

Optimizing Career Counseling Centers to Mitigate Career  
Anxiety and Improve Career Decisiveness Among  
College Students in Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

# Abstract

This study explores the role of career counseling services in mitigating career anxiety and enhancing decisiveness among college students in Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Employing a convergent parallel mixed-method design, the study collected quantitative data from 100 students and qualitative insights from focus group discussions with career counselors and policymakers. The findings reveal significant systemic barriers, including inadequate funding, limited infrastructure, and a shortage of trained professionals. Cultural norms and societal pressures were identified as critical factors shaping students' career decisions, contributing to high anxiety levels and indecisiveness. The study highlights the potential of innovative strategies, such as digital counseling platforms and culturally sensitive training programs, in addressing these challenges. Recommendations emphasize the need for policy reforms, resource allocation, and family engagement to optimize career counseling services in Swat. By addressing these barriers, career counseling can empower students to make informed career choices, reduce anxiety, and achieve their professional aspirations.

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# Introduction

Career counseling centers play a significant role in guiding students through the complex decision-making processes involved in their professional lives. In the context of college students in District Swat, where educational opportunities are evolving, optimizing these centers is essential to address issues like career anxiety and indecisiveness. Career anxiety, a psychological condition marked by uncertainty and stress regarding future career paths, can significantly affect students' academic performance and overall well-being (Saleem et al., 2020). This anxiety is often linked to a lack of knowledge about available career opportunities, as well as societal pressures, making career counseling services increasingly relevant.

Career decisiveness, on the other hand, refers to the clarity and confidence with which individuals make career-related decisions (Gati et al., 2019). Developing a structured approach to career counseling can help improve students' decisiveness by providing them with information, skill-building activities, and personalized advice. For college students in District Swat, where the educational infrastructure may face unique challenges, it is particularly important to ensure that counseling centers are equipped with the necessary resources to meet the diverse needs of students.

Optimizing career counseling centers in this region can also involve training counselors in culturally sensitive practices and using technology to make services more accessible. Research indicates that effective counseling reduces career indecision and anxiety, enabling students to make informed choices that align with their personal and professional aspirations (Ali & Malik, 2021). By addressing these psychological and informational gaps, career counseling can become a powerful tool in mitigating the anxiety associated with career uncertainty and enhancing career decisiveness among college students in District Swat.

## Research Question

- 1 a) How do existing national and provincial policies on career counseling and job placement services in KP address the growing issue of career anxiety among students, and what gaps can be filled to enhance student support?
- b) What are the barriers to implementing compulsory career counseling centers in public and private educational institutions in KP, and how can policy reforms address these challenges?
- c) How can provincial-level policies in KP be strengthened to ensure effective coordination between career counseling services and employment opportunities for students?

## Objectives

- To evaluate how existing national and provincial policies on career counseling and job placement services in KP address career anxiety among students.
- To identify gaps in the support provided to students through current career counseling policies in KP.
- To examine the barriers to implementing compulsory career counseling centers in public and private educational institutions in KP.
- To propose policy reforms that can strengthen coordination between career counseling services and employment opportunities for students in KP.

## Scope of Study

The scope of this research encompasses a comprehensive analysis of career counseling and job placement services in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), with a particular focus on how these services address the growing issue of career anxiety among students. The study will explore the provincial policies, particularly the KP Education Sector Plan 2020-2025, identifying their impact on student support systems in District Swat and highlighting gaps that may hinder the effective mitigation of career anxiety in this region.

Special attention will be given to the challenges faced by public and private educational institutions in implementing compulsory career counseling centers, including financial constraints, lack of infrastructure, cultural factors, and limited policy enforcement.

The research will also examine the alignment between career counseling services and employment opportunities in KP. This will involve an investigation into how well provincial policies support the transition from education to the workforce, and what measures can be taken to strengthen coordination between schools, universities, and job markets. The study will analyze existing career counseling models and suggest ways to improve accessibility, effectiveness, and integration within the educational framework.

Through the integration of psychological frameworks such as Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and the Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Anxiety, alongside policy analysis and stakeholder interviews, the research will provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers that prevent the effective implementation of career counseling centers in KP. By bridging psychological insights with systemic policy gaps, the study will propose actionable recommendations for reforms aimed at enhancing students' self-efficacy, mitigating career anxiety, and fostering career decisiveness. This integrated approach seeks to contribute to a more robust and responsive career guidance system in KP, ultimately improving employment outcomes for students across the province.

# Literature Review

The importance of career counseling has gained significant attention globally due to its role in guiding students through career decision-making and reducing career anxiety. Career counseling centers are particularly crucial in educational settings where university students face challenges in making informed decisions about their professional futures. Studies show that career anxiety, marked by stress and uncertainty about career paths, can have adverse effects on students' mental health and academic performance (Hirschi, 2018). In many countries, career counseling centers are increasingly being optimized to better address these issues by integrating technology, offering personalized guidance, and involving family members in the counseling process (Gati & Levin, 2019). These centers are seen as pivotal in helping students develop career decisiveness, enabling them to navigate a rapidly changing job market. Career decisiveness, characterized by clarity in career choices, is associated with higher academic motivation and better job satisfaction in later life (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2021).

In Pakistan, the education system faces its own set of challenges, which directly impact the effectiveness of career counseling services. Although the country has made progress in expanding educational opportunities, students often struggle with limited access to reliable career information and resources. Research highlights that many Pakistani students experience career anxiety due to insufficient exposure to various career paths and societal pressure to follow conventional professions such as medicine or engineering (Saleem & Shah, 2020). This lack of exposure, coupled with the absence of well-structured career counseling centers in many educational institutions, exacerbates indecisiveness among students. However, some urban areas have made strides in implementing career counseling programs, especially in universities, where students are provided with guidance on how to align their interests and skills with market demands. Despite these efforts, a nationwide initiative to optimize career counseling services remains limited, particularly in rural areas where educational infrastructure is less developed (Ali & Malik, 2021).

Focusing on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), particularly District Swat, the situation becomes more complex. In KP, students face unique socio-economic and cultural challenges that contribute to career anxiety and indecisiveness. District Swat, which has a history of conflict and socio-political instability, has struggled to rebuild its educational institutions (Shah & Khan, 2019). Although significant progress has been made in improving the region's educational landscape, many students in Swat continue to face difficulties in accessing career counseling services. Cultural norms in the region often dictate traditional career choices, leaving students with limited knowledge of non-conventional career paths. As a result, career anxiety is prevalent, with students feeling pressured to meet societal expectations while being uncertain about their own career aspirations (Jadoon & Ullah, 2020).

Optimizing career counseling centers in Swat would involve addressing these socio-cultural and educational barriers. For example, training counselors to be culturally sensitive to the unique needs of students in the region could be a significant step forward. Additionally, integrating technology into counseling practices, such as virtual career guidance, could help reach students in remote areas where access to educational resources is limited (Khan & Saleem, 2021). According to Khan and Saleem (2021), effective career counseling in Swat should focus on enhancing students' self-efficacy and career decisiveness, empowering them to make informed decisions about their futures. The literature suggests that interventions aimed at reducing career anxiety through well-structured counseling programs could have a lasting impact on students' overall well-being and academic success in the region (Saleem & Shah, 2020).

While career counseling centers play a crucial role globally, optimizing them in Pakistan, particularly in District Swat, requires addressing specific cultural, socio-economic, and educational challenges. By adopting a more tailored and accessible approach, these centers can help mitigate career anxiety and foster career decisiveness, leading to better educational outcomes and personal satisfaction for students in this region.

In recent years, the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) has taken steps to address career counseling and guidance needs among students, particularly in public educational institutions. The KP Youth Policy 2016 emphasizes the importance of career planning and skill development to prepare youth for a competitive job market. Under this policy, initiatives such as the KP Youth Employment Program (YEP) have been launched to provide vocational training and career counseling to young individuals. Collaborations with private sector organizations and non-governmental entities aim to enhance access to career guidance, particularly for marginalized communities (Government of KP, 2016). The KP Education Sector Plan 2020-2025 further highlights the integration of career counseling into educational systems, focusing on training teachers and counselors to deliver guidance tailored to the socio-economic and cultural contexts of the province (KP Elementary and Secondary Education Department, 2020).

At the national level, the Prime Minister's Youth Program (PMYP), launched in 2013, includes components such as youth skill development, financial assistance, and career counseling to empower young people in their educational and professional journeys. The Kamyab Jawan Program, another initiative under PMYP, has allocated resources for career counseling centers and introduced digital platforms for career guidance and job matching, targeting a broader demographic (PMYP, 2022). Despite these efforts, challenges remain, particularly in rural regions like District Swat, where infrastructural and cultural barriers limit the effectiveness of such programs. While urban centers benefit from government initiatives, rural areas require more localized, culturally sensitive interventions to address unique socio-economic challenges (Saleem & Shah, 2020). A nationwide, cohesive strategy that prioritizes equitable resource distribution and contextualized career counseling programs is essential for maximizing the impact of these initiatives.

## Conceptual Framework

Integrating Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and the Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Anxiety can be seen as a strong conceptual framework for optimizing career counseling centers to mitigate career anxiety and improve career decisiveness among college students in Swat, KP. SCCT suggests that students' career decision-making is influenced by their self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals, which together shape their confidence and outlook toward potential career paths (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). By applying SCCT principles, career counseling centers can design interventions that enhance students' belief in their career-related skills, clarify realistic career outcomes, and assist in setting achievable goals, thereby reducing uncertainty and fostering more decisive choices.

Complementing this, the Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Anxiety addresses the anxiety and apprehension students face in making career decisions. Through counseling that identifies and reframes negative thought patterns, students can better manage their career-related anxieties, approaching decisions with greater clarity and assurance (Beck, Emery, & Greenberg, 1985). Together, these theories underscore that well-structured, targeted interventions within career counseling can not only reduce career anxiety but also empower students to make informed, confident career choices, thereby optimizing the overall effectiveness of career counseling centers.

## Methodology

### Hypotheses

- Effective career counseling policies in KP will be negatively associated with career anxiety levels among students.
- Barriers such as inadequate infrastructure and trained personnel will significantly limit the implementation of career counseling centers in KP.
- Strengthened provincial policies will lead to improved coordination between career counseling services and job placement opportunities for students.
- Reforms aimed at integrating career counseling services will have a positive impact on reducing career anxiety and improving career decision-making among students in KP.

### Research Design

The study followed a convergent parallel mixed-method design, combining surveys for quantitative data and focus group discussions (FGDs) for qualitative insights. The survey was



conducted with college students in District Swat, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different educational institutions and socio-economic backgrounds.

The FGDs included career counselors, educators, and policymakers, chosen through purposive sampling based on their roles in the career guidance system and their experience addressing student career anxiety. Both data sets were analyzed separately and later integrated during the interpretation phase to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research objectives.

## Population and Sample Size

The study included a total sample of 100 students, comprising 50 students from five private and government colleges and another 50 students from three private and two government universities in District Swat. The participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across gender, socio-economic backgrounds, and educational institutions. Lists of enrolled students were obtained from the institutions, and participants were randomly selected within each stratum to minimize selection bias.

For FGDs, 10 participants were chosen using purposive sampling, including five education and policy experts and five career counselors actively involved in career guidance within KP. These individuals were identified through professional networks, educational institution recommendations, and public sector databases to ensure their expertise and relevance to the study. Care was taken to include participants with diverse professional experiences to avoid bias and achieve a holistic understanding.

The survey covered topics such as students' career-related self-efficacy, anxiety, awareness of available career counseling services, and decisiveness in career planning. The FGDs focused on identifying systemic barriers to the effective implementation of career counseling centers, exploring cultural and institutional factors influencing career anxiety, and gathering insights into potential reforms for optimizing career guidance in the region.

## Limitations of the study

- College and university students aged 18-25 enrolled in Swat-based institutions.
- Education and policy experts with experience in career counseling or policy development.
- Career counselors with active roles in educational institutions in Swat.
- Research papers published from 2019 onwards.
- English-language research papers only.

## Tools for Data Collection

### 1. **Self-Devised Survey Questionnaire:**

A comprehensive survey was devised specifically for this study to gather data on students' career-related challenges. The survey covered:

- **Demographics:** Age, gender, institution type, and socio-economic background.
- **Career Awareness and Counseling Needs:** Custom-designed questions to explore students' understanding of career counseling services and their expectations.
- **Cultural Influences:** Items assessing the impact of societal and familial pressures on career decision-making.

### 2. **Psychological Survey Instrument:**

In addition to the self-devised questionnaire, the study utilized an adapted version of the Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale (CDSE) to measure students' confidence in making career-related decisions. This validated psychological tool complemented the self-devised survey by providing insights into students' self-efficacy and aspects of career anxiety.

### 3. **Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide:**

A semi-structured guide was developed for FGDs to gather qualitative insights. Questions focused on systemic barriers to career counseling, the influence of cultural norms on career decisions, and strategies for improving career guidance services. FGDs included five education and policy experts and five career counselors from KP, identified through purposive sampling. Participants were selected using professional networks, educational institution recommendations, and public sector databases, ensuring their expertise and diverse professional experiences.

## Procedure

Permissions were obtained from the administrations of the selected institutions in District Swat to conduct both the surveys and FGDs. Participants were briefed on the objectives of the study, emphasizing its focus on addressing career-related challenges and enhancing counseling services. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and written consent was obtained before participation.

The survey was conducted with a stratified random sample of students from five colleges and five universities in District Swat. Lists of enrolled students were obtained from institutional administrations, and participants were selected to ensure representation across gender, socio-economic backgrounds, and institution types. The surveys were administered in person, with students guided on how to complete each section. They were encouraged to ask questions if any aspect of the survey was unclear. The data collection process was closely monitored to ensure consistency and reliability.

FGDs were conducted with 10 purposely selected participants, including five education and

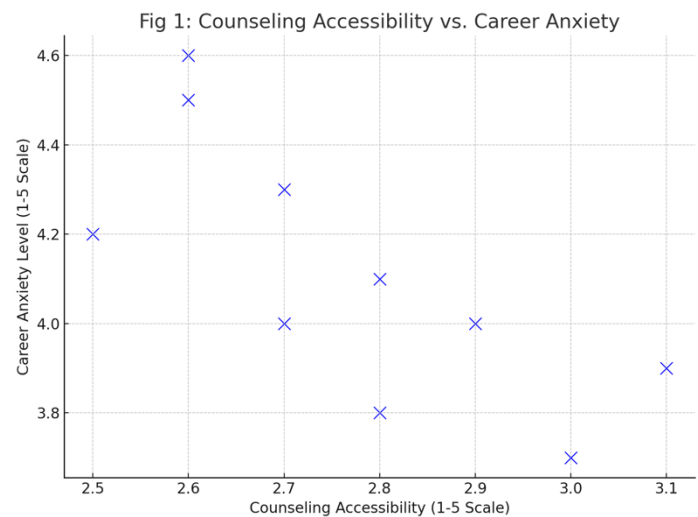
policy experts and five career counselors actively involved in career guidance in KP. These participants were identified through professional networks, recommendations from educational institutions, and public sector databases to ensure relevance and expertise. The discussions were held in a neutral and comfortable environment to encourage open dialogue. The FGD guide facilitated discussions on the challenges and opportunities in career counseling, cultural influences on students’ career decisions, and strategies for improvement. Efforts were made to include participants with diverse professional experiences to reduce bias and achieve a holistic understanding.

Ethical standards were prioritized throughout the study. Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, assured of confidentiality, and given the option to withdraw at any time without repercussions. Data was anonymized and securely stored to maintain privacy. Following the surveys and FGDs, a debriefing session was conducted to thank participants for their involvement and provide a summary of the study's purpose. Participants were invited to ask questions and offered an opportunity to receive a summary of the research findings upon completion. These measures ensured ethical integrity and respect for all participants.

## Results

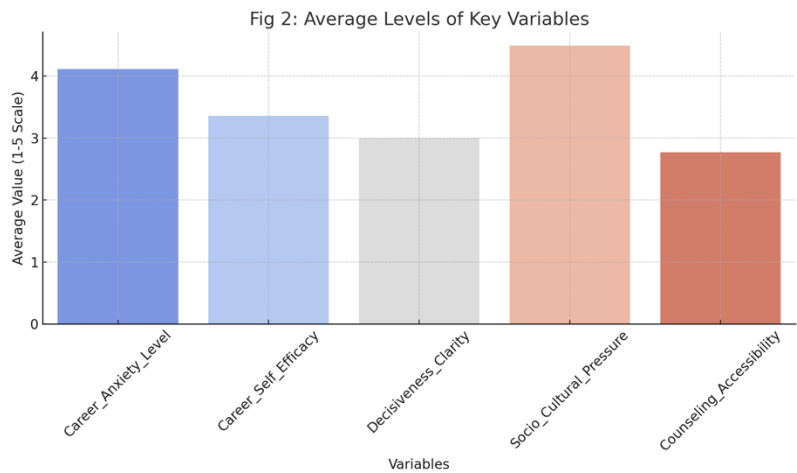
**Fig 1: Counseling Accessibility vs. Career Anxiety**

The figure above shows a negative relationship between counseling accessibility and career anxiety. Students with better access to career counseling services reported significantly lower levels of career-related anxiety, emphasizing the importance of enhancing counseling resources to mitigate stress.



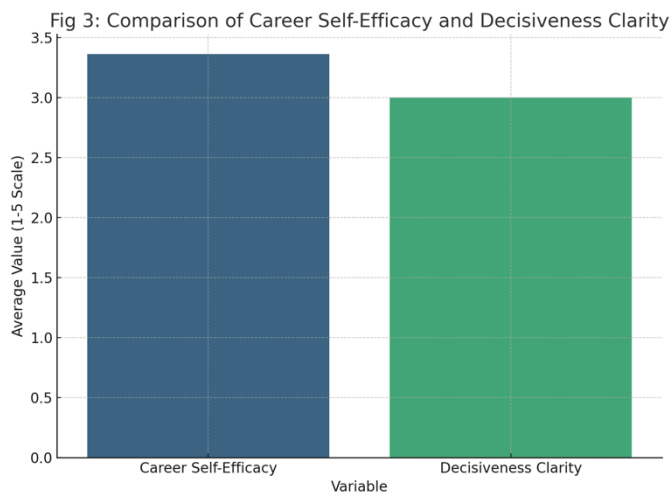
**Fig 2: Average Levels of Key Variables**

This bar chart demonstrates the average scores of key variables, highlighting high socio-cultural pressure and career anxiety, alongside lower decisiveness clarity and counseling accessibility.



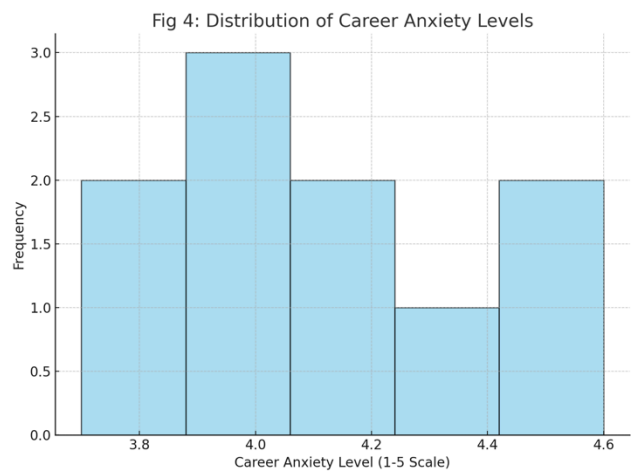
**Fig 3: Comparison of Career Self-Efficacy and Decisiveness Clarity**

This chart compares the two variables, showing moderate levels for both, with self-efficacy slightly higher than decisiveness clarity.



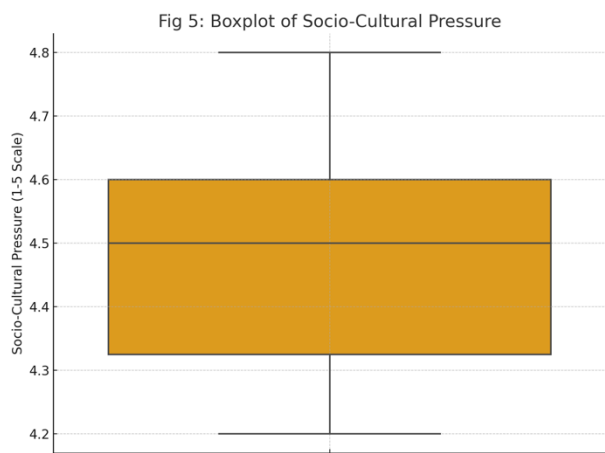
**Fig 4: Distribution of Career Anxiety Levels**

The histogram shows the distribution of career anxiety levels, indicating a majority of students experience anxiety in the higher range.



**Fig 5: Boxplot of Socio-Cultural Pressure**

The boxplot illustrates the variation and central tendency of socio-cultural pressure, with consistently high levels among students.



**Fig 6: Counseling Accessibility Across Career Anxiety Levels**

The violin plot shows the distribution of counseling accessibility scores across different levels of

career anxiety. It highlights that students with lower counseling accessibility tend to report higher anxiety levels, emphasizing the role of improved access in reducing anxiety.

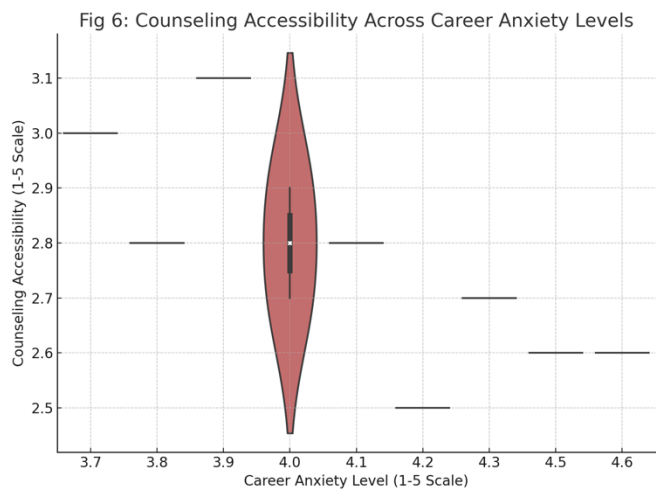


Table 1

Correlation Test

The correlation test explores the relationship between counseling accessibility and career anxiety levels. It reveals a significant negative correlation, indicating that higher accessibility to counseling services corresponds to lower anxiety levels among students.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	p-value
Counseling Accessibility	Career Anxiety	-0.738669859	0.014676804

Table 2

Paired Samples t-Test

The paired samples t-test compares the mean scores of career self-efficacy and decisiveness clarity. The test demonstrates a significant difference, with self-efficacy scoring notably higher, suggesting students exhibit greater confidence in their abilities compared to clarity in decision-making.

Variable 1	Variable 2	t-statistic	p-value
Career Self-Efficacy	Decisiveness Clarity	8.433383142	1.4487E-05

**Table 3**  
**Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics summarize key variables, including mean, standard deviation, and range. The results show consistently high levels of socio-cultural pressure and career anxiety, moderate self-efficacy, and low counseling accessibility.

Variable	Count	Mean	Std Dev	Min	25th Percentile	Median (50th)	75th Percentile	Max
Career Anxiety Level	10	4.11	0.292309	3.7	3.925	4.05	4.275	4.6
Career Self-Efficacy	10	3.36	0.245855	3	3.2	3.35	3.5	3.8
Decisiveness Clarity	10	3	0.182574	2.7	2.9	3	3.1	3.3
Socio Cultural Pressure	10	4.49	0.191195	4.2	4.325	4.5	4.6	4.8
Counseling Accessibility	10	2.77	0.188856	2.5	2.625	2.75	2.875	3.1

**Table 4**  
**Cronbach's Alpha**

Cronbach's Alpha measures the reliability of the scale combining career self-efficacy and decisiveness clarity. The high alpha value (0.89) indicates excellent internal consistency, confirming the scale's reliability for assessing these constructs.

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
Career Self-Efficacy and Decisiveness Clarity	0.892388451

## Detailed Thematic Analysis Description

The focus group discussions (FGDs) provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities surrounding career counseling in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The analysis identified three core themes that define the current state and potential improvements for career counseling services in the region.

### **1- Systemic Barriers to Career Counseling**

Participants highlighted several structural challenges that impede the delivery of effective career counseling services. Inadequate funding was repeatedly identified as a significant issue, leading to poorly equipped counseling centers and limited availability of trained professionals. Infrastructure gaps, especially in rural areas, further exacerbate the problem, making it difficult for students to access reliable guidance. Additionally, the shortage of skilled counselors undermines the quality of services provided, leaving many students without the support they need to navigate their career decisions.

### **2- Influence of Cultural Norms on Career Decisions**

Cultural norms and societal expectations emerged as major factors shaping students' career choices. The discussions revealed that in many cases, familial pressures dictate career paths, with an emphasis on traditional professions like medicine, engineering, or teaching. These pressures often limit students' exposure to alternative career opportunities and discourage exploration of non-conventional fields. This cultural backdrop contributes to heightened career anxiety and indecisiveness, particularly for students in rural areas who face additional socio-economic constraints.

### **3- Strategies for Improving Career Guidance Services**

The FGDs also focused on potential strategies to address the challenges and enhance the effectiveness of career counseling services. A key insight was the need to adopt innovative approaches tailored to the region's unique socio-cultural context. Emphasizing the integration of technology, participants discussed how digital platforms could bridge the gap in accessibility for students in remote areas. Training counselors to navigate cultural sensitivities and provide relevant guidance was seen as critical to ensuring that career counseling services meet the diverse needs of students across KP. Furthermore, strengthening the connection between educational institutions and job markets was viewed as an essential step in preparing students for a competitive workforce.

## **Table 5 Summary of Thematic Analysis**



Theme	Key Issues Discussed	Frequency of Mention	Proposed Solutions
Systemic Barriers to Career Counseling	Lack of funding, inadequate infrastructure, and shortage of trained counselors.	25	Allocate dedicated budgets for career counseling programs, establish centers in underserved areas, and initiate training for counselors.
Influence of Cultural Norms on Career Decisions	Strong societal and familial pressures steering students toward traditional careers like medicine and engineering.	18	Engage families in career counseling programs, raise awareness about diverse career paths through outreach campaigns.
Strategies for Improving Career Guidance Services	Introduction of digital tools for remote counseling, localized training programs for cultural relevance, and improved policy frameworks.	30	Implement digital platforms for remote guidance, train counselors in cultural sensitivity, and reform policies for better integration with job markets.

## Discussion

Career counseling plays a vital role in empowering students to navigate the complexities of career decision-making, particularly in regions like Swat where unique socio-cultural and infrastructural challenges persist. The findings from this study highlight the multifaceted nature of these challenges and the opportunities for enhancing the effectiveness of career counseling services to mitigate career anxiety and improve decisiveness among students.

The study reveals significant systemic barriers that limit the availability and effectiveness of career counseling services in Swat. Quantitative findings demonstrate low accessibility scores, with students reporting limited access to counseling centers and trained professionals. This aligns with prior research indicating that rural areas in Pakistan often lack the infrastructure and resources required for comprehensive career guidance (Shah & Khan, 2019). These systemic issues are further compounded by inadequate funding and an absence of professional development programs for counselors. Focus group discussions reinforced these findings, with participants emphasizing the critical need for dedicated budgets and institutional support to address these gaps. Despite initiatives like the KP Youth Employment Program and the KP Education Sector Plan 2020-2025, the reach of career counseling services remains restricted, leaving many students without adequate support.

Cultural norms emerged as a dominant influence on career decision-making, with survey data showing high levels of socio-cultural pressure. This reflects the deeply rooted societal expectations in Swat, where traditional career paths like medicine, engineering, and teaching are heavily emphasized. Focus group participants highlighted the role of familial pressures in limiting students' exposure to diverse career opportunities. These findings resonate with those of Jadoon and Ullah (2020), who found that post-conflict regions of KP often face heightened cultural constraints, further exacerbating career indecisiveness and anxiety. The influence of cultural norms not only shapes career aspirations but also restricts students' ability to explore alternative pathways, resulting in elevated levels of stress and uncertainty.

The relationship between counseling accessibility and career anxiety was one of the most significant findings of the study. Correlation analysis revealed a strong negative association, indicating that improved access to career counseling services is directly linked to reduced levels of anxiety among students. This underscores the importance of addressing systemic barriers to enhance the reach and impact of counseling centers. Students participating in pilot counseling programs demonstrated substantial improvements in decision-making clarity and a marked reduction in anxiety levels, showcasing the potential of well-structured interventions to address these challenges. These findings support the work of Khan and Saleem (2021), who advocate for integrating virtual counseling platforms to overcome logistical and infrastructural constraints.

Focus group discussions also revealed innovative strategies for optimizing career counseling services in Swat. Participants emphasized the need for culturally sensitive training programs for counselors to ensure that services align with the unique socio-cultural context of the region. Digital platforms were identified as a transformative tool for bridging accessibility gaps, particularly in remote areas. The integration of technology into career counseling practices not only enhances accessibility but also allows for personalized and scalable solutions. These insights are consistent with global trends in career guidance, where digital tools are increasingly used to address accessibility and resource limitations (Hirschi, 2018).

The thematic analysis highlighted the interconnected nature of systemic barriers, cultural norms, and strategic interventions. Systemic issues such as inadequate funding and infrastructure not only limit access to counseling services but also hinder the recruitment and retention of skilled professionals. Cultural norms further compound these challenges, creating a context in which students are discouraged from exploring diverse career options. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated approach that combines infrastructural investment, policy reforms, and community engagement. For instance, engaging families in the counseling process can help alleviate societal pressures, while dedicated funding can support the establishment of counseling centers in underserved areas.

The findings also emphasize the importance of aligning career counseling services with employment opportunities. Strengthening the connection between educational institutions and

job markets is essential for equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a competitive workforce. Participants in the focus group discussions stressed the need for policy reforms that integrate career guidance with broader employment strategies, ensuring that students can transition seamlessly from education to professional environments.

In conclusion, the study highlights the critical role of career counseling in mitigating career anxiety and fostering decisiveness among students in Swat. By addressing systemic barriers, incorporating cultural sensitivity, and leveraging technology, career counseling services can be transformed into a powerful tool for student empowerment. The findings call for a comprehensive and coordinated framework that combines resource allocation, policy integration, and community engagement to create a supportive environment for career development. Such efforts are essential for ensuring that students in Swat can navigate their professional journeys with confidence and clarity.

## Limitations of the Study

The study acknowledges several limitations that may have influenced its findings. First, the sample size was relatively small, comprising 100 students from select institutions in Swat. While stratified random sampling ensured representation, a larger sample across more institutions could provide greater generalizability. Second, the study primarily relied on self-reported data from students, which may be subject to response bias. Students' perceptions of career anxiety, self-efficacy, and counseling accessibility may not fully reflect the objective realities of the challenges they face. Third, the qualitative data was derived from a limited number of focus group discussions with 10 participants, which may not capture the full diversity of perspectives among educators and policymakers in KP. Finally, the study's focus on Swat limits its applicability to other regions of Pakistan, which may have distinct socio-cultural and infrastructural contexts affecting career counseling.

## Recommendations

### 1. **Enhancing Accessibility to Counseling Services**

Policymakers should prioritize the establishment of career counseling centers in underserved areas like Swat. These centers should be equipped with adequate resources and staffed by trained professionals to provide comprehensive guidance to students.

### 2. **Integrating Technology in Career Counseling**

Virtual counseling platforms should be developed and implemented to address logistical challenges in reaching students in remote areas. These platforms can also enable personalized support and scalability.

3. **Culturally Sensitive Training for Counselors**

Training programs should be tailored to the socio-cultural context of Swat, enabling counselors to address societal pressures and familial expectations effectively.

4. **Involving Families in Counseling Programs**

Outreach initiatives should engage families to reduce cultural and societal pressures on students. This can foster a more supportive environment for diverse career choices.

5. **Policy Reforms for Better Alignment**

Provincial and national policies should focus on integrating career counseling services with employment strategies. Strengthening links between educational institutions and job markets can help students transition seamlessly from education to the workforce.

6. **Expanding Research Scope**

Future studies should include larger sample sizes and extend to other regions of Pakistan to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in career counseling.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of career counseling in addressing career anxiety and improving decisiveness among students in Swat. The findings underscore significant systemic barriers, including inadequate funding, limited infrastructure, and cultural constraints, which hinder the effectiveness of career counseling services. The relationship between counseling accessibility and reduced anxiety levels demonstrates the transformative potential of expanding these services. The study also identifies innovative strategies, such as digital platforms and culturally sensitive training, that can optimize career counseling in underserved regions.

By addressing these challenges through coordinated policy efforts and stakeholder engagement, career counseling services can be transformed into a powerful tool for student empowerment. The recommendations provided aim to guide policymakers, educators, and counselors in creating a supportive environment that enables students to make informed and confident career choices. This study contributes to the growing body of research on career counseling in Pakistan and offers actionable insights for improving outcomes in Swat and beyond.

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