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Effects of career guidance on Post-Secondary Learners: A perspective of commercial students at one university in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Career guidance plays an influential role in shaping students' academic and professional futures, particularly within competitive and versatile fields such as commerce. In South Africa, and especially in historically disadvantaged provinces like the Eastern Cape, many students begin tertiary education without a clear understanding of career pathways. This study explores the impact of career guidance on the decision-making, confidence, and preparedness of commercial students at one Eastern Cape university. Grounded in the Social Cognitive Career Theory, the study adopted a qualitative exploratory design using a sample of 36 students. Findings revealed low visibility and accessibility of career guidance services, yet demonstrated significant positive outcomes for those who accessed them. The study concludes that improved institutional support, integrated planning, and awareness strategies are vital to enhancing the efficacy of career guidance interventions. The study recommends that the university should integrate career guidance into the curriculum and boost its visibility through proactive marketing. Targeted interventions must focus on building confidence and supporting early decision-making for first-year and historically disadvantaged students. This study provides evidence on career guidance in South Africa, applying Social Cognitive Career Theory to commerce students. It identifies a visibility paradox where effective services remain inaccessible. The findings offer insights for designing equitable career interventions.

Keywords: Career Guidance**,** Career choice, Post-Secondary, Career decision-making, Students, Career counselling.

INTRODUCTION

Career development has become an integral part of post-secondary education as students face complex decisions concerning their academic paths and professional futures. For students in commerce-related programmes, which include economics, finance, accounting, and business management, the career landscape presents both vast opportunities and significant complexities. Ford believed that these students must align their personal goals with industry expectations and dynamic professional trends.[1] These students are also required to navigate economic volatility, competitive job markets, and evolving

[1] Paul Lalonde, "The Role of Career Education on Students' Education Choices and Post-Secondary Outcomes," 2020.

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personal interests. Career guidance is increasingly recognized as a strategic intervention that aligns student aspirations with labour market realities, promoting retention and reducing the incidence of career switching after graduation.[2]

In the South African context, systemic disparities inherited from the apartheid era continue to affect the quality and accessibility of education. The Eastern Cape, being one of the most underdeveloped provinces, faces significant challenges such as poor infrastructure, a high student-to-advisor ratio, and inadequate school-level career preparation.[3] Consequently, many commercial students embark on their tertiary education journeys without a clear understanding of the career paths available to them or how to effectively plan for them.[4]

Career guidance, when effectively delivered, plays a vital role in bridging the information gap. It helps students make informed academic and career choices by enhancing their self-awareness, knowledge of labour markets, and understanding of the required competencies.[5] However, the presence, quality, and accessibility of career guidance in South African universities remain inconsistent, with historically disadvantaged institutions often lagging behind.[6]

Maringe et al. argued that many university entrants lack a structured career plan due to limited access to information, socioeconomic challenges, and inadequate pre-university support.[7] This study examines the impact of career guidance on the academic and career-related decisions of post-secondary commercial students, focusing on their access to guidance services, perceptions of their effectiveness, and the extent to which these services influence academic choices and career confidence. Although several South African studies have examined career guidance in schools and higher education, research has been limited in its focus on post-secondary commercial students in historically disadvantaged universities, particularly in rural provinces such as the Eastern Cape. Previous studies mainly explored general career choice challenges, learner preparedness and graduate employability, with little emphasis on how career guidance influences students' confidence, academic choices, and career decision-making within commerce programmes[8]. This study addresses this gap by focusing on commercial students at a historically disadvantaged university and applying Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) to examine how career guidance shapes students' self-efficacy and career decision-making, and why career guidance services exist but remain largely unknown or inaccessible to many students.

The main aim of this study is to explore the effects of career guidance on the academic and career-related decisions of post-secondary commercial students at one university in the Eastern Cape Province. In addition, the study aims to:

- Assess the availability of career guidance services for commercial students.
- Explore students' perceptions of the relevance and usefulness of career guidance.
- Examine the influence of career guidance on students' academic and career decision-making.

The study seeks to answer this main question: What is the effect of career guidance on the academic and career-related decisions of post-secondary commercial students at one university in the Eastern Cape Province?

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[2] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Career Guidance for Adults in a Changing World of Work," Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/career-guidance-for-adults-in-a-changing-world-of-work_9a94bfad-en.html.

[3] Nick Taylor, "Priorities for Addressing South Africa's Education and Training Crisis: A Review Commissioned by the National Planning Commission," *Joint Education Trust (JET) Education Services. South Africa*, 2011.

[4] Felix Maringe, Anthony Masinire, and Thabisile Nkambule, "Pre-University Schooling and Its Impact on First Year University Performance: A South African Case," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 29, no. 5 (2015): 100–117.

[5] Mark L Savickas, "Career Construction Theory and Counseling Model," *Career Development and Counseling: Putting Theory and Research to Work* 3 (2020): 165–200.

[6] Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), *Report on the Status of Career Development Services in South Africa* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2019); L. Nel, "The Visibility and Impact of Career Services in Higher Education: A South African Perspective," *African Journal of Career Development* 3, no. 1 (2021): 1–8.

[7] Maringe, Masinire, and Nkambule, "Pre-University Schooling and Its Impact on First Year University Performance: A South African Case."

[8] Abrahams, A. 2015 Factors Influencing the career Choice of Undergraduate Students at a Historically Disadvantaged South African University. Available online at: http://doi.org/10.5367/ihe.2015.0253

The following sub-questions are also answered in this study:

- What forms of career guidance are available to commercial students?
- How do students perceive the effectiveness of the career guidance they receive?
- In what ways has career guidance influenced their academic and career choices?

This study may inform policymakers, university administrators, and career practitioners about the effectiveness and accessibility of career support services. The findings can help improve career guidance programmes, enhance student decision-making, and contribute to better academic and career outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Career Guidance in Higher Education

Career guidance in higher education is a multifaceted process aimed at helping students understand themselves, explore career options, and make informed decisions. It includes career counselling, job shadowing, internships, skills workshops, and industry engagement platforms.[9] Institutions that integrate career guidance into their curriculum and student support structures tend to experience higher retention, increased graduate employability, and enhanced student satisfaction.[10]

Globally, countries like Finland and Singapore have successfully embedded career development within their educational frameworks, focusing on lifelong career learning, starting at the school level.[11]This proactive approach contrasts with South Africa's predominantly reactive model, where students only access guidance once already enrolled in tertiary studies. In addition, the professionalisation of career practitioners is more advanced internationally, whereas in South Africa, many guidance roles are filled by untrained academic staff.[12] This discrepancy raises concerns about the quality and consistency of the advice students receive, particularly in underfunded universities.

However, the implementation of career guidance remains inconsistent across South African universities. The Department of Higher Education and Training highlights critical deficiencies in career development units, particularly in historically disadvantaged institutions.[13] Research indicates that institutions in disadvantaged regions often have fragmented services, limited staffing, and lack digital tools to reach wider audiences.[14]

Recent developments in digital career counselling platforms, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, show promising potential to increase outreach and personalisation.[15] Moreover, emerging evidence shows that AI-driven platforms like virtual career coaches and online self-assessment tools are gaining traction in developed contexts and beginning to be piloted in some South African universities.[16] However, the adoption of such innovations is still uneven across institutions, with rural universities facing technological and financial constraints.[17]

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[9] A. G Watts and R. G Sultana, "Career Guidance in the Context of Social Justice," *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling* 48, no. 2 (2020): 127–32.

[10] William E. Donald, Yehuda Baruch, and Melanie Ashleigh, "The Undergraduate Self-Perception of Employability: Human Capital, Careers Advice, and Career Ownership," *Studies in Higher Education* 44, no. 4 (April 3, 2019): 599–614, https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1387107.

[11] Tristram Hooley, " Career Development in Finland: A Lifelong Learning Approach" (. International Centre for Guidance in Education (iCeGS), University of Derby, 2022).

[12] T. M. Makoelle, "The State of Career Development in South African Universities: Challenges of Professionalisation and Equity," *Journal of Career Development* 50, no. 4 (2023): 489–504.

[13] Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), *Report on the Status of Career Development Services in South Africa*.

[14] S. C. Mahlaba, "Challenges Faced by South African Rural University Students in Accessing Career Services," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 10, no. 1 (2022): 89–104; Molatlhegi S. Nhlapo, Sakhile V. Makhubela, and Kgotso J. Mokoena, "The Provision of Career Guidance and Development Services in South African Higher Education: A Post-Apartheid Perspective," *South African Journal of Psychology* 51, no. 4 (2021): 591–604.

[15] M Mentz and J Botha, "Digitalisation of Career Guidance: Implications for South African Universities ," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 8, no. 2 (2020): 45–61.

[16] S Nxumalo and Mhlanga, "Artificial Intelligence in Career Development: Opportunities and Challenges for Higher Education," *SA Journal of Human Resource Management* 21, no. 1 (2023).

[17] Maringe, Masinire, and Nkambule, "Pre-University Schooling and Its Impact on First Year University Performance: A South African Case."

Challenges Faced by Post-Secondary Learners

Post-secondary students, especially those from rural or low-income backgrounds, often enter higher education with limited awareness of career opportunities. This leads to uncertainty, anxiety, and at times, poor decision-making. Nhlapo et al. stressed the importance of targeted guidance interventions to help students navigate career possibilities and develop necessary skills for the labour market.[18] Moreover, students often face internal challenges, such as low self-confidence and external factors, such as a lack of role models.

Most students transition into university underprepared for career decision-making. A study by Van Broekhuizen et al. reveals that high school career orientation programmes in rural South African schools are often superficial or absent.[19] This lack of early intervention leads to high levels of uncertainty, disengagement, and misaligned course selection at the tertiary level.

Financial hardship, limited exposure to professionals, and cultural expectations such as choosing careers based on family prestige further complicate decision-making.[20] In particular, commercial students often gravitate towards traditional and perceived high-status careers like accounting and law, sometimes without a genuine interest or understanding of these paths.

Moreover, research shows that students struggle to reconcile personal goals with labour market trends. Career guidance that is not culturally or contextually responsive may reinforce this misalignment.[21] Career development that addresses identity, motivation, and context has shown to be more effective than generic interventions. Perceptions of effectiveness are heavily influenced by how well career services assist students in developing realistic expectations, setting attainable goals, and aligning educational choices with labor market demands.[22] Where proactive career development interventions have been introduced, such as alumni mentorship or work-integrated learning, students report greater satisfaction and enhanced decision-making capabilities.[23]

Commercial Students and Career Choices

Commercial disciplines such as accounting, marketing, economics, and entrepreneurship offer diverse opportunities but require informed and strategic decision-making. Without structured support, students may base career decisions on hearsay, peer influence, or societal pressure rather than reflective self-assessment.[24]

Students in commerce face a unique challenge due to the breadth and competitiveness of commerce-related careers. The pressure to specialise early increases the likelihood of misaligned choices without proper guidance. Other authors contend that early and continuous career support is essential to avoid dissatisfaction and prevent later career-switching among commerce students.[25] Career counselling in commerce can also foster entrepreneurial thinking and innovation, as highlighted by the OECD, which is crucial in a country with high youth unemployment.[26]

Research highlights the importance of early exposure to real-world experiences through internships, mentorship, alumni interactions, and career simulations in supporting meaningful career

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[18] V. Nhlapo, A. Pillay, and M. Themane, "Supporting Career Development in Resource-Constrained Contexts: The Case of South African Universities," *South African Journal of Higher Education 35 (2): 89–105.* 35, no. 2 (2021): 89–105.

[19] Hendrik Van Broekhuizen, Servaas Van der Berg, and Heleen Hofmeyr, "Higher Education Access and Outcomes for the 2008 South African National Matric Cohort" (IZA Discussion Papers, 2016).

[20] Nhlapo, Pillay, and Themane, "Supporting Career Development in Resource-Constrained Contexts: The Case of South African Universities."

[21] Savickas, "Career Construction Theory and Counseling Model."

[22] E.A.J. Van Hooft et al., " Social Cognitive Career Theory in Action: Contemporary Developments and Future Directions," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 145 (2023): 103856.

[23] L. Ramrathan and T. Mhlongo, "Enhancing Employability of Commercial Students through Alumni Engagement: A South African Case Study," *South African Journal of Education* 43, no. 1 (2023): 1–11; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Career Readiness and the Evolving Labour Market: Strengthening Career Guidance Systems* (OECD Publishing, 2023).

[24] Hendrik Van Broekhuizen, "Graduate Unemployment and Higher Education Institutions in South Africa," *Bureau for Economic Research and Stellenbosch Economic Working Paper* 8, no. 16 (2016): 1–48.

[25] Van Broekhuizen, "Graduate Unemployment and Higher Education Institutions in South Africa."

[26] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Career Readiness: Helping Students Navigate the Future* (OECD Publishing, 2021).

exploration.[27] Alumni narratives in particular have been shown to inspire goal setting and improve confidence in decision-making.[28]

Mseleku and Pillay emphasize the need for universities to reimagine career services as incubators for innovation and self-employment, extending beyond predictable advice to include entrepreneurship education, pitch competitions, and collaboration with local businesses.[29] This is especially important in South Africa, where youth unemployment rates remain high.[30] Furthermore, the other researchers found that commercial students exposed to business start-up initiatives during their studies were more likely to consider self-employment as a viable option upon graduation.[31] Localised support systems that promote entrepreneurial mindsets could help shift perceptions and open up more diverse career paths.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employed Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), developed by Lent et al., as its foundational framework. SCCT underlines the importance of personal action and highlights how individuals form career interests, make decisions, and achieve goals based on three central constructs: self-efficacy, outcome expectations**,** and personal goals.[32] These constructs are influenced by contextual factors such as support systems, environmental barriers, and social learning.

SCCT is mostly relevant to the South African higher education context, where socio-economic and educational disparities significantly influence students' self-beliefs and perceived career options. According to Bandura, self-efficacy beliefs can be strengthened through structured support, mentoring, and practical exposure to all key elements of effective career guidance.[33] This is reinforced by recent international research, which shows that underrepresented or first-generation students benefit the most from interventions that build career confidence and provide contextualised support.[34]

Furthermore, because SCCT focuses on both internal and external factors, it is ideal for understanding how university students from underserved areas, such as the Eastern Cape, navigate their academic and professional development. Locally, Moodley and Singh confirm that in South African rural universities, students frequently rely heavily on informal networks due to the lack of structured career guidance, making SCCT's holistic lens especially important.[35]

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design to gain a deep, contextual understanding of the effects of career guidance from the perspective of commercial students. An exploratory approach is particularly appropriate for investigating complex, experience-based phenomena where the goal is to uncover nuanced insights rather than to test predetermined hypotheses.[36] This design allowed the researcher to investigate not only the presence of career guidance services but, more importantly, how

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[27] Donald, Baruch, and Ashleigh, "The Undergraduate Self-Perception of Employability: Human Capital, Careers Advice, and Career Ownership."

[28] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Career Readiness: Helping Students Navigate the Future*.

[29] Z Mseleku and D Pillay, "Perceptions of Career Counselling among Rural University Students in South Africa ," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 10, no. 1 (2022): 27–45.

[30] Statistics South Africa, *Quarterly Labour Force Survey: Q1 2024*, 2024.

[31] T. Ramoloko and W.T. Chinyamurindi, "Fostering Entrepreneurial Intent among Commerce Students in South African Universities," *Education and Training* 66, no. 3 (2024): 375–92.

[32] Robert W. Lent, Steven D. Brown, and Gail Hackett, "Contextual Supports and Barriers to Career Choice: A Social Cognitive Analysis.," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 47, no. 1 (January 2000): 36–49, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.47.1.36.

[33] Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, vol. 11 (Freeman, 1997).

[34] Nadya A Fouad and Mercedes C Santana, "SCCT and Underrepresented Populations in STEM Fields: Moving the Needle," *Journal of Career Assessment* 25, no. 1 (2017): 24–39; Zhou Jiang et al., "Career Exploration: A Review and Future Research Agenda," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 110 (2019): 338–56.

[35] K. Moodley and P. Singh., "The Role of Academic Advising in Enhancing Student Success in South Africa.," *Journal of Higher Education Studies* 7, no. 2 (2015): 95–110.

[36] J.W Creswell and C.N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th Edition, 2018.

students perceive, interpret, and derive meaning from these services as they navigate their career pathways.

Semi-structured questionnaires were selected as the primary data collection instrument. This method was chosen because it provides a balanced framework: it ensures that all participants address the core research themes (e.g., awareness, utilisation, and perceived impact of services) while offering the flexibility for them to elaborate on issues most salient to their personal experiences. The open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their lived experiences, challenges, and recommendations in their own words, aligning with qualitative research principles that prioritize participant voice and the richness of narrative data.

Population and Sampling Strategy

Target Population

The target population for this study was second-year to fourth-year-level students enrolled in commerce-related programmes (e.g., Business Studies, Accounting, Economics) at a selected university in the Eastern Cape Province. This population was deliberately chosen because these students are at a critical juncture in their academic and professional development. They are actively making course selections, seeking internships, and preparing for workforce entry, making them a highly relevant group for whom career guidance is presumed to be most impactful. It was assumed that by their second year, they would have had sufficient exposure to the university's academic advising and career services to provide meaningful insights.

Sampling Method and Justification

A simple random sampling technique was utilised. This approach ensures that each member of the population has an equal probability of being included, which minimizes selection bias and provides a foundation for statistically valid inference.[37] Furthermore, this probability sampling strengthens the internal validity of the study by reducing systematic error in group composition.[38] By giving every eligible student in the defined population an equal chance of being selected, the method aimed to produce a sample whose views were not systematically skewed by the researcher's preconceptions, thereby strengthening the credibility of the emergent themes. To implement this, a comprehensive sampling frame was ideally constructed from the university's student records system, listing all second-year to fourth-year-level commerce students. A random number generator was then used to select participants from this frame.

Sample Size Determination and Justification

The final sample consisted of 36 participants. In qualitative research, the adequacy of a sample size is not determined by statistical power, but by the principle of data saturation, the point at which collecting new data no longer yields additional insights or thematic patterns. The target population of 36 participants was established as a pragmatic and methodologically sound goal to achieve this saturation. This number aligns with empirical studies suggesting that saturation in qualitative interviews often occurs within the first 12-30 participants, but a slightly larger sample was targeted to account for the breadth of potential specialisations within the commerce faculty (e.g., Accounting vs. Management) and to ensure a diversity of perspectives. The recruitment process continued until subsequent responses provided redundant information, confirming that saturation had been reached. This approach prioritises the depth, richness, and informational quality of the data over its statistical representativeness.

Participants' Demographics Profile

The study consisted of 36 participants drawn from commerce-related programmes at one university in the Eastern Cape Province. Participants included students from disciplines such as Accounting,

[37] William G Cochran, "Sampling Techniques, 3d Ed Wiley," *New York*, 1977.

[38] Christine M Anderson-Cook, "Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Generalized Causal Inference" (Taylor & Francis, 2005).

Economics, and Business Studies. The inclusion of students from different specialisations ensured a broad range of perspectives regarding career guidance experiences. Both male and female students participated, with ages ranging from 19 to 27 years, representing different stages of academic and career development. The sample included second, third, and fourth-year students who were considered suitable for the study due to their exposure to the university environment and potential interaction with career guidance services. The diversity of participants enhanced the credibility of the study by providing varied perspectives on the awareness, accessibility, utilization, and effectiveness of career guidance services within the university context.

Table 1: Tabular Representations of Demographic Profile

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	16	50%
	Female	20	50%
Age Group	19–21 years	14	38.9%
	22–24 years	16	44.4%
	25–27 years	6	16.7%
Year of Study	Second Year	12	33.3%
	Third Year	14	38.9%
	Fourth Year	10	27.8%
Programme	Accounting	12	33.3%
	Business Management	10	27.8%
	Economics	14	38.9%

Data Collection

Data were collected using the semi-structured questionnaire, administered in both hard copy and electronic formats to maximise accessibility and participation rates. The questionnaire was divided into two sections:

1. Section A collected demographic data (age, gender, year of study, specific programme) through closed-ended questions to characterise the sample.
2. Section B contained open-ended questions exploring students' experiences, knowledge, perceptions, and the perceived impact of the university's career guidance services.

Prior to the main study, the instrument was pilot-tested with four commerce students who were not part of the final sample. This was crucial for refining the questionnaire, identifying ambiguous wording, and ensuring the questions were interpreted as intended, thereby enhancing the instrument's validity and reliability.

Ethical considerations were rigorously upheld. Written informed consent was secured from each participant only after the researcher had explained the nature of the study, the procedures involved, potential risks and benefits, and the safeguards for their anonymity and right to withdraw without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed by using codes instead of names and securely storing all data.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyse the qualitative data. This involved familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, and review of thematic structures.[39] This method is particularly suited to studies aiming to capture patterns in participants' lived experiences and is widely used in educational and psychological research for analysing open-text responses.[40]

[39] Saraswati Dawadi, "Thematic Analysis Approach: A Step by Step Guide for ELT Research Practitioners," *Journal of NELTA* 25, no. 1–2 (2020): 62–71.

[40] Lorelli S Nowell et al., "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1609406917733847.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This section presents and discusses the findings from the field study. The various themes that were established during the fieldwork are discussed subsequently.

a. Access to Career Guidance

Only 40% of students reported having used the university's career guidance services. A significant 54.5% had never heard of these services, while 57% accessed career advice before university. This mirrors Mseleku and Pillay findings on poor service visibility in underfunded universities. The lack of promotional strategies and the absence of embedded career education within the curriculum contribute to this invisibility.[41]

Students described how the lack of awareness hindered their ability to plan effectively for their future careers:

Participant 7: *"I only found out about the university's career office through a friend in my third year. By then, I had already chosen a path that I now realise doesn't fit me well."*

Participant 22: *"No one ever introduced us to career support services during orientation. I didn't know such offices existed on campus."*

These findings align with Mseleku and Pillay, who found that career services in underfunded South African universities often suffer from low visibility due to a lack of promotional strategies and insufficient integration into the academic journey.[42] Several students noted that they assumed career services were only available to final-year students or graduates.

b. Influence on Career Decision-Making

Of those who accessed guidance, 40.6% found it helpful in clarifying career goals. Participants valued individual consultations, aptitude assessments, and exposure to different career pathways and responded as follows:

Participant 14: *"The career guidance officer helped me realise I was more suited for financial planning than auditing. That changed how I chose my electives."*

Participant 30: *"They helped me identify my strengths and consider career options I didn't even know existed in commerce."*

However, many students expressed that they wished they had known about these services earlier. 46.9% stated that career guidance might have helped them avoid indecision or wrong career choices if introduced during their first year or even before university entry.

Participant 11: *"By the time I got proper advice, I was already halfway through my course. If I had guidance in matric or first year, I could've made better decisions."*

In terms of timing, 41% believed that career guidance should start in high school**,** while 45% argued for structured interventions during first-year orientation and curriculum planning. These insights are consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)**,** which suggests that self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations develop through early and structured exposure to role models, resources, and feedback.[43]

Many participants emphasised the value of real-world exposure, especially through stories of alumni success or visits from industry professionals:

Participant 9: *"Listening to someone who studied BCom and now works for a bank gave me the confidence to know what's possible."*

Such experiential elements not only clarified career options but also helped in building career confidence, which is a critical component of SCCT, influencing motivation and goal setting.

[41] Mseleku and Pillay, "Perceptions of Career Counselling among Rural University Students in South Africa ."

[42] Mseleku and Pillay, "Perceptions of Career Counselling among Rural University Students in South Africa ."

[43] Lent, Brown, and Hackett, "Contextual Supports and Barriers to Career Choice: A Social Cognitive Analysis."

c. Preferred Timing for Career Guidance

The findings revealed that most participants believed career guidance should be introduced earlier in students' academic journeys. Approximately 45% of participants indicated that career guidance should be provided during the first year of university to assist students with academic and career planning at an early stage. In addition, 41% believed that career guidance should begin in high school to prepare learners before entering higher education. Only 14% of participants felt that career guidance should mainly be offered during the final year of study. These findings suggest a strong preference for early and continuous career guidance. This is also shown in the figure below:

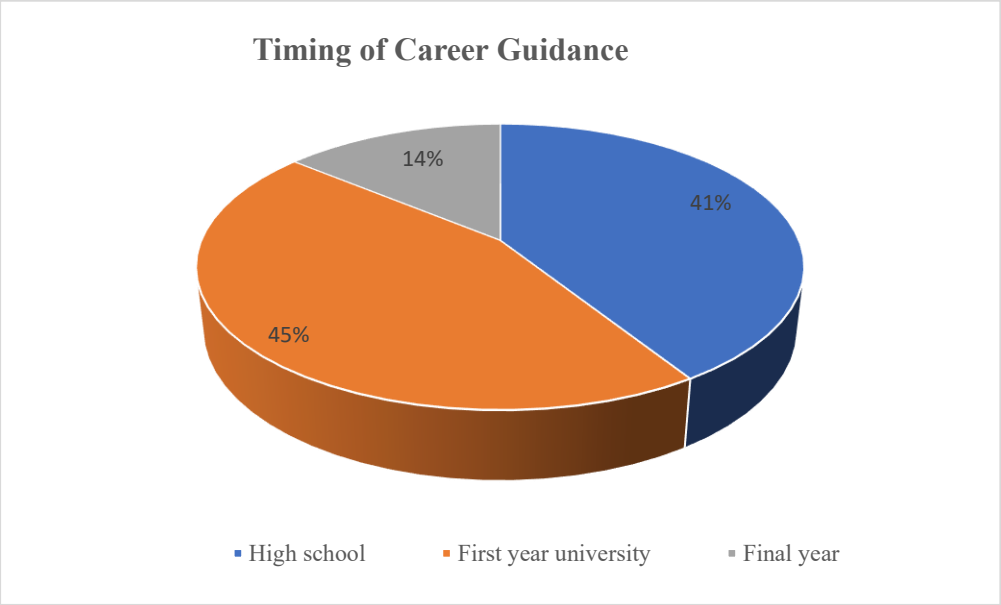


Figure 1: Represents the preferred Timing of Career Guidance

d. Barriers to Effective Career Guidance

Numerous barriers to accessing and benefiting from career guidance emerged from the data. One of the most quoted issues was limited time and scheduling conflicts:

Participant 18: *"The career centre was only open during my class hours. I couldn't skip classes to go there."*

Another common barrier was a lack of digital access or online booking platforms, especially for students from remote areas or those relying on public internet access:

Participant 5: *"Everything should be online. Not all of us can go to campus often. A WhatsApp chat or app would help."*

Stigma and misconceptions also played a significant role. Some students viewed career guidance as remedial or only for struggling students:

Participant 27: *"People think going to career services means you're lost or failing. So some of us avoid it."*

These responses reflect Nel's argument that universities need to reframe career services from a reactive, problem-solving approach to a proactive, developmental model embedded in student growth.[44]

Another key concern raised by participants was the lack of personalised advice and inadequate knowledge of commerce-specific career paths among career advisors:

Participant 13: *"The person I met did not really understand what BCom Law involves. I left more confused."*

This calls for the professional development of staff and the appointment of domain-specific advisors to ensure relevant, context-sensitive guidance.

[44] Nel, "The Visibility and Impact of Career Services in Higher Education: A South African Perspective."

Limited Awareness of Career Guidance Services

A significant proportion of students (54.5%) had never heard of the university's career guidance services, and only 45.5% had accessed them. This highlights poor visibility and awareness of existing services, especially in under-resourced institutions. It is, therefore, recommended that the university run orientation and awareness programmes to demystify career guidance and encourage early engagement.

Table 2: Showing the Awareness of Career Guidance Services

Response	Percentage
Aware of services	45.5%
Not aware	54.5%
TOTAL	100.0

Positive Impact on Career Decision-Making (When accessed)

Among students who used the services, 40.6% found them helpful in clarifying their career goals. Additionally, 46.9% believed that earlier exposure to career guidance could have positively influenced their decisions. This finding underscores the value of career guidance in enhancing self-efficacy and decision-making, as outlined in the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT).

Multiple Barriers to Effective Utilisation

Students identified several barriers, including limited time, lack of digital access, stigma around counselling, and the absence of personalised and commerce-specific support. These challenges reduce the reach and effectiveness of career services.

Strong Demand for Early and Integrated Career Support

Most participants suggested that career guidance should be made available as early as high school or the first year of university. They also called for the integration of services into classroom teaching, online platforms, and collaborations with alumni and industry to make guidance more relevant and accessible.

DISCUSSION

Access and Visibility of Career Guidance Services

The findings revealed that career guidance services remain largely inaccessible and poorly visible to many commercial students at the university. More than half of the participants indicated that they were unaware of the existence of career guidance services, suggesting that the institution's communication and awareness strategies may be ineffective. These findings support previous studies by Mseleku and Pillay, who found that career services in historically disadvantaged South African universities often suffer from weak institutional visibility and limited integration into students' academic experiences. Similarly, Mahlaba argued that under-resourced universities frequently struggle to market student support services effectively because of financial and staffing limitations.

From the perspective of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), limited awareness and exposure to career guidance may negatively affect students' self-efficacy and confidence in making informed career decisions. Many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, rely heavily on institutional support for career-related information and guidance. The findings therefore suggest that universities should adopt proactive awareness strategies, such as orientation programmes, classroom presentations, and digital communication platforms, to ensure that students are informed about available career development services early in their academic journey.

Influence of Career Guidance on Decision-Making

The study found that students who accessed career guidance services experienced improved confidence, greater self-awareness, and clearer career direction. Participants highlighted that career consultations, aptitude assessments, and interactions with professionals helped them understand different career pathways within commerce and make more informed academic decisions. These findings are consistent with previous studies which indicate that career guidance positively contributes to students' career maturity, self-efficacy, and decision-making abilities. The findings also align with SCCT, which emphasises that environmental support and exposure to career-related experiences influence individuals' career interests and goals.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that many students wished they had received career guidance earlier, particularly during high school or first year at university. This suggests that career guidance should not be viewed as a once-off intervention but rather as a continuous developmental process throughout students' academic journeys. Unlike some previous South African studies that focused mainly on secondary school learners, this study demonstrates that university students also require structured and ongoing career support to navigate increasingly complex labour market demands and academic pathways.

Barriers Affecting Effective Career Guidance

The findings identified several barriers that limit students' access to and utilisation of career guidance services, including scheduling conflicts, limited digital access, stigma, and insufficient commerce-specific guidance. Participants reported that career centres often operated during lecture times, making it difficult for students to attend consultations without missing classes. These findings support previous research indicating that institutional and structural challenges frequently reduce the effectiveness of career guidance services in disadvantaged university contexts. In addition, limited online platforms and digital support systems further restricted access for students from remote or low-income backgrounds.

Another important finding was the stigma associated with seeking career guidance, as some students perceived counselling services as being intended only for struggling or academically weak students. Similar findings were reported by Nhlapo, Pillay, and Themane, who argued that misconceptions surrounding counselling and student support services discourage many students from seeking assistance. Participants also expressed dissatisfaction with generic advice that lacked understanding of specialised commerce-related career pathways. This suggests a need for universities to employ trained and discipline-specific career advisors capable of providing relevant, personalised, and context-sensitive guidance to students.

Need for Early and Integrated Career Guidance

The findings revealed a strong demand for career guidance interventions beginning in high school and continuing throughout university studies. Most participants believed that earlier exposure to career guidance could have prevented confusion, poor course selection, and uncertainty regarding career pathways. These findings support previous literature which emphasises the importance of early career development interventions in improving students' confidence, preparedness, and long-term career planning. Internationally, countries such as Finland and Singapore have demonstrated the benefits of integrating career development into educational systems from an early stage.

The study further highlights the importance of embedding career guidance within the university curriculum and broader student support structures. Participants recommended that career guidance should include mentorship programmes, alumni engagement, career workshops, and industry exposure to make services more practical and accessible. In the South African context, particularly within historically disadvantaged institutions, integrated career support may contribute significantly towards improving graduate employability, academic success, and equitable access to career development opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that although career guidance has a significant influence on students' decision-making and confidence, numerous challenges undermine its effectiveness and accessibility. In response, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen career guidance services, particularly for commercial students at universities in underserved areas such as the Eastern Cape Province.

a. Enhance Visibility and Awareness of Career Services

It is recommended that universities implement comprehensive awareness campaigns to improve the visibility of career services. These campaigns should utilise a variety of communication platforms, including university websites, noticeboards, social media, classroom presentations, and student newsletters. Career services should also be formally introduced during orientation programmes, and lecturers should be encouraged to refer students to these services throughout the academic year.

b. Introduce Career Guidance Early and Integrate It Across the Academic Journey

Career guidance should be introduced as early as the first year of study and, where possible, in collaboration with secondary schools. Structured career development activities should be embedded in the academic curriculum across all years of study. This includes offering compulsory workshops, seminars, and modules that address self-assessment, career planning, and labour market trends.

c. Improve Accessibility Through Flexible and Digital Platforms

To address time constraints and scheduling conflicts, universities should extend the operating hours of career centres and offer flexible, student-friendly access to services. Additionally, the integration of digital tools such as online booking systems, virtual consultations via Zoom or WhatsApp, and mobile applications should be prioritised to accommodate students studying remotely or with limited access to campus facilities.

d. Invest in Resources and Continuous Professional Development of Career Staff

Universities must allocate adequate financial and human resources to career guidance units. Ongoing professional development and training should be provided for career advisors to ensure they are equipped with up-to-date knowledge and effective counselling strategies. This will enable the provision of high-quality, relevant, and context-sensitive guidance to all students.

These recommendations are aimed at developing a student-centred, inclusive, and future-oriented career guidance framework that supports improved academic and professional outcomes for students in the field of commerce.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the impact of career guidance on the decision-making, confidence, and preparedness of commercial students at one Eastern Cape university. The findings revealed that Career guidance significantly shapes students' confidence, decision-making, and readiness for professional environments. However, its impact is limited by poor accessibility and visibility. This study underscores the urgent need for universities, particularly in underserved provinces like the Eastern Cape, to invest in accessible, well-resourced, and student-centred career development programmes. Strengthening these services could also contribute to broader national goals such as graduate employability, economic participation, and educational equity.

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