



Navigating the Future: The Role of Career Guidance and Career Counseling in Reducing Career Uncertainty Among University Students

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Abstract

Background: Career uncertainty is a pervasive psychological challenge among university students, stemming from limited self-awareness, inadequate institutional support, sociofamilial pressures, and insufficient exposure to occupational opportunities. Career-related uncertainty is associated with increased anxiety, reduced career decision-making self-efficacy, and poorer psychological well-being (Gati et al., 1996; Betz & Taylor, 2006). Effective career interventions enhance career decision-making skills, self-efficacy, adaptability, and preparedness for employment among university students (Soares et al., 2022; Milledzi et al., 2024; Alkal, 2025). Furthermore, emerging evidence highlights the importance of psychological resources such as resilience, growth mindset, and future orientation in reducing career-related uncertainty and strengthening career confidence (Alkal, 2025; Li et al., 2025). Thus, investigating on the effectiveness of career guidance and counseling is crucial for identifying strategies that can mitigate career uncertainty and better equip university students to navigate an increasingly complex and dynamic world of work and deepen understanding of how career guidance and counseling can address career uncertainty and foster informed, confident, and autonomous career decision-making among university students.

Objective: To study the role of career guidance and counseling in reducing career uncertainty among university students



Methodology:

- Research Design: Focus Group Discussion and Thematic Analysis (Qualitative research designs)
- Sample size: 6 participants
- Sampling technique: Purposive sampling and snowball sampling

Findings: The findings suggest that effective career guidance and counseling play a pivotal role in enhancing students' self-confidence, career clarity, emotional well-being, and capacity for informed career decision-making. The results further underscore the increasing significance of digital and artificial intelligence-driven career guidance platforms as accessible and innovative resources for career exploration and planning. The study concludes that the effective mitigation of career uncertainty requires a comprehensive institutional framework that incorporates individualized counseling services, sustained mentorship opportunities, curriculum-integrated career development initiatives, and technologically responsive support systems. Such an approach can foster greater career preparedness, autonomy, and adaptability among university students in an increasingly complex and evolving employment landscape.

Keywords: *Career Guidance, Career Counseling, Career Uncertainty, Psychological Well-Being*

I. Introduction

Career is a vital aspect of human life that refers to the long-term progression of an individual's professional journey. It encompasses education, skill development, work experiences, and personal achievements within a chosen field. A career is not merely a job but a continuous process of growth that shapes a person's identity, financial stability, and future aspirations. For university students, developing a clear career path is an essential part of preparing for adulthood and achieving personal and professional success. The concept of career guidance emerged in the early twentieth century with the work of Frank Parsons, who introduced vocational guidance by emphasizing the importance of matching individual abilities and interests with appropriate career choices. Later, theorists such as Donald Super expanded the field by conceptualizing career development as a lifelong process. Over time, career counseling evolved into a more comprehensive and structured practice that is now widely incorporated into educational institutions around the world.

Choosing a career is often a complex process, as students must consider their interests, abilities, values, and available opportunities. During their university years, students are expected to make important decisions regarding their professional futures, which can significantly influence their long-term development. Effective career planning enables students to set realistic goals, build confidence, and prepare for the demands of the modern workforce. Career uncertainty refers to the confusion, indecision, or lack of clarity that students may experience when contemplating their future occupations. This uncertainty may arise from limited knowledge of career options, inadequate self-awareness, family or societal expectations, and the rapidly changing nature of the employment market. Career uncertainty often leads to stress, anxiety, and fear of making incorrect decisions, which may negatively affect students' academic performance and emotional well-being.

Career guidance and counseling are essential services that help students understand themselves and explore suitable career opportunities. Career guidance provides information related to educational and occupational choices, while career counseling assists students in identifying their strengths and weaknesses, clarifying their interests and values, and making informed career decisions. These services play a significant role in reducing career uncertainty by enhancing decision-making skills, increasing self-

confidence, and providing emotional support. In many developing countries, including India, career counseling services remain limited, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas. Many students rely primarily on parents, relatives, or peers for career advice, which may not always be accurate or well-informed. Additionally, social and cultural factors often exert a greater influence on career decisions than individual interests or abilities. This increases the likelihood of career mismatches and subsequent dissatisfaction.

The present study focuses on the effectiveness of career guidance and counseling in reducing career uncertainty among university students. It aims to examine whether counseling interventions help students gain greater clarity regarding their career goals and reduce confusion in the decision-making process. Understanding the impact of such interventions is important for improving student support services and promoting positive educational and occupational outcomes.

Thus, career uncertainty remains a significant challenge for many university students. However, career guidance and counseling can play a crucial role in reducing confusion, enhancing self-awareness, strengthening confidence, and improving career decision-making. In today's rapidly changing world, career counseling has become an essential resource for helping students make informed choices and build successful futures.

II. Review of Literature

- Alnarijar and Hashish (2024), in their study titled *Career Guidance and Counseling Program*, found that career guidance and counseling programs significantly improved students' decision-making skills and readiness for the job market. The study highlighted that appropriate counseling support enabled students to make informed career choices and enhanced their confidence regarding future employment opportunities.
- Agrawal (2022), in the study *Role of Technology in Career Counseling*, examined the contribution of technology to career counseling services. The findings revealed that online platforms and AI-based career assessment tools improved the accessibility and effectiveness of counseling services, particularly for students residing in remote areas.
- Ghosh and Roy (2021), in their study *Soft Skills in Career Counseling for Engineering Students*, investigated the role of soft skills training within career counseling programs. The results indicated that counseling interventions focusing on both technical and interpersonal competencies prepared students more effectively for professional life and increased their confidence during recruitment and placement processes.
- Kumar and Sharma (2020), in their study *Framework for Effective Career Counseling in Private Universities*, proposed a comprehensive framework for career counseling services. The study identified regular skill assessments, industry collaborations, and alumni engagement as essential components for achieving successful counseling outcomes.
- Singh and Gupta (2019), in their study *Impact of Career Counseling on Student Well-being*, examined the relationship between career counseling and student well-being. Their findings demonstrated that students who received consistent career guidance reported lower levels of anxiety and greater confidence in their career decisions, highlighting the broader psychological benefits of counseling services.
- Patel and Kumar (2018), in their study *Gaps in Career Counseling Services in Private Universities*, explored the challenges affecting the effectiveness of career guidance programs. The study found that inadequate resources and a shortage of trained counselors limited the quality of counseling services and recommended improvements in infrastructure and professional training.

- Mishra and Verma (2017), in their study *Effectiveness of Personalized Career Counseling in Engineering Colleges*, assessed the impact of individualized counseling interventions on students' career planning. The findings revealed that personalized counseling sessions facilitated more effective career planning by providing guidance tailored to students' interests, abilities, and current labor market trends.
- Chopra (2016), in the study *Integration of Career Counseling into Engineering Curricula*, examined the benefits of incorporating career counseling activities within academic programs. The study concluded that integrating counseling into the curriculum increased student participation and contributed to improved long-term career planning and career development outcomes.

III. Objective

The objective of the study was to analyse the role of career guidance and counseling in reducing career uncertainty among university students

IV. Research Methodology and Procedure

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques for participant recruitment. Only students who voluntarily consented to participate were included in the study. The sample consisted of six students enrolled in regular undergraduate and postgraduate programs. All participants were permanent residents of India and were between 18 and 25 years of age. Data were collected through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted with the participants. The discussion was documented through note-taking and audio recordings using a mobile phone. Prior to the commencement of the session, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that the information shared would remain confidential and be used solely for research purposes. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Upon completion of the discussion, participants were thanked for their cooperation and valuable contributions. The collected data were subsequently analyzed using Thematic Analysis to identify key themes and patterns emerging from the discussions.

V. Generation of all Possible Codes & Themes

Codes	Themes	Verbatims
Uncertainty about career choices, Lack of career direction, Indecisiveness about future, Guidance gap, Career competition	Career Uncertainty and Indecision	"I am not sure about my career even after entering university." "High competition demotivates me sometimes." "Competition in the job market creates uncertainty."
Family pressure, Parental control over career, Pressure to choose a stable career, Reduced autonomy in decision-making, Parental expectation	Familial Pressure and Parental Expectation	"My parents have slightly influenced my career decisions" "My family expects me to choose a stable career." "Parents want us to achieve what they could not achieve."
Social expectations, Cultural norms affecting choices, Peer influence	External Influence and Social Peer Expectations	"In our culture, certain careers are considered respectable and others are not."

pressure for career choice, Social pressure		others are not, and that pressure is there." "My friends are all going for government jobs, so I feel like I should too, even if it's not what I want."
Fear of failure, Employability stress, Competition anxiety, Fear of not getting a job	Occupational and Employability Anxiety	"What if I study all this and still don't get placed anywhere?" "I feel stressed thinking about whether I will get a good job."
No standardized counseling cell/unit, No institutional roadmap for career support, Absence of peer counseling programs, Lack of career guidance sessions, Limited counseling services	Institutional Counseling Deficiency and Guidance Gap	"Our university did not provide any career guidance." "I didn't even know if our college had a counseling cell." "The university does not provide enough career guidance."
Absence of job market orientation, No career pathway mapping, Lack of employability skills guidance, Need for skill growth and practical exposure	Career Preparedness and Industry Readiness Gap	"We don't have enough exposure to what industry actually expects from us." "I don't know much about internships or how to apply, and nobody ever explained that to us." "Students need internship guidance and skill development."
Need for continuous guidance, One-time guidance with no continuity, No mentorship beyond single sessions, Lack of ongoing career follow-up	Guidance Discontinuity	"Guidance should not be one-time; it should be continuous."
Need for individual attention, One-to-one counseling, Desire for personalized feedback sessions, Group counseling, Personal counselling	Preference Between Personalized and Group Counseling	"Group sessions are helpful, but I really need one-to-one sessions for me." "Both group counseling and one-to-one counseling are useful."

AI mentorship, Online counseling, Modern career guidance	Digital and Technology- Based Guidance Tools	"AI mentorship and online career guidance tools can be useful."
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VI. Finalization of Codes and Themes

Codes	Themes
Interpersonal support, skills growth, practical exposure, Absence of job market orientation, No career pathway mapping, Lack of employability skills guidance	Student Support Needs
Lack of institutional support, Limited counseling services, No standardized counseling cell/unit, No institutional roadmap for career support	Institutional Challenges
Guidance gap, career competition, Lack of direction, Lack of career direction, Indecisiveness about future, Fear of failure, Employability stress, Competition anxiety, Fear of not getting a job, Uncertainty about career choices	Career Uncertainty
Parental expectation, Social pressure, Pressure to choose a stable career, Reduced autonomy in decision-making, Parental expectation, Cultural norms affecting choices, Peer pressure for career choice	External Pressure
AI mentorship, Online counseling, Modern career guidance	Digital Guidance Tools
Group counseling, Personal counseling, Feedback sessions	Counseling Preference
Need for continuous guidance, One-time guidance with no continuity, No mentorship beyond single sessions, Lack of ongoing career follow-up	Guidance Discontinuity

VII. Explanation of the Themes

1. Student support needs

From a psychological perspective, student support needs are closely related to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), which explains that students must satisfy basic emotional and psychological needs before achieving self-actualization and career success. Emotional support helps reduce anxiety and stress, while academic and career guidance improves confidence and motivation. Carl Rogers' Person-Centered Theory (1951) also supports this theme by emphasizing empathy, acceptance, and unconditional positive regard in counseling. When students receive emotional and academic support from teachers and counselors, they

develop better self-esteem and decision-making ability. In addition, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) explains that self-efficacy (belief in one's own ability) is important in career planning. Career counseling improves students' confidence in handling interviews, communication, and professional skills, helping them feel more prepared for future careers.

2. Institutional challenges

Institutional challenges can be explained through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which states that students' development is influenced by multiple environmental systems, including educational institutions. When institutions lack trained counselors, proper infrastructure, or financial support, students' career development is negatively affected. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1978) also highlights the importance of guidance from knowledgeable adults such as teachers and counselors. Without proper mentoring and institutional support, students may struggle to make informed career decisions. Additionally, Organizational Support Theory suggests that when institutions fail to provide enough support systems, students may feel neglected, reducing motivation and career readiness.

3. Career Uncertainty

Career uncertainty is strongly connected to Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (1968), especially the stage of Identity vs Role Confusion, where young adults try to identify their future roles and career paths. Lack of clarity creates confusion, stress, and self-doubt. Super's Career Development Theory (1957) also explains that career development is a lifelong process where students explore interests, abilities, and occupational choices. During the exploration stage, uncertainty is normal and necessary for growth. Furthermore, Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making (1976) explains that career uncertainty develops due to limited experiences, lack of exposure, and environmental influences. Counseling helps students explore opportunities and improve decision-making.

4. External pressure

External pressure can be understood using Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954), which explains that individuals often compare themselves with others and make decisions based on social expectations. Students may choose careers based on family pressure or societal status rather than personal interest. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) states that people perform better when their choices are based on internal motivation rather than external control. Excessive family or social pressure reduces autonomy and can negatively affect mental well-being. Adler's Individual Psychology also highlights the influence of family expectations and social environment on personal decisions. Counseling helps students balance social expectations with personal goals.

5. Digital guidance tools

Digital guidance tools can be explained through Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, where observational learning and self-efficacy play important roles. Online platforms, webinars, and career assessment tools help students observe opportunities and increase confidence in career planning. Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) also supports this theme by explaining that students use digital counseling tools when they find them useful and easy to access. This is especially helpful for students in remote areas. Additionally, Constructivist Learning Theory suggests that students actively build knowledge through interaction with digital resources, helping them explore careers independently and make informed decisions.

6. Counseling preference

Counseling preference is strongly linked to Carl Rogers' Person-Centered Theory, which emphasizes that effective counseling depends on trust, empathy, and emotional safety. Some students prefer face-to-face

counseling because it provides personal connection and emotional support. Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) also explains that students may prefer counseling styles based on their comfort level and trust in authority figures. Those with stronger trust may prefer individual counseling, while others may feel safer in group settings. Behavioral Theory suggests that positive past experiences with counseling influence future counseling preferences. If students receive helpful guidance, they are more likely to seek support again. Therefore, understanding counseling preference helps institutions provide student-centered support systems and improve career guidance effectiveness.

7. Guidance Discontinuity

From a psychological perspective, guidance discontinuity reflects a fundamental gap in the sustained support students require for healthy career development. Super's Career Development Theory (1957) emphasizes that career development is a lifelong, continuous process that unfolds across distinct stages and that consistent guidance at each stage is essential for individuals to develop a stable and coherent vocational self-concept. When guidance is limited to a single session with no follow-up, students are left to navigate subsequent stages without adequate support. Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1984) further highlights that individuals undergoing major life transitions such as choosing a career path require ongoing mentoring and relational support to cope effectively with uncertainty. Without continuity in guidance, students lack the mentoring relationship needed to build confidence over time. Additionally, Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (1978) suggests that learners make the most progress when guided consistently by a more knowledgeable other, a principle directly applicable to career counseling, where periodic, progressive sessions are far more effective than isolated interventions. The absence of ongoing career follow-up thus not only limits students' career readiness but also undermines their psychological sense of direction, purpose, and self-efficacy in professional decision-making.

VIII. Conclusion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that career uncertainty is influenced not only by informational and institutional gaps but also by a range of psychological factors, including self-efficacy, identity formation, anxiety, autonomy, motivation, and resilience. Family and societal expectations, fear of failure, and limited career preparedness further shape students' confidence and decision-making processes. Career guidance and counseling play a crucial role in addressing these psychological dimensions by fostering self-awareness, strengthening career decision-making self-efficacy, promoting emotional well-being, and supporting students in making autonomous and informed career choices. Therefore, integrating psychologically informed career counseling within higher education institutions can significantly enhance students' career readiness and overall psychological well-being.

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