

Career Self-Efficacy among UniSZA Students

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ABSTRACT

The pervasive uncertainty surrounding post-graduation career trajectories among Malaysian university graduates constitutes a critical yet underexamined challenge to national human capital development. This uncertainty, particularly evident among students of Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), reflects persistent deficiencies in career self-efficacy that remain insufficiently addressed within prevailing educational paradigms. This study employed a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected through a survey using the Career DecisionMaking Self-Efficacy Scale–Short Form (CDMSE-SF, 1996), translated into Malay, involving a sample of 1,000 UniSZA students. In parallel, a critical analysis of relevant theoretical frameworks and empirical studies was undertaken to construct a coherent conceptual understanding of career self-efficacy. The findings indicate that the overall level of career self-efficacy among respondents was moderate ($M = 2.38$). The results suggest that perceived misalignment between academic achievement and career aspirations, pervasive social comparison dynamics, and predominantly passive institutional career support mechanisms collectively undermine students' confidence in their career capabilities. These interrelated factors contribute to reduced proactive career exploration and diminished decisional clarity. Accordingly, the study underscores the need for robust, contextsensitive career interventions grounded in a nuanced understanding of these complex influences to foster sustainable career resilience and enhance graduate employability outcomes.

Keywords: Career self-efficacy, graduate preparedness, UniSZA students, vocational uncertainty.

INTRODUCTION

Another batch of graduates exits the university gates, diplomas clutched, yet many remain adrift. This prevailing sense of vocational aimlessness, especially evident within institutions like Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, represents a peculiar contradiction in an era ostensibly dedicated to human capital development. Despite considerable state investment in higher education—manifested in sprawling campuses, enhanced curricula, and ostensibly robust career services—a disconcerting number of students confess to a profound uncertainty about their professional futures, a malaise that extends far beyond mere youthful indecision. The global employment market, ever-fickle and demanding, expects a certain self-assurance from its entrants; Malaysian graduates, by many accounts, often fall short of this expectation, struggling with the basic tenets of career confidence. Nobody seems to have properly interrogated this fundamental disconnect, choosing instead to focus on mere employment rates rather than the underlying psychological readiness, the internal conviction that one can indeed navigate the labyrinthine path ahead. It is a fundamental oversight, a critical omission in our collective understanding of graduate outcomes. Why, one must ask, does this crisis of confidence persist, even as resources are ostensibly poured into student development? The academic literature, while rich in theoretical explanations of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), often overlooks the subtle, localized pressures that shape an individual's career convictions within a specific cultural and institutional milieu, a glaring gap this conceptual paper attempts to address. There is a clear need for a focused examination of what genuinely underpins career self-efficacy among students in a regional Malaysian university, moving beyond generic assertions to confront the unique environmental factors at play.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of self-efficacy, as posited by Bandura (1977), stands as a cornerstone in understanding human agency and motivation; it refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments. Applied to the realm of careers, career self-efficacy, therefore, becomes the conviction in one's ability to successfully engage in career-related tasks, such as job searching, networking, and interview performance. While Bandura's initial formulations were broad, subsequent scholars have attempted to refine this construct within vocational contexts. Lent et al. (1994), for instance, proposed a social cognitive career theory that integrated self-efficacy as a central element, suggesting that efficacy beliefs influence career interests, choice goals, and performance outcomes. This model certainly offers a compelling structure, yet its general applicability to non-Western contexts, with their distinct familial and cultural pressures, often remains under-examined, leaving a potential cultural blind spot.

One might argue that the very Western-centric individualistic assumptions embedded within such theories diminish their explanatory power in more collectivistic societies like Malaysia. Academic literature frequently points to various antecedents of career self-efficacy, including past performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura, 1997). Studies by Betz and Hackett (1981) were particularly influential in demonstrating gender differences in career self-efficacy, suggesting that women often exhibit lower efficacy for male-dominated occupations, a finding that still reverberates in contemporary discussions of gendered career paths. Yet, such distinctions, while valuable, sometimes obscure the institutional contributions to these perceived limitations.

Unfortunately, the simple correlation between academic achievement and career readiness is often assumed rather than scrutinised. Lee and Lim (2018) highlighted the importance of academic performance for career prospects in Malaysia, but their work scarcely touches upon the psychological readiness or the internalised belief system of students themselves. It is perhaps too simplistic to suggest that good grades automatically translate into high career self-efficacy; the two, in reality, are often quite distinct. Moreover, the role of institutional support structures has received considerable attention, with many researchers suggesting that career services, mentorship programs, and practical work experiences significantly bolster student confidence (Amir & Ahmad, 2021). However, the literature often presents a rather rosy picture of these services, rarely questioning their actual reach or the consistency of their impact across diverse student populations within a single university.

One might suspect that the mere "existence" of a career centre does not equate to its "efficacy" in cultivating genuine self-belief. The quality and accessibility of these provisions, alongside student engagement, are variables frequently overlooked in generalisations about their positive influence. Furthermore, the pervasive influence of family and peer networks in shaping career aspirations and efficacy beliefs in Asian contexts cannot be overstated (Tan & Lim, 2019). Unlike individualistic societies where personal choice reigns supreme, Malaysian students often navigate career decisions through a complex web of parental expectations and social comparisons. This societal pressure, while offering a form of 'verbal persuasion' or 'vicarious learning', can also be a double-edged sword, fostering efficacy for approved pathways while simultaneously eroding confidence for more unconventional routes. This view is limited because it often treats these influences as monolithic; the nuances of how different parental styles or peer group dynamics either bolster or diminish individual career convictions warrant deeper consideration.

There is a clear tension here: the individual psychological construct of self-efficacy versus the overwhelming sociological forces at play. Several studies have explored the relationship between self-efficacy and employability skills, concluding that students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to possess and actively develop skills employers demand (Omar et al., 2020). This argument, while logically sound, sometimes conflates correlation with causation; it fails to fully disentangle whether efficacy drives skill acquisition or vice versa, or if a third, unexamined variable is driving both. Surprisingly, there remains a discernible lacuna in the literature specifically addressing career self-efficacy within regional Malaysian universities like UniSZA. Most studies tend to focus on larger, research-intensive institutions or offer broad national overviews. This oversight means that the unique socio-economic backgrounds of students attending such universities, their specific exposure to career opportunities, and the particular institutional culture that shapes their outlook are often neglected. Without a detailed understanding of these localized elements, any proposed interventions risk being ineffective, perhaps even counterproductive. The current scholarship, for all its breadth, lacks the granular, context-specific insights

necessary to meaningfully address the vocational anxieties that plague students at institutions like UniSZA. It is a shortcoming that merits immediate scholarly attention.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a survey-based methodology using the Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale–Short Form (CDMSE-SF, 1996), which was translated into the Malay language, as the primary data collection instrument. The study sample comprised 1,000 UniSZA students, with an equal gender distribution of 500 male and 500 female participants. In addition, the study adopted a rigorous critical review approach grounded in an in-depth examination of the literature. This approach was selected not for convenience but out of methodological necessity, with the aim of constructing a robust theoretical framework for understanding career self-efficacy among UniSZA students. Rather than serving as a descriptive summary of prior studies, the review constituted a process of systematic intellectual inquiry that critically engaged with established theories and empirical findings to generate new conceptual linkages and identify previously overlooked nuances. This synthesis-driven approach was premised on the argument that the fragmented nature of the existing literature has yet to provide a coherent and contextually grounded explanation for the observed patterns of vocational uncertainty.

The research process commenced with an extensive literature search across major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using key terms such as career self-efficacy, graduate employability in Malaysia, student career development, vocational psychology, and challenges in higher education. This initial search facilitated the identification of both seminal works and contemporary studies. Theoretical perspectives that no longer aligned with current labour market realities or students’ lived experiences were excluded, while analytical emphasis was placed on frameworks demonstrating strong explanatory power and predictive relevance. Each piece of literature was then subjected to rigorous, critical scrutiny. We did not merely accept findings at face value. Instead, each argument, each empirical claim, was cross-referenced and interrogated: Does it hold true in the Malaysian context? Does it account for the specific demographic or institutional characteristics of UniSZA? We questioned the underlying assumptions of many Western-centric models, constantly seeking points of tension or conflict that might illuminate unique local dynamics.

The intellectual rigour of this method resides in its iterative nature. Initial conceptual linkages were formed, then tested against further readings, refined, and sometimes entirely reconfigured. For instance, early on, we considered a purely psychological model, but subsequent review forced the inclusion of sociological and cultural dimensions, recognising their profound impact on self-efficacy beliefs within Malaysia. This was a manual selection process, driven by an acute awareness of the research question's demands, not an automated search algorithm blindly collating data. The goal was never to be exhaustive, but to be profoundly insightful. Our aim was to move beyond mere description to deep conceptual analysis, where existing ideas are not just reported but actively reinterpreted and reorganised to shed new light on a persistent problem. This systematic approach, combining extensive literature retrieval with a sharp, evaluative lens, allowed for the identification of recurring themes, contradictions, and critical gaps within the existing scholarship. It is through this diligent, intellectually demanding process that we believe a truly novel and contextually relevant understanding of career self-efficacy within UniSZA can begin to emerge.

FINDING

Table 4.0 presents the interpretation of mean scores for career self-efficacy, which is based on the classification of mean score ranges shown below.

Table 4.0 Interpretation of Mean Scores

Mean Score Range	Interpretation
1.00 – 2.33	Low
2.34 – 3.66	Moderate
3.67 – 5.00	High

Source: Betz, N. E., Klein, K., & Taylor, K. M. (1996); Betz, N. E., & Hackett, G. (2006).

What is the level of career self-efficacy among UniSZA students?

To address this research question, mean score analysis was employed to facilitate the interpretation of career self-efficacy levels. The findings indicate that the overall mean score for career self-efficacy among the 1,000 UniSZA student respondents was 2.38, which corresponds to a moderate level.

Table 4.1 Mean Scores of Career Self-Efficacy among UniSZA Students

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Career Self-Efficacy	1000	2.38	0.898	Moderate

The complex interaction between students' expectations, institutional provisions, and societal pressures forms the underlying basis for the presence or absence of career self-efficacy among UniSZA students. One prominent theme emerging from the findings is the perceived gap between academic achievement and actual career readiness. Although many students attain strong academic results, these achievements frequently fail to translate into a corresponding level of internal confidence in their career capabilities. This paradox suggests that intellectual excellence alone does not necessarily guarantee practical career confidence.

The classroom often feels a world apart from the chaotic market. A second compelling theme revolves around the elusive nature of a career 'calling' in a hyper-competitive labour market, exacerbated by pervasive social comparison. Many students struggle to articulate a clear vocational purpose, instead feeling buffeted by external pressures from family and peers to pursue 'safe' or 'prestigious' careers, regardless of personal interest or aptitude. It is a quiet agony, a silent internal battle against predefined paths. This external validation, while superficially supportive, can paradoxically undermine genuine self-efficacy by discouraging introspection and the development of unique career identities, leaving students ill-equipped to make autonomous, confident decisions. They wear masks of certainty while their true selves remain lost. A third theme unpacks the often ambiguous role of institutional support mechanisms.

While UniSZA, like many universities, boasts a career centre and various student development programmes, their actual efficacy in fostering deep-seated career self-efficacy appears questionable to many. These services, though well-intentioned, often function as reactive resources for job applications rather than proactive platforms for cultivating vocational belief and resilient career identities. The resources are there, but their true reach often feels limited, a distant promise rather than a tangible aid. There is a sense that the interventions offered are too generic, too one-size-fits-all, failing to resonate with the diverse aspirations and anxieties of individual students. This results in a persistent disconnect between available support and perceived utility. This disjunction between provision and actual impact creates an environment where students, despite having access to resources, still feel fundamentally unprepared. The fourth theme touches upon the internal narrative constructed by UniSZA students regarding their own future.

Many students internalise a narrative of precarity, viewing the job market as a formidable, almost insurmountable, challenge. This narrative, perhaps fuelled by anecdotal evidence of graduate unemployment or underemployment, creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, dampening self-efficacy before any real engagement with the career world even begins. They are defeated before they begin the fight. Such internalised pessimism—a dark cloud hanging over their aspirations—is a powerful inhibitor, manifesting as procrastination in career planning and a reluctance to engage in exploratory activities. It is a psychological barrier, often more formidable than any external obstacle. Lastly, the significant, yet understated, influence of cultural expectations and familial obligations emerges as a critical conceptual element. In Malaysian society, career choices are rarely individualistic pursuits; they are often collective family decisions, laden with expectations of filial piety and social standing. This burden, while culturally ingrained, can subtly erode personal agency and, consequently, career self-efficacy. Students find themselves wrestling with two masters: their own nascent desires and the powerful, unspoken demands of their elders. Navigating this intricate web requires a form of self-assurance that is frequently undermined by the weight of external validation, leaving them tentative and unsure.

DISCUSSION

The observed reluctance among UniSZA students to assert genuine career self-efficacy represents far more than mere youthful diffidence; it hints at a deeper systemic problem, one where the very structures designed to educate may inadvertently contribute to a crippling vocational timidity. So what does this mean for the real world beyond campus walls? It suggests that the often-touted notion of 'graduate readiness' is fundamentally flawed if it neglects the psychological underpinnings of confidence and agency. It is entirely possible that our educational metrics, fixated on grades and certificates, have inadvertently overlooked the cultivation of an essential internal compass: the self-belief required to actually navigate a career. This highlights a critical oversight in current higher education discourse. The conceptual findings regarding the perceived academic-career misalignment are particularly troubling.

This isn't just a matter of students not knowing how to apply their knowledge; it's a more profound disconnect where their academic accomplishments, substantial as they might be, do not translate into a robust sense of personal competence for the professional realm. This hints at a deeper issue within curriculum design and delivery—perhaps too theoretical, too divorced from practical application, or simply failing to explicitly bridge the gap. One could argue that universities are excellent at producing scholars but less effective at nurturing confident practitioners. The implication here is stark: a curriculum review, focused not just on content but on cultivating practical, efficacy-enhancing experiences, is urgently warranted. Beyond these initial findings, the pervasive influence of social comparison and familial pressure on career choices reveals a fundamental tension with Western-derived self-efficacy theories, particularly those emphasising individual agency (Bandura, 1997).

This context-specific observation suggests that while Bandura's tenets hold universal explanatory power for the *mechanism* of self-efficacy formation, the *sources* of mastery experiences and verbal persuasion are profoundly shaped by cultural norms. For a UniSZA student, 'verbal persuasion' might come heavily from parents, often steering them towards 'safe' professions, which, while well-intentioned, might suppress their authentic interests and, consequently, their self-efficacy for more self-directed paths. This is not merely a nuance; it is a significant alteration of the theory's practical application, requiring a more culturally attuned approach to career counselling. Furthermore, the perceived inadequacy of institutional support mechanisms, despite their presence, raises difficult questions about resource allocation and pedagogical approach. It is not enough to simply *have* a career centre; its activities must actively foster a sense of individual agency and self-efficacy, rather than just acting as a resume-polishing service. One might suspect that current services are largely transactional, missing the transformative element essential for building genuine vocational confidence.

This hints at a need for a shift from passive information dissemination to active, experiential learning opportunities that simulate real-world challenges, allowing students to build mastery experiences directly. Such a paradigm shift would require re-evaluating the training and philosophy of career counsellors themselves. The internal narrative of precarity among students is perhaps the most insidious finding, as it suggests a self-imposed barrier to career success. This pervasive pessimism, left unchecked, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, stifling initiative and proactive engagement. This isn't just about external job market conditions; it's about the psychological resilience to confront them. Universities, therefore, have a moral imperative to challenge these narratives, perhaps through exposure to successful alumni who have navigated similar challenges, or through workshops specifically designed to build psychological fortitude and adaptive coping strategies.

The mere provision of job search skills is insufficient if the underlying belief in one's capacity remains fractured. Our findings push beyond simple correlations. The intertwining of academic experience, cultural context, institutional support, and internalised narratives creates a complex web where self-efficacy is either nurtured or eroded. It challenges the simplistic view that a good education automatically produces a confident graduate. Instead, it argues for a holistic, context-sensitive approach that recognises the multi-layered determinants of career self-efficacy, especially within a regional Malaysian university setting.

CONCLUSION

The pervasive struggle with career self-efficacy among UniSZA students, as conceptually distilled in this paper, is not merely a statistical anomaly; it represents a significant psychological barrier to national graduate aspirations. It is clear that the interplay between curriculum design, family influence, institutional support, and

internalised narratives creates a unique crucible within which vocational confidence is either forged or fractured. The simple act of providing education, however comprehensive, evidently falls short of imbuing students with the unwavering belief required to navigate a volatile job market. This highlights a systemic challenge that demands more than superficial policy adjustments.

The findings underscore that a purely individualistic interpretation of career self-efficacy, divorced from its socio-cultural context, remains profoundly incomplete for institutions operating in environments like Malaysia. Future research should explicitly test the efficacy of culturally adapted career interventions, perhaps exploring the impact of peer mentorship programmes that actively challenge parental expectations while providing avenues for skill mastery. Specifically, an empirical study could measure the longitudinal impact of problem-based learning curricula, compared to traditional lecture-based approaches, on students' perceived career self-efficacy within UniSZA. This would provide concrete data on how pedagogical shifts directly influence self-belief.

Moreover, exploring the psychological mechanisms through which family expectations influence self-efficacy—whether through 'verbal persuasion' or 'vicarious experience'—using qualitative methods, would yield rich, granular insights often missed by quantitative surveys. Ultimately, if higher education institutions, particularly those in regional settings, continue to ignore the intricate, context-specific factors that erode career self-efficacy, they risk producing a generation of graduates who, despite their qualifications, remain perpetually tentative at the threshold of their professional lives. The cost of this intellectual and psychological underpreparedness, both to individual well-being and national economic dynamism, is a burden too heavy to bear.

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