

The role of Career Counselling and Guidance in Supporting Students' Career Decision-making in Tertiary Education

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ABSTRACT

Career counselling and guidance are critical in supporting students' career decision-making in tertiary education, facilitating the transition from academic preparation to professional readiness. This paper examines the role of structured counselling interventions, assessment tools, and personalized guidance in enabling students to make informed career choices. Drawing on contemporary career development theories, including Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory, the study highlights how career guidance enhances self-awareness, goal clarity, employability skills, and alignment between personal values and professional pathways. Evidence indicates that students engaging in career counselling demonstrate greater confidence, proactive planning, and resilience in navigating complex labour markets. Institutional and contextual factors, such as accessibility, technological integration, and cultural responsiveness, influence the effectiveness of these services. The findings underscore the strategic importance of embedding comprehensive career guidance frameworks within tertiary institutions to promote student success, lifelong employability, and societal contribution. Implications for policy, practice, and future research in higher education career services are discussed.

Keywords: Career counselling, Career guidance, Tertiary education, Career decision-making, Employability, Student development, Higher education.

INTRODUCTION

In an era increasingly defined by rapid technological change, globalization and shifting labour-market demands, tertiary education institutions face growing pressure to equip students not only with disciplinary knowledge but also with the capacity to navigate complex career pathways (e.g., adaptability, self-awareness, decision-making). Career counselling and guidance services therefore assume a vital role in bridging the gap between academic preparation and professionally meaningful employment. Historically, career guidance has been conceptualised as a process of helping individuals to clarify their interests, skills, values and possibilities, explore occupational alternatives, and make informed decisions that align education with labour market realities (Ali & Graham, 1996 as cited in the literature).

Within tertiary (higher education) settings, career decision-making is a complex, multi-dimensional task. Students must often navigate not only choice of major or discipline, but also transitions into work, postgraduate study, or other career trajectories which may themselves be evolving

quickly (Pillay et al., 2019). Effective career counselling and guidance can: enhance self-awareness (of interests, values, strengths, weaknesses), improve information literacy regarding occupations and labour market trends, support goal-setting and planning, and foster alignment between academic study and future professional roles. In turn, these supports have the potential to reduce dropout rates, mitigate mismatch between qualification and employment, and enhance employability and student wellbeing.

Empirical evidence highlights both the promise and the challenges of career guidance services in tertiary institutions. For example, a study of Romanian universities found that a large majority of students were unaware of available career counselling services, and that utilisation was low, with implications for students' career preparation and outcomes. In a study from Tanzania, while students affirmed that guidance and counselling services were critical in shaping their career paths, the availability and accessibility of such services in tertiary institutions were often limited or absent. These findings point to a broader phenomenon: the existence of career guidance

services alone is insufficient, issues of accessibility, quality, relevance, cultural responsiveness and institutional capacity are fundamental.

Several important theoretical and contextual dimensions underpin the role of career counselling in tertiary education. Theoretically, frameworks such as the Life-Span, Life-Space theory (Super, 1990) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994) emphasise the interplay of personal factors (self-efficacy, outcome expectations), environmental supports and barriers, and decision-making processes in career development. Practically, in tertiary institutions there is need for an integrated approach that links academic advising, career services, industry engagement and student support functions. Further, in a globalised, digitised world, the notion of career is shifting from linear trajectories to more dynamic, boundaryless and protean paths; thus, career guidance must evolve accordingly to support lifelong career development and adaptability.

In the context of tertiary education, key functions of career counselling and guidance include: facilitating career exploration and decision-making; supporting transitions (into, within, and out of higher education); promoting employability and career resilience; and aligning student aspirations with labour-market demands and social contribution. Accordingly, the present paper investigates the role of structured career counselling interventions, assessment tools, and personalised guidance strategies in supporting students' career decision-making in tertiary education. It examines institutional and contextual factors influencing effectiveness (such as service accessibility, technological integration, cultural responsiveness and resource constraints) and explores the implications for policy, practice and research.

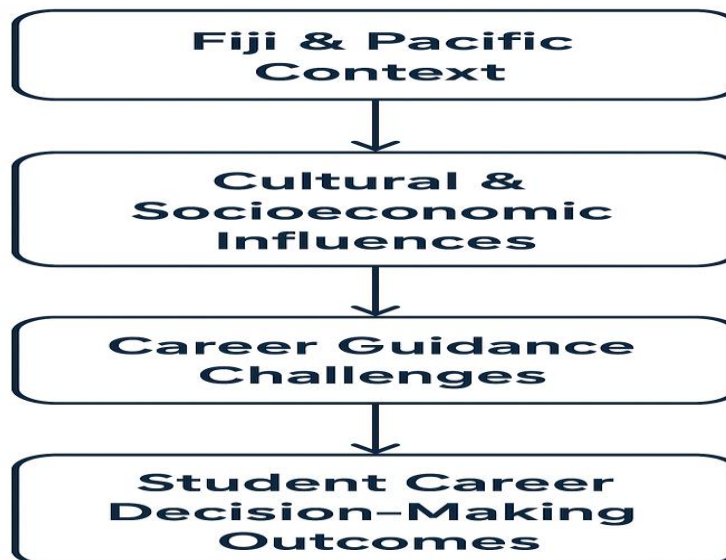
Finally, this paper is of particular relevance in the age of the Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR) where digital disruption, changing job roles and emerging skills requirements mean that students must be more proactive, resilient and self-aware in planning their career pathways. Within tertiary education, career counselling and guidance therefore offer a strategic mechanism to support student agency, lifelong employability, and meaningful transitions from education to work. By synthesising current research and practice, the paper advocates for embedding comprehensive career guidance frameworks within tertiary institutions as an essential component of student success and workforce readiness.

Fiji and the Pacific Context

Career counselling and guidance in tertiary education across

Fiji and the broader Pacific region exist within distinctive sociocultural and economic contexts. Pacific Island nations face constraints such as limited human capital, scarce resources, and geographic dispersion, all of which affect the accessibility and delivery of guidance services (Ravuvu, 2017; Singh & Sharma, 2021). Strong communal values and family expectations also play a pivotal role in shaping students' educational and career decisions, often balancing personal aspirations with collective obligations. In Fiji, tertiary institutions such as the University of the South Pacific and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges increasingly recognise career guidance as essential for employability and national development (Ministry of Education, Fiji, 2020). However, research shows that many students remain unaware of available counselling services, and institutional capacities, particularly staffing, infrastructure, and technological support—are uneven across campuses (Naidu, 2018). While technology-based platforms for career exploration and labour market information are emerging, their use is still limited (Fiji Higher Education Commission, 2022). Cultural influences remain central to career decision-making. Communal expectations and respect for family traditions often steer students toward conventional fields such as teaching, civil service, or family enterprises, sometimes at the expense of emerging opportunities in entrepreneurship, digital innovation, or STEM disciplines (Ravuvu, 2017). Therefore, guidance frameworks must adopt culturally responsive approaches that respect indigenous values while promoting global competencies and employability.

Across the wider Pacific, similar challenges persist. Many small island states experience narrow labour market structures, workforce shortages in critical sectors, and unequal access to higher education and career support (McCluskey, 2019). These realities underscore the need for regionally tailored career counselling systems that strengthen student agency, enhance employability, and align with national and regional development priorities. In sum, career counselling and guidance in Fiji and the Pacific must move beyond imported models to contextually grounded, culturally relevant, and resource-sensitive approaches. By enhancing access, institutional capacity, and cultural alignment, tertiary institutions can empower students to make informed career decisions and contribute effectively to sustainable regional development.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Career counselling and guidance (CCG) have long been recognised as integral to supporting students' personal, academic, and professional development. Foundational theories by Super (1990), Holland (1997), and Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) established the basis for understanding career decision-making as a developmental, psychological, and contextual process. Super's life-span and life-space theory underscores that career choices evolve through self-concept development, while Holland's theory of vocational personalities emphasizes the importance of congruence between individual characteristics and occupational environments. Lent and Brown's (2013) social cognitive model further integrates self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual supports as determinants of effective career behaviour.

In tertiary education, career counselling plays a central role in equipping students with self-awareness, decision-making skills, and employability competencies (Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004; Gysbers & Henderson, 2014). Empirical studies indicate that structured counselling interventions enhance student clarity about career paths, promote goal orientation, and reduce anxiety related to career uncertainty (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Gati & Levin, 2015). Such interventions also promote self-efficacy and lifelong learning attitudes, which are essential for adapting to rapid economic and technological changes.

Contemporary discourse situates career guidance within the global transition toward knowledge economies and the digital age. As technological disruptions reshape labour markets, tertiary institutions are increasingly tasked with developing students' capacity for lifelong adaptability, creativity, and digital literacy (Schwab & Zahidi, 2020; OECD, 2021). Hooley (2018) and Sultana (2020) contend that modern career counselling must transcend traditional employment matching

to include social justice, inclusivity, and personal agency. In this sense, CCG not only supports individual employability but also contributes to broader socio-economic goals such as human capital development (Becker, 1993; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

In developing and small island contexts, including Fiji and the Pacific, research underscores the need for culturally responsive and contextually grounded career counselling systems (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2019). Lingam, Reddy, and Sharma (2022) highlight the gaps in professional counselling services across tertiary institutions, where students often rely on informal academic advice or peer networks rather than trained counsellors. National and regional policy frameworks such as the *Fiji Education Sector Strategic Plan 2019–2023* (Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts [MEHA], 2019) and the *Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF) 2018–2030* (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2020) recognise career guidance as a strategic priority to promote workforce readiness, gender equity, and sustainable development.

Overall, the literature confirms that career counselling and guidance provide essential scaffolding for students navigating complex educational and career pathways. They empower individuals to align their aspirations with market realities while fostering social responsibility and national development (Duarte & Rossier, 2018; Dabalen, Oni, & Adekola, 2021; Watts & Sultana, 2022; Sharma, 2023).

Research Gaps

While substantial literature exists on the theories and practices of career counselling, notable gaps remain in understanding its application and effectiveness within tertiary education systems, particularly in developing

regions.

First, most existing studies have been conducted in Western contexts, focusing on well-established institutional frameworks (Gati & Levin, 2015; OECD, 2021). There is limited empirical research exploring how career counselling functions in resource-constrained environments such as Fiji and other Pacific Island nations, where institutional capacity, digital infrastructure, and professional training are limited (Lingam & Lingam, 2021; Reddy & Sharma, 2022).

Second, few studies have examined how cultural values, indigenous knowledge systems, and communal worldviews influence career decision-making among Pacific tertiary students. Scholars such as Nabobo-Baba (2006) and Thaman (2019) emphasize the need to integrate indigenous epistemologies into counselling practices, yet most frameworks currently applied are Western-centric and may not fully capture Pacific students' relational and collective orientations.

Third, although policy documents such as *PacREF* (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2020) and MEHA (2021) stress the importance of employability and student guidance, there is little evaluative research on how these policies are implemented at the institutional level or their impact on student outcomes. The gap between policy formulation and practical implementation remains a significant concern in tertiary education systems.

Finally, there is limited longitudinal or mixed-method research assessing how career counselling interventions influence students' long-term career trajectories, employability, and satisfaction. Most available studies focus on immediate perceptions or short-term outcomes rather than sustained impacts.

Addressing these research gaps is essential for strengthening evidence-based policy, professional training, and culturally relevant counselling frameworks in the Pacific. It will also contribute to developing holistic, inclusive, and future-ready tertiary education systems capable of supporting students' career development in the 21st century and beyond.

UNDERSTANDING CAREER COUNSELLING AND GUIDANCE

Career counselling and guidance constitute a fundamental component of modern educational systems, aimed at facilitating individuals' understanding of themselves, their opportunities, and their pathways toward meaningful and productive careers. Broadly defined, career counselling is a developmental process that assists individuals in making informed educational, occupational, and life decisions that align with their values, interests, and abilities (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2022). Guidance, on the other hand, encompasses a broader continuum of support services, educational, vocational, and personal, designed to enhance students' self-

awareness, decision-making capacity, and transition readiness (Gysbers & Henderson, 2014). In the tertiary education context, career counselling and guidance are not merely remedial or advisory interventions but form an integral part of institutional strategies for employability, lifelong learning, and personal development.

Functions and Processes

The process of career counselling typically involves three interrelated functions: self-understanding, opportunity awareness, and decision-making (Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004). Self-understanding entails the exploration of personal values, skills, interests, and aspirations through self-assessment tools or reflective dialogue. Opportunity awareness involves gathering and interpreting information about educational programs, labour market trends, and employment prospects. Decision-making integrates these insights into coherent, actionable career plans that are flexible and contextually responsive.

In tertiary institutions, career counselling and guidance often manifest through career centres, workshops, mentorship programs, and experiential learning initiatives such as internships and industry placements (OECD, 2021). These programs aim to build students' employability skills, enhance their confidence, and connect them with potential employers. Importantly, career counsellors serve as facilitators who empower students to become autonomous decision-makers rather than passive recipients of advice (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2022).

Role in Tertiary Education

At the tertiary level, career counselling bridges the gap between academic learning and employment readiness. Universities increasingly view career development as a core dimension of graduate outcomes, integral to their mission of producing competent, adaptable, and socially responsible citizens (OECD, 2021). Effective career counselling helps students integrate academic experiences with career aspirations, thereby improving persistence, motivation, and satisfaction (Gati & Levin, 2015). It also supports students in coping with uncertainty and transition anxiety, especially in the face of volatile job markets and technological disruption associated with the Fourth and Fifth Industrial Revolutions (Schwab & Zahidi, 2020).

Moreover, tertiary career guidance plays a pivotal role in addressing equity and inclusion. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, first-generation learners, and those with limited social capital often lack access to informal networks or career information, making

institutional guidance essential for promoting social mobility (Hooley, 2018). Inclusive career counselling practices therefore recognize the diversity of students' socio-cultural contexts and provide tailored support that accommodates varying aspirations, constraints, and identities (Sultana, 2020).

A Developmental and Lifelong Perspective

Career counselling and guidance are increasingly understood through a lifelong and developmental lens, acknowledging that career decision-making does not occur at a single point but unfolds through continuous learning, reflection, and adaptation. The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (2015) defines lifelong guidance as "a range of activities that enable citizens of any age to identify their capacities, competences, and interests, make educational, training, and occupational decisions, and manage their individual life paths in learning, work, and other settings" (p. 7). This perspective underscores the need for tertiary institutions to equip students with meta-skills such as adaptability, resilience, and digital literacy that support career self-management across changing contexts.

In summary, career counselling and guidance encompass a holistic educational process that empowers tertiary students to make informed, realistic, and personally meaningful career choices. Rooted in both classical and contemporary theories, it integrates self-knowledge, labour-market understanding, and reflective decision-making. Within tertiary education, it functions as a bridge between learning and employability, fostering not only workforce readiness but also lifelong personal and professional development. As the 21st-century world of work becomes increasingly dynamic, effective career counselling must remain flexible, inclusive, and culturally responsive, ensuring that all learners are supported to envision and construct purposeful futures.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CAREER COUNSELLING AND GUIDANCE IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

Career counselling and guidance play a critical role in tertiary education by bridging the gap between academic learning, personal development, and professional aspirations. In an era characterized by technological disruption, globalization, and rapidly changing labour markets, tertiary institutions are increasingly expected to prepare students not only with disciplinary expertise but also with the capacity for career adaptability, resilience, and lifelong learning (OECD, 2021; Schwab & Zahidi, 2020). Career counselling provides structured support to help students identify and pursue career goals that align with their abilities, interests, and values while considering labour market realities and future skills demands (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2022).

Enhancing Informed Career Decision-Making

One of the most important functions of career counselling in tertiary education is to facilitate informed career decision-making. Many university students experience uncertainty, confusion, or indecision regarding career choices, especially when faced with multiple academic options and limited exposure to occupational realities (Gati & Levin, 2015). Through career assessments, one-on-one counselling sessions, workshops, and experiential learning opportunities, career services enable students to gain greater self-awareness and explore potential career paths. This process promotes more deliberate and evidence-based decision-making, reducing the likelihood of career misalignment, academic attrition, or post-graduation dissatisfaction (Herr et al., 2004; Lent et al., 1994).

Career guidance interventions have been shown to improve students' career decision self-efficacy—the confidence to make career-related choices, and reduce anxiety related to uncertainty and transition (Duarte & Rossier, 2018). This is particularly significant for students navigating complex academic systems or shifting from traditional career trajectories to emerging professions in the digital and knowledge economies. By integrating psychometric assessments and reflective dialogue, counsellors help students make sense of their aspirations and align them with achievable pathways (Watts & Sultana, 2022).

Linking Education to Employability and Labor Market Needs

In the 21st century, employability has become a central policy and institutional priority in higher education. Career counselling plays a strategic role in equipping students with the competencies needed to enter and thrive in the labour market (Hooley, 2018). Employability extends beyond securing employment, it encompasses the ability to gain, sustain, and progress in work through the application of transferable skills, such as problem-solving, communication, teamwork, and digital literacy (Yorke, 2006). Career guidance supports this development by connecting students with industry networks, facilitating internships, and helping them translate academic achievements into workplace competencies (OECD, 2021). In tertiary institutions globally, the integration of career counselling into curricula has been found to enhance student employability outcomes (Dabalen et al., 2021). Structured programs, such as mentoring schemes, employability workshops, and cooperative education placements, create platforms where students can develop practical skills while receiving tailored advice on job

search strategies and professional identity formation (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2022). These interventions ensure that students graduate with both academic qualifications and a sense of career direction, thereby increasing their competitiveness in global labour markets.

Supporting Lifelong Learning and Career Adaptability

Given the volatility and uncertainty of contemporary employment landscapes, tertiary education must equip students with the capacity for career adaptability, the ability to manage change, overcome barriers, and reorient goals in response to shifting circumstances (Savickas, 2013). Career counselling contributes directly to this adaptability by fostering reflective practice, self-directed learning, and resilience. Students who engage with career services are more likely to develop adaptive career behaviours, including proactive skill acquisition, openness to new opportunities, and long-term goal planning (Lent & Brown, 2013).

Career counselling also reinforces the concept of lifelong learning, a principle central to both educational and workforce development policies (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network [ELGPN], 2015). By promoting awareness of continuous professional development, counsellors help students conceptualize career growth as an ongoing process rather than a one-time decision. This lifelong orientation is crucial in preparing graduates to manage multiple career transitions across their professional lives, particularly as automation and digital transformation redefine work boundaries (Schwab & Zahidi, 2020).

Promoting Equity, Inclusion, and Social Mobility

Career counselling and guidance also serve a social function by promoting equity and inclusion in tertiary education. Students from marginalized backgrounds, such as those from low-income families, rural areas, or underrepresented groups, often lack access to career information, networks, or role models (Hooley, 2018; Sultana, 2020). Without targeted guidance, these students may experience limited career awareness or restricted occupational aspirations. Tertiary institutions that provide comprehensive and inclusive career counselling help mitigate these inequalities by ensuring all students receive support in exploring diverse opportunities and building career confidence (Duarte & Rossier, 2018).

Furthermore, culturally responsive counselling practices that respect students' values, traditions, and community contexts can enhance engagement and trust (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010). In multicultural societies, including Pacific nations like Fiji, acknowledging cultural influences on career decision-making is essential to ensuring that counselling is both effective and respectful (Thaman, 2019). Inclusive counselling frameworks thus contribute not only to individual

empowerment but also to national goals of social cohesion and human capital development.

Institutional and Policy Significance

At an institutional level, effective career counselling enhances student satisfaction, retention, and graduate employability, key indicators of tertiary education quality (OECD, 2021). From a policy perspective, it aligns with the broader human capital development agenda, where education is viewed as an investment that yields economic and social returns through a skilled, adaptable, and innovative workforce (Becker, 1993; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Governments and higher education bodies increasingly regard career counselling as an essential mechanism for aligning academic offerings with labour market demands and for ensuring smooth transitions between education, training, and employment sectors (World Bank, 2021).

Career counselling and guidance in tertiary education serve as a multidimensional mechanism that supports academic, professional, and personal development. By facilitating informed decision-making, enhancing employability, fostering adaptability, and promoting inclusion, it contributes to both individual success and societal progress. As tertiary education systems evolve within the global knowledge economy, embedding structured and culturally responsive career counselling becomes essential to preparing graduates who are not only career-ready but also capable of lifelong learning and purposeful contribution to their communities.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Career counselling and guidance play a pivotal role in shaping students' career decision-making processes in tertiary education. As students navigate complex academic choices and transition from higher education to the workforce, the availability and quality of career guidance services can significantly influence their career trajectories, employability, and overall satisfaction with their educational experiences (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2012; Gati et al., 2018). This discussion analyses the multifaceted impact of career counselling and guidance, focusing on three key areas: career self-efficacy, informed decision-making, and alignment with labour market demands.

Career Self-Efficacy and Confidence

A substantial body of research indicates that career counselling enhances students' career self-efficacy, which refers to their belief in their ability to make informed

career choices and successfully achieve career-related goals (Lent et al., 2017). Through structured guidance, assessments, and reflective exercises, students develop a clearer understanding of their skills, interests, and personal values. For instance, personality and aptitude assessments administered during counselling sessions provide empirical feedback, helping students recognize potential career pathways they may not have previously considered (Nauta, 2010). This heightened self-awareness reduces career decision-making anxiety and empowers students to engage in proactive career planning, fostering resilience amid uncertainties in the contemporary labour market (Osborn & Baggerly, 2004).

Informed Decision-Making

Career counselling facilitates informed decision-making by equipping students with knowledge of career options, educational prerequisites, and professional competencies. The guidance process often includes workshops, mentoring, and one-on-one sessions where students explore occupational information, higher education pathways, and industry expectations (Gati et al., 2018). This comprehensive exposure ensures that students make decisions based on both personal interests and objective realities, minimizing the likelihood of future dissatisfaction or career mismatch. Moreover, structured counselling encourages students to set short-term and long-term goals, fostering a strategic approach to academic and professional planning (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Empirical studies have consistently shown that students who engage with career services report higher levels of preparedness and clarity regarding their career choices compared to those who do not (Herr, 2017).

Alignment with Labor Market Needs

A critical dimension of career guidance in tertiary education is its alignment with labour market demands and emerging industry trends. Career counsellors increasingly act as intermediaries between students and the employment sector, offering insights into skills in demand, professional networking opportunities, and strategies for enhancing employability (Hooley et al., 2018). In the era of rapid technological advancement, such as the Fourth and Fifth Industrial Revolutions, students require guidance on future-oriented skills, including digital literacy, critical thinking, and adaptive competencies (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2020). Effective career counselling ensures that tertiary education is not solely an academic pursuit but also a conduit for economic participation, bridging the gap between institutional learning outcomes and workforce requirements.

Challenges and Considerations

Despite the demonstrated benefits, several challenges constrain the effectiveness of career counselling in tertiary education. Resource limitations, high student-to-counsellor ratios, and varying institutional commitment can impede the delivery of personalised guidance (Lapan et al., 2012). Additionally, cultural and social factors, including family expectations and societal perceptions of certain professions, influence students' career decisions, necessitating culturally sensitive counselling approaches (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Research also emphasizes the importance of integrating career guidance into the broader educational curriculum rather than treating it as an ancillary service, thereby reinforcing career awareness and decision-making skills throughout the academic journey (Watts & Sultana, 2004).

Implications for Practice

The discussion underscores the need for tertiary institutions to prioritise comprehensive, evidence-based career counselling services. Integrating technological tools, such as online career assessment platforms and virtual mentoring, can augment traditional counselling methods and increase accessibility (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2016). Moreover, counsellors should receive ongoing professional development to remain updated on labour market trends and innovative guidance strategies. By doing so, institutions not only support students' immediate career choices but also contribute to the development of adaptable, skilled graduates capable of thriving in dynamic work environments.

Synthesis

Overall, career counselling and guidance function as essential mechanisms for facilitating informed, self-directed, and strategic career decision-making among tertiary students. By enhancing self-efficacy, providing actionable information, and aligning student aspirations with labour market realities, career counselling reinforces both individual and societal outcomes. However, institutional commitment, resource allocation, and culturally responsive practices remain critical factors in maximising the efficacy of career guidance services (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2012; Gati et al., 2018; Hooley et al., 2018).

THE FIJI AND PACIFIC CONTEXT

In the Pacific region, and particularly in Fiji, the role of career counselling and guidance in supporting tertiary students' career decision-making has become increasingly significant in light of evolving economic, technological, and

social transformations. The Fijian government and higher education institutions are progressively recognizing that structured career guidance is essential to align student aspirations with national development priorities and global labour market demands (Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts [MEHA], 2019; Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat [PIFS], 2020). However, the practice and institutionalisation of career counselling remain uneven across the region, constrained by limited resources, lack of trained personnel, and varying levels of policy integration (Lingam & Lingam, 2021).

National and Institutional Priorities

In Fiji, tertiary education institutions such as the University of the South Pacific (USP), Fiji National University (FNU), and the University of Fiji have introduced student support services that include academic and career counselling components. These services are designed to help students navigate program choices, understand occupational opportunities, and prepare for employability in a globalized labour market (USP, 2023). However, the effectiveness of these services depends largely on institutional commitment, staff capacity, and collaboration with industries. The *Fiji Education Sector Strategic Plan (2021–2025)* emphasizes the importance of strengthening career education and counselling as part of a broader strategy to improve student transition from education to employment (MEHA, 2021). This policy direction aligns with regional frameworks, such as the *Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF)*, which underscores the need for quality education systems that support life and career readiness (PIFS, 2020).

Challenges in Career Guidance Implementation

Despite policy intent, implementation challenges persist. Many Fijian tertiary students continue to make career decisions based on family expectations, financial constraints, and limited exposure to professional options (Lingam et al., 2022). This cultural dynamic often leads students to prioritize job security over personal interest or aptitude, resulting in career mismatches and underemployment. Furthermore, the lack of specialized career counsellors in tertiary institutions restricts access to professional guidance. In many cases, academic advisors, who are already burdened with teaching responsibilities, provide limited career advice without formal counselling training (Reddy & Sharma, 2022). This situation reflects a broader regional issue across Pacific Island countries, where guidance services are often underdeveloped due to systemic and resource-related constraints (Thaman, 2019).

Another pressing challenge lies in the dynamic nature of the Fijian and Pacific labor markets. The Fourth and emerging Fifth Industrial Revolutions (4IR and 5IR) are reshaping skill

demands through automation, artificial intelligence, and green innovation (Sharma, 2023). Consequently, tertiary education institutions are under pressure to prepare graduates with adaptable and transferable skills. Career counselling, therefore, must evolve beyond traditional job matching to include future-focused competencies such as digital literacy, creativity, emotional intelligence, and intercultural communication (Pacific Higher Education Forum [PHEF], 2022).

Cultural Context and Indigenous Perspectives

Career counselling in the Pacific must also be culturally contextualized. Pacific societies, including Fiji, are guided by collective values and relational decision-making, which often differ from the individualistic assumptions underpinning Western counselling models (Thaman, 2019). For example, career choices are frequently influenced by family elders or community expectations rather than purely personal aspirations. Hence, effective counselling in the Fijian context must integrate culturally responsive approaches that respect communal norms while fostering individual agency. Incorporating indigenous knowledge systems and using local metaphors in career discussions can make counselling more relevant and engaging (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). This culturally grounded approach promotes inclusivity and strengthens students' sense of identity and belonging as they navigate globalized career landscapes.

Emerging Opportunities and the Way Forward

Despite these challenges, several promising developments are emerging. USP's Career and Entrepreneurship Centre and FNU's Career Services Unit have begun integrating employability workshops, internships, and industry linkages into student development programs (USP, 2023; FNU, 2023). These initiatives provide experiential learning opportunities that enhance students' career readiness and decision-making confidence. Additionally, regional collaboration under the *PacREF* is fostering the exchange of best practices and capacity-building for counsellors across Pacific nations (PIFS, 2020).

Going forward, Fiji's tertiary institutions must institutionalize career counselling as a central, well-resourced component of student services. Building partnerships with industries, government ministries, and regional organizations will help align academic programs with evolving labor market needs. Moreover, embedding career education within the curriculum, rather than confining it to extracurricular activities, can help normalize career planning as a lifelong learning process. In the Fijian and Pacific contexts, career counselling

represents both an opportunity and a necessity for ensuring that tertiary graduates are equipped to navigate increasingly complex career environments. When implemented effectively, career guidance can enhance self-awareness, informed choice-making, and employability, contributing directly to national human capital development. However, to maximize impact, these services must be adequately resourced, culturally attuned, and strategically aligned with national and regional education and employment frameworks (Lingam & Lingam, 2021; Sharma, 2023). Strengthening these elements will not only support individual student success but also foster broader socio-economic resilience in the Pacific's rapidly changing world of work.

CONCLUSION

Career counselling and guidance play a central role in enabling tertiary students to make informed, purposeful, and adaptive career decisions. The literature and analysis underscore that effective career guidance is not merely an auxiliary support service but a critical educational and developmental function that enhances employability, self-efficacy, and lifelong learning. Globally, tertiary institutions that embed structured, theory-informed counselling models demonstrate higher rates of student career readiness, academic engagement, and graduate employability (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2012; Gati et al., 2018; Hooley et al., 2018).

The discussion has established that career counselling strengthens students' career self-efficacy and confidence by facilitating self-assessment, reflection, and alignment of personal values with occupational goals (Lent et al., 2017; Nauta, 2010). It also equips students to make informed decisions through access to reliable labour market information and professional mentorship, thus reducing the risks of career indecision and mismatch (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Furthermore, as economies undergo digital and structural transformation under the Fourth and Fifth Industrial Revolutions, career guidance serves as a bridge between educational systems and evolving labour market realities (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2020).

Within the Fiji and broader Pacific context, the integration of career counselling into tertiary education remains in its developmental phase. Institutional and policy frameworks are progressively acknowledging its strategic importance for human capital formation and youth employment outcomes (MEHA, 2021; PIFS, 2020). However, systemic challenges persist—particularly a shortage of trained counsellors, limited institutional funding, and the absence of culturally grounded counselling models (Lingam & Lingam, 2021; Reddy & Sharma, 2022). The collectivist nature of Pacific societies also necessitates a culturally responsive counselling approach that harmonises traditional communal values with the individual decision-making required in contemporary labour

markets (Thaman, 2019; Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

Overall, career counselling in tertiary education is a multidimensional practice that enhances not only employability but also holistic student development. Its success depends on an ecosystemic approach involving policy support, institutional leadership, counsellor professionalisation, and stakeholder collaboration. For small island developing states such as Fiji, this role becomes even more crucial for building adaptive, skilled, and socially responsible citizens capable of navigating a rapidly changing world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(a) Strengthen Policy and Institutional Frameworks

Tertiary institutions and education ministries should formally embed career counselling within national education and employment policy frameworks. The inclusion of career education in the *Fiji Education Sector Strategic Plan (2021–2025)* and the *Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF)* provides a foundation for this integration (MEHA, 2021; PIFS, 2020). However, these frameworks must be operationalised through clear institutional mandates, performance indicators, and dedicated funding. Establishing national career guidance standards and accreditation systems for counsellors can help professionalise the field and ensure consistency in service delivery (Herr, 2017).

(b) Build Counsellor Capacity and Professional Development

Given the current shortage of trained counsellors in Fiji and other Pacific nations, it is vital to invest in specialised training programs at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Collaboration with regional institutions such as the University of the South Pacific (USP) can facilitate the development of accredited courses in career counselling and guidance (USP, 2023). Ongoing professional development, including exposure to international best practices and technological tools, will enhance counsellors' capacity to respond to emerging career trends (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2016).

(c) Integrate Career Education into Curricula

Career education should be embedded within tertiary curricula rather than delivered as isolated services. Embedding employability modules, work-integrated learning, and reflective career planning units across academic disciplines can help students contextualize their learning in relation to career outcomes (Hooley et al., 2018). This integration fosters a proactive career mindset and encourages lifelong adaptability—key attributes in an era of rapid technological change (WEF, 2020).

(d) Foster Industry and Community Partnerships

Stronger partnerships between tertiary institutions, industries, and communities are essential for aligning academic programs with labour market needs. Structured internships, mentorship programs, and employer engagement events can provide students with practical exposure and professional networking opportunities (FNU, 2023; USP, 2023). In the Fijian and Pacific context, collaboration with regional organisations such as the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Pacific Higher Education Forum (PHEF) can facilitate knowledge exchange, regional internships, and cross-country career mobility programs (PHEF, 2022).

(e) Promote Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Counselling

Culturally attuned career counselling models must be developed to reflect Pacific worldviews and indigenous epistemologies. Counsellors should adopt approaches that balance collective family aspirations with individual career autonomy, employing local metaphors, community narratives, and indigenous frameworks of wellbeing (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2019). Inclusive counselling must also address the needs of students from rural, maritime, and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to ensure equitable access to career opportunities (Lingam et al., 2022).

(f) Leverage Digital and Technological Innovations

Digital career counselling platforms, artificial intelligence-based assessment tools, and virtual mentoring systems can expand the reach and effectiveness of counselling services, particularly for students in remote Pacific islands. The post-pandemic digital transformation in education provides a timely opportunity to develop hybrid models that combine in-person and online counselling (Sharma, 2023). Institutions should also equip students with digital literacy skills to enable them to navigate online career resources and global job markets effectively.

FINAL REFLECTION

Career counselling and guidance are transformative elements in tertiary education that empower students to become active architects of their futures. In Fiji and the Pacific, these services hold the potential to not only enhance individual employability but also to contribute to regional resilience, social equity, and sustainable development. Achieving this vision requires sustained investment, collaboration, and cultural contextualisation. By integrating global best practices with local values, Pacific tertiary institutions can cultivate graduates who are not only career-ready but also grounded in their identities, capable of leading innovation and inclusive growth in the 21st century.

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