

Integrating Career Planning and Guidance to Foster Career Readiness: A Conceptual Perspective on Student Development

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly complex and competitive job market, enhancing students' career readiness has become a critical goal for higher education institutions. This conceptual paper explores the integration of career planning and guidance as a strategic approach to support student development and improve career outcomes. Drawing upon established theories such as Social Cognitive Career Theory and Career Construction Theory, the paper proposes a conceptual framework linking career planning and guidance interventions to key dimensions of career readiness, including self-efficacy, goal setting, and employability skills. The role of academic advising, institutional strategies, and co-curricular support are examined in fostering this integration. Furthermore, the paper highlights the emerging role of digital career platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) in personalizing guidance services, while calling for future empirical research to assess their impact and ethical implications. The study offers theoretical contributions for curriculum designers, educators, and policymakers in designing more holistic career readiness programs aligned with 21st-century workforce demands.

KEYWORDS: Career Planning and Readiness, Career Guidance Education, Student Development

I. INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of the 21st-century workforce, career readiness has emerged as a critical educational outcome that bridges the gap between academic knowledge and practical workforce demands. Rapid technological advancements, globalization, and the dynamic nature of labor markets have reshaped the skills employers expect from graduates. Today's employers seek not only technical proficiency but also a combination of soft skills such as critical thinking, communication, adaptability, and collaboration—core elements of career readiness (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2023). According to the World Economic Forum (2023), by 2027, approximately 44% of core skills required for jobs are expected to change, highlighting the urgency for students to acquire future-proof competencies. Despite this, many higher education institutions struggle to embed structured career development interventions that holistically prepare students for the workforce (OECD, 2022).

The increasing mismatch between graduate capabilities and job market expectations has led to growing calls for early, intentional integration of career planning and guidance into the educational system to ensure smoother school-to-work transitions (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Thus, a deeper understanding of how integrated career development strategies can enhance student career readiness is both timely and essential.

In today's dynamic and competitive job market, academic qualifications alone are no longer sufficient indicators of a graduate's readiness for the workforce. While educational institutions continue to emphasize academic performance, there is growing concern over graduates' lack of essential employability skills such as communication, critical thinking, adaptability, and teamwork (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). This mismatch between what higher education institutions deliver and what industries demand has created a persistent "employability gap" that limits students' career success despite strong academic records.

Recent global studies have highlighted that many graduates struggle to translate theoretical knowledge into practical competencies required by employers (OECD, 2023). For instance, although students may achieve high academic grades, they often lack the ability to apply knowledge in real-world contexts, interact effectively in multidisciplinary teams, or solve complex problems independently (Andrews & Russell, 2022). The World Economic Forum (2023) also identified skill mismatches as a key factor contributing to youth unemployment worldwide.

Moreover, employers frequently report dissatisfaction with graduates' preparedness for professional roles, citing deficiencies in soft skills, decision-making capabilities, and work ethic (Cavanagh et al., 2022). This disconnect suggests a pressing need to complement academic curricula with structured career planning and guidance mechanisms. Such integration helps students develop a clearer understanding of labor market expectations and fosters the development of skills necessary for successful employment transitions.

Despite increasing global emphasis on employability and workforce readiness, many educational institutions continue to inadequately integrate career planning and guidance into their curricula and student development strategies. This lack of integration results in a significant gap between students' academic learning and their preparedness to navigate complex, rapidly changing labor markets (Hooley, 2023). Research highlights that while students may graduate with formal qualifications, they often lack critical career decision-making skills, self-efficacy, and knowledge about labor market opportunities—core elements of career readiness (NACE, 2022; Robson et al., 2021).

The issue is particularly evident in tertiary education settings, where career guidance is often limited to one-off services or optional sessions rather than being embedded within the academic experience (Reardon et al., 2021). Moreover, many students perceive career services as peripheral, underutilizing available resources due to unclear institutional mandates or lack of awareness (Watts & Sultana, 2020). As a result, students graduate without clear career goals or strategies, contributing to increased job mismatch, prolonged job searches, and underemployment (Sage-Gavin, 2021).

Addressing this problem requires a comprehensive, theory-driven understanding of how career planning and guidance can be systematically embedded into student development models. Without this integration, institutions risk producing graduates who are academically competent but professionally unprepared.

The purpose of this study is to conceptually explore how the integration of career planning and career guidance can foster career readiness among students in higher education. In an increasingly dynamic and competitive global labor market, institutions of higher learning face growing pressure to equip students not only with academic knowledge but also with the practical and psychological competencies required for successful workforce entry (NACE, 2023; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

Career readiness has emerged as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains—including self-awareness, career decision-making skills, and knowledge of career pathways (Kim, Ra, & Lee, 2022). However, many students still lack structured support mechanisms to navigate their career development effectively. Career planning allows students to set meaningful goals aligned with their values and skills, while career guidance provides professional support in identifying opportunities, developing competencies, and making informed career decisions (Hooley, 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021).

By developing a conceptual framework, this study aims to synthesize existing theoretical and empirical perspectives to better understand the mechanisms through which career planning and guidance interventions can collectively improve students' career readiness. The insights from this conceptual exploration will inform educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers on how to embed these practices into the educational system more holistically.

This study holds significant theoretical and practical value in the evolving discourse on student career readiness. As the demands of the global workforce continue to shift toward skills such as adaptability, lifelong learning, and career agility, the need for a structured and theoretically grounded integration of career planning and guidance into higher education curricula becomes increasingly critical. The conceptual exploration offered in this paper contributes to the understanding of how such integration can holistically shape students' readiness for the workforce.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends the application of established career development theories, such as Super's Life-Span Theory (Super, 1990), Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), and Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013), by emphasizing their relevance in contemporary academic contexts. It provides a synthesized model that unites individual development with institutional support mechanisms—thus aligning psychological theories of career development with pedagogical practice.

For educators and curriculum developers, this study offers a conceptual rationale for embedding career planning modules and guidance services into the formal curriculum. Research by Dey and Cruzvergara (2020) highlights the growing expectation for universities to not only deliver academic knowledge but also cultivate career readiness through intentional programming and advising structures.

For policymakers, the findings of this study underscore the importance of creating educational policies that mandate or encourage systematic career guidance interventions across higher education institutions. The World Bank (2021) and UNESCO (2022) emphasize that well-designed career guidance frameworks at the policy level can significantly influence youth employment outcomes and national workforce competitiveness.

By addressing these key stakeholder groups, this conceptual paper aims to inform future practices and stimulate further empirical investigation into the integration of career development theories within institutional contexts.

This conceptual paper specifically focuses on the integration of career planning and career guidance within tertiary education settings, particularly universities and colleges. The scope is confined to exploring how structured career development initiatives within higher education environments can influence students' career readiness, encompassing aspects such as employability skills, career self-efficacy, goal orientation, and preparedness for transition into the workforce.

The study deliberately excludes primary and secondary education, as the developmental stages and institutional mandates in these settings differ significantly from those in tertiary institutions (Knight, Armitage, & Rowe, 2022). Additionally, this paper does not present empirical findings; instead, it adopts a conceptual and theoretical approach to integrate and synthesize existing literature and frameworks. By doing so, it seeks to develop a holistic model that can guide future empirical investigations and policy developments.

This delimitation is intentional to allow for theoretical depth and clarity, providing a foundation that can later be tested in diverse institutional contexts. The paper focuses on general career readiness, rather than discipline-specific readiness (e.g., engineering, education), to ensure broader applicability. While the influence of socio-economic background, gender, and digital platforms is acknowledged in the literature, these variables are outside the direct scope of this paper and will be proposed as future research

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

directions. Career readiness refers to the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for successful transition into the workplace (NACE, 2021). As the bridge between academic preparation and professional performance, career readiness encompasses a set of competencies that enable individuals to navigate complex career pathways, adapt to dynamic job markets, and contribute meaningfully to organizational goals.

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2021), career readiness is defined through eight core competencies: critical thinking/problem solving, oral/written communication, teamwork/collaboration, digital technology, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, career management, and global/intercultural fluency. These competencies reflect the integration of cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal skills essential for employability and long-term career success.

Savickas (2013) extends the conceptualization of career readiness through his Career Construction Theory, which highlights career adaptability, self-concept development, and life design as pivotal to preparing individuals for future work. From this perspective, career readiness is not solely about securing employment but about constructing a meaningful and sustainable career identity.

Four key components are particularly salient in current literature:

1. Soft Skills

Soft skills are non-technical interpersonal attributes such as communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, and adaptability. They are increasingly regarded as essential for career readiness, often more so than domain-specific technical knowledge (Robles, 2012). Employers consistently report that graduates lack sufficient soft skills, despite high academic qualifications (Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Suleman, 2018).

2. Employability Skills

Employability skills are broadly defined as transferable core competencies required in almost every job (Andrews & Higson, 2008). These include critical thinking, problem-solving, time management, and the ability to learn and adapt. Yorke (2006) emphasized that employability is not just about gaining a job but about the capacity to remain employable throughout life.

3. Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy—the belief in one’s ability to achieve goals—plays a pivotal role in shaping career aspirations and perseverance in job search behavior (Bandura, 1997). In the context of career development, higher career decision-making self-efficacy leads to better career planning and adaptability (Betz & Hackett, 2006; Lent & Brown, 2013).

4. Goal-Setting

Goal-setting facilitates direction and motivation in career development. Research has shown that students who set clear career goals are more likely to engage in proactive career behaviors and secure meaningful employment upon graduation (Locke & Latham, 2002; Hirschi, 2011). Moreover, goal-setting is linked with self-regulatory behaviors that enhance persistence and focus during the transition to work (Taber, 2013).

A. Career Planning and Development in Education

(Tab Career planning and development in education refer to structured processes and interventions that assist students in understanding their career interests, exploring potential pathways, setting goals, and preparing for future employment. In the context of increasing global competition and rapidly evolving labor markets, the importance of embedding career development strategies within educational institutions has been widely acknowledged (OECD, 2021).

Super’s Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (Super, 1980; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996) posits that career development is a lifelong process involving multiple life stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance,

and disengagement. Each stage reflects a different set of developmental tasks influenced by self-concept, which evolves through personal experiences and societal expectations. The model emphasizes the significance of self-awareness and role salience (e.g., student, worker, citizen), making it particularly relevant for designing educational career guidance programs that support transitions across the life span.

Recent scholarship highlights the applicability of Super's model in guiding holistic career education. According to Schmitt-Wilson and Faas (2021), educational systems should adopt a developmental perspective, recognizing that students in early stages (e.g., adolescence to early adulthood) benefit from activities that support self-exploration and occupational awareness.

Career Construction Theory (CCT), introduced by Savickas (2005), complements Super's developmental approach by emphasizing career adaptability, life themes, and narrative identity. CCT views career as a dynamic process shaped by individuals actively constructing their vocational paths in response to changing contexts. Key components include career adaptability—concern, control, curiosity, and confidence—which are critical for career readiness in uncertain or complex environments (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Recent empirical studies affirm the value of CCT in educational settings. For example, Maree and Twigge (2021) found that interventions based on CCT significantly enhanced students' self-efficacy and future orientation, especially when integrated with reflective narrative activities. This underscores the need for career education that empowers students to become proactive agents of their career trajectories.

Integrating career planning into early education stages is strategically vital to equip students with future-ready skills and direction. Early career interventions are associated with greater career clarity, higher academic motivation, and reduced career indecision (Hirschi & Läge, 2020). Research also shows that students who receive structured career guidance are more likely to pursue aligned educational pathways and exhibit stronger labor market transitions post-graduation (Hooley, Marriott, & Sampson, 2021).

The alignment between personal aspirations and occupational realities—when addressed early—can prevent mismatch and unemployment. Therefore, career planning should not be an isolated event but a continuous process embedded across the curriculum (Watts & Sultana, 2021). This approach also aligns with policy recommendations from UNESCO and the International Labour Organization (ILO), advocating for lifelong career development strategies beginning in school.

B. Role of Career Guidance Services

Career guidance services play a pivotal role in helping students navigate the complexities of educational and career decision-making. These services typically include individual counseling, group interventions, and career development workshops, all of which are designed to support students in aligning their personal interests, abilities, and values with suitable career paths.

Individual career counseling provides students with personalized support to explore their strengths, career aspirations, and options. According to *Pritchard and Barnes (2021)*, one-on-one counseling enables students to

develop clearer career goals and enhances their decision-making efficacy by addressing personal doubts and contextual barriers. Counselors help students interpret career assessments, build career action plans, and increase self-awareness, which are critical to career readiness (NACE, 2022).

Group-based interventions, such as peer career coaching and career exploration workshops, foster a collaborative environment where students learn from one another's experiences. Research by *Ali et al. (2020)* indicates that students who participate in structured group guidance sessions demonstrate improved career adaptability and social learning, especially when integrated with reflective practices. Group interventions are also more cost-effective and scalable within higher education institutions.

Workshops covering topics such as résumé writing, interview preparation, job search strategies, and professional branding are essential tools for building job market preparedness. These structured sessions are often led by career advisors or industry practitioners. *Yuen et al. (2019)* found that students who participated in multiple workshops reported greater confidence in job-seeking skills and were more proactive in pursuing internships and employment opportunities. Workshops are particularly effective when tied to real-world industry engagement, such as job fairs and employer networking events.

A growing body of evidence supports the positive impact of career guidance services on students' career decision-making abilities and employment outcomes. For example, *Hooley and Dodd (2022)* argue that access to comprehensive career guidance significantly reduces career indecision and improves alignment between educational choices and labor market needs. Furthermore, students who actively engage in guidance services are more likely to develop critical soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, and adaptability, which are highly valued by employers (OECD, 2023).

C. Theoretical Foundations

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), introduced by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), emphasizes the dynamic interaction between personal attributes (such as self-efficacy), environmental factors, and behavioral intentions in shaping career development. SCCT asserts that individuals' beliefs about their capabilities (self-efficacy), expected outcomes, and goals are central to their career interests, choices, and performance.

In the context of career readiness, SCCT offers a valuable lens for understanding how students develop confidence in their abilities and navigate educational and occupational decisions. For instance, career planning programs that enhance self-efficacy and provide vicarious experiences (e.g., internships, mentoring) can significantly influence students' readiness for the workforce.

Recent empirical studies support the relevance of SCCT in education and career development. According to *Flores et al. (2020)*, students who receive structured career guidance aligned with SCCT principles demonstrate higher career decision-making self-efficacy. Similarly, *Jiang et al. (2021)* found that environmental supports (e.g.,

school counselors) and barriers play a moderating role in the relationship between self-efficacy and career readiness.

Holland's Career Typology Theory

Holland's Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environments (RIASEC model) posits that people and work environments can be categorized into six types: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. Career satisfaction and effectiveness are maximized when there is a good fit (congruence) between an individual's personality type and their work environment (Holland, 1997).

This theory is instrumental in career guidance practices, particularly in helping students explore their interests and identify congruent career paths. When integrated into career planning courses, the RIASEC model enhances self-awareness and informs goal-setting. Research by Nauta (2019) confirms that congruence between student personality types and career environments predicts greater clarity and satisfaction in career decision-making.

Recent applications of Holland's theory in higher education support its relevance in diverse cultural contexts. For example, a study by Tracey & Robbins (2022) shows that structured career assessment tools based on the RIASEC model significantly improve the effectiveness of university career counseling programs.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) posits that individuals are motivated to grow and change when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. In the context of career development, SDT provides a framework for understanding how internal motivation can be nurtured through supportive educational environments.

SDT is particularly useful for designing career education programs that move beyond extrinsic motivators (e.g., salary) and foster intrinsic interest in career exploration and personal development. Research shows that when students perceive career activities as self-relevant and autonomy-supportive, they are more likely to engage in proactive career behaviors (Howard et al., 2021).

Moreover, career guidance services that affirm students' individual choices and build their confidence in navigating career pathways align closely with SDT principles. The theory underscores the importance of empowering students to become self-directed in their career planning.

III. METHODOLOGY

Construct Definitions

Construct	Definition	Key Sources
Career Planning	Structured, proactive career goal-setting and pathway development	Brown & Lent (2021)
Career Guidance	Professional support to assist informed career decision-making	Hooley (2023)
Career Readiness	Possession of essential skills for workforce transition	NACE (2022)
Student Development	Holistic cognitive, emotional, and professional student growth	Patton et al. (2019); Komives (2021)

This conceptual paper proposes a framework where career planning and career guidance are significant predictors of students' career readiness, with student engagement or career self-efficacy acting as a mediating factor. Career planning, defined as a proactive and self-regulated process involving self-assessment, career exploration, and goal setting (Creed & Hughes, 2013), equips students with clarity and direction in their career trajectories. This process enhances students' ability to navigate the complexities of the labor market, thereby improving their perceived career readiness. Empirical studies support this relationship, noting that students who actively plan their careers tend to exhibit greater confidence in career decision-making and adaptability (Yuen, Gysbers, & Chan, 2021). Theoretically, this is grounded in Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory, which emphasizes that career planning contributes to personal growth and identity formation, both of which are essential for career readiness (Super, 1990).

Similarly, career guidance—which encompasses structured support services such as counseling, career workshops, and mentoring—plays a pivotal role in preparing students for the workforce. Effective guidance interventions help students understand the labor market, align their personal values with occupational choices, and develop actionable plans for their future (Hooley, Watts, & Sultana, 2015). Research by Vuorinen (2022) and Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) confirms that high-quality guidance enhances students' employability skills, decision-making abilities, and career maturity. From a theoretical standpoint, the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) underscores the influence of environmental supports such as guidance services on career-related outcomes (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).

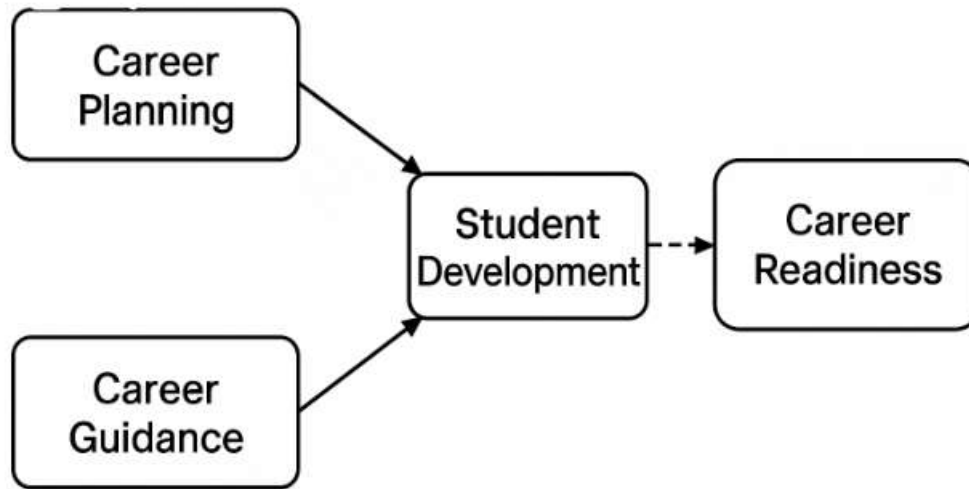


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

In addition, this study proposes a mediating role for either student engagement or career self-efficacy. Student engagement, which refers to the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral involvement in learning and developmental activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), has been shown to correlate positively with skill acquisition and career preparedness (Bakker, Sanz-Vergel, & Kuntze, 2021). Engaged students are more likely to actively participate in internships, job shadowing, and resume-building activities, thus enhancing their readiness for professional life. Alternatively, career self-efficacy—the belief in one’s capacity to successfully perform career-related tasks—has been widely identified as a mediator linking career interventions to career outcomes. According to Tsai, Yang, and Liu (2017), students who receive structured career planning and guidance experience increased self-efficacy, which in turn translates into greater career readiness. This mediating effect is further supported by Shen and Herr (2023), who found that career self-efficacy serves as a key mechanism through which career development initiatives influence students’ transition into the workforce.

In sum, the proposed conceptual framework asserts that both career planning and career guidance exert a direct positive influence on students’ career readiness, and that this relationship is strengthened when mediated by student engagement or career self-efficacy. This model offers a theoretically grounded pathway to enhance the design and implementation of career education in higher learning institutions.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. Integration of Career Planning and Guidance

Effective integration of career planning and guidance into higher education institutions requires a multi-pronged approach that embeds these services into the formal curriculum, co-curricular engagements, and institutional support systems like career centers. This holistic integration fosters an ecosystem where students are continuously exposed to career development activities aligned with their academic journey and personal growth.

Embedding career readiness into the curriculum ensures that all students systematically acquire the competencies needed for future work. This can be achieved through career-integrated syllabi, internship-based learning modules, and reflective career assessments. Research shows that curriculum-embedded career education significantly enhances students' career clarity and transition efficacy (Yuen et al., 2020). For example, programs that integrate career development components—such as resume writing, interview simulations, and labor market analysis—within general education or major-specific courses show better student preparedness (Jackson, 2021).

Further, competency-based curriculum models that emphasize employability skills (communication, critical thinking, teamwork) are gaining traction as essential tools for preparing students for rapidly evolving job markets (McMullan et al., 2023). Universities are also increasingly adopting Career-Integrated Learning Outcomes (CILOs) to ensure academic modules contribute to long-term career success.

Co-curricular programs—such as student clubs, industry competitions, and leadership training—play a critical role in reinforcing career readiness by allowing students to practice transferable skills in real-life contexts. These programs provide opportunities for students to develop soft skills, build professional networks, and explore career interests outside the classroom (Cranmer, 2020). For instance, involvement in entrepreneurship boot camps or innovation hackathons enables students to build initiative, resilience, and adaptability—traits highly valued by employers (Suleman et al., 2021).

Moreover, career-focused mentoring and peer-coaching initiatives have proven effective in helping students articulate career goals and navigate career choices (Wong & Yuen, 2023). Institutions that recognize and accredit co-curricular achievements via digital badges or transcripts are also found to improve student motivation and employer engagement (Greenwood et al., 2022).

Career centers act as central hubs for career development support, offering structured services like one-on-one guidance, job placement assistance, industry engagement programs, and graduate tracking. Their effectiveness lies in their ability to provide tailored guidance based on students' academic backgrounds, career interests, and evolving job market demands. Recent studies indicate that students who engage with career services early in their academic journey are more confident in their career decisions and perform better in the transition to the workforce (Côté & Andrews, 2020; Osmani et al., 2021).

Additionally, the shift toward digital career platforms and AI-driven tools in career centers—such as e-portfolio systems, automated CV reviews, and virtual career fairs—has expanded access and personalization of services (Kim & Suh, 2022). Institutions that strategically align career center objectives with academic goals tend to foster a more coherent and impactful career development experience.

B. Strategic Interventions for Stakeholders: Role of Academic Advisors, Counselors, and Institutions

Improving students' career readiness requires a coordinated strategy involving multiple educational stakeholders, particularly academic advisors, career counselors, and institutional leadership. These actors play

distinct but complementary roles in supporting students' career development pathways through structured planning, timely interventions, and resource integration.

Academic advisors serve as the first point of contact in guiding students' academic and career trajectories. Their ability to align academic plans with students' career goals is vital. According to Robbins et al. (2013), effective academic advising is positively associated with students' sense of direction, goal clarity, and career self-efficacy. Advisors can help students select appropriate courses, explore relevant co-curricular activities, and reflect on career aspirations throughout their academic journey.

Career counselors, on the other hand, offer specialized support that includes self-assessment tools, individualized counseling, job search training, and internship placements. As noted by Hughes and Thomas (2020), career counseling interventions that include career exploration workshops and one-on-one guidance significantly enhance students' confidence in making career decisions and navigating job markets. These services are especially impactful when tailored to students' psychological readiness and developmental stages.

Institutions must play a macro-strategic role by embedding career planning and guidance systematically into the academic experience. This can be achieved through policy-level initiatives such as integrating career development modules into general education curricula, establishing active career centers, and partnering with industries for experiential learning opportunities (Tran, 2021). Furthermore, institutions can support faculty and staff through training programs that raise awareness of their roles in career development, fostering a career-ready culture across departments.

A strategic institutional approach must also address equity and access. Students from marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds often require more targeted interventions due to limited social capital or career exposure (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Therefore, inclusive policies and targeted outreach are necessary to ensure all students benefit from career guidance resources.

In sum, a coordinated framework that mobilizes the roles of advisors, counselors, and institutions can substantially enhance the effectiveness of career planning efforts, thereby improving students' readiness for an increasingly complex and competitive workforce.

C. Challenges and Barriers

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of career planning and guidance in promoting students' career readiness, several persistent challenges and barriers hinder the effective implementation of such programs in educational institutions.

Many institutions, particularly in developing or underfunded educational systems, struggle with inadequate financial and human resources to deliver robust career services. This includes the shortage of trained career counselors, insufficient infrastructure, and limited budget allocations for career-related programs (Osborn, Dikel, & Sampson, 2011). Career guidance is often treated as an auxiliary service rather than a core educational

component, leading to underinvestment in tools, training, and outreach needed to make the programs impactful (Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2018).

Career services in many institutions are delivered in a disjointed manner, lacking integration with academic advising, student development initiatives, and the broader institutional mission (Watts & Fretwell, 2004). The absence of a coordinated framework often results in isolated workshops or one-off career fairs that fail to provide continuous or developmental career support. This fragmentation reduces the effectiveness of interventions and prevents students from receiving consistent, structured guidance throughout their academic journey (Barnes & Rowe, 2019).

Another major challenge is the low level of student engagement or perceived relevance of career planning services. Many students delay career preparation activities until their final year or underestimate the value of proactive career development (Dodd & Hooley, 2016). This apathy may stem from lack of awareness, unclear career goals, or the belief that academic performance alone ensures employability. Without strong motivation or early interventions, students may not fully utilize available resources, thereby limiting the potential benefits of institutional efforts.

D. Policy and Institutional Implications

Embedding career education within general education requirements represents a proactive policy strategy to ensure that all students, regardless of their major, receive structured guidance on career readiness and employability. This approach acknowledges the growing recognition that career development should not be confined to optional services or elective courses, but should instead be systematically integrated into the educational experience of all students.

From a policy perspective, mandating career education as a component of general education ensures equitable access to essential skills such as resume writing, interview preparation, self-assessment, and labor market navigation. It aligns with national and global calls for higher education institutions to produce work-ready graduates. For instance, the OECD (2021) emphasizes that career guidance should be a core component of education policy frameworks to bridge the transition from school to work and reduce youth unemployment.

At the institutional level, embedding career education into curricula may involve restructuring existing courses or developing interdisciplinary modules that incorporate real-world problem-solving, industry engagement, and reflection on career paths. This holistic integration reinforces the value of career learning across disciplines and supports student identity development as future professionals. According to Dykeman et al. (2003), students exposed to structured career planning curricula are more likely to make informed post-secondary and career choices, thereby improving both academic motivation and career outcomes.

Furthermore, career education within general requirements can be aligned with institutional goals on graduate employability, accreditation standards, and stakeholder expectations. It fosters a culture of early and continuous career engagement, helping students contextualize their learning and set actionable goals. Osborn and

Zunker (2021) argue that career interventions embedded within academic settings are more impactful than standalone workshops, especially when tied to student learning outcomes.

However, institutionalizing career education requires coordination across departments, professional development for faculty, and robust evaluation mechanisms. Universities may need to invest in digital tools, career assessments, and partnerships with industry to deliver relevant and engaging career content. As Hughes et al. (2016) note, a whole-institution approach to career education—where leadership, faculty, and career services work collaboratively—can lead to systemic improvements in graduate employability and student satisfaction.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the pivotal role that career planning and guidance play in fostering students' career readiness within higher education contexts. The proposed framework suggests that when educational institutions strategically integrate career planning activities—such as self-assessment, goal-setting, and career exploration—with structured career guidance services, students are better positioned to develop the competencies and confidence required for successful workforce entry.

Drawing upon Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), the model underscores that students' career decisions and readiness are strongly influenced by their self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations. Similarly, Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (Super, 1990) and Savickas' Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013) emphasize that career development is a dynamic, lifelong process shaped by both personal agency and environmental support systems, including education and counseling.

By consolidating these theoretical foundations, the framework positions career readiness not as a standalone outcome but as the product of intentional and developmental interventions. The synergy between career planning and guidance promotes career adaptability, decision-making skills, and student engagement—key dimensions identified in the literature as critical to future employability (NACE, 2021; Hodzic et al., 2015).

Ultimately, this conceptual exploration advocates for a more systemic and curriculum-embedded approach to career development in higher education. Institutions that recognize and invest in career planning and guidance as core student development services are likely to produce graduates who are not only academically prepared but also career-ready, adaptable, and confident contributors to the workforce.

To effectively prepare students for the complexities of today's workforce, higher education institutions must move beyond ad-hoc career services and adopt structured, integrated career development initiatives. These initiatives should be embedded into academic curricula, supported by institutional policies, and aligned with labor market needs. Research has shown that students who engage in structured career development activities—such as guided self-assessment, career exploration, and skill-building workshops—demonstrate higher levels of career readiness and confidence in their vocational choices (Osborn et al., 2022; Dodd & Hooley, 2016). Furthermore, integration ensures that career planning is not viewed as a peripheral or optional activity but as a central component of student development. As argued by Bridgstock (2009), career development learning embedded in

disciplinary contexts can significantly enhance graduate employability. Without this integration, students may lack the guidance, motivation, and preparedness to transition effectively into the workforce, leading to underemployment and skills mismatch. Therefore, higher education institutions must prioritize a systemic and holistic approach to career planning and guidance, ensuring it is accessible, equitable, and responsive to evolving career trajectories.

A. Implications for Future Research

Although this paper presents a conceptual model linking career planning and guidance with career readiness, future research should empirically validate the relationships proposed. Quantitative studies using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) or Partial Least Squares (PLS) could test the mediating roles of student engagement or career self-efficacy. Variables such as academic discipline, socioeconomic background, and access to guidance services should also be controlled to assess generalizability.

Research by Datu (2021) and Nelsen and Latham (2022) supports the idea that conceptual frameworks must undergo empirical scrutiny to ensure practical relevance. Such validation can confirm the reliability of constructs and improve intervention designs within career development programs.

Future research should also explore cross-institutional and cross-cultural comparisons to understand how different educational environments and national career systems affect the success of career planning and guidance. For instance, countries with structured national career frameworks (e.g., Singapore or Germany) may show different outcomes compared to those with decentralized or under-resourced systems.

Comparative studies would help in identifying context-specific practices and universal principles in enhancing career readiness. As noted by Watts and Sultana (2021), the socio-political context plays a significant role in how career services are structured and perceived. A multicountry study could also reveal systemic inequities or best practices transferable across educational systems.

With rapid technological advances, the integration of digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) in career planning and guidance opens new research avenues. Future studies could explore how virtual career advisors, AI-driven recommendation systems, or gamified guidance tools influence students' career decision-making and readiness.

Studies such as those by Hooley, Marriott, and Sampson (2020) have shown that digital tools can expand access and personalization of career services, but ethical and equity issues remain under-researched. Moreover, AI-based platforms must be evaluated for bias, transparency, and their effectiveness compared to traditional counseling models.

B. Comparative Studies Across Institutions or Countries

Future research should explore comparative analyses across different institutional contexts and national education systems to better understand how cultural, policy, and infrastructural differences affect the integration

of career planning and guidance and their impact on career readiness. The design, delivery, and institutional prioritization of career services vary significantly between countries—often influenced by socioeconomic factors, national employment policies, and education governance frameworks (Watts & Fretwell, 2004).

For instance, countries like Germany, with their dual education system, offer deeply institutionalized career pathways integrating vocational training and employment opportunities, while many Anglo-American systems emphasize broader academic development with less structured career support (OECD, 2021). These variations can affect student development outcomes and the effectiveness of career interventions. Therefore, a cross-national comparative study would allow researchers to assess best practices, identify gaps, and evaluate the transferability of career readiness models across diverse educational environments.

Institution-level comparisons are also crucial. For example, research has shown that institutions with embedded career development units and mandatory career courses report higher levels of student career preparedness (Dey & Real, 2010). Exploring differences between public vs. private universities, urban vs. rural institutions, or research-intensive vs. teaching-focused campuses could yield insights into contextual factors influencing the success of career guidance initiatives.

Such comparative studies could adopt mixed-methods approaches, combining surveys on students' career self-efficacy and readiness levels with institutional audits of available career support mechanisms. This would help in crafting a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of how integrated career planning can be optimized globally and locally.

C. Role of digital career platforms and AI in guidance

The integration of digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) in career guidance represents a transformative shift in how students access and interact with career planning resources. Digital career platforms—such as Handshake, CareerExplorer, and LinkedIn Learning—offer interactive tools for self-assessment, labor market analysis, and skill-matching, allowing students to personalize their career trajectories (Barnes & Hooley, 2018). AI-driven systems can enhance these platforms by providing real-time, data-driven recommendations for career paths based on individual profiles, learning analytics, and job market trends (Jaschke et al., 2022). Chatbots, virtual career coaches, and intelligent mentoring systems are now being developed to offer round-the-clock support, simulate mock interviews, and refine resumes through natural language processing (Sampson & Makela, 2014). However, ethical concerns such as data privacy, algorithmic bias, and accessibility remain underexplored. Future research should empirically examine the effectiveness, usability, and equity of AI-integrated career guidance platforms in diverse educational contexts. This will help bridge the gap between traditional counseling services and scalable, tech-enabled interventions in career development.

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