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EXPLORING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' MOTIVATION IN POST-GRADUATION CAREER PLANNING

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Abstract:

Career planning is a critical aspect of preparing university students for post-graduation success. This study explores students' motivation to plan their careers and the factors that shape it. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study involved two fifth-semester students participating in internship programs. Data were collected through naturalistic observation and semi-structured interviews to obtain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. The findings indicate that career planning is influenced by both internal and external factors. Participant 1 emphasized family social support and self-evaluation in setting career goals, whereas Participant 2 prioritized technical skill development, personal branding, and the use of technology. Both participants highlighted self-awareness, adaptability, and proactivity as essential to building a successful career. The study concludes that effective career planning requires a balance among self-evaluation, adaptability to change, and institutional support, including career guidance, skills training, and access to technology. Educational institutions therefore play a strategic role in helping students prepare for global challenges in the labor market.

Keywords: Student Motivation, Self-Development, Career Planning

INTRODUCTION

University students' career planning is an important component of readiness for entering the labor market after graduation. During late adolescence, students are in a critical developmental phase in which they begin to formulate long-term life and career goals that are aligned with their aspirations, competencies, and personal values. This process is not limited to choosing a job; it also encompasses holistic self-development. In this context, students encounter a range of internal and external challenges that may influence the seriousness and direction of their career planning.

According to Sari (2018), motivation is a key factor that determines how seriously students develop their career plans. Highly motivated students tend to participate more actively in academic and extracurricular activities that support their career goals. Student motivation is shaped by both internal and external factors. Internal factors, including interests, talents, personal values, and individual aspirations, encourage students to pursue careers that correspond to their potential. External factors, such as social support, family, and education, contribute to the formation of their goals and motivation. Together, these factors shape students' frameworks for determining career objectives and strategies for achieving them. Strong motivation enables students to remain focused and resilient when facing obstacles during the career-planning process. Winkel and Hastuti (2004) further emphasized that the combination of internal and external factors plays an important role in determining students' readiness for employment. Career planning is not merely about securing a job after graduation; it also involves developing skills, adapting to changing circumstances, and maintaining the capacity for lifelong learning. In the era of globalization and Industry 4.0, adaptability has become a key requirement for success in a dynamic and competitive labor market.



Career planning is influenced by career development, which comprises a series of changes across the stages of life (Adiputra, 2015). This development is driven by self-understanding, values, attitudes, perspectives, abilities, and expectations in determining career direction. A career is not limited to a job or position; it also reflects achievement across the various roles an individual performs and therefore contributes to overall career success. Career planning allows individuals to take control of their own career direction and proactively build the professional future they desire. Ozora et al. (2016) found that students who begin planning their careers early through self-assessment, career exploration, goal setting and planning, skill development, and employment-information seeking are better prepared to compete in the labor market. These five stages constitute the principal components of career planning and are considered capable of increasing students' prospects for career success (Ozora et al., 2016).

However, evidence indicates that many university graduates in Indonesia are not fully prepared for the challenges of employment. As reported by Detikcom, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology stated that 13.33% of university graduates remained unemployed in 2023. Statistics Indonesia recorded 173,846 unemployed diploma graduates and 871,860 unemployed university graduates as of February 2024. These figures reflect a substantial challenge in ensuring that higher-education graduates possess competencies and readiness that correspond to labor-market requirements. A mismatch between graduate competencies and industry needs, insufficient practical experience, and limited access to career information are among the principal causes of high unemployment among university graduates.

In addition, students' career planning is frequently affected by limited support from educational institutions in helping them identify their potential and formulate effective career strategies. Educational institutions nevertheless play a crucial role in guiding students to develop competencies relevant to labor-market needs. Initiatives such as soft-skills training, exposure to industry knowledge, internship programs, and structured career counseling can significantly improve students' career readiness.

This study aims to explore university students' motivation in planning their careers, including the factors that influence such motivation. It also seeks to provide relevant insights for educational institutions in designing programs and policies that support students' career readiness more comprehensively. By understanding the dynamics of student motivation, this study is expected to contribute to students' preparation for labor-market challenges while offering recommendations to educational institutions for improving the quality of their career services.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore and understand participants' experiences of career planning. A phenomenological design interprets how participants assign meaning to each of their experiences (Kahija, 2017). The participants were two fifth-semester students who were undertaking internship programs. Their internship experiences provided direct exposure to the workplace, enabling them to gain a better understanding of career planning and reflect on the requirements of post-graduation life. Data were collected through observation and interviews. Naturalistic observation was conducted without modifying the observed situations; the researchers recorded events as they occurred spontaneously. Semi-structured interviews using open-ended and flexible questions allowed participants to describe their experiences in detail. The interviews were recorded electronically, accompanied by notes on non-



verbal information such as facial expressions, behavior, tone of voice, and the surrounding atmosphere.

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The first stage involved transcribing the interviews to facilitate analysis and interpretation. The transcripts were then read repeatedly to identify initial patterns and emerging elements in the data. Next, initial notes, commonly referred to as exploratory comments, were developed to highlight important aspects of the collected data. These comments consisted of the researchers' interpretative statements regarding participant accounts considered significant. After the exploratory commenting stage, emergent themes were generated by analyzing phrases, keywords, and central concepts in the participants' statements. Emergent themes were developed manually through systematic documentation to ensure that each element of the data was represented. The emergent themes were subsequently organized into superordinate themes that reflected the participants' core experiences. Relationships among themes were evaluated, and the groupings were adjusted according to the meanings expressed by the participants. The final stage involved interpreting the themes by referring to the participants' perspectives and relevant theoretical frameworks.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study involved two participants. Participant 1 was a fifth-semester Psychology student at a university in Surabaya and was originally from Sidoarjo. At the time of the study, the participant was undertaking an internship at the Office of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, Population, and Family Planning as a PUSPAGA facilitator. The interview with Participant 1 was conducted on November 22, 2024. Participant 2 was a fifth-semester Digital Business student at a university in Surabaya and was originally from Tulungagung Regency. At the time of the study, the participant was taking part in an Independent Entrepreneurship (Wirausaha Merdeka) internship program focused on micro, small, and medium enterprises. The interview with Participant 2 was conducted on November 28, 2024.

The observation and interview findings revealed differences in the two participants' career-planning priorities. Participant 1 emphasized the importance of social support from family and peers. The family provided motivation by allowing the participant to choose a career aligned with personal interests and talents, whereas peers encouraged continued development through healthy competition. Although Participant 1 experienced difficulty identifying personal interests and talents, the participant continued to engage in self-reflection. Future uncertainty and limited career information also constituted barriers to the participant's career-planning process. In contrast, Participant 2 focused more strongly on technical skill development and the use of technology in career planning. The participant actively developed a portfolio, personal branding, and competencies through the internship program and used technology, including artificial intelligence (AI), to enhance competitiveness in the digital era.

Table 1. Participant 1

Identity	Career Planning	Factors Influencing Career Planning
• Name: N.I. • Occupation: University student	• Emphasized the importance of career planning to prepare for employment and establish a clear direction.	• External factors, including family and peer support. • Internal factors, particularly self-evaluation.

Identity	Career Planning	Factors Influencing Career Planning
• Origin: Sidoarjo	• Developed personal branding through LinkedIn, attended career-planning seminars, and improved technical skills. • Managed concerns about future uncertainty and labor-market competition calmly and learned from experience. • Evaluated whether the internship experience was relevant to career goals.	

Table 2. Participant 2

Identity	Career Planning	Factors Influencing Career Planning
• Name: A.F.A. • Occupation: University student • Origin: Tulungagung	• Prepared a portfolio and curriculum vitae to improve employment prospects. • Used technology, including artificial intelligence (AI), to increase competitive value. • Identified financial independence as a major motivation for career planning. • Built personal branding through business and financial skills and participation in the Wirausaha Merdeka program. • Responded to challenges by adapting to digital change. • Strengthened the portfolio through AI and information-technology skills as part of self-evaluation.	• Internal factors, particularly skill development. • External factors, including university support.

Participant 1: Focus on Social Support and Self-Evaluation. Participant 1 demonstrated that social support from family and peers, together with self-evaluation, played an important role in career-planning readiness. The principal themes included the importance of career planning from the beginning of university study, strategies for managing career-related concerns, challenges arising from future uncertainty, and self-evaluation.

"Alhamdulillah, my family is very supportive. They allow me to choose anything according to my interests. Perhaps because they believe that being overly restrictive is not good, my family gives me greater freedom to choose and pursue what I want."

This finding is consistent with Dillard's theory (1985, as cited in Faseh & Khusumadewi, 2019), which identifies self-awareness and the environment as core components of career development. Family support that is not excessively restrictive gives individuals the freedom to explore different alternatives and therefore enables them to make career decisions more independently. Peers also serve as important sources of motivation. Participant 1 stated:

"Peers often become a source of motivation because, when we see them performing better, we are encouraged to catch up with them or even become better than they are."

This account supports Festinger's social comparison theory (1954, as cited in Myers & Twenge, 2021), which proposes that individuals tend to compare themselves with others as a means of evaluating their own abilities and achievements. In this context, comparison with peers can strengthen the motivation to pursue higher career goals.



Participant 1 nevertheless encountered challenges, including limited access to career information and anxiety regarding an uncertain future. Self-evaluation therefore became a crucial aspect of the planning process:

"I sometimes feel confused about identifying my own interests and potential, which makes it difficult to determine my career goals."

This statement highlights the need for more comprehensive self-evaluation. According to Super's career development theory (Winkel & Hastuti, 2012), individuals with limited self-awareness experience greater difficulty in planning their careers effectively. Super emphasized that career development depends on an individual's ability to recognize and evaluate personal potential and to adjust goals in response to changes in life circumstances and interests.

Participant 2: Skill Development, Personal Branding, and Technology. In contrast to Participant 1, Participant 2 focused more strongly on technical skill development, personal branding, and the use of technology, including AI, to improve professional competitiveness. Participant 2 demonstrated considerable initiative in developing a portfolio, building personal branding, and independently seeking opportunities. One strategic step was described as follows:

"I have developed personal branding based on my knowledge of cryptocurrency markets, financial markets, and business strategy. I also joined the Wirausaha Merdeka program to learn how to build a business from zero capital."

Participant 2 also used technology to adapt to the digital era:

"People who use AI will have greater value and be considered more valuable than those who do not use AI."

This finding supports Spurk et al. (2015), who found that optimism, networking, and purposeful career planning can improve subjective career success. University support through programs such as Certified Independent Study and Internship (MSIB) and access to technology also served as enabling factors:

"The MSIB program is extremely helpful because it allows us to strengthen the foundation of our knowledge and broaden our understanding before entering the labor market."

Differences Between Participant 1 and Participant 2. Overall, both participants demonstrated a balance between internal and external influences on career-planning readiness, although their priorities differed. Participant 1 relied more strongly on social support and self-evaluation, whereas Participant 2 demonstrated greater emphasis on technical skill development and personal branding through the use of technology. These differences confirm the importance of approaches tailored to individual needs, whether through strengthened self-evaluation or technology-based training.

The findings have implications for several stakeholders. In higher education, universities need to provide more holistic career-support programs, including technology-based guidance and personal-branding training, to help students develop professional competitiveness. For students, the findings emphasize the importance of initiative and self-awareness in managing career concerns through skill development, self-evaluation, and the use of technology. Educational institutions, including Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), should also provide career counselors who can help learners understand their potential, access career information, and plan educational and occupational pathways that correspond to their abilities and interests.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that university students' career planning is influenced by a combination of internal factors, such as self-evaluation and skill development, and external factors, including social support and access to technology. Participant 1 emphasized the role of family and peer



support in strengthening motivation, whereas Participant 2 highlighted the importance of technological competence and personal branding in improving competitiveness in the labor market. Successful career planning requires a balance between personal reflection and the ability to adapt to change. Educational institutions play an important role in providing career guidance, skills training, and technology-enabled support to prepare students for global labor-market challenges.

Students should therefore actively explore their interests, potential, and career opportunities through internships, training, and career consultation. Educational institutions are also encouraged to expand access to career guidance integrated with current technological developments, including digital platforms and career-data analytics. In addition, emotional and material support from families is needed to motivate students to plan their careers effectively. Future research should involve a larger sample and consider the diversity of students' backgrounds in order to obtain more comprehensive insights.

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