



## Evaluating the Value of Online Career Counseling Efforts for Management Undergraduates – A Study Associated with Sri Lankan Universities

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### Abstract

Many studies pinpoint career counseling is worthwhile for employees' sound career decision-making. Higher education institutions have been offering many career counseling services to careerists in their various career stages. Moreover, online career counseling has been evolving as a novel mode of career support. However, the pertaining literature in academia is much sluggish and unorganized by missing its contextual applicability. Furthermore, several studies testify that the phenomenon of online career counseling is strange and almost unknown to Sri Lankan higher educational institutions. Hence, the objective of this study is twofold; to assess students' willingness to adopt online counseling and understanding its perceived benefits. A qualitative-exploratory study was designed to achieve so-called objectives and implemented cross-sectionally. Data were collected from 34 management undergraduates in 6 universities in Sri Lanka through semi-structured interviews. Codes and themes were extracted from the thematic analysis. It was found that employed undergraduates demonstrate a mild-level passion in online career counseling and they acknowledge that online career counseling is much viable and a timely approach in career guidance. Personalized career support, adaptability to environmental changes, raised self-awareness, career development and crafting are claimed as key benefits of online career counseling. This study stands as a pinpoint for higher educational administrators to redesign career guidance services and for undergraduates to educate themselves in its perceived benefits. Future researchers can develop relevant measurement scales on *willingness* of careerists to receive these services and can test the applicability of these services for non-educational sectors by further validating the findings of this study with longitudinal research designs.

**Keywords:** Career Planning, Career Development, Career Guidance, Career Advising, and Online Career Counseling

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## Introduction

Career counseling was born back in 1908 under vocational guidance with the work done by Frank Parsons (Kuder Inc., 2023) but it was popularized and started adopting in higher education institutes after the work published by Savickas (2005). Increasing number of studies have shown that career counseling is much worthwhile to experience a positive career vibration of someone's career (Green et al., 2023; Perdrix et al., 2012). On the other hand, sound career counseling will have a positive impact on career planning (Sutoyo et al., 2023), career advancement (Kaushik et al., 2023), career adaptability (Wetstone & Rice, 2023), and career decision-making (Xu, 2021). Therefore, higher education institutions, specially the universities, have already undertaken career counseling mainly targeting their undergraduate student populations (Kaliris et al., 2023). Students of higher education evidenced that they have benefitted a lot from career counseling freely offered by their universities (Kuswanti & Yulia, 2023).

However, an increasing number of evidences depict that students in higher education are so discouraged to obtain related career counseling / career guidance services from the formal career guidance authorities (Inderanata & Sukardi, 2023; Sun & Yuen, 2012). Some studies demonstrate that students are not reliable in the career guidance services offered by their university (Barnes et al., 2022). Also, the career-related assistance is significantly poor in their universities (Kunnen, 2014). Even, literature testified that some of the career counselors (advisors) are not qualified, and they are unable to cope up with the career demands of students (Stipanovic et al., 2017). Due to these reasons, a significant number of

university undergraduates are not willing to receive career assistance from their career guidance at the major milestones of their career. However, that does not mean that students reject career assistance from their higher education institutions. They do not hesitate to obtain the necessary service from their higher education institute if it caters to their clear-cut requirement (Dislere & Vronska, 2020).

Contextually, it is witnessed that the conventional career-related assistance in Sri Lankan universities cannot satisfy the real requirements of undergraduate (Herath et al., 2024). It has been found that students in Sri Lankan higher educational institutes are less likely to rely upon the institutional career guidance services when choosing and planning their early career opportunities (Gunathilaka et al., 2024). Moreover, Dunumadalawa et al. (2024) found that many state university undergraduates in Sri Lanka heavily rely upon freelanced opinions for their career development where they largely come across from social media and freelancing websites on the internet as university career advisors fail to meet their authentic career aspirations. This point is further validated by the work of Lokuge et al. (2024) saying that hierarchical career advisories in universities seem unwanted for contemporary undergraduates as they much expect the guidance on career adaptability and work volition from career guidance. But these so-called career advisories have no emphasis on these requirements of undergraduates. Therefore, in a nutshell, it can be noted that conventional career guidance authorities in Sri Lanka are not successful with their primary purpose.

Online career counseling emerged as a new trend in COVID-19 pandemic after 2021 (Zammiti et al., 2023). It rapidly

popularized over the higher education institutions all around the world within a shorter period of time (Santili et al., 2022). Especially, the work carried out by Khurumova and Pinto (2023) emphasized that online career counseling is a perfect solution and much meaningful for university students and it should be a priority of any university. However, adopting these online career assistance by Sri Lankan universities is not performed as expected and many of the universities are still not fully adopted to online counseling services. But, on the other hand, undergraduates of Sri Lankan universities demonstrate an interest in receiving online career counseling services. Therefore, it is important to explore the willingness of students in Sri Lankan universities to adopt to online counseling services.

Career counseling has been theoretically constructed by the Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005). The theory explains that career development is an ongoing process and career counseling is important for individual careerists as a vocational guidance to successfully cope with their ongoing careers. Therefore, career counseling and its latest trend, online career counseling are somewhat deserving a scientific inquiry.

Further, this research requirement is further validated with a recent intervention made by two undergraduates of The Open University of Sri Lanka, one of the well-known state universities of the nation. It has been introduced an AI-driven chatbot for the Bachelor of Science undergraduates named as *Open Smart Bot* intending to provide adequate career guidance for those undergraduates (Perera & Uduwela, 2024). This intervention may be a potent of a grand breakthrough of future

career guidance (advising) in State Universities. Hence, the two-fold objectives of this study are to (i) to assess students' willingness to adopt online counseling and (ii) to understand its perceived benefits.

## Literature Review

As scholars in career-related research point out, career counseling mainly aims to achieve two goals in the university contexts, to bridge the gap between education and employment and to meet constantly evolving demands expected from careerists (Keshf & Khanum, 2022; Yoon et al., 2018). As American Counseling Association (ACA) interpreted, counseling is known to a professional relationship that supports people, families, and any other group to achieve mental health, wellbeing, education, and career goals (Kaplan et al., 2014). As one aspect of this umbrella term of counseling, career counseling is defined as the supporting network for people to discover their real stance, achieve self-awareness, and create a clear-cut unified picture about themselves and the world of work (Pordelan & Hosseinian, 2021). Hence, career counseling does not demarcate only to career-decision making but it deals with career-related issues in a wide array. In overall, career counseling deals with people to find suitable professions / vocations and also to identify the environmental conditions where those people can thrive (Baruch, 2004; Pordelan & Hosseinian, 2021).

Career counseling has also been conquered by the use of information and communication technologies as it has been influential to many human services mainly after 2010. This online career counseling became so popular, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic (Zammiti et al., 2023). Consequently, the trend developed fast

named online career counseling. Santilli et al. (2022) defined it as the increasing use of technology in the field of career counseling leading to develop the competency standards and ethical guidelines of career counseling. As Zammitti et al. (2023) demonstrate, this phenomenon is not a new practice, but it intensified after the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no clear-cut definition for the concept of online career counseling but many authors merely interpreted it as using technology and/or digital media in traditional career counseling. Further, it has been proven that not only individual level but also group career counseling interventions are also possible in online mode (Nota et al., 2016; Pordelan et al., 2018).

Literature testified that Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013) acts as the foundation of career counseling. Also, Self-Construction Theory (Guichard, 2016) makes a similar level of contribution for the construction of career counseling phenomenon. Both theories suggest that one-to-one or small group career counseling is vital for careerists to reflect their potentials, defining priorities, cultivating resources, and maximizing engagement in order to cope up and develop their careers (Santilli et al., 2022). Further, career counseling is recognized as a positive psychological construct because it focuses on empowering human strengths and resources which allow individuals and groups to flourish in various life stages (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2014). Thus, it can be seen a congruence between the purposes of career counseling and the theoretical emphasis of career construct (Savickas, 2013) as they cater to fulfil this ultimate reason of positive psychology (Zammitti et al., 2023). Based on Career Construction Theory, life design

approach has been designed to stabilize one's career sustainably in an unpredictable environment by considering all the areas and experiences of the lifespan of a person for his/her career construction (Savickas, 2013; 2015; Zammitti et al., 2023).

Literature in exploring the cornerstone factors of the development of online career counseling platforms is much sluggish, sparse, and limited. However, few studies have determined the factors affecting to develop online career counseling tools. As Pordelan and Hosseinian (2020) pinpointed, online career counseling tools were designed in universities after 2015s as students started experiencing an increasing unrest in the transition from higher education to labor market. Thus, online career counseling tools were developed to smoothen this transition and to support students to cope up with the new environment effectively. Meanwhile, concrete arguments were subsequently developed pinpointing that the main reason for popularizing online career counseling tools is the COVID-19 pandemic though they were available even before the pandemic (Pordelan & Hosseinian, 2021; Santilli et al., 2022; Zammitti et al., 2023). However, there was adequate evidence that online career counseling was used even back in 2010 (Adewale et al., 2010). These authors argued that Africa needs more online career counseling interventions as an increasing number of employees are victimized by socially burning issues such as drug addiction, prostitution, dropping out from education and so on. Hence, it is clear that COVID-19 pandemic and increasing need for effective and remote supporting interventions are two leading factors affecting for developing online career counseling platforms.

Increasing body of literature testifies that online career counseling largely exists in higher educational institutions. Web-based career counseling for polytechnic students could successfully lead to make prolific career decision-making and it has shown that their career decision-making capabilities increased as a result of web-based career counseling (Ardi et al., 2022). Cojocariu and Puiu (2014) stipulated that career-counseling services in Romanian universities have remarkably grown. Chircu (2014) have discovered that university students mainly attempt to find information about seven areas from career counseling, namely, information about jobs locally available; information about jobs available abroad; international study opportunities; study continuation opportunities; job hunting techniques; information about self-awareness; and career planning strategies. Meanwhile, it has been emphasized that web-based career counseling should be mainly targeted the university students irrespective of their geographical location (Adewale et al., 2010). As Khurumova and Pinto (2023) believe, career counseling (career guidance) must be a priority of any higher education institution. Further, the authors explored that university students are not interested anymore in conventional career guidance, but most students are willing to use online and computer-assisted one-to-one career guidance. Hence, it is obvious that online career counseling is better to practice in universities and other higher educational institutes.

Focusing the career counseling systems established in Sri Lankan university system, it is challenging to find documented evidence on its functionality and delivery. Existing literature in this domain is very limited in Sri Lankan context and the remaining

studies have merely focused on career counseling / career guidance at secondary education (school) level. However, according to the guidelines of the University Grants Commission – Sri Lanka, there are 17 state-owned universities in Sri Lanka and all of these universities are having their own centralized Career Guidance Units (CGU). Career advisors are appointed in every CGU and their typical role to perform is career counseling. However, data are largely available about the career resources in Sri Lankan university system. Nevertheless, the career guidance interventions in Sri Lankan universities occur as large group interventions as many of undergraduate students are not willing to have one-to-one or small group counseling services rather, students much prefer to get the benefits from large-group career counseling interventions such as short course in soft skill development, large group focused workshops, career fairs, and short courses in Human Resource Management (Kalyani & Chathuranga, 2021; Udagama et al., 2019). Hence, there is an urgency of documenting the deliveries of career guidance of Sri Lankan universities and immediately focus on online one-to-one career counseling.

## **Methods**

### ***Research design***

Based on the positivistic philosophy, this research was designed as a qualitative-exploratory study. The deductive approach of research can be matched to the purpose of this study as the domain of this study, online career counseling is well-grounded on career construction theory though this study does not intend to make theoretical improvements or modifications. Further, in terms of methodological choice, this is a mono-method

qualitative study and survey strategy was occupied to collect data through semi-structured interviews. The time horizon of this study is cross-sectional as all the data were gathered from semi-structured interviews consecutively during the two weeks ended on 16 February 2024.

### ***Population, sample, and sampling technique***

The population of this study is the business management undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities both state-owned and non-state owned. Commerce undergraduates are not considered for this study. According to the university statistics published by the University Grants Commission (2022), total business management undergraduates who are currently in their final year (year 4) are 7,076. The unit of analysis of this study is a business management undergraduate who pursues the studies in year four in a 4-year special/honours related degree and who is about to start his/her career. Based on the convenient sampling technique, 34 business management undergraduates who are in their year 4 were purposively selected from 6 universities. 31 respondents were from state-owned universities and the degree programs are Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) Honours, Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Business Management, and Bachelor of Business Management (BBMgt) Special Degree. 3 respondents were chosen from a non-state university, and the related degree program is Bachelor of Business Administration (Honours). All respondents were well-explained the purpose of the study and interviews were conducted after receiving their verbal consent.

Moreover, it was considered the academic performance when selecting the respondents for this study. This was

solely tested with their accumulated Grade Point Average (out of 4.00) at the end of their coursework. The academic performance was considered with the intention of receiving more meaningful and insightful answers presuming that those respondents take their academic-related tasks more seriously. Even Wetstone and Rice (2023) also witnessed that academic performance of students makes a serious impact on their career adaptability after completing their higher studies. Data saturation could be achieved with 34 respondents. A few unrelated codes were disregarded and retained only much relevant and meaningful 21 codes.

### ***Development of the interview guide***

The interview protocol mainly had three open-ended questions. Question one: Are you aware about something called career counseling on online / digital media platforms and would you comment on that? Question two: are you interested or not interested in receiving online career counseling services from the Career Guidance Unit of your university or faculty and why? Question three: what sort of benefit or support that you can get from such an online career counseling system from the CGU? In addition to these three questions, respondents were allowed to talk about anything related to online career counseling in their respective universities. These 3 interview questions were reviewed by one career advisor and a mentor professor of the author of this study and no special comments were given for improvement. All interviews were recorded with the permission of respondents. 27 interviews were conducted in the medium of Sinhala and then converted them into English for the documentation purpose. The average time taken for a single interview is 37 minutes (the whole duration for

interviews is 53 hours and 8 minutes).

## Results

The qualitative data were examined through the thematic analysis relied upon the guidelines of Clarke and Braun (2016). As per the guidelines, the thematic analysis was conducted with the 4-steps namely, (a) *familiarization with the data (by reading the transcripts a few times and listening to the audio files)*, (b) *code generation*, (c) *identification of themes*, (d) *reviewing and reporting those themes* (Naeem et al., 2024). Following the steps as prescribed by Clarke and Braun (2016), all 34 audio files of interviews were transcribed into text documents. It was not used any software to generate initial codes and manually generated.

Accordingly, generation of the themes, their reviewal, and defining of themes were done manually. According to the thematic analysis, 7 main themes were identified namely, (i) virtual and remotely available career assistance, (ii) mild-interest in career support, (iii) personalized career support, (iv) coping up with environmental demands, (v) career development, (vi) career crafting, and (vii) self-awareness. 21 initial codes were recognized for each and every of this themes. Those initial codes are presented below.

### ***Career counseling as virtual and remotely available career assistance***

This is the first theme recognized in the analysis and three initial codes were accompanied to define this theme.

#### *Use of virtual meeting platforms*

Respondents answered the question one that online career counseling can somewhat occur in virtual meeting platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Hence those respondents believe

that career counseling may occur like an online lecture and both career counselor and the student can enhance their engagement by switching on their cameras and actively talking to each other. Few respondents claimed that these mutual virtual meetings can be done through a special software application which is exclusive to their own university. Further, some respondents suggested if career counseling online, this could be functioned on social media such as WhatsApp and Telegram as well.

#### *Sharing of online career resources*

Respondents believe that career counselors can swiftly share the vacancy announcements, flyers of various workshops by career guidance units through digital media platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram. Even the career counselors share the vast amount of information such as previous webinar recordings through these media platforms. Moreover, the respondents believe that career counselors can make short videos on a daily basis about personal and career development so that they can instantly watch them no matter where they are. Further, this method is easier than attending pre-scheduled webinars or in-person workshops.

#### *Remote but closed connectivity*

As respondents claimed, they are not willing to make extra commitments in their final year but focus only on their mainstream academic activities. Therefore, auxiliary academic commitments such as career counseling are better to set up remotely so that they can commit to these career counseling interventions flexibly. Further, respondents proclaimed that they are fed up with traditional counseling interventions offered by their career guidance authorities so that they do not

want to get themselves connected with those authorities anymore. However, they believe that remote connectivity would be deployable whenever they need career-related support. The following quote was extracted from the transcript of respondent 5 to validate this theme.

*“... you know, I very recently got to know that there are staff members called career advisors in our campus. I have never been to the Career Guidance Unit of our campus, and I even don't know where it is situated. We even connect with our lecturers and research supervisors virtually. So why don't these career advisors reach us online or let us reach them online? My partner studies in ..... private campus (name withheld) and they recently conducted online career fair and that was so successful. Even I also attended to that and I registered many job portals, too. I never think that our campus can do such a thing (chuckles)...”*

#### ***Mild interest in online career support***

This is the third theme identified in the analysis and three initial codes were accompanied to define this theme.

#### ***Career Goals are Achievable Independently***

Some of the respondents proclaimed that they feel a third-party career support is unnecessary as they are adequately confident about their own career. So that, having such an online career counseling intervention is anyway better but the business management undergraduates feel it is not mandatory to have such an intervention. However, those respondents proclaimed that these online career counseling interventions may be so prolific to undergraduates

from the Faculty of Arts as they are struggling to find suitable entry level position in the business sector. Further, business management undergraduates usually go through these things in their degree curriculums so that they have self-efficacy to achieve their own career goals.

#### ***Better to have but not so important***

Business management undergraduates are in-touch with the labor markets and several industries even since the early stages in their studies so that many undergraduates are powered-up with employment opportunities and their own career paths. Therefore, the respondents firmly believe that online career counseling interventions do not matter them a lot. However, having such a supporting system may be useful for them for two reasons. One, that kind of support system may be important to obtain career-related advices. Second, this supporting system may be useful to improve their resilience to sustainably face career shocks.

#### ***Making 24/7 Available***

Respondents claimed that in this is an online intervention, it should be available always. No need to make it 24/7 live as it is not possible. But those authorities can set up bots powered by all new artificial intelligence (AI) technologies then the students can get the support whenever they need. Further, having online repositories in own set-up information systems in CGUs may be an added advantage. Just like there is a hotline for student counseling, it is better to have a career counseling hotline, too. Moreover, bot-powered online career counselors may also be a smart solution. Further, business management undergraduates will have maximum benefits if this is available 24/7. The following quote was



extracted from the transcript of respondent 31 to validate this theme.

*“...I have already decided my career path with the support of my parents and my cousin. Both of my parents are directors in leading corporates in Sri Lanka. Therefore, I don't feel that career counseling is necessary for me. But, yes, not every student in the university is clear with her own career plan in the future. So, yes, career support might be important. However, I believe more students may be attractive to career support if it is offered online...”*

### ***Personalized career support***

This is the second theme identified in the analysis and three initial codes were accompanied to define this theme.

#### ***One-to-one career support***

As respondents declared, the ongoing career guidance interventions in universities are not personalized and those are large group based. But, career aspirations, areas of improvements, career interests and other psycho-social metrics are different from student to student. Hence, rather, always having industry-organized large-scale workshops, it is better to have individualized and personalized career counseling. Further, they suggested to have appointment of personal mentors for career matters of senior undergraduates may be a useful solution. Therefore, students proclaimed that they expect more personalized career support from this kind of online intervention.

#### ***Confidentiality***

As the respondents declared, the more they reveal the more they learn. Sometimes, the career counselors in the university teach and re-teach the same

areas repeatedly as they assume the areas of improvement of students. But this approach is wrong. The best thing is to attempt to assess the career requirements and passions from individual students then they will benefit at the best possible level from the career counseling interventions. However, this personalization will not be possible without assuring the confidentiality of private information. And also, this includes data security as well. The authorities should be very mindful when dealing with students' sensitive information on online platforms. However, most of the respondents are not satisfied about the current network and data security platforms of university web resources.

#### ***Focusing on personal strengths and weaknesses***

As respondents claimed, most of the business management undergraduates do not have a clear awareness about their personal strengths and weaknesses. Some of those accepted that they have landed on wrong jobs which are not matching their personal strengths. It may lead to suffer in their jobs. But career counseling is important to reveal their personal strengths and weaknesses to choose correct career paths in the future focusing long-term success. Sometimes, they feel that a particular career path is unsuitable for them, but that career path may reveal most of the strengths of that student which are even unknown to them. Therefore, supporting students to identify their own strengths and weaknesses is a crucial job of a career counselor.

The following quote is extracted from the transcript of respondent 19 to justify the theme 3, personalized career support.

“You know, recently, the career guidance unit of our university conducted a workshop on choosing and planning the career after the degree and there were 600+ students in the audience. I too attended. I remembered our orientation in the first year (giggling). Later I saw in the CGU website that they have boasted on their grand success of that workshop. But for me, that is totally useless. Because someone’s career should be planned individually. So, it should be more private. So, I think if this advising is provided online, it would be more effective...”

### ***Coping with environmental changes***

This is the fourth theme identified in the analysis and three initial codes were accompanied to define this theme.

#### ***Changes in information and communication technologies***

Respondents claim that most of the business management undergraduates are not technologically-savvy though they use all new technological devices. Most university students use expensive and all new devices to implement basic needs. But technology is changing at a very rapid pace, for instance, even though the AI technologies have conquered many of the personal tasks, students merely use them just to generate answers for their homework and assignment. But many students still do not know how to use these technologies for video making / editing, setting up a very creative CV, to write a covering letter and so on. Hence, online career counseling may be so important to adopt to ever changing ICT technologies.

#### ***Changes of required skills***

Respondents claimed that the soft skills targeted to improve by the career

guidance authorities in the universities and the real soft skills expected them to have by the companies are remarkably different to each other. They have experienced this shock in their first internships. Also, the skill expectations from undergraduates are different from firm to firm and from industry to industry. Therefore, in online career counseling, those students can remotely but closely connect to the career counselors and ask the support from career counselors / advisors to further educate them about this skills and get the guidance to improve them. In that sense, career advisors should not only serve registered university students within the university, but they need to serve even to passed out students in online career counseling.

#### ***Awareness of macro environmental forces***

Respondents proclaimed that many of business management undergraduates are unaware the real-time changes happening specially in political, economic, and social environmental forces in the country (Sri Lanka according to the sample). However, outsiders expect them to explain these dynamic phenomena as they are into business management. Further, respondents claimed that this awareness they cannot obtain from their regular lectures in their degree programs, but they guess that they can gain this knowledge and awareness through a personalized one-to-one career counseling experience. Therefore, respondents believe that an online career counselor is like their personal teacher.

The following quote is extracted from the transcript of respondent 23 to prove the theme 4, coping with environmental changes.

“...I have a brother, and he lost his job during the pandemic period and now he does a job which is totally opposite to the area of his specialization. But he is doing well. So, I think, rather than trying so hard to stick with our career aspiration, we should be more adaptable to the environmental demands. I feel that our career advisors think that career planning is one time task in the student's life. But of course, it is not. So, career planning must be somewhat lifelong and on-going. The university career guidance must focus on that. But, as per my sight, career guidance can make more on-going if it is rendered virtually...”

### ***Career development***

This is the fifth theme identified in the analysis and three initial codes were accompanied to define this theme.

### ***Career planning***

Respondents believe that most of them do not have a career plan, and careers do not navigate intentionally. Even most of the students do not choose their areas of specialization according to a long-term career plan. However, they declared that they do not receive the required support from the career advisors and authorized personnel in career guidance units to choose their future paths so that most of the students are discouraged to obtain career guidance services. Further, they are fed up with career planning workshops, but they need personalized support and written documents for their career planning. Further, they expect continuous engagement from career counselors and online connectivity until making sure the student is in the correct career path.

### ***Career Advancement***

As proclaimed by respondents, career

advancement is a personal responsibility of those students but still the support from the career counselor is required to cope with the challenges, frustrations, and problems that they come across in their career paths. Hence, they expect career counselor to be their personal motivator who can push them forward when they are discouraged. Education and training in this regard might be important even during their academic studies in university.

### ***Career adaptability***

The respondents claimed that even some of the talented students also fall in their career due to poor adaptability skills to different contexts. In that point, just a motivation or an encouragement is not enough at all to cope up with the changing environmental demands. As some of the respondents claim, the 4C's framework of career adaptability (concern, control, curiosity, and confidence) as explained in the Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005) may be a sound guideline for young adults. They further mentioned that they share the videos and notes with their colleagues. Therefore, career counselors too can focus on these dimensions if they connect with students in online mode.

The following quote is extracted from the transcript of respondent 9 to prove the theme 5, career development.

*“...I feel our career guidance unit is so inactive and disconnected from its main objective. They always conduct workshops on CV writing. I even attended for two (chuckles). Even career advisors are so young, and they don't have an idea about the varieties of careers. So, career guidance should not merely focus on career planning but career advancement, too. Therefore,*

*this should be way tailored and ongoing process. I think online guidance is way effective for this job. Then the students can even connect to the university career advising services even after they leave the university, and they can get the support they need to develop their careers in future. May be the CGU can introduce a mobile application then it can be done easily...”*

### **Career crafting**

This is the sixth theme identified in the analysis and three initial codes were accompanied to define this theme.

#### *Person-job fit*

As respondents claimed, many of their colleagues do the particular entry level job or the training because of two reasons. One, they need to fulfil the mandatory requirement of training to complete their degree program. Second, they just do their job because of the survival, and they just need to stay employed. Otherwise, it does not ensure the match between the person and the job. As a result, most of them are totally dissatisfied in their jobs. Most of them are rushing to find job opportunities or internships during a specific period of the year and sometimes, it is almost like a ‘rat race’. But career counselors (advisors) can play a crucial role here to guide students to match their personality and the job. But students are also reluctant to receive that support from them but if there is an online platform, most of the students will definitely connect with career counselors for their person-job fit.

#### *Relevancy of knowledge and skills*

Respondents believe that most of the knowledge and skill components they attempted to gain in their academic studies are irrelevant to perform their jobs. Therefore, they expect two

benefits from career counseling. One, they need to know what the required knowledge and skills are they need to develop to develop their corporate personalities. Second, how to unlearn those irrelevant knowledge. These things might be simple, but students do not even consider these things. Depending on the time and other resource limitations, the students also do not care a lot about career advising at this point but online career advising platforms may be utterly deployable for this task.

#### *Capacity development*

As proclaimed by the respondents, many students do not consider upskilling their talents after landing on a particular career. Most of the students tend to earn postgraduate qualifications but capacity expansion is not their main motive. Therefore, the career advisors should connect with the industry and outside world focusing capacity development of careerists (employees) without certainly demarcating only to group of a particular university. This should not be personalized learning but addressing to large group in the outside world and this should be highly industry-focusing knowledge sharing.

The following quote is extracted from the transcript of respondent 11 to justify the theme 6, career crafting.

*“...I always believe every university should be responsible for career shaping of its stakeholders. Once a student, always a student, even after graduation. Also, most of the students start their jobs even before graduation and in future, you know, no one can depend solely on one job. Even we may be doing few jobs. Then, universities have a great responsibility to give the relevant career, social, and emotional support to the students whenever they*

*need. But still, our lecturers simply expect that students will get an appointment and come to meet them physically. That will never happen. So, what I see, if this service can be given online, definitely, this will be a hit among students. Even the past students who are now working abroad may also get this service. Because everyone is having many troubles with their jobs. Honestly...*"

### **Self-awareness**

This is the seventh or the last theme identified in the analysis and three initial codes were accompanied to define this theme.

#### *Meeting demands of society*

As respondents proclaimed, the person-job fit and meeting societal expectations are contradictory. Sometimes, students need to dedicate their own interests and motives just to impress their parents' needs or societal expectations. But this may be inevitable in certain circumstances. Career counselors / advisors should know these facts and should be sensible in these situations. If an online platform is introduced for career advising, this should be a worthwhile exercise to support to mitigate the mental sufferings of the clients as such an online platform is remote and private.

#### **Awareness of Self-Values**

Respondents claim that undergraduates are not much aware about their own values. Values are taught in several course in any business management degree but still they are not aware of them. Value alignment is something to be considered when choosing or altering a career. Even though it is not always possible to align values with the jobs, the awareness about our own values may be important even when

choosing a career in the future. Further, they believe that career counselors can effectively support to filter out these things on online platforms.

#### **Awareness of Motives**

Respondents proclaimed that many of their colleagues believe that employment opportunities are so limited in the job market. They do not exactly know the truth about this. Therefore, with a competitive mindset, students are literally ready to pursue whatever job they get. But, here, the main argument is, the students should be empowered to find the most suitable career path by seriously considering their own triggers and interests. Since this kind of a sensitive support they cannot get from their own teachers, the career counselors can do this job much effectively on online platforms.

Altogether, the 21 codes were generated under 7 themes. Each of the theme is carrying 3 codes. Themes were then defined after extensively reviewing the codes by considering the answers given by the respondents. Out of these 7 themes, the first theme relates to the understanding and interpretation of online career counseling services for students (this is not an objective of this study but an additional outcome). The second theme directly relates to the level of willingness of students to receive online career counseling services from universities. The last five themes relate to the perceived benefits of online career counseling to students. Those are tabulated under table 01.

The following quote is extracted from the transcript of respondent 33 to justify the theme 7 of this study, self-awareness.

*"...You know, there is a moment of everyone's self that they either over-*

*estimate or under-estimate themselves. Sometimes, we are getting depressed and burnt out. Then we feel to give up. When people meet these types of issues, the support should be readily available and real time, right. So that is the beauty of online counseling. Because I know my support is in my fingertips. This support may always not career-related, but this counseling sort of things can enhance our psycho-social capital. It will be helpful at least to enhance our self-understanding..."*

## Discussion

It was found that person-job fit (code 16), relevancy of knowledge and skills (code 17), and value alignment (code 20) are some of the crucial benefits of online career counseling services offered by universities for the sake of business management undergraduates. Meanwhile, Kalyani and Chathuranga (2021) proved that it would be disastrous if the university students do not align their career choice with their personalities and interests. Further, those who ignore the person-job fit may suffer from job dissatisfaction, demotivation, and severe stress. Even this mismatch may lead to dropout from the university as a career failure (Kalyani & Chathuranga, 2021). Code 18 in the findings was capacity development, and it is also considered one of the benefit of online career counseling. Alternatively, Udagama et al. (2019) convinced that new academic areas such as Service Learning should be introduced to the curriculums in Career Guidance Units to ensure the competitiveness of the graduates.

The respondents of the sample acknowledged that students are not anymore interested to use the career services offered by the universities (CGUs) but they may use these services if those are offered online. The same matter has been testified by Khurumova

and Pinto (2023) among Portuguese university system and those students also evidenced that they are much interested in web-based career advising platforms. Further, it was proven that online career counseling services are much meaningful and seem to be a perfect solution. Further, one of the key features of online career counseling services is remote connectivity. Back in years, Adewale et al. (2010) proved that the most powerful feature of any online counseling system is the remote connectivity.

Moreover, one-to-one career support (code 7), confidentiality (code 8), and focus on personal strengths and weaknesses (code 9) were thematized into third theme, personalized career support. Alternatively, that means the students are looking for close supervision or a mentorship in online career counseling services. The same point has been proven by Nocoleta (2014) in the Romanian context that close supervision is crucial for the success of academic career counseling. Meanwhile, Ardi et al. (2022) explored that online career counseling services could enhance the career decision-making capability of university students. That finding is re-validated by this study by exploring that online career counseling services benefit for career planning (code 13), career advancement (code 14), and career adaptability (code 15) (Zammiti et al., 2022) which were thematized under the theme of career development (theme 5).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was designed and fulfilled in order to achieve two objectives: to guess the willingness of the final year undergraduates to receive online career counseling services from the career guidance authorities in universities and to comprehend the perceived benefits of online career counseling services for

them. A qualitative mono-method exploratory study was designed cross-sectionally to achieve so-called dual objectives. The respondents were having a satisfactory level understanding about online career counseling (advising) services. The two main features expected from online career counseling services are virtual presence of career counselor and remote connectivity where students do not need to connect in-person.

Moreover, students do not show a strong willingness to receive online career counseling as most of them are already deviated from career assistance offered by career guidance authorities in universities. But they still demonstrate a mild interest to receive career counseling (advising) if those are offered completely online. Moreover, students acknowledge that there are number of perceived benefits of online career counseling, sequentially, (i) personalized career support (Adewale et al., 2010), (ii) successful cope-up with environmental changes (Barnes et al., 2022), (iii) career development (Cojocariu & Puiu, 2014; Kalyani & Chathuranga, 2021), (iv) career crafting (Green et al., 2023), and (v) raising self-awareness (Nicoleta, 2015). Hence, it is concluded that online career counseling services are worthwhile for final year business management undergraduates due to the mid-level willingness of students and their perceived benefits that can be enjoyed individually (Perera & Uduwela, 2024).

As per the current knowledge, this paper is sort of a cornerstone study in online career counseling literature in the context of Sri Lankan higher education. Hence, it is recommended the policymakers and senior administrators in Sri Lankan higher education sector to redesign prevailing career guidance (advising) units /

systems in universities making career counseling more effective and malleable for the Gen Z undergraduates. Even Abutalip et al. (2023) recognized that online and AI-driven counseling interventions are needed for Gen Z undergraduates. On the other hand, a living experience can be found from the Open University of Sri Lanka by recently introducing its AI-driven chatbot for its undergraduates and surprisingly, this chatbot has been invented by two young undergraduates studying in the same university (Perera & Uduwela, 2024). Therefore, the Sri Lankan higher education sector is at a threshold for a policy-driven intervention for an online career counseling service for its universities (Herath et al., 2024).

On the other hand, this study strongly recommends the undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities to take more online career counseling services in a serious manner. Even Savickas (2015) highly emphasized that career counseling can play a major role to craft adolescents' career aspirations in a rational manner so that taking such services from universities is pivotal. According to the findings, undergraduates demonstrate a mild interests towards the online career counseling services. However, these services are provided by the university free of charge (Gunathilaka et al., 2024; Herath et al., 2024) and students can encourage career advisors to move career advising task to online platforms just as an initiative of this huge task. Even Awad et al. (2024) have inquired and shown students' successful initiatives to persuade career advisors in Islamic universities for online career advising.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Future researchers are encouraged to develop studies to alleviate the limitations of this study. First, this study

is carried out as a qualitative-exploratory study. But decision makers are more convenient if this phenomenon is studied in quantitative-explanatory way. Therefore, it is encouraged to develop measurement scales (questionnaires) to scale the perceived willingness (interest) to receive online career counseling services of university students. Further, lack of longitudinal studies in this area of research is a notable limitation. Hence, it is important to design and implement more longitudinal studies to test the use and benefit of online career counseling services for university undergraduates. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to test the applicability of online career counseling services for organizations targeting their workforces without demarcating this valuable service only to higher education institutions.

### Author Contributions

This research work is solely and

originally implemented by the author of this paper.

### Competing Interests

This study has been implemented purely for academic purposes and hereby the author declares that no any conflict of interest in terms of this study and its outcomes.

### Data Availability

The author is ready to make available the data (interview transcriptions) on request.

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## Figures and Tables

**Table 1**

*Codes, Themes, and Definitions from Thematic Analysis*

Code No.	Initial Code	Theme	Interpretation of the Theme
01	Use of virtual meeting platforms	Career counseling as virtual and remotely available career assistance	Online career counseling is a virtual support system that is set up online and on digital media platforms with remote connectivity for the benefit of careerists (Pordelan & Hosseinian, 2020).
02	Sharing of online career resources		
03	Remote but Closed Connectivity		
04	Career goals are achievable independently	Mild interest in online career support	Online career counseling services may be half-way attractive to those who seek career support.
05	Better to have but not so important		
06	Making 24/7 available		
07	One-to-one career support		



08	Confidentiality	Personalized career support	Online career services must be highly individualized and should ensure the privacy of information and networks.
09	Focusing on personal strengths and weaknesses		
10	Changes in information and communication technologies	Coping up with environmental changes	Online career services should support to successful adapt to ever-changing environmental factors.
11	Changes of requires skills		
12	Awareness of macro environmental forces		
13	Career planning	Career development	Online career services should support to advance according to a well-articulated career plan in the chosen career path by adapting to different circumstance.
14	Career advancement		
15	Career adaptability		
16	Person-job fit	Career crafting	Online career services should support individuals to choose the tasks and duties of the job in accordance with their prevailing knowledge and skills.
17	Relevancy of knowledge and skills		
18	Capacity development		
19	Meeting societal demands	Self-awareness	Online career services should support individuals to improve a sense of their community expectations and their inner motives.
20	Awareness of self-values		
21	Awareness of motives		

Source: Author (2024)

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