

Career development for university students: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Within the diverse worldwide population of university students and graduates, those who experienced global lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to work might encounter particular challenges in their career development and job-seeking issues. These challenges include psychological impacts, career uncertainty, changes in academic and social life, and a lack of job opportunities due to the disruption of the labour market. This article discusses these career challenges and focuses on two primary theoretical strategies to help students explore available resources, benefit from unplanned events, and construct and enact meaningful career narratives. The Happenstance Learning Theory and Narrative Career Counselling approach are applied to helping clients with their career development challenges. These theories address the challenges faced by university students who encountered the unplanned event of the pandemic, especially around career anxiety and uncertainty.

Key words: career development, university students and graduates, happenstance learning theory, narrative career theory, COVID-19

Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a newly discovered COVID-19 virus a global pandemic, as it had spread to over 100 countries and continued to develop (Ghebreyesus, 2020; World Health Organization, 2022). In order to prevent infection and slow the transmission of this epidemic, many countries' public health agencies required people to keep social distance (i.e., stay 6 feet away from others), wear a mask in public areas, and avoid unnecessary travel (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2021). At the same time, WHO (2022) and the CDC (2021) recommended the necessity of a lockdown as one of the measures to prevent COVID-19 virus transmissions. People in numerous regions, such as India (Gopal et al., 2021), China (Clark et al., 2021), Turkey (Manuoğlu & Güngör, 2023), Serbia (Stevanović et al., 2021), Greece (Salta et al., 2022), Italy (Colombo et al., 2022), Canada (Conrad et al., 2022), and the United States (Zheng et al., 2021), shifted their academic and social activities online.

The pandemic directly disrupted students' lives, leading to the closure of schools and universities and enforcing a sudden shift to online learning and remote work from home. Among the influence of the pandemic and the lockdown policy, university students and graduates were two of the most vulnerable groups in the job market as they were facing psychological distress and the uncertain future, challenges of the school-to-work transition, and the lack of job opportunities due to the disruption of the labour market (Kwok, 2018; Mahmud et al., 2021; Svabova et al., 2020). Usually, students approaching or after their graduation would inevitably encounter the transition from school to work. However, the pandemic disrupted the job market, creating employment uncertainties and reducing high-quality recruitment positions, particularly in tourism, aviation, hospitality, and small enterprises (Wang & Wang, 2024). While emerging industries like information technology, logistics, online education, telemedicine, and e-commerce expanded, their recruitment demand did not fully offset losses in traditional sectors (International Labour Organization, 2024; Wang & Wang, 2024). Recovery has been uneven, with low- and middle-income countries lagging due to limited fiscal resources and weaker social protection systems (International Labour Organization, 2024). As such, students seeking their first formal job or training opportunities could be disproportionately affected by the different economic realities post-pandemic (Svabova et al., 2020). It is essential to focus on recent and soon-to-be graduates and facilitate their access to job opportunities and help empower them to face employment challenges.

This article will discuss several main challenges faced by university students and graduates regarding career development due to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, including psychological distress (e.g., depression, anxiety, stress, self-esteem) and career uncertainty, changes in academic and social life, and the disruption of the labour market and individual work opportunities in the following sections. Subsequently, the current article will apply two career development concepts of Krumboltz's (2009, 2011) Happenstance Learning Theory and Cochran's (1997) Narrative Career Theory to understand the mentioned challenges and explore related interventions to facilitate students in dealing with these challenges with sufficient research support.

Career challenges

Psychological impacts and uncertainty in future career

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented influence not only on individuals' daily lives, such as wearing a mask in public, living in isolation, losing jobs, and the risk of death from infection, but also created a negative impact on people's psychological wellbeing, including anxiety, depression, and fear (American Psychological Association, 2020; Mahmud et al., 2021). The pandemic halted people's lives and challenged economic growth as many individuals and industries tried to survive this unusual event (Bakker & Wagner, 2020). Among these multi-layered challenges, it was not uncommon that university students and graduates who were facing the uncertainty of their future and the fear or worry of not getting a job would be the vulnerable group for encountering psychological distress or related mental health challenges (Mahmud et al., 2021).

A study conducted by Cao and colleagues (2020) explored university students' psychological pressure in a medical college in China during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that economic effects, the change in daily life routine, and delays in academic activities were positively correlated with anxiety symptoms. Moreover, having friends or relatives infected with COVID-19 was a risk factor leading to increased anxiety in college students (Cao et al., 2020). Consistent with Cao et al.'s (2020) study, Liu et al. (2020) further supported that university students' anxiety and depression levels increased significantly during the epidemic of COVID-19 and were significantly higher than the national norm level.

Likewise, Mahmud and colleagues (2021) explored the relationship between the 'Fear of COVID-19' and career anxiety among university students who were unemployed and anticipated to join the job market within a short time. The symptoms and severity of the COVID-19 virus resulted in people's fear, fueled by social media and other forms of misinformation, the lack of control over rumours, and misleading resources that increased people's fear of COVID-19 (Tsang et al., 2021; Weir, 2020). Furthermore, economic growth has been negatively influenced, resulting in widespread layoffs and difficulties in securing new employment, along with the quarantine policy that prevented people from working in the office. These factors have contributed to the future workforce's career anxiety (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Gopinath, 2020; Pappas, 2020; World Health Organization, 2022). In addition, depression, which included insomnia symptoms, feeling hopeless and worthless, and recurrent thoughts of death, was one of the major psychological impacts of COVID-19 (American Psychological Association, 2020). Studies found that the 'Fear of COVID-19', intolerance of uncertainty, and depression significantly impacted career anxiety among university students who would face the labour market soon (Mahmud et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). Furthermore, researchers revealed that depression derived from the 'Fear of COVID-19' worked as a mediator between the 'Fear of COVID-19' and career anxiety in future workforces and that the anxiety and depression might have a long-term negative influence on individuals' wellbeing (Mahmud et al., 2021).

Regarding the implementation of the lockdown, several negative influences had resulted from this method to prevent the transmission of the virus. Brooks and colleagues (2020) reviewed the psychological impact of quarantine using electronic databases. The review found that most studies showed negative psychological consequences of quarantine on

individuals, including post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion and anger from a lack of clear information from public health authorities and unclear purpose of quarantine, frustration, boredom, and a sense of isolation due to the loss of regular daily routine and social interaction (Brooks et al., 2020). Even before the presence of the pandemic, Kwok (2018) found that university students were facing critical challenges associated with the uncertainty of their future careers, including the unpredictability of the external environment, lack of sufficient executive function among emerging adults, and the negative impact of uncertainty on their psychological wellbeing. Therefore, under the lasting impacts of the pandemic, the pandemic might have worsened university students' and recent graduates' psychological wellbeing.

Changes in academic and social lives

By April 2020, schools in over 190 countries were temporarily closed down, marking the beginning of an online, digital learning era (Daniela & Visvizi, 2022; Reuge et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2023). A study conducted in Ghana showed several critical challenges for students who had to switch their study format to online study (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020). These challenges included low efficiency in studying at home, lack of supervision from others that leads to lower performance, inability to learn effectively by individuals, lack of sufficient support to access the internet, and insufficient knowledge of technical knowledge in the e-learning platform (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020). Similarly, Sava (2020) reported critical challenges of online learning during the pandemic, including a lack of personalized support for students with special learning needs, actual human interaction, monitoring of the learning study process, and immediate feedback.

Concerning the change in social life, De Vos (2020) showed that the implementation of social distancing reduced individuals' chance of social interaction with one another. Moreover, avoiding social gatherings reduced the frequency and types of outdoor activities, such as reducing travel demand or travelling by public transport, no gathering or parties with friends, and no travelling or remaining trapped abroad (De Vos, 2020; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). In addition, the negative influence of limited social contact might have resulted in social isolation and reduced physical activity (De Vos, 2020; Radwan et al., 2021), which could be detrimental to both psychological and physical health. Although there was an increased frequency of online entertainment, including watching TV shows, reading, finishing academic works or writing, and playing computer games, individuals still found their lives more isolated than before (Pan, 2020). The disruption of academic or social lives could be a barrier for university students and graduates to maintain their everyday lives and prepare for their career planning.

Unemployment and the disruption of the labour market

The COVID-19 pandemic and shutdown measures disrupted business activities worldwide, resulting in significant personnel changes, including workforce reductions and rising unemployment rates (Svabova et al., 2020). In Slovakia, the registered unemployment rate began to rise sharply in March 2020 due to lockdown measures, with the highest number of new job seekers recorded in April 2020 (Svabova et al., 2020). The majority of industries, such as food services and administrative and support service industries, were heavily affected by a reduced employment capacity (Svabova et al., 2020). Before the pandemic, youth unemployment was already a significant issue across the European Union, with some countries like Greece and Spain reporting particularly high rates (Lambovska et

al., 2021). The implementation of pandemic-related restrictions led to further increases in youth unemployment, disproportionately affecting young workers under the age of twenty-five (Lambovska et al., 2021). Even countries with historically low youth unemployment (e.g., the Netherlands and the Czech Republic) experienced notable spikes (Lambovska et al., 2021). Globally, surveys conducted in 2020 revealed that a significant proportion of respondents worldwide felt their jobs or businesses were threatened by the pandemic, with many reporting high levels of financial concern (Elflein, 2021; Hirschmann, 2021). These findings highlight the pandemic's far-reaching consequences on job security and economic stability across diverse regions, deteriorating not only business operations and development but also individual job confidence and security, especially challenging for new workforces seeking their first jobs.

Since the peak of the pandemic in 2020, the labour market has shown signs of recovery. According to the most recent report published by the International Labour Organization (2025), global employment growth remained steady, keeping the unemployment rate stable at 5%. However, this growth has been insufficient to address persistent decent work deficits, particularly for young people, whose unemployment rate remains high at 12.6% (International Labour Organization, 2025). Young workers remained overrepresented among the unemployed and discouraged workers, with the rate of young people not in education, employment, or training rising above historical averages, particularly among young men in low-income countries (International Labour Organization, 2025). Even among new workforces holding formal or informal employment, their real wages have yet to recover from pandemic losses, and some of them faced limited opportunities for career advancement, precarious job conditions, poor working conditions, and inadequate social protections due to imbalanced labour market power (International Labour Organization, 2025). Furthermore, gender gaps and disparities remained salient, with young women disproportionately represented in informal and low-paying work, especially in low-income countries (International Labour Organization, 2025). The International Labour Organization (2025) has called for targeted policies and greater investments in education, skills development, and quality training programs to support new workforces in securing decent employment.

Aside from psychological distress and career uncertainty, academic and social changes, and unemployment and disruption of the labour market, students might encounter additional difficulties due to the increasingly blurred boundary between family and work, work loss and trauma, and inequality in the workplace (Autin et al., 2020; Linnekaste, 2021). Unfortunately, disparities in race, gender, social class, and occupation gave rise to inequality so that some workforce populations were disproportionately and more severely impacted by the pandemic, such as workers of colour, women, immigrants, and persons with disabilities (Cubrich et al., 2022; Dang & Nguyen, 2021; Mishra & Cousik, 2021; Perugini & Vladislavljević, 2021). On top of all the challenges faced by the workforce and its influence on economic development, there were positive sides of the pandemic, such as paying more attention to a positive lifestyle (e.g., doing more exercise and choosing a more healthy diet), taking care of one's health psychologically and physically and of one's friends or relatives, saving travel time due to working from home, exploring the meaning of work, and actively searching for more job opportunities (Akkermans et al., 2020; Di Renzo et al., 2020; Elmer et al., 2020; Khaira & Sari, 2022; Parola, 2020).

This article will address the challenges faced by university students by applying the Happenstance Learning Theory (HLT) and the Narrative Career Counselling approach

(NCC). These career development theories are particularly relevant in the context of the post-pandemic job market, as they offer unique perspectives for navigating unplanned events and constructing meaningful career narratives. HLT emphasizes the importance of embracing uncertainty and leveraging unplanned events as opportunities, making it highly applicable to the unpredictable job market and disrupted career trajectories caused by the pandemic (Krumboltz, 2009). NCC provides a framework for students to reframe their experiences, construct coherent career identities, and find meaning in their career journeys (Cochran, 2011). Together, these theories offer complementary approaches with HLT equipping students with an open mindset and skills to adapt to chance events and NCC helping them make sense of their experiences and envision future possibilities.

Career counselling interventions for university students in the post-pandemic world

In helping university students deal with their career challenges and needs in a job market still recovering from the impact of the pandemic, career development approaches supported by theoretical research would be advisable. The following section proposes using Krumboltz's (2009) Happenstance Learning Theory and Cochran's (1997) Narrative Career Counselling approach to support university students' current challenges under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding transforming happenstance as an opportunity and seeking the meaning of work. The goals of these career counselling interventions aim to improve university students' vocational wellbeing and self-efficacy to benefit from unplanned events in their lives (Krumboltz, 2009, 2011; Cochran, 1997). Among the major career psychology theories, Krumboltz's (2009) Happenstance Learning Theory and Cochran's (1997, 2011) Narrative Career Counselling approach provide strong contextual relevance and address unique challenges in these unprecedented times. HLT is uniquely positioned to help individuals address issues that are outside their control, such as economic downturns, labour market disruptions, and unplanned career setbacks (Krumboltz, 2009). For students and graduates grappling with the economic and psychological aftermath of the pandemic, HLT provides a situation-sensitive and non-judgemental perspective to help university students and graduates create a distance between themselves and unplanned events, reflect on their career challenges, and develop alternative coping strategies for their job-seeking difficulties (Krumboltz et al., 2013). Similarly, NCC's dual purpose of engaging individuals in crafting a larger story of their career life and strengthening their sense of agency closely aligns with students' need to rekindle hope and make sense of their experiences, values, and career identities through narrative construction in the face of uncertainty (Cochran, 2011; Kaliris & Issari, 2022; Maree, 2021, 2022). University students with relatively limited real-life work experience, internships, or training opportunities may be especially vulnerable to economic disruptions (Blokker et al., 2023). Career counselling interventions informed by these career theories, coupled with their emphasis on openness to unplanned events and strength-oriented perspectives, can help students explore opportunities based on their unique circumstances and adapt to evolving demands.

Helping with Krumboltz's Happenstance Learning Theory

Krumboltz's Happenstance Learning Theory (HLT) is one of the advisable methods to work with individuals who encounter unplanned events every day in the rapidly changing world (Krumboltz, 2009, 2011). This theory evolves from the Social Learning Theory (Krumboltz

et al., 1976) and attempts to explain why people behave the way they do, deriving from genetic influences, environmental conditions and events, and different types of learning experiences (Krumboltz, 2009). HLT claims that since unplanned events are unavoidable and constant in life, people need to learn to accept these happenstances and be alert and sensitive to them to recognize potential opportunities. As such, the HLT is a suitable choice for career counsellors to work when addressing university students' influence of the unplanned event of the COVID-19 pandemic in their personal and vocational lives. Krumboltz (2009) emphasizes four fundamental propositions in the HLT: (1) Helping clients learn to take action to achieve more satisfying career and personal lives, rather than making a single career decision. (2) Assessment should stimulate learning rather than matching personal characteristics with occupational characteristics. (3) Clients could learn to engage in exploratory actions to benefit from unexpected events. (4) Clients' accomplishments outside of the counselling sessions indicate the success of counselling. This theory is an action-oriented approach that aims to help clients engage in self-discovery, be open-minded and alert to potential opportunities, and benefit from unplanned events (Krumboltz, 2009, 2011).

HLT typically starts with setting clear expectations about the counseling process (Krumboltz et al., 2013). For students and graduates who feel overwhelmed by the uncertainty of the post-pandemic job market, the counsellor may emphasize that counselling goals are exploring actions and creating opportunities rather than finding a single 'perfect' job. By doing so, counsellors can help students adopt a proactive mindset, reduce anxiety, and foster a sense of control, thereby addressing the psychological impacts and uncertainty they have felt. For students facing unemployment and labour market disruptions, emphasizing action over rigid planning aligns with the need to adapt to a rapidly changing environment. By framing uncertainty as a normal part of career development, counsellors can help students feel more prepared to navigate the challenges ahead.

Students and graduates may feel discouraged by setbacks caused by the pandemic, such as internship rejections or gaps in their resumes. Highlighting past successes helps them reframe their experiences, build confidence, and recognize their strengths and resilience, countering feelings of self-doubt commonly experienced (Krumboltz et al., 2013; Mahmud et al., 2021). For students who experienced disruptions in their academic and social lives, focusing on achievements since the pandemic, such as adapting to online learning or managing remote collaborations, can demonstrate their readiness for the workforce (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020). By drawing on these experiences, students can more objectively make sense of their experiences and articulate their skills and accomplishments to potential employers.

Counsellors need to be mindful that although unplanned events are inevitable in individuals' lives, each person may have a different perspective of what is considered a chance. To this end, Ulas-Kilic and colleagues (2020) conducted a study in Turkey to understand university students' perception of chance events and how they viewed the influence of these events in their careers. Results revealed that there were three themes from university students' perceived chance events: social factors (e.g., family impacts from the immediate environment), individual factors (e.g., test anxiety), and political or legal factors (e.g., educational policies). 67% of students indicated numerous unplanned events in their career development, while 33% of them did not recognize any chance events in their lives, although Turkey's legal and educational policies have changed frequently. Participants who

did not recognize chance events in their lives might be less conscious about the unplanned events and lose the potential opportunities to learn from these events. Thus, career counsellors could assist these students to become more conscious and sensitive to chance events in their lives to benefit from these events. In addition, researchers suggested that most of the chance events perceived by university students in Turkey were controllable factors, which indicated that students might consider themselves passive when making career decisions (Ulas-Kilic et al., 2020). Researchers recommended that actions aiming to improve students' open-mindedness, self-efficacy, and competencies to transform unplanned events into opportunities should be prioritized (Ulas-Kilic et al., 2020). Similarly, research has shown that remaining optimistic, being productive, and re-evaluating new opportunities despite facing career uncertainty were particularly important during the pandemic (Mouratidou & Grabarski, 2022). In HLT, Krumboltz (2009) introduced three steps to prepare individuals to capitalize on unplanned events: (1) before the unplanned events, clients should take actions that position them to experience the unplanned events, (2) during these events, clients should remain alerted and sensitive to recognize potential opportunities, (3) after the events, clients should initiate actions that enable them to benefit from the events. With the help of this procedure, counsellors could assist students to increase their consciousness about unplanned events while improving their career competencies to benefit from future chance events before, during, and after the events occur.

Fear of failure, lack of confidence, or uncertainty about skills can prevent students from taking action toward their career goals (Krumboltz et al., 2013). Counselors can help students identify and challenge negative thoughts while breaking down goals into small, manageable steps and overcoming blocks to actions (Krumboltz et al., 2013). The attitudes of being acceptable, open-minded, curious, and exploratory are crucial elements for the success of students' transition to work. Peila-Shuster (2016) illustrated how HLT, integrated with other theoretical approaches (i.e., Life Design Counseling, Career Construction Theory, and Hope Theory), could be a helpful resource that provides potential avenues for career counsellors to support students in higher education in their transitions from the school to professional lives. In this integrated theoretical approach, HLT played a role in facilitating career counsellors to help students learn to accept unplanned events, reframe students' indecision to open-mindedness, improve career curiosity, and explore the potential opportunities from unplanned events actively (Peila-Shuster, 2016). Additionally, HLT provides career counsellors with a direction to help students develop action plans and encourage them to implement their plans in real life to benefit from the happenstance and further build up their competencies of career confidence (Peila-Shuster, 2016). Peila-Shuster's (2016) study showed the advantages of HLT in helping students prepare and benefit from unplanned events and its effectiveness as a complementary tool.

Reyes (2019) studied what skills and strategies Latina women used that contributed to their career success in higher executive roles in higher education institutions. The purpose of the study was to use these participants' successful experiences as a reference to develop a career development program to help other Latinas and minorities improve their competencies in future career goals. The study comprehended and analyzed participants' experiences through the lens of HLT and found that these women used all the five skills that were central to HLT during their career paths, which were curiosity, persistence, optimism, risk-taking, and flexibility (Reyes, 2019). Among these skills, flexibility (i.e., adapting to the environment by changing their attitudes and circumstances) and risk-

taking (i.e., taking actions in the face of uncertain outcomes) were more prevalent than others from participants' successful experiences (Reyes, 2019). Based on the potential contributions of these career skills to these participants' career success, it is likely that improving HLT career skills, especially flexibility and risk-taking skills, may help university students overcome their career uncertainty, which could be beneficial for their mental health and further career development. Based on the findings, the author recommended schools and higher education institutions include workgroups, mentorships, and career coaching on campus to facilitate students in developing career skills and empower them to become more competent in the career marketplace (Reyes, 2019). These recommendations could apply to university students who may encounter career-related challenges before, during, and after unplanned events to empower them and improve their competencies for their career development.

Incorporating narrative career counselling in helping

The Narrative Career Counselling (NCC) approach could work as a great main or supplementary tool in career counselling as it helps clients construct and enact meaningful career narratives, improve their agency, and establish a career identity (Cochran, 1997, 2011). NCC is grounded in the idea that individuals construct their identities and career paths through the stories they tell about themselves. These stories are shaped by cultural, relational, and societal contexts, and they can be reshaped through NCC practices that emphasize externalizing problems, re-authoring narratives, and creating new meanings (Abkhezr, 2024).

Narrative career counselling starts with identifying a career challenge. To better understand university graduates' career planning in their school-to-work transition under the lasting influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Parola (2020) conducted a study using the narrative approach in Italy as a starting point to understand students' narratives. The study showed that these young adults tended to be negatively influenced by the quarantine as they felt fear, uncertain, and anxious about their future career path and had no idea where and how to apply their strengths. One key NCC practice is externalizing conversations that allow students to separate themselves from these struggles and revise their relationship with negative emotions (Abkhezr, 2024). By shifting the language from 'I don't know whether I can secure a job in this era' to 'When anxiety visits, it highlights the difficulties of getting an above-standard position post-pandemic,' students may view job insecurity as an external force rather than an inherent part of their career identity, empowering them to take proactive steps (e.g., practicing interview skills) and building confidence in themselves.

Savickas (2011) summarized three elements in a narrative approach: '(1) constructing career through small stories; (2) deconstructing and reconstructing the small stories into a large story, and (3) co-constructing intention and action to begin the next episode in that large story' (p. 256). This process can be facilitated using career writing, storytelling, and re-authoring conversations. Lengelle and colleagues (2014) found that career writing could help students in higher education find a career identity that could provide a sense of meaning and direction in career development. Career writing is one of the NCC approaches that help individuals construct their career identity by exploring their life themes and challenges. The study introduced three types of writing in the narrative

approach: creative, expressive, and reflective writing. Creative writing refers to writing a fictional part of self that aims to gain self-insight; expressive writing encourages clients to explore their deepest feelings and emotions regarding an adverse event; whereas reflective writing helps clients perceive a scenario from various perspectives (Lengelle et al., 2014). Lengelle and colleagues (2014) found a negative association between career writing and negative emotions, including anxiety, anger, and sadness, indicating that career writing might help promote students' wellbeing or prevent psychological impacts during their career development. When facilitating storytelling during narrative career counselling, it is imperative for counsellors to value clients' roles as active agents in telling their stories. Counsellors may use story-crafting questions as facilitators while deeply and curiously listening to clients and finding clues to explore related stories in a culturally sensitive and respectful relationship (McMahon & Watson, 2012). During the process of storytelling, counsellors could seek to understand clients' positive and negative experiences and prepare clients to re-author their narratives in more adaptive ways to benefit their career development (Cochran, 1997). When working with university students who were negatively influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of mental health, life changes, and career uncertainty, counsellors who adopted narrative career counselling could have the chance to understand students' backgrounds, personal experiences, values, and behaviour patterns and collaborate with students to reframe their narrative in alternative and beneficial ways (Cochran, 1997). Having sufficient knowledge of students' past experiences equips counsellors to guide re-authoring conversations, where students explore alternative narratives and reclaim their sense of agency (Mate et al., 2023). The re-authoring process centers on the landscape of action, focusing on the practical and concrete steps students can take to move toward their career goals and increase readiness, and the landscape of identity, exploring the values, meanings, and personal qualities that underpin these actions (Abkhezr, 2024; Mate et al., 2023). For university students navigating the post-pandemic job market, re-authoring conversations can help them reframe their experiences of uncertainty, rejection, or self-doubt into narratives that highlight their strengths, values, and aspirations.

Group counseling and workshops rooted in NCC provide opportunities for students to share their experiences, learn from others, and co-create new narratives within a supportive community (Abkhezr, 2024). For example, outsider witness practices may invite students to share their re-authored narratives with an audience of peers, family members, or mentors, who may then offer validation and support. In a university context, outsider witness practices could be integrated into career workshops or peer mentoring programs. Collective narrative practices involve creating shared narratives that capture the zeitgeist of the pandemic and the group's collective stories that embrace resilience and agency. Moreover, workshops and info sessions can directly address career-related themes and engage students in skill training. Researchers recommended schools offer career writing workshops in a classroom setting with a whole class of students, where the presence of peers could bring out more insights through discussing and sharing their thoughts (Lengelle et al., 2014).

The post-pandemic world has exacerbated existing inequalities, making it even more challenging for some populations, such as refugees and other marginalized groups, to secure employment (International Labour Organization, 2024). Abkhezr and McMahon (2017) proposed that narrative career counselling can provide a safe space for clients with refugee backgrounds to explore their preferred life and career stories that might have been

challenged throughout their immigration process. During career counselling, counsellors facilitate students' self-reflection to enhance their understanding of the cultural, social, and historical contexts of their lives. Within a culturally sensitive relationship, counsellors could guide students to externalize unique challenges they have encountered in the past, such as language barriers or discrimination during the pandemic, focus on their strengths and aspirations, and subsequently develop a preferred alternative life and career stories (Abkhezzr & McMahon, 2017). By focusing on individual narratives, collective practices, and the unique needs of marginalized groups, NCC offers a holistic and culturally sensitive approach to students' career development in the post-pandemic world, potentially helping them reclaim their agency, build resilience, and achieve their career goals.

Conclusion

University students and graduates today face a challenging career situation, where the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted their psychological wellbeing, social and academic life, and the disruption of the labour market. University students and graduates may feel more uncertain and anxious about their career planning and need more support than before the pandemic to prepare them to face unplanned events due to the pandemic and its related restricted measures (e.g., quarantine). The Happenstance Learning Theory offers perspectives and career skills to turn unplanned events into opportunities, and narrative career counselling serves as a valuable intervention to help reframe clients' future career stories in a more beneficial way. HLT's emphasis on action and adaptability complements NCC's focus on narrative construction and agency, creating the momentum that helps students break free from the 'stagnation' of the pandemic and get 'unstuck.' These theories help individuals move from feeling overwhelmed by external circumstances to taking small, meaningful actions that build confidence and success.

By knowing students' challenges during this exceptional circumstance of the pandemic and the beneficial aspects of these career counselling approaches, schools and related institutes may consider incorporating tailored interventions to support students in their transition challenges and psychological and vocational impacts. Individual interventions may adopt HTL and NCC as their primary frameworks and incorporate practices from these theories to improve students' self-discovery, self-efficacy, and wellbeing and enhance their capacities to be more conscious of potential opportunities and benefit from unplanned events. On a broader scale, group or collective interventions may include workshops on building career adaptability, peer mentoring initiatives to foster social support, and partnerships with industries or field leaders to create internship and job placement opportunities. By combining theoretical insights with practical strategies, career counsellors can better support young people in navigating the complexities of the modern labour market and achieving their career aspirations.

In the hope of further advancing this discussion, we propose several directions for future research and practice. First, given the gap in the literature, future studies may explore the long-term effects of the pandemic on career development, particularly how students from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic backgrounds have adapted to or been hindered from fully participating in the evolving labour market. Second, the pandemic has exacerbated disparities in employment opportunities and pay ranges, underscoring the need for research and public attention. With international data indicating that disparities have widened across genders, social groups, and countries, more research into the current

situation and potential strategies to address inequality is urgently needed (International Labour Organization, 2024). Lastly, future research could examine the effectiveness of integrating the Happenstance Learning Theory and Narrative Career Counselling approach into school career counselling programs.

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