

Analyzing the Key Problems Affecting Students' Decisions Making to Pursue Careers in Academic

Muhammad Abdullah

abdullah62751@gmail.com

MPhil Scholar, Institute of Education, University of Sargodha

Dr. Muhammad Uzair-ul-Hassan

uzair.hassan@uos.edu.pk

Director, Institute of Education, University of Sargodha

Dr. Abdul Majeed Khan

abdul.majeed@uos.edu.pk

Assistant Professor, Institute of Education, University of Sargodha

Corresponding Author: * Dr Abdul Majeed Khan abdul.majeed@uos.edu.pk

Received: 04-11-2025

Revised: 21-11-2025

Accepted: 11-12-2025

Published: 23-12-2025

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the problems facing students in choosing an academic career which influence academic and professional paths within post-secondary education, with the context of the semi-urban setting of Sargodha, Pakistan. The data was gathered using a qualitative research design that employed the open-ended interview, which involved 25 students of Sargodha University, and was analyzed using thematic analysis. The results indicate that personal motivation, especially Passion and job security, plays a significant role in how students make their career decisions, whereas parental influence, often based on financial security and cultural norms, is decisive at times, resulting in negotiating or disagreeing. Socioeconomic barriers, limited career counseling, and external influences such as peers and media further shape these trajectories. The research paper indicates that structured career guidance is necessary to close the gap between the aspirations of students and the expectations of their parents so that the decisions made by them can be informed and fulfilling. Among the recommendations are the early career planning of students, effective parental engagement, institutional counseling services, and policy interventions to improve access to the available career opportunities. Such observations assist in the comprehension of the student-parent dynamics within the Pakistani higher education system, and offer avenues within which student-centered career development could be encouraged.

Keywords: Academic career, post-secondary education, parental influence, Socioeconomic barriers, limited career counseling, external influences, Pakistani higher education system, career development, Sargodha, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Choosing academic and career pathways is one of the most crucial moments in a student's life, laying the foundations for their future occupation and their future position in the social and economic hierarchy. Personal interests, socioeconomic status, and cultural and familial expectations play a deciding role in the choice (Hasdiansa & Hasbiah, 2024; Olmos-Gómez et al., 2021). In most cultures, especially in Pakistan, the shift from secondary to post-secondary education is influenced far beyond the individual, especially by parental involvement (Ahmed, 2022; Delavande & Zafar, 2018). Oweini, (2024) explain that this process incorporates personal considerations like interests and skills and external factors such as economic conditions. Parental influence is the active and passive impact that parents have on their children's educational and occupational decisions. Parents may provide help or may impose expectations driven by

economic or cultural factors. These expectations may come along with financial and socio-cultural resources that familial decision-making frameworks incorporate (Flanagan-Bórquez & Soriano-Soriano, 2024; Flaster, 2017). In Europe, there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of student autonomy in decision-making (Radoilska, 2022). Scholars have stressed the importance of students being able to study a broader range of disciplines and pursue career options that integrate personal fulfillment with prevailing market demands (Calabit & Orongan, 2023). Such developments are indicative of a global trend geared at increasing autonomy in career decision-making, even though familial and cultural pressures are present in most regions of the world.

In the context of post-secondary education in Pakistan, the intricate socio-cultural landscape and the hybridization of academic pressure yield a multidimensional and complex scenario. Families in Pakistan have a long history of placing importance on the careers of civil services, engineering, and medicine, and even to date, the significance attached to these professions, which evoke societal respect, success, and admiration, dominates the decision-making of families. Parent involvement in children's academic decisions goes beyond mere guidance (Pasha & Siddiqui, 2019; Shaheen, 2017). This phenomenon is due to socio-cultural constructs that emphasize the importance of financial security and social prestige (Nawabi, 2019).

Students in Pakistan willing to pursue less conventional professions face tremendous bureaucratic and administrative challenges, which are significantly due to the even greater absence of structured career counseling programs in educational and professional institutions. Research suggests that over 70% of students depend heavily on their parents to decide on their educational avenues (Ali et al., 2020; Fatima et al., 2024; Yaqoob et al., 2017). A weak link in the academic and professional decision-making of students and their core interests often leads to disinterest and eventual dissatisfaction in their careers (Akbar et al., 2023). Such a core interest and professional decision-making disconnect, albeit on a lower scale, is evidenced in less urban and rural semi-areas such as Sargodha.

In Sargodha and in many parts of the country, the impact of parents is described as a part of the order of the culture. If students decide to pursue advanced studies in fields like arts, social sciences, or entrepreneurship, they are often confronted with a culture of family opposition, especially for many students with well-established careers that are "secure" like engineering, medicine, or government services. The expectations of the family and a social structure create conflict that is often unsolvable and forces students to choose between their own interests and aspirations.

Most family members, especially parents, are involved with and impact the decision-making process in students' career choices and are the single most influential factor in semi-urban contexts (Oweini, 2024). This is primarily because, in these contexts, dominant equilibrium family structures are greatly impacted by traditional beliefs. Specific career options are perceived to be more successful than others. Family members, particularly parents, impact the student's self-esteem and self-worth regarding attaining a particular career. When students and parents have mismatched expectations regarding a career, it tends to create frustration that is counterproductive to the student's education (Dorot & Davidovitch, 2023; Rivera & Li, 2020).

In Pakistan, many parents root their aspirations within a framework defined primarily by economic stability, security, and societal respect. Given such circumstances, students often find themselves pursuing their education within a narrowly defined structure of success, which can overlook their individual passions and strengths (Rashid, 2024). Such misalignments can lead to disengagement, stress, and lifelong dissatisfaction professionally. Furthermore, this problem in balance is made worse, in many cases, by the absence of effective career counseling in educational institutions, leaving students without the requisite support and

tools to shape their futures decisively (ERDOĞAN et al., 2023). This research aimed to identify the key problems facing by students in choosing an academic career in Sargodha. It gave disseminate knowledge to help develop more integrated, student-centered decision-making in educational policy and practice. To this end, the research will also assist educators, career counselors, parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders in understanding how to create conditions that support informed decision-making in students in order to attain satisfying educational and vocational goals

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative methodological framework to explore the scholarly and professional paths of post-secondary students, especially regarding how student interest interacts with parental concerns. The qualitative design enabled an in-depth investigation of the lived experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes, enabling the participants to share their narratives without the restrictive boundaries of structured survey questions (Pfarrwaller et al., 2023). The constructivist paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed, subjective, and molded by cultural and familial contexts. In this study, the phenomenological approach was used to understand how students and parents experience the process of academic and career choice within the socio-cultural environment of semi-urban Sargodha, Pakistan. Such an approach helped uncover not only the factors that influence students' academic trajectories but also the relational dynamics between students and their families.

The population of the study included undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Sargodha, due to its heterogeneous student composition, reflecting various socioeconomic groups, disciplines, and regions. Through purposive sampling, 25 students were selected based on the fact that they could provide rich, relevant, and experience-based responses regarding the research questions. This sample size was adequate to attain data saturation, which is generally achieved in qualitative interview studies with 20–30 participants. The data collection instrument was a self-developed open-ended questionnaire, which was designed after an extensive review of literature on educational and career development theories, parental influence, and student decision-making. The instrument was pretested on a few students to refine the clarity and contextual relevance of the questions.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews conducted in quiet, private settings within the university to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent before being transcribed verbatim. Ethical principles were strictly followed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity through pseudonyms, and secure handling of audio recordings and transcripts. After data collection, the data interpretation used thematic and content analysis techniques. Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis framework was adopted: familiarization with data, generating codes, identifying and reviewing themes, defining those themes, and producing the final report supported by illustrative quotations. The strategies used to ensure trustworthiness of data included member checks to enhance credibility, rich descriptions for transferability, an audit trail to show dependability, and reflexive journaling to promote conformability. Even as the methodological process has been tight, there is a realization of several limitations, including a sample taken from one public-sector University, dependence on self-reporting data that could be subjected to social desirability, and a cultural specificity that may not allow for generalizability of findings to other settings. The methodology presented a sound basis upon which to investigate multi-faceted variables defining students' academic and career decision-making processes in relation to the expectations of their parents and socio-cultural settings.

RESULT OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Examination of the student responses unveiled several repeating patterns in regard to career aspirations, parental influence, exposure, financial constraints, peer dynamics, and broader socio-cultural factors. During thematic coding, fifteen major themes have been developed with sub-themes that reflect the diverse experiences that shape students' academic and professional choices.

Theme 1: Career Motivation revealed that the early aspirations of students were influenced mainly by internal drives and the expectations of society. A majority of students, 40% of them, based their post-school aspirations on Personal Passion, which was closely related to long-cherished ambitions of becoming a doctor, teacher, artist, or engineer. As Participant 7 revealed, "I have always wanted to be a doctor because I have always wanted to save lives since childhood." The other students, 24%, identified Job Security and Scope as the motivating factors in career choice and identified engineering as a field that offered them "a stable income and high demand," said Participant 12. Social Status and Prestige guided the choice of 20% of the students, as Participant 19 described law as a "highly appreciated profession amongst the people." For 16%, careers were a means of Service to Society, such as Participant 3, who wanted to teach because he would "be able to serve future society through teaching." These findings point toward the growth of career aspirations through personal interest, perceived economic stability, and cultural values concerning respectability and contribution.

Theme 2: Parental Role highlighted the potential of parents to influence career paths. In comparison, 36% of students described Supportive Guidance, stating freedom to choose according to their interests, while 28% experienced Directive Influence from their parents; for example, Participant 14 explained, "My dad wanted to have me as an engineer when I did not like the arts." Some (20%) had negotiated and used evidence-based persuasion, often presenting market trends to their parents, as Participant 9 explained. For others, 16% had Financial Decision Influence, such as Participant 21, who said he "settled for a relatively cheap medical program because of the affordable fee and budget constraints." This theme identified that parents can either facilitate or be the decision-makers, influencing the direction through emotional, practical, or financial means.

Theme 3: Exposure and Experience showed that real-life experiences acted as strong facilitators of change or modification in career choice. Of the total, 44% claimed Positive Confirmation of their chosen field through volunteering and others, which Participant 6 reports to have strengthened the motivation toward medicine through volunteer work in hospitals. On the other hand, 32% had to go through a Reality Check or Adjustment, where Participant 18 reported that the internship in architecture brought out low-income potential, hence a shift. Another 24% reported the discovery of their Specialization Choices in university, such as Participant 11's interest in Data Science. These responses indicate that exposure either affirms initial ambitions or sends students down more informed paths.

Theme 4: Barriers and Challenges showed the obstacles that the students had to go through. The most evident was Financial Constraint, 40%, depicted by Participant 13, who intended to pursue studies abroad but could not bear the high costs. The second challenge was the Lack of Local Opportunities, 24%, especially for rural students whose desired programs were not available locally. High Competition Pressure, 20%, also emerged, especially for medical entrance exams, while 16% showed Information Gaps, reporting a lack of awareness about available scholarships or alternative paths. These findings evidence how access to educational mobility is shaped under differential structural conditions.

Theme 5: Influences Beyond Family: Teachers (36%), relatives (32%), peers (20%), and media (12%) played a role in influencing choices. Teachers were often directly inspiring, as in the case of participant 4's

science teacher, while for relatives this generally involved exposure to successful careers, as Participant 10 noted. Peers contributed both through shared decision-making and imitation, while the media played a more minor but notable role in career inspiration.

Theme 6: Career Uncertainty showed that confusion was a normal phase of vocational development. Of the total, 36% experienced a Lack of Clear Direction, whereas for 28%, Multiple Interests were the issue, as they kept changing their fields. For 20%, the Trial-and-Error Approach was used, whereby students found out what suited them by taking different classes. For 16%, Strong Clarity from the Start prevailed, as they have had stable career visions.

FINDINGS

We have presented the findings in the form of the order of the dimensions of career choice according to the questionnaire used by 25 individuals who were subjected to an interview as input in the process of developing this study. This ranking encompassed the extent to which diverse factors in situum dictated the academic and even career path as students went through their post-secondary schooling years. The results showed the complexity of the interaction between personal needs, family interests, exposure, misfortunes, as well as the broader factors plaguing society.

The motivation aspects that were raised by the participants the most are career motivation, particularly personal Passion, and job security, with the most common responses (80 per cent and 72 per cent, respectively). This was the perception of the students who considered intrinsic interest and practical consideration of job opportunities during the choice of a career. Social status and giving back to society were also raised, but had relatively moderate to low weightage, which meant that students maintained a balance between personal gratification and community giveback. The second most powerful dimension was that of parents, which was supported hugely. Their supportive parents (76%) and monetary decision-making (68%) were widely found, suggesting that parents did not just guide but also decide whether their choices would be more viable or not. Directive influence and evidence-based negotiation were also pervasive, as they indicated that parents were mainly helpful, but they usually required children to explain their decisions based on justifiable reasons.

The respondents also drew towards exposure and experience as the important drivers in determining career directions. The confirmation of selected occupations at a positive level (72%) was rated high, whereas the reality checks and specialization choices were ranked in the middle, meaning that the process during years of study often served to alter or narrow the student decisions.

In terms of barriers/challenges, moderately approved (yet not strongly) were financial limits (68%), absence of commercial opportunities in the locality (64%), and high competition and information gaps. This implied that structural and financial problems played a key role in limiting career choices. Non-family Influences were also present, among them, teacher or mentor inspiration (60%), and exposure of relatives to peers (48 to 56). This resonated the point that the decisions on career were typically determined or influenced by external social circles.

In general, the results suggested that individual Passion, job security, and parental support were the most influential dimensions that influenced the career decision of the students, and such factors as values, societal trends, and uncertainty played secondary and, at the same time, important roles. The results support the importance of supported intrinsic interest using external facts, which prove the multidimensionality of career choice among post-secondary Pakistani students.

CONCLUSION

The significant factors that could predict the career direction were personal motivation, which is the strongest, and Passion and job security. There was a decisive role of parents in guiding the children as well as financially exerting authority over them, but the children, at a later stage, made efforts to negotiate their decisions. The experience and exposure reaffirmed or modified original preferences and constraints, like financial constraints and lack of opportunities, which limited the ambitions. External factors such as teachers, peers, and media also played a role, but to a lesser extent.

These results emphasize that the students need independence in the selection of a career, but they are still heavily reliant on parental and infrastructural circumstances. Therefore, the choice of career by post-secondary students in Pakistan indicates personal agency as well as circumstantial limitation.

DISCUSSION

The study results are significant in terms of post-secondary students making career choices, involvement of the parents in career decisions, and the external influence affecting such decisions.

Motivation in the career field proved to be the best dimension, and personal interest and security were the most mentioned aspects. The latter is the same as observed in preceding studies (Lent et al., 2017), in that a career choice is usually a tradeoff between internal interests and external job market conditions (Phạm et al., 2024). The availability of social status and service to society demonstrates further that students do not only consider personal benefit but also the social identity and service, although these aspects were at a lower ranking.

Parental Role was also found to be of even greater importance. Both the supportive and the directive influences of the parent were also mentioned, but financial decision-making proved to be a highly influential sub-theme. These results are similar to a study carried out by Dorot & Davidovitch, (2023) and Oweini, (2024), which emphasized that parents are one of the most significant influencing factors that define the career choices of children. However, there was also one more pattern of the negotiation, i.e., the predisposition of the students to convince their parents by means of arguments and logical reasoning, proving the gradual transition of the unilateral parental rule to the consensus decision-making behavior.

Other sources of influence, including teachers, mentors, relatives, and peers known as Beyond the Family, were moderately approved. These findings point to the fact that there is still dominance of family, but there is also a significant role of external networks. According to previous studies (Boat et al., 2021; Prasetya et al., 2024), social modeling and mentoring capabilities have been involved when generating self-efficacy and career aspirations). The theme Research Uncertainty and Exploration helped to show that numerous students were not committed, or they had numerous interests, or tried the trial-and-error method. This depicts an age bracket where a full development of career maturity has not been achieved, and students still have trial options before choosing a final direction. This observation agrees with the idea of emerging adulthood, which is characterized by exploration and instability as normative processes of development. The situationally less endorsement of Values, Identity & Service Orientation intimated that helping others, leadership, and creativity were of significance, but not the initiating factors. Likewise, the Influence of Societal Trends and Media, including social media exposure, cultural trends, and stories and narratives in society, was noted as a secondary and significant influence. These outcomes align with the latest studies that provide a glimpse into how the media becomes more and more significant in shaping the interest of youth in their career, yet it is less important than the family and individual motivation. On the whole, the discussion proves that the consideration of career choices is a multidimensional phenomenon where the

most important roles are taken by personal Passion, parental support, and structural barriers, and the values and societal tendencies turn out to be marginalized.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

For Students

1. Start the process of self-appraisal and career planning early to be realistic about what you enjoy doing.
2. Engage in exposure like internships, workshops, and mentorship programs.
3. Negotiate on career choices with parents using evidence-based reasoning.

For Parents

1. Offer encouraging directions but still honoring the personal interests of students.
2. Correspondence between intervention and provision of financial support and moral strength, without being rigid in decision-making.
3. Consult with children and have professional career counseling sessions in order to make a decision.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. There is a need to carry out bigger studies with various socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.
2. Make a comparison between the differences that exist between the public and the private institutions as far as career guidance is concerned.
3. Discover gender-related differences in the parental impact on influences and career selection.
4. Undertake a longitudinal study to trace the career choices of the students over time.
5. Explore further the impact of digital media and digital platforms on careers.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, W. (2022). Impact of Economic Factors on Major Subject Choice. Pakistan Social Sciences Review, 6. [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2022\(6-ii\)41](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2022(6-ii)41)
- Akbar, H., Ahmad, S., & Muhammad, H. (2023). College Students' Struggles with Career Decisions and Their Personality. Pakistan Journal of Health Sciences, 62. <https://doi.org/10.54393/pjhs.v4i08.885>
- Ali, H., Rafi, S. M. T., Rehman, H., Tariq, A., Zafar, F., Naeem, S., & Nawab, A. (2020). Career Counselling: Medical And Healthcare Students Perspective in Deciding their Career Preferences. South Asian Journal of Management Sciences, 14(2), 221. <https://doi.org/10.21621/sajms.2020142.04>
- An Empirical Investigation of a 21st Century Career Development Program for Business Majors. (2022). Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice, 22(13). <https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v22i13.5510>

- Boat, A. A., Miranda, A., & Syvertsen, A. K. (2021). Enhancing Education and Career Pathways Through Peer and Near-Peer Social Capital. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 51(7), 1287.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-021-01540-x>
- Calabit, M., & Orongan, R. C. (2023). Curriculum Innovation, Instructional Strategy and School Governance on the Technical Competency of On-the-Job Trainees. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4580913>
- Delavande, A., & Zafar, B. (2018). University Choice: The Role of Expected Earnings, Nonpecuniary Outcomes, and Financial Constraints. *Journal of Political Economy*, 127(5), 2343.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/701808>
- Dorot, R., & Davidovitch, N. (2023). Parental influence on adult children's choice of career. *SCIREA Journal of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.54647/education880498>
- ERDOĞAN, F. R., Kılınç, N. D., Murat, M., & Şenturan, L. (2023). Examination of Career-Related Stress in Senior Students of Health Sciences Departments. *Sağlık Akademisyenleri Dergisi/Sağlık Akademisyenler Dergisi*. <https://doi.org/10.52880/sagakaderg.1269244>
- Fatima, W., Haneef, F., Abbasi, R. A., Noor, M. N., & Khalid, A. (2024). Identifying Significant Factors Associated with Career Selection: A survey based study in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Engineering Technology & Science*, 12(1), 104. <https://doi.org/10.22555/pjets.v12i1.1090>
- Flanagan-Bórquez, A., & Soriano-Soriano, G. (2024). Family and higher education: developing a comprehensive framework of parents' support and expectations of first-generation students. *Frontiers in Education*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1416191>
- Flaster, A. (2017). *Paying Kids' Way: Parental Financial Support and Adolescents' College Choices*. Deep Blue (University of Michigan). <https://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/140925>
- Hasdiansa, I. W., & Hasbiah, S. (2024). Entrepreneurial Interest is Reviewed from Entrepreneurship Education, Family Environment, and Technopreneurship Literacy with Self-Efficacy as an Intervening variable. *Deleted Journal*, 2(1), 63. <https://doi.org/10.62794/pjer.v2i1.2474>
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (2017). Social cognitive career theory. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (3rd ed., pp. 115–146). Wiley.
- Nawabi, S. (2019). PARENTAL INFLUENCE ON CAREER CHOICE OF THEIR CHILDREN: LITERATURE REVIEW. 7(3), 221. <https://doi.org/10.21474/ijar01/8625>
- Olmos-Gómez, M. del C., Luque-Suárez, M., Ruíz, D. B., & Cuevas-Rincón, J. M. (2021). Gender and Socioeconomic Status as Factors of Individual Differences in Pre-University Students' Decision-Making for Careers, with a Focus on Family Influence and Psychosocial Factors. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(3), 1344.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18031344>

- Oweini, A. (2024). The Influence and Involvement of Family Members in Career Decision-Making. *Psychology & Psychological Research International Journal*, 9(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.23880/pprij-16000393>
- Pasha, A., & Siddiqui, D. A. (2019). Factors Influencing Professional Selection Choices: Evidence from Pakistan. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3400731>
- Pfarrwaller, E., Maisonneuve, H., Laurent, C., Abbiati, M., Sommer, J., Baroffio, A., & Haller, D. M. (2023). Dynamics of Students' Career Choice: a Conceptual Framework–Based Qualitative Analysis Focusing on Primary Care. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 39(9), 1544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-023-08567-9>
- Phạm, M., Lam, B., & Anh, B. N. T. (2024). Career exploration and its influence on the relationship between self-efficacy and career choice: The moderating role of social support. *Heliyon*, 10(11). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e31808>
- Prasetia, A. T., Yunus, A. R., Nirwana, H., Afdal, A., Syukur, Y., Iswari, M., & Fikri, M. (2024). Family education: Instilling career expectations for woman. *Journal of Education and Learning (EduLearn)*, 18(2), 271. <https://doi.org/10.11591/edulearn.v18i2.21153>
- Radoilska, L. (2022). Autonomy and Responsibility. In Routledge eBooks (p. 147). Informa. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429290411-16>
- Rashid, A. (2024). Untitled. <https://doi.org/10.55277/researchhub.vq5dnd6h>
- Rivera, H., & Li, J. (2020). Potential Factors to Enhance Students' STEM College Learning and Career Orientation. *Frontiers in Education*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.00025>
- Shaheen, S. (2017). The Identity Formation of South Asians: A Phenomenological Study. <https://doi.org/10.25772/vwzq-wy67>
- Yaqoob, Ú., Arif, F., Samad, M., & Iqbal, A. (2017). Career counselling and its knowledge among high school students in Pakistan. *International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health*, 4(7), 2261. <https://doi.org/10.18203/2394-6040.ijcmph20172817>