The Role of Irrational Career Beliefs in Career Readiness among University Students: A Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

Career readiness has become an increasingly important objective in higher education as universities seek to prepare graduates for successful transition into the workforce. Despite the growing emphasis on career development initiatives, many university students continue to experience difficulties in career exploration, planning, and decision-making. These challenges are often associated with underlying psychological barriers. One of the psychological barriers is irrational career beliefs, which consist of rigid, unrealistic, and maladaptive beliefs about career success, failure, and decision-making. These beliefs may lead to career anxiety, indecision, and avoidance behaviours that hinder students' ability to engage effectively in career development processes. Drawing on existing theoretical and empirical literature, this conceptual paper examines the role of irrational career beliefs in influencing career readiness among university students. Specifically, the paper discusses how irrational career beliefs may negatively shape students' career-related cognition, emotions, and behaviours, thereby affecting their preparedness to make informed career decisions. By synthesising current perspectives in career development and counselling literature, this paper proposes a conceptual argument linking irrational career beliefs to lower levels of career readiness. The discussion highlights the importance of addressing maladaptive career beliefs within career counselling and educational interventions aimed at strengthening students' psychological readiness for career development. Finally, the paper offers implications for career counselling practice and recommends future empirical research to further examine the relationship between irrational career beliefs and career readiness among university students.

Keywords: irrational career beliefs; career readiness; career development; university students; career counselling

INTRODUCTION

The Higher Education Plan 2026–2035 urges institutions to develop graduates who are not just academically competent, but psychologically prepared, demonstrating adaptability, agility, and resilience in navigating increasingly complex global environments (Ministry of Higher Education, 2026). In today's rapidly evolving labour market, undergraduates face growing challenges in preparing for employment due to technological advancements, shifting workforce demands, and heightened employer expectations (Wong & Abdullah, 2025; Zhang, 2025). In response, career readiness has become an increasingly important priority in higher education, as universities seek to prepare graduates for successful participation in a rapidly evolving labour market (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022; Succi & Canovi, 2020). This emphasis reflects the increasing complexity and uncertainty associated with the school-to-work transition (Tomlinson et al., 2022). As a result, universities are expected to provide not only disciplinary knowledge but also transferable skills, adaptability, and career management competencies to support students in navigating dynamic career pathways (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022). Accordingly, Malaysia's national higher education policies continue to stress the importance of developing holistic graduates equipped with both professional competencies and psychological resources for sustainable career development (Ministry of Higher Education, 2026; Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2025).

Higher education institutions play an important role in fostering career readiness among university students through various employability and career development initiatives (Dahal et al., 2025). Universities commonly implement programmes such as career counselling services, employability workshops, internship opportunities, and industry engagement activities aimed at enhancing students' preparedness for the labour market (Osunde, 2025). These initiatives are designed to support students in developing career-related competencies, gaining exposure to professional environments, and improving their understanding of workplace expectations. However, despite the increasing emphasis on employability programmes, many university students continue to experience difficulties in career exploration, planning, and decision-making (Kulcsár et al., 2020; Pignault et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2025). Previous studies indicate that initiatives focusing primarily on technical skills acquisition and industry exposure may not sufficiently address the behavioural and psychological factors influencing students' ability to translate competencies into effective career actions, as students often lack the personal attributes required for application (Siddique et al., 2022), experience limited impact from exposure without structured support (Khan et al., 2025) and depend on psychological resources to navigate career development (Ifeanyieze et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2025).

Career readiness is not solely influenced by technical competencies or academic achievement, but also by individuals' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural characteristics that shape their engagement in career-related activities (Omar et al., 2023; Wong & Saraih, 2024; Xiong et al., 2026). Previous studies have identified several psychological factors that influence students' career development and readiness for employment. These include constructs such as career adaptability and career self-efficacy, which shape individuals' confidence, motivation, and ability to navigate career-related tasks (Alkal, 2025; Xu et al., 2025; Zewude et al., 2025). While these factors have received considerable attention in career development research, there is also increasing recognition of the role of irrational career beliefs (Ari & Eşkisu, 2025; Ekwueme et al., 2023; Ifeanyieze et al., 2021). Irrational career beliefs are conceptualised as maladaptive thoughts and emotional responses that hinder effective career decision-making by leading to unfavourable outcomes (Ifeanyieze et al., 2021).

Preliminary findings from a needs assessment conducted among undergraduate students revealed that 11.8% of respondents reported low levels of irrational career beliefs, 47.3% demonstrated moderate levels, and 39.1% reported high levels of irrational career beliefs (Abdul Rashid & Mahfar, 2025).The high prevalence of irrational career beliefs highlights the need for greater attention to the psychological dimensions of career readiness, particularly factors that may hinder students' confidence in career decision-making and career readiness.

In summary, career readiness extends beyond technical skills and academic achievement to include important psychological factors that shape how students engage in career development. While universities have introduced various employability initiatives, these alone may not be sufficient without addressing students' internal processes. In particular, psychological factors such as career adaptability, self-efficacy, and irrational career beliefs play a key role in influencing students' ability to make effective career decisions. Therefore, this conceptual paper aims to examine the role of irrational career beliefs in influencing career readiness among university students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Career Readiness

Career readiness is grounded in several psychological and educational theories that provide a framework for understanding how individuals prepare for career transitions. One of the most prominent is Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which emphasises the role of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals in shaping career readiness, while also highlighting the interaction between individual characteristics and contextual factors such as social support (Bandura, 1997). In addition, Career Construction Theory explains how individuals actively construct their careers through personal meaning-making and adaptability, with particular emphasis on career adaptability and decision-making processes(Savickas, 2005). Complementing these perspectives, Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) theory offers a structured approach to career readiness by focusing on knowledge acquisition, information processing, and decision-making skills, and has been widely applied in the development of career interventions and readiness assessments (Savickas, 2005). Collectively, these theories underscore the importance of both psychological and cognitive processes in enhancing

individuals' readiness to navigate career development and transitions.

Career readiness is frequently described in terms of competencies and skills, referring to the acquisition and demonstration of both academic and non-academic capabilities such as critical thinking, communication, and adaptability, that facilitate successful transitions into employment (Moore & Thaller, 2023). In addition, motivational and attitudinal factors play a significant role, with constructs such as intrinsic motivation, career optimism, emotional intelligence (Liu, 2025), and self-discipline influencing individuals' engagement in proactive career-related behaviours (Bazine et al., 2023), including planning and continuous skill development (Chatterjee et al., 2023). Career readiness also encompasses a range of abilities and behaviours, particularly those related to career planning, decision-making, and confidence-building, which are essential for navigating the transition from university to the workforce (Talib et al., 2023). Furthermore, several studies adopt holistic frameworks that integrate psychological, social, and technical dimensions, emphasising the importance of factors such as self-efficacy, adaptability, and external supports, including career guidance and mentoring, in fostering students' overall readiness (Gustina et al., 2024; Rachmawati et al., 2024).

Synthesising these perspectives, this paper conceptualises career readiness as a multidimensional construct involving the integration of psychological, cognitive, and behavioural capacities that support students' transition from university to the workforce. In university contexts, career readiness reflects students' ability to respond to changing labour market demands and manage their career pathways effectively. Importantly, this readiness is shaped by the interaction between individual factors and contextual supports, such as career guidance, mentoring, and experiential learning opportunities. Within this conceptualisation, cognitive processes play a central role, suggesting that the ways students think about careers, particularly the presence of irrational career beliefs, may influence how effectively these capacities are developed and enacted.

Irrational Career Beliefs

Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), conceptualised irrational beliefs as maladaptive, illogical, and non-empirical cognitions that contribute to emotional distress and dysfunctional behaviours (Ellis, 1975). Within the REBT framework, these beliefs are positioned in contrast to rational beliefs, which are logical, evidence-based, and facilitate adaptive emotional and behavioural responses (D. O. David et al., 2019). Irrational beliefs are typically characterised by rigid, absolutist, and non-pragmatic thinking patterns, often reflected in demanding statements such as "I must always succeed" or "Others must treat me fairly." (D. O. David et al., 2019). Such cognitive distortions are associated with dysfunctional consequences, as they tend to produce unhealthy negative emotions, including anxiety, depression, and anger, alongside maladaptive behaviours (Turner, 2023). In contrast, rational beliefs promote more balanced emotional experiences, such as concern or sadness, which support more constructive and adaptive coping responses (Bernard & Pires, 2006). Ellis identified several core irrational beliefs, including demandingness, awfulizing, low frustration tolerance and global evaluation (Neenan & Dryden, 1999).

In career contexts, irrational beliefs can be understood as maladaptive assumptions, expectations, or myths about work and career development that distort individuals' thinking and hinder effective career-related functioning (Ogbuanya, Eseadi, Orji, Anyanwu, Joachim, & Otu, 2018). Irrational career beliefs can also be refereed as thoughts and feelings that interfere with effective career decision-making due to their negative consequences (Ifeanyieze et al., 2021). For example, when students pursue a particular field with uncertainty or doubt, they may experience reduced intrinsic motivation and show less willingness to invest effort in their career development. These beliefs often involve misconceptions, inaccurate interpretations, false assumptions, and unrealistic expectations about careers (Ifeanyieze et al., 2021). Previous studies have described similar constructs using terms such as dysfunctional career thoughts (Sampson Jr et al., 1998), negative career thoughts and feelings (Kelly & Shin, 2009), and negative career thoughts (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2011), all of which reflect negative and pessimistic perceptions of career pathways.

Irrational career beliefs have been consistently linked to negative career-related outcomes. According to Jamali et al. (2015), such beliefs can lead to persistent career indecision among students when left unaddressed. Similarly, Albert Ellis (1997) suggested that irrational beliefs may contribute to inappropriate career behaviours, while Dorn (2014) highlighted their role in ineffective career development. In addition, Hyland et al. (2017)

argued that irrational beliefs are likely to produce dysfunctional outcomes, both in everyday life and within career contexts. As a result, irrational career beliefs can be harmful, and if not properly addressed, may lead to dissatisfaction and suboptimal performance in one's chosen career path (Mogoaşe et al., 2013). Therefore, addressing and modifying these irrational career beliefs is essential in supporting more adaptive career decision-making, enhancing individuals' psychological well-being, and promoting more effective career readiness.

This paper therefore focuses on irrational career beliefs as a psychological construct influencing career readiness among university students. Irrational career beliefs, defined as maladaptive, illogical, and unrealistic assumptions about careers, are conceptualised as cognitive barriers that shape how individuals interpret career-related experiences and make decisions. Within this framework, such beliefs can hinder effective engagement in career exploration, planning, and decision-making processes by fostering doubt, fear, and negative self-evaluations. In summary, irrational career beliefs act as a cognitive filter that distorts perceptions and limits adaptive career behaviours, making them a critical factor in understanding variations in career readiness. The next section examines empirical and theoretical evidence on how irrational career beliefs influence career readiness, particularly in shaping students' preparedness for career development and transitions.

Irrational Career Beliefs as a Predictor of Career Readiness

Irrational career beliefs, defined as rigid, inaccurate, and maladaptive thoughts about careers, can negatively influence career readiness by shaping individuals' emotions, decision-making, and behaviours. These beliefs often create difficulties in career decision-making, as they increase intolerance of uncertainty and emotional distress, making it harder for students to make confident and informed career choices (Ogbuanya, Eseadi, Orji, Anyanwu, Joachim, & Otu, 2018). For example, students who hold unrealistic beliefs about employment may experience higher levels of anxiety and reduced decisiveness, which can limit their readiness to transition into the workforce (Akar et al., 2024; Vandana et al., 2025). In terms of career readiness components, irrational beliefs mainly affect confidence and adaptability. They tend to lower career decision-making self-efficacy, as students feel less confident in their ability to make appropriate career choices (Ogbuanya, Eseadi, Orji, Anyanwu, Ede, & Bakare, 2018). (2,3,5), and reduce adaptability by creating emotional barriers such as stress and anxiety, which limit flexibility in handling career challenges (Akar et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025).

From the perspective of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), this relationship can be explained through the ABC model, where a career-related situation (A) is interpreted through beliefs (B), leading to consequences (C). When beliefs are irrational, they produce negative emotions such as anxiety or fear and result in maladaptive behaviours like avoidance and indecision, whereas rational beliefs promote healthier emotions and more constructive behaviours such as persistence and problem-solving (D. David et al., 2019; D. O. David et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2017).

Ifeanyieze et al. (2021) found that students who hold more rational career beliefs tend to experience fewer career-related difficulties and lower levels of career decision-making anxiety. These findings suggest that a functional and adaptive belief system supports more effective career decision-making, reflecting key aspects of career readiness. From this perspective, reducing or disputing irrational career beliefs may foster more positive career behaviours and tendencies, thereby enhancing students' engagement in career-related activities and supporting their overall career development.

Ogbuanya et al. (2018) provide evidence that Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) is effective in reducing students' irrational career beliefs. Their study demonstrated that participation in an REBT-based career intervention led to a significant decline in maladaptive career cognitions among technical college students compared to a control group, with these improvements sustained over 3- and 6-month follow-up periods. The intervention, which focused on identifying, disputing, and restructuring irrational beliefs, helped students develop more rational and functional thinking patterns regarding career decision-making. These outcomes suggest that REBT-based interventions play a crucial role in fostering adaptive career beliefs, which are essential for effective career decision-making, reduced career-related anxiety, and overall career readiness.

Empirical evidence also supports the role of irrational career beliefs in shaping key outcomes associated with career readiness. Kutlu and Bedel (2021) examining irrational beliefs related to career choice found that the pre-

test to post-test difference scores between experimental and control groups were statistically significant in favour of the experimental group ($U = 16.00$, $p < .05$), indicating that the intervention effectively reduced maladaptive career beliefs. Correspondingly, significant improvements were observed in career decision outcomes, with the experimental group demonstrating greater gains compared to the control group ($U = .00$, $p < .05$). Further reinforcing this relationship, (Khalili et al., 2019) reported substantial increases in career decision-making self-efficacy among participants who underwent Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), with mean scores rising from 48.46 at pre-test to 94.43 at post-test and 96.06 at follow-up. Repeated measures analysis confirmed significant differences across time points and between experimental and control groups ($p < .01$), highlighting the sustained impact of the intervention. Notably, REBT demonstrated strong effect sizes across key components of career decision-making self-efficacy, including self-appraisal (45%), career information (62%), goal selection (70%), planning (66%), and problem-solving (63%).

Taken together, these findings suggest that irrational career beliefs function as a significant psychological barrier that can hinder the development of career readiness. When such beliefs are reduced, individuals show marked improvements in career decision-making self-efficacy, planning, and goal clarity, core dimensions of career readiness. This implies that irrational career beliefs are not merely associated with career-related difficulties but may act as a key predictor influencing students' readiness to engage in effective career planning and decision-making processes.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

This conceptual paper applies the perspectives of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) to emphasise the role of irrational career beliefs as a key psychological determinant of career readiness. From an SCCT standpoint, career readiness is shaped by individuals' self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goal-directed behaviours, which collectively influence their ability to engage in career exploration and decision-making. However, REBT provides a complementary lens by explaining how irrational beliefs such as rigid demands, catastrophising, and low frustration tolerance can distort these cognitive processes. When students hold maladaptive beliefs about career success or personal competence, these cognitions can weaken self-efficacy, generate negative outcome expectations, and hinder the formation of realistic career goals. As a result, students may experience increased anxiety, reduced confidence, and avoid career-related tasks. Consistent with prior research, psychological factors play a central role in career development by shaping motivation, resilience, and individuals' capacity to cope with uncertainty (Betz & Hackett, 2006; Creed et al., 2004). Therefore, irrational career beliefs can be conceptualised as a significant predictor that negatively influences career readiness by disrupting the core cognitive mechanisms proposed in SCCT.

Future research should empirically examine the proposed framework, particularly the predictive role of irrational career beliefs in influencing career readiness across diverse student populations and educational contexts. Intervention-based studies are especially important to evaluate the effectiveness of REBT-informed counselling approaches in modifying irrational beliefs and strengthening self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal-setting behaviours. Additionally, future research may explore the design of structured career readiness programmes that explicitly applies REBT-based techniques, particularly the identification and disputation of irrational beliefs, along with the development of more rational and adaptive thinking patterns, with SCCT-informed career interventions such as mastery experiences, modelling, and guided career exploration. This would provide a more comprehensive approach to addressing both the cognitive distortions and behavioural processes underlying career development. These efforts can offer valuable implications for university counsellors in developing evidence-based practices that not only facilitate career planning but also enhance students' psychological readiness for career transitions. By embedding theoretically grounded psychological interventions within career services, higher education institutions can better support students in becoming both cognitively and emotionally prepared to navigate complex and evolving career pathways.

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