Career Maturity among UniSZA Students

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ABSTRACT

The persistent disjunction between tertiary education and the demands of the modern workforce casts a long, unsettling shadow over the prospects of countless graduates. A significant proportion of university leavers, including those from institutions like UniSZA, grapple with a distinct lack of readiness for professional life—a deficit arguably rooted in an underdeveloped sense of career maturity. This study employed a mixed-methods research design encompassing quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative phase involved a survey using the Career Maturity Inventory–Revised (1995), translated into Malay and validated as the Malay Revised Inventori Kematangan Kerjaya (1995). The sample comprised 1,000 UniSZA students, including 500 male and 500 female participants, selected using systematic sampling. This paper presents a critical conceptual analysis that systematically re-examines existing vocational development theories in light of contemporary socioeconomic realities. The findings of the study indicate that independent-samples t-test results reveal a statistically significant difference in career maturity based on students' gender, while the overall level of career maturity among UniSZA students is at a moderate level. The analysis further identifies interrelated conceptual dimensions as central to understanding career maturity among UniSZA students: the persistent tension between individual career aspirations and the strong influence of familial career scripts. Future interventions must pivot from generic skills training towards targeted, culturally sensitive strategies that address these deeply embedded, context-specific factors, truly preparing students for the rigours of post-graduation life.

Keywords: Career readiness, vocational development, higher education, emerging adulthood.

INTRODUCTION

The recent graduate unemployment figures paint a grim picture. For many, a university degree no longer guarantees a clear path; instead, it often leads to profound uncertainty, a chasm between expectation and grim reality, forcing a critical re-evaluation of what 'preparedness' truly signifies for young adults entering the workforce. This predicament is particularly acute in developing economies, where rapid industrial shifts collide with deeply entrenched societal expectations, leaving institutions like Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) in a difficult position, ostensibly producing graduates for roles that may not exist or for which students are simply not adequately equipped. The conventional wisdom—that students merely need more 'skills'—is demonstrably insufficient; it sidesteps the more profound, internal struggle concerning identity, aspiration, and realistic selfassessment. Few, it seems, question the foundational premise of what constitutes career maturity in a rapidly evolving, often unforgiving, global economy, especially when viewed through the lens of a regional university. The existing discourse often presumes a linear, Western-centric trajectory of career development, ignoring the specific cultural pressures, socio-economic limitations, and distinct educational philosophies that shape the experiences of students in places like UniSZA. This oversight leaves a considerable lacuna; we lack a nuanced conceptual understanding of how these multifaceted forces coalesce to either foster or impede genuine career readiness among this particular demographic. It is a critical omission that demands redress.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic discourse surrounding career maturity has, for decades, largely orbited around seminal figures such as Super (1980), whose developmental stage theory provided an enduring, if increasingly challenged, framework for understanding vocational progression. Super posited a series of life stages, each marked by specific tasks and psychological adjustments, suggesting a universal trajectory from exploration to establishment. Yet, one might suspect this linear progression, so neatly delineated, struggles for universal applicability; its genesis in a mid-20th century Western context renders it somewhat tenuous when applied uncritically to contemporary non-Western populations, particularly in rapidly industrialising nations where traditional career paths are dissolving (Patton & McMahon, 2014). This rather deterministic view, while historically significant, arguably oversimplifies the chaotic, often recursive nature of modern career navigation.

Indeed, the concept has morphed and expanded, with researchers like Savickas (2005) offering a more postmodern, constructivist perspective through his career construction theory. Savickas pushed back against the notion of a single, predetermined path, instead asserting that individuals actively 'construct' their careers through narrative and adaptation to changing life roles. This shift certainly offered a more flexible lens, acknowledging agency and personal meaning-making, a welcome departure from rigid stage models. However, even this approach, while emphasising adaptability, can occasionally gloss over the pervasive external forces—socioeconomic inequality, cultural prescriptions, and market volatilities—that frequently constrain individual agency, especially for students from less privileged backgrounds (Guichard, 2005). The freedom to 'construct' a career, after all, presupposes a certain baseline of opportunity and resource.

Beyond these individual-centric models, a significant body of work has explored the environmental and contextual factors influencing career development. Studies have repeatedly pointed to the profound impact of family expectations and cultural norms on career choice, particularly within collectivist societies where filial piety often dictates vocational pathways (Choudhuri et al., 2016). For many Malaysian students, career decisions are rarely purely individualistic ventures; they are intricate negotiations between personal ambition, parental aspirations, and community values (Salleh & Yahaya, 2011). This interplay introduces a layer of complexity that purely Western-derived theories often fail to fully apprehend, frequently underestimating the psychological burden of perceived duty versus personal desire.

Furthermore, the economic realities of a region cannot be ignored. The availability of relevant jobs, the perceived value of certain professions, and the broader economic stability of a nation significantly shape how students perceive their career futures. For instance, the demand for specific technical skills in a burgeoning manufacturing sector might inadvertently steer students away from humanities or arts, regardless of individual aptitude or interest (Mohd Rasdi et al., 2011). This external structural influence — often a harsh reality check — clashes with the idealistic notions of self-discovery promoted by some psychological models. The 'maturity' in this context then involves not just self-knowledge, but also a sober assessment of market feasibility and personal compromise.

More contemporary research has begun to disentangle the role of career self-efficacy—an individual's belief in their ability to successfully execute career-related tasks—as a critical component of career maturity (Betz & Luzzo, 1996). High self-efficacy in career decision-making, job searching, and skill acquisition appears strongly correlated with positive career outcomes. This seems plausible. Yet, the question of how this selfefficacy develops in an environment where role models might be scarce, and exposure to diverse professional settings limited, remains somewhat underexplored. UniSZA students, for instance, might come from rural backgrounds with limited exposure to the breadth of modern industries, potentially stunting the development of robust career self-efficacy, irrespective of academic achievement (Othman et al., 2014).

The prevailing literature, while rich in empirical data concerning career readiness levels, frequently treats 'career maturity' as a static, measurable construct rather than a dynamic, culturally embedded process. This is unfortunate. The existing instruments, largely quantitative scales, provide snapshot assessments but offer less insight into the underlying conceptual architecture that makes students 'mature' or 'immature' in their vocational outlook within a specific socio-cultural milieu (Creed et al., 2002). There is, arguably, a tendency to conflate symptom with cause, measuring the observable deficit without fully dissecting its deeper, contextual roots. What is sorely needed is a synthesis that moves beyond mere description, offering a more robust conceptual

understanding that acknowledges both the psychological and the socio-structural forces at play, specifically within a university context like UniSZA.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component utilized a survey method based on the Career Maturity Inventory–Revised (1995), which was translated into Malay and adapted as the Malay Revised *Inventori Kematangan Kerjaya* (1995). The study sample comprised 1,060 UniSZA students, including 530 male and 530 female participants, selected using systematic sampling. The qualitative component focused on a critical conceptual analysis, adopting a rigorous interpretative approach that differs fundamentally from conventional systematic reviews, which typically prioritise empirical synthesis. This approach is particularly appropriate when the research objective is to develop or refine theoretical understanding, especially in fields where quantitative evidence offers only fragmented insights. Accordingly, this study does not seek to measure prevalence, but rather to elucidate the underlying structural dynamics of a complex career development phenomenon.

The process began with an expansive, yet targeted, search for foundational theories in vocational development, career psychology, and emerging adulthood. Key databases were explored, including Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO, with an initial focus on seminal works from the 1960s onwards—Super, Holland, Savickas being obvious starting points. This allowed for the mapping of the historical progression of thought, identifying shifts in theoretical paradigms from trait-factor theories to more constructivist and contextual approaches. Crucially, this was not a passive data collection exercise; each theory was approached with a critical eye, questioning its assumptions, its cultural universality, and its potential limitations when applied beyond its original context. For instance, a theory heavily reliant on individualistic self-exploration might be flagged for its reduced explanatory power in collectivist societies.

The next step involved an iterative process of conceptual refinement. We purposefully discarded outdated or empirically unsupported theoretical tenets, favouring those that demonstrated robust explanatory power or offered conceptual flexibility for adaptation. This meant a constant re-evaluation: *does this concept truly explain what we observe in the current educational landscape, or is it a relic of a bygone era?* Special attention was given to literature that discussed career development in non-Western contexts, particularly Southeast Asia and Malaysia, allowing for the identification of culturally specific variables that general theories often neglect. This included scholarly articles, book chapters, and relevant policy documents that provided insight into local educational philosophies, labour market dynamics, and societal values impacting career choices.

Data extraction, in this conceptual context, was not about numerical data points. It involved identifying core constructs, their definitions, the relationships between them, and the implicit assumptions underpinning various theoretical propositions. These constructs were then catalogued, compared, and contrasted, searching for points of convergence, divergence, and outright contradiction. The goal was to build a comprehensive conceptual map, identifying key themes that consistently emerged as significant determinants or influencers of career maturity.

Ultimately, this methodology allowed for the synthesis of disparate theoretical strands into a coherent framework. It enabled the identification of gaps within existing knowledge and the proposition of new conceptual relationships. The justification for this approach lies in its capacity to generate theoretical advancements and offer fresh interpretations of existing phenomena, providing a foundation for future empirical investigation. It is a necessary precursor to effective intervention; after all, one cannot truly address a problem without first understanding its conceptual underpinnings.

FINDING

Based on the study findings, the independent-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in career maturity based on students' gender. Overall, the level of career maturity among UniSZA students was found to be moderate. The mean career maturity score for male students was lower ($n = 530$, $M = 72.5$) compared to female students ($n = 530$, $M = 86.1$), with the difference reaching a high level of statistical significance ($p < .001$). Differences in career maturity according to gender ($N = 1,060$). With respect to gender, female students demonstrated significantly higher levels of career maturity than their male counterparts.

When interpreted in relation to the existing literature, the findings suggest that career maturity within the UniSZA context should not be understood as a monolithic construct, but rather as an outcome shaped by the interaction of several context-specific conceptual dynamics. This interaction is inherently complex. A salient conceptual theme that emerged is the persistent tension between individual aspirations and dominant familial career scripts. Although students ostensibly possess autonomy in selecting their academic and professional pathways, they frequently find themselves navigating a network of implicit yet powerful expectations imposed by parents and extended family members. This condition can be psychologically demanding. Perceptions of "career maturity" are therefore often less dependent on autonomous self-exploration, as posited in Western career development theories, and more contingent upon students' capacity to accommodate—or subtly resist—external pressures. Such dynamics frequently result in career choices driven by perceived responsibility rather than personal interest (Choudhuri et al., 2016). This internal conflict is clearly evident and plays a formative role in vocational decision-making in ways that are seldom captured through aptitude-based assessments alone.

Beyond these deeply ingrained familial narratives, the pervasive influence of "perceived self-efficacy, often shaped by limited exposure to diverse professional roles", presents another significant conceptual dimension. Many students arrive at university with a narrow understanding of the sheer breadth of career opportunities available, their horizons often confined to professions visible within their immediate communities or those valorised by popular culture. How, one might ask, can a student develop robust self-efficacy in career planning if their mental repository of potential career selves is so impoverished? This lack of exposure stunts their ability to realistically assess their capabilities against a wider array of professional demands, leaving them feeling unprepared for tasks they simply haven't envisioned.

The final, yet equally compelling, conceptual theme points to the often-underestimated "structural constraints imposed by local industrial landscapes". The notion of a perfectly mobile, meritocratic job market is, for many, a cruel fiction. For UniSZA students, particularly those from Terengganu and its surrounding regions, the local economic reality, dominated by specific sectors like oil and gas, tourism, or public service, significantly circumscribes perceived career options (Mohd Rasdi et al., 2011). This is not merely a matter of information scarcity; it is a fundamental limitation of opportunity. A student might conceptually 'mature' in their selfunderstanding, yet face a brick wall when their aspirations collide with the stark realities of regional job availability. Their 'readiness' then becomes less about internal developmental stages and more about navigating an externally imposed, limited menu of choices.

These three conceptual dimensions—familial influence, self-efficacy shaped by exposure, and structural market limitations—do not operate in isolation. They intertwine, creating a unique, context-specific pattern of career maturity that defies simplistic, universal definitions. A student might be conceptually advanced in one dimension, yet severely hindered in another, complicating any easy assessment of their overall vocational preparedness. It is, arguably, a dance between personal agency and systemic forces.

DISCUSSION

What, then, does this conceptual deconstruction of career maturity truly mean for the UniSZA graduate, and by extension, for the institution itself? It means that a simplistic focus on 'employability skills' alone misses the point entirely. If familial career scripts hold such sway, university guidance counsellors must move beyond mere CV workshops and engage with the broader family unit, perhaps through parent-student career forums, challenging ingrained assumptions and broadening horizons collectively. It seems plausible that if students are making choices under duress, their commitment to these paths will be fragile, leading to early career dissatisfaction or, worse, prolonged unemployment as they drift between unfulfilling roles. This hints at a deeper issue within educational systems that often fail to acknowledge the powerful, often unspoken, cultural narratives that shape individual choices.

The revelation that perceived self-efficacy is so heavily tied to limited professional exposure also demands a re-think of pedagogical approaches. It is entirely possible that traditional internship programmes, while valuable, are insufficient if they merely reinforce existing, narrow career stereotypes. One might suspect that a more radical approach is needed: perhaps a mandatory, diverse experiential learning module that exposes students to roles far outside their comfort zones or initial expectations, fostering a more robust, adaptable sense of self-efficacy (Luzzo et al., 2000). The current system, arguably, perpetuates a cycle where students only aspire to what they

can see, inadvertently reinforcing the very limitations they seek to overcome. How can a student dream of being a bio-informatician if they've never encountered one?

Furthermore, the stark reality of structural constraints in the local job market is a direct challenge to the often-optimistic rhetoric surrounding 'career choice.' It means that career development initiatives cannot operate in a vacuum, detached from the economic realities of the East Coast of Malaysia. The university, therefore, bears a responsibility to not only prepare students for "any" job but to critically evaluate the alignment between its academic offerings and the actual demand, both local and national. This is not about capitulating to market whims, but about fostering a pragmatic form of career maturity, where students understand the economic 'rules of the game' and how to strategically position themselves within those parameters. Perhaps, a greater emphasis on entrepreneurship, tailored to local resources and needs, could offer an alternative pathway, circumventing the saturated traditional job markets.

This conceptual framework also forces a re-evaluation of the foundational theories themselves. Super's stages, while offering historical context, struggle to fully encapsulate the fluidity and non-linearity of career paths for many UniSZA students. Similarly, while Savickas's emphasis on career construction offers a more adaptable lens, it might still overstate individual agency in a context where external forces—familial, economic, and cultural—exert significant, sometimes overwhelming, pressure. The 'maturity' then, is less about mastering predefined developmental tasks and more about cultivating a sophisticated adaptability, a resilience in the face of constraint, and a nuanced understanding of where personal ambition can realistically intersect with external opportunity. To ignore these contextual specificities is to condemn vocational guidance to irrelevance for a significant portion of the student population.

CONCLUSION

The journey into understanding career maturity among UniSZA students has revealed a conceptual terrain far more intricate than often acknowledged by general theories. It is a terrain shaped less by a neat progression of developmental stages and more by a turbulent confluence of deeply ingrained familial expectations, the oftenlimited scope of perceived self-efficacy born from restricted exposure, and the unyielding realities of regional economic structures. To approach this challenge with generic, one-size-fits-all career guidance is, arguably, an exercise in futility; it fails to grapple with the specific socio-cultural and economic undercurrents that dictate vocational readiness in this unique context. We have seen how the individual's 'choice' is frequently a negotiation, a complex ballet between personal desire and powerful external directives.

The implications for higher education institutions, particularly UniSZA, are clear, if uncomfortable. They must move beyond merely imparting academic knowledge and fostering generic skills; a more robust mandate involves cultivating a 'contextually astute career maturity.' This entails a significant overhaul of how career services are conceived and delivered. Instead of isolated career fairs, there should be integrated, year-long programmes that involve not just students, but also their families, fostering open dialogues about career paths and challenging long-held assumptions. Moreover, pedagogical reforms should consciously integrate diverse professional exposure through mandated project-based learning, mentorships, and even virtual reality simulations of niche industries, broadening the imaginative scope for students and bolstering their self-efficacy.

Future research should, therefore, abandon broad, comparative surveys in favour of longitudinal, qualitative studies exploring the specific lived experiences of UniSZA students as they navigate these conceptual tensions. Such studies could test the validity of these proposed conceptual dimensions, perhaps through ethnographic approaches, revealing the nuances of how students reconcile personal ambition with familial duty and market realities. A particularly fruitful avenue would involve examining the impact of targeted, culturally sensitive interventions on the development of career self-efficacy within collectivist cultural settings. If this nuanced understanding is ignored, if institutions persist in applying universal models to distinct local realities, we risk a future where an increasingly educated populace remains unprepared for the economic demands, leading to widespread disillusionment and a tragic waste of human potential.

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