast-Track SPM, compared with 55.9% among those reporting average or below-average performance. This suggests that a positive assessment of current performance is associated with greater parental confidence in academic readiness.

Concern about the short program duration was also associated with perceived readiness. Among parents who reported this concern, 65.9% considered their children ready, compared with 88.9% of parents who did not report it. These results suggest that concerns about the limited preparation period are related to parents' assessments of academic readiness. Both associations remained statistically significant after adjustment for multiple comparisons.

The other six comparisons, including financial burden and academic pressure, were not statistically significant after adjustment. This does not mean that these concerns are unimportant to families. Rather, the survey did not provide sufficient statistical evidence of an association with the specific readiness measure. These findings describe parental perceptions and should not be interpreted as proof of the students' actual readiness or as evidence of cause and effect.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined parental perceptions of academic readiness and educational concerns in Fast-Track SPM programs for Tahfiz graduates. These programs offer an academic pathway for students whose earlier studies may have focused mainly on Quranic memorization. The key challenge is not simply obtaining an SPM qualification but supporting students as they move from full-time Tahfiz education to intensive academic preparation within a shorter period. Understanding parental perspectives is important because families help students make this transition.

Most respondents believed that their children were academically ready and able to manage the program workload. At the same time, financial burden, the short preparation period and academic pressure were common concerns. Thus, confidence in children's abilities can coexist with concerns about program demands. The exploratory analysis also identified two significant associations: favorable parental ratings of current academic performance were associated with greater perceived readiness, whereas concern about the short program duration was associated with lower perceived readiness. These results describe relationships between parental assessments. They do not establish students' actual readiness, causal effects or the effectiveness of Fast-Track SPM programs.

The findings suggest that providers should pay attention to both academic preparation and communication with families. An entry-level academic assessment could identify students who need additional support before starting intensive lessons. Schools may also consider bridging classes, appropriate teaching schedules, regular feedback and opportunities to maintain Quranic revision. Clear information about subject requirements, learning support and examination preparation may help parents understand the program and monitor their children's progress. These measures are recommendations for consideration and evaluation; their effectiveness was not tested in this study.

More broadly, academic progression after Tahfiz education should be planned in ways that value students' religious learning while providing realistic opportunities to obtain a recognized qualification. Students may enter Fast-Track SPM with different academic backgrounds, and a single teaching approach may not suit everyone. Cooperation among tahfiz institutions, Fast-Track SPM providers, parents and other educational stakeholders may help clarify students' needs and support the transition. Financial accessibility is also relevant because many respondents reported concerns about fees, although this study did not evaluate financial assistance programs.

Despite the contributions, this study also has limitations. Respondents were recruited voluntarily from selected private institutions, and 130 of the 139 respondents (93.5%) reported a school location in Selangor. The findings therefore cannot be generalized to all parents of Tahfiz graduates in Malaysia. In addition, performance and

readiness were assessed by parents rather than through academic tests or SPM results. The survey did not establish students exact academic histories, completion of 30 *juz* or reasons for choosing a particular Tahfiz pathway. Future research should involve a larger and more geographically diverse sample, students' and teachers' perspectives, direct assessments of academic competence and subsequent examination results. Such evidence would help determine how perceived readiness relates to students' educational experiences and achievements.

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