

The role of career guidance on preparing learners in the Hardap region for transition to tertiary education

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Abstract

This study examined the role of career guidance in preparing learners in the Hardap region of Namibia for tertiary education. The study sought to answer the questions such as, how is career guidance implemented in schools? What are the challenges in the delivery of career guidance to learners? How effective are the existing career guidance programs in schools? What strategies can be adopted to improve career guidance in schools? The study population included fifteen (15) grades 11 and 12 learners, five (5) first-year tertiary education students, three (3) Life Skills teachers, and three (3) school principals. Three schools were sampled conveniently to take part in the study. A simple random sampling was used to select fifteen learners from three schools. Life Skills teachers from each school were purposively selected and finally the school principals and the first-year students were selected using convenient sampling technique. Employing a mixed-methods approach within a pragmatism paradigm, data were collected through interviews and questionnaires. Thematic analysis and descriptive statistics were used to analyse qualitative and quantitative data, respectively. Results indicated that while career guidance supports learners' decision-making and readiness for higher education, challenges such as limited resources, inadequate trained personnel, and inconsistent program implementation hinder its effectiveness. The study recommends the starting of career guidance in Grade 8 or 9 and strengthening partnerships with external stakeholders. It recommended that schools should pay visits to universities and other tertiary institutions to receive up-to-date information as well as hosting annual career fairs. Training for all teachers should be contacted for integrating career guidance across all subjects' disciplines. Schools should also conduct aptitude and interest assessments and allocate enough time for career guidance activities and securing dedicated funding to support these programs.

Keywords: role, career guidance, transition, tertiary education

Introduction

Education is widely regarded as a powerful solution to various socio-economic challenges, such as poverty, ignorance, unemployment, and poor governance (Olamide & Olawaiye, 2013). It is viewed as a key to unlocking the potential of young people, enabling them to contribute to society and improve their own lives. The process of career selection plays a crucial role in determining not only an individual's future profession but also their lifestyle, social status, and personal satisfaction (Borchert, 2002). Thus, the consequences of a wrong career decision can be profound, affecting an individual's well-being and long-term success (Borchert, 2002). Therefore, this study sought to address the gap in understanding the specific challenges and opportunities associated with career guidance in the Hardap region. While previous research has focused on the importance of career guidance globally and nationally, there is limited evidence on how these services

function in rural Namibian contexts. In addition, the study aimed to provide actionable insights that inform educational policy and practice, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their geographical location, are adequately prepared for the demands of tertiary education. Globally, career guidance is acknowledged as a key component of quality education systems. In many developed countries, such as the United States and Finland, structured career guidance programs are integrated into secondary education curricula to support learners in aligning their academic paths with career aspirations (Watts & Sultana, 2004). These programs emphasize individualized support and access to up-to-date career information. In the United Kingdom Career guidance is recognised as a crucial component of the education system. Initiatives like National Careers week emphasize the importance of career education, with organizations such as the Gatsby Charitable Foundation highlighting the need for proper

career support to shape young people's futures (Harris, 1999). On the contrary, in Africa, career guidance faces numerous challenges, including a lack of trained counsellors, limited resources, and cultural perceptions that undervalue its significance. In Nigerian schools, as stated by Oluwatosin (2016) in the study about stakeholders' perception of counselling and career guidance services in secondary schools, pointed out that the majority of students, teachers and parents were aware of the relevance of counselling to learners but admitted that the services provided were ineffective due to lack of qualified personnels and lack of resources, while some schools do not have counselling services. This contradiction implies that counselling services were given more attention in some schools than others.

Similarly, a recent study by Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa (2006), in Zimbabwean high schools found that students from mission and government schools indicated awareness of guidance and counselling services, while students from rural schools did not have access to these services due to lack of material resources, qualified career counsellors and poor socioeconomic status of parents. The report also showed negative attitudes of school authorities to guidance and counselling services. In Namibia, career guidance is part of the national education curriculum as addressed in the Life Skills curriculum and agenda, reflected in policies such as the Education Sector Strategic Plan and the National Youth Policy (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2022). However, its implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in rural regions such as the Hardap region. Schools in this region often lack trained career counsellors, and learners have limited exposure to career exploration opportunities (Namibian Broadcasting Corporation, 2023).

Consequently, many learners cannot make informed decisions about tertiary education pathways, leading to high dropout rates and misaligned career choices (Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture, 2022). According to Mbwale (2004), parents, guardians and teachers influence learners the most in career guidance. Beyond the said factors, Oluwatosin (2016) also found that family's socio-economic background also contributes to the children's career decision-making. Apart from that, gender expectations and stereotypes have also an influence on

subject choices in schools. The study indicated that, girls are usually advised to take subjects other than mathematics and science. This could be due to the perception or expectation that the girls' role is mainly to have children and to nurture them (Mostert et al., 2001). Career guidance has become essential in helping learners navigate the complex process of career selection. Providing learners with the necessary resources, information, and support can empower them to make choices that align with their strengths and aspirations. Despite its recognized importance, the delivery and effectiveness of career guidance services vary significantly across different contexts, with rural regions such as the Hardap region in Namibia facing unique challenges that hinder learners' preparedness for tertiary education. Studies have shown that effective career guidance positively influences learners' ability to transition to higher education and careers, particularly when provided consistently and systematically (Gysbers & Henderson, 2014).

Statement of the problem

In Namibia, career guidance is part of the education system intended to support learners' transition to higher education, but in the Hardap region, its implementation and effectiveness are likely inconsistent and inadequate. Many schools lack dedicated career counsellors, structured programs, or sufficient resources to provide comprehensive guidance, partly due to limited exposure to career options, a poor understanding of tertiary education requirements, and a shortage of career planning tools (Mushaandja et al., 2013; Edwards & Quinter, 2011). The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (2022) also reports that a significant number of learners fail to transition successfully into tertiary education, largely due to inadequate career support and planning. These issues are further compounded by socioeconomic challenges and disparities in educational resources across schools in the region, highlighting a need to examine and improve current career guidance practices to better prepare learners for their future academic and career endeavours.

Research questions

1. What is the role of career guidance in preparing learners for tertiary education in Hardap region?
2. How is career guidance implemented in schools in the Hardap region?

3. What are the challenges in the delivery of career guidance to learners in Hardap region?
4. How effective are the existing career guidance programs in schools in Hardap region?
5. What strategies can be adopted to improve career guidance in schools in Hardap region?

Theoretical framework

This study utilised Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), developed by Lent et al. (1994) which is built on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. SCCT explores how individuals develop career interests, make choices, and achieve success by emphasising the dynamic interaction among self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. It also considers the influence of environmental and contextual factors on career development (Schuk, 2012). The theory was especially relevant in analysing how career guidance services can influence learners in the Hardap region, helping shape their confidence (self-efficacy), expectations about the benefits of tertiary education, and their ability to set and attain goals. Given the socio-economic challenges in rural areas such as limited resources and access to information, SCCT provides insights into how environmental barriers and supports impact learners' career aspirations and decision-making processes (William, 2005). It highlights how external support systems and targeted guidance can help learners overcome these barriers and build motivation for higher education.

Applying SCCT in this context was aimed at exploring how career guidance programs could be tailored to meet the specific needs of learners in the Hardap region. The theory underscores the importance of addressing environmental challenges like resource scarcity and geographic isolation, through external supports such as structured guidance initiatives. Finally, the research sought to identify strategies that enhance career guidance efforts, fostering successful transitions to tertiary education and improving learners' socio-economic prospects (William, 2005).

Literature review

The role of career guidance in preparing learners for the future job market

According to Li and Jin (2019), new opportunities are emerging in sectors such as

artificial intelligence, green technology, and data science. This shift highlights the growing need for career guidance programs that not only help young people identify their passions but also prepare them for the realities of a dynamic and unpredictable job market. In developed countries like the United States and Germany, career guidance programs have begun focusing on equipping learners with future-ready skills, emphasising adaptability, innovation, and digital literacy (OECD, 2021).

The effectiveness of career guidance services varies, with some countries implementing strong programs while others face challenges in this area. For instance, over the past decade, South Korea has made significant advancements in establishing a nationwide career development system tailored to various settings, including K-12 education, higher education, and public and private employment services (Korea Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training, 2023). Furthermore, Singapore through the Skills Future Initiative, strengthened education and career guidance, by offering an enhanced internships and overseas market immersion opportunities. This program aims to equip young people with the necessary skills and experiences to thrive in the evolving job market (Tan, 2002).

However, there are countries facing challenges in career guidance such as Australia. A report by Watson et al. (2014) revealed that inadequate career planning among Australian school leavers was costing the economy \$3.5 billion annually due to exacerbated industry skill gaps. The study found that only a quarter of young Australians felt adequately prepared for work and further study, highlighting the need for improved career guidance services. Cook and Maree (2016) established that like Australia, some African countries, also experienced a skills mismatch between the knowledge learners acquire in school and the evolving demands of the labour market. Mtemeri (2017) stated that career guidance plays a crucial role in bridging this gap by equipping learners with relevant information about emerging career opportunities, required skill sets, and industry expectations. Moving away from the tradition, where children expected to follow in their parents' careers paths. Nowadays youth are encouraged to explore a wider range of professions (Edwards & Quinter, 2011).

Several African countries have made strides in implementing career guidance initiatives, with South Africa integrating such programs into its school curriculum to help learners explore professions and make informed decisions. However, disparities in access and implementation persist due to historical inequalities, resulting in inconsistent availability of these services across regions (Farao & Du Plessis, 2024). Uganda's Makerere University exemplifies structured efforts, offering formal career services to support students' career development, reflecting an increased recognition of the role of career guidance in improving employability (Nsubuga & Kronholz, 2016).

Meanwhile, Ujakpa et al. (2021) established that countries like Tanzania and Namibia faced significant challenges in their career guidance efforts. Tanzania struggles with limited vocational resources and a lack of structured guidance, which often leads students to make uninformed decisions that contribute to job-skill mismatches and hinder employability. The study by Ujakpa et al. (2021) suggests that integrating career guidance into the school curriculum and improving teacher counsellors' training could possibly alleviate some of these issues in Namibia, because the country faces issues of lack of career awareness, especially in remote areas, such as the Hardap region, where learners remain uninformed about emerging industries. Therefore, such a problem has placed the learner at a disadvantage in the evolving global job market.

Challenges affecting the implementation of career guidance services

Many countries like Italy and the United Kingdom also face challenges in delivering effective career guidance, mainly due to diverse student populations and high learner-to-counsellor ratios, which make personalized support difficult. These systemic issues often lead to a one-size-fits-all approach, limiting the ability to cater to individual needs (Li & Chen, 2016; Pope, 2000). In Uganda, youths face different obstacles such as limited training for career guidance providers, inadequate employment skills, lack of experience, and low ICT skills. The high learner-to-teacher ratio, estimated at 350:1, further hampers the effective implementation of career guidance programs, while teachers and counsellors often lack the necessary skills to provide meaningful

support and assessment (Wamaggi et al., 2020; Kabunga, 2020). Namibia's efforts, like the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) career fair, aims to support learners, but financial constraints restrict the reach of these initiatives to all secondary schools in Namibia, with many learners only accessing career guidance after university admission. Geographic isolation, especially in the Hardap region, limits students' exposure to diverse career opportunities, further affecting their career development prospects (Ujakpa et al., 2021).

Effectiveness of career guidance services in secondary schools

Watts and Sultana (2004) found that developed countries like the United States and Finland, career guidance services were embedded within the educational curriculum, providing learners with personalised counselling, up-to-date career information, and technological tools to support their career exploration and readiness for tertiary education. These programs often involve structured activities and professional support to help students make informed academic and career choices. Similarly, South Africa and Kenya have introduced career education initiatives aimed at aligning students' academic paths with economic opportunities, leading to improved career aspirations, self-awareness, and motivation among learners.

In Namibia, career guidance is delivered through school-based programs, career fairs, and collaborations with tertiary institutions like NUST and University of Namibia (UNAM). It is also integrated into the Life Skills curriculum to develop essential personal and career skills. However, this integration faces challenges as many Life Skills teachers lack specialised training in career counselling, resulting in insufficient guidance for students. The limited curriculum time, resource shortages, and lack of industry exposure further restrict students' ability to explore diverse career options beyond their immediate environment (Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture, 2022). Despite these limitations, schools with career guidance programs in Namibia have seen increases in students' awareness of tertiary and vocational training opportunities, leading to informed post-secondary decisions. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives is hampered by inadequate resources, limited teacher

training, and the absence of personalised counselling services, which are essential for providing tailored support that aligns with individual student aspirations and capabilities (Munyaka, 2018).

Programs in support of career guidance

Globally, the need for innovative and inclusive career guidance programs has increased as the job market evolves with technological and economic changes. In China, efforts to enhance these services include training for counsellors, the use of Western theories like Holland's Typology and Career Construction Theory, and leveraging technology such as social media, MOOCs, and big data to support career counselling. There is a growing emphasis on updating methods to serve diverse populations, including learners under the Gaokao system, women, and marginalized groups, with ethical considerations and cultural understanding for digital services becoming priorities (Li & Jin, 2016; Yoon et al., 2018).

In Africa, countries recognise the importance of equipping youth with relevant skills for modern labour markets. South Africa established a Career Development Services helpline offering counselling and mentorship, while Kenya implemented school-based guidance programs that incorporate technical and entrepreneurial training to address unemployment and prepare students for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. In Namibia, research advocates for a structured, flexible career guidance approach that includes personalised counselling, workshops, mentorship networks, and mentor training, especially aimed at learners in remote areas. These strategies aim to address the diverse needs of youth and create tailored programs to help them navigate evolving career landscapes (Mbwale, 2024).

Methodology

A research paradigm is a set of beliefs and assumptions that guide how research is conducted and how knowledge is interpreted (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). For this study, the pragmatism paradigm was chosen because it suits mixed-methods research by combining

qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of career guidance's role in preparing learners for tertiary education in the Hardap region (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pragmatism emphasizes practical solutions to real-world problems and allows for integrating multiple perspectives, data collection and analysis methods. This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data collection and analysis of numerical trends with qualitative insights into personal experiences. Quantitative methods involved systematic data collection and analysis to identify patterns (Maree, 2014), while qualitative methods explored individual perceptions and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This triangulation strengthened the validity and reliability of the findings by covering different facets of the research problem.

The population included twenty-six (26) participants comprises of fifteen (15) secondary school learners, three (3) Life Skills teachers, three (3) principals, and five (5) first-year university students from the Hardap region. Three schools were sampled conveniently to take part in the study. A simple random sampling was used to select fifteen learners from three schools. Life Skills teachers from each school were purposively selected and finally the school principals and the first-year university students were selected using convenient sampling technique. Data were collected by structured questionnaires administered to Life Skills teachers, secondary school learners and principals, as well semi-structured interview contacted face to face and through video conference with secondary school learners Life Skills teachers, first year university students and principals. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data analysis while *Microsoft Excel* graphical tools used to analyse quantitative data.

Research findings

The table below presents the themes that were developed in this study during the data analysis period.

Table 1: Themes developed in the study

Theme 1	Awareness and provision of career guidance
Theme 2	Effectiveness of Career Guidance Programs in Schools.
Theme 2	Effectiveness of Career Guidance Programs in Schools.
Theme 3	The implementation of career guidance in schools

Theme 4	The challenges in the delivery of career guidance to learners
Theme 5	Strategies for improving career guidance in schools.

Theme 1: Awareness and provision of career guidance

The study was conducted to find out more about the awareness of career guidance services and how these services were provided in secondary schools within the Hardap region. The data was collected from learners, Life Skills teachers, school principals, and first-year

tertiary students. Structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Result indicated majority of the learners in secondary schools in Hardap region were not exposed to career guidance programs. Only 20% of secondary school learners are aware of career guidance programmes in the region.

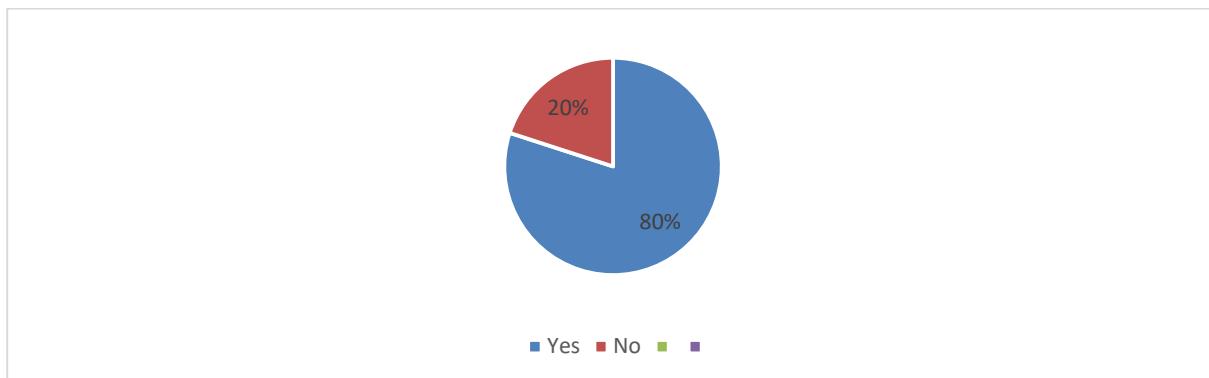


Figure 1: Learners' awareness of career guidance

Data from interviews indicated that career guidance was delivered through Life Skills lessons, but learners admitted that the content was often limited due to time constraints and lack of specialised and well-trained teachers.

Student 2: “*We only had one session in Grade 12 about career options, and by then, most of us had already applied to universities based on our own research or advice from family.*”

Student 5: “*I didn't even know what career guidance was until I got to university and saw how other students had prepared.*”

Teacher 1: “*We don't have enough time to prepare learners for career guidance at school level.*”

Theme 2: Effectiveness of career guidance programs in schools

The study sought to understand the effectiveness of career guidance programs in schools. Data were collected by closed ended questionnaire. Results indicated that most schools in Hardap region, career guidance programmes are not effective. Yet in some schools' learners are not aware of career guidance at all thus they remained neutral. However, there are some schools that are carrying out career guidance programmes effectively.

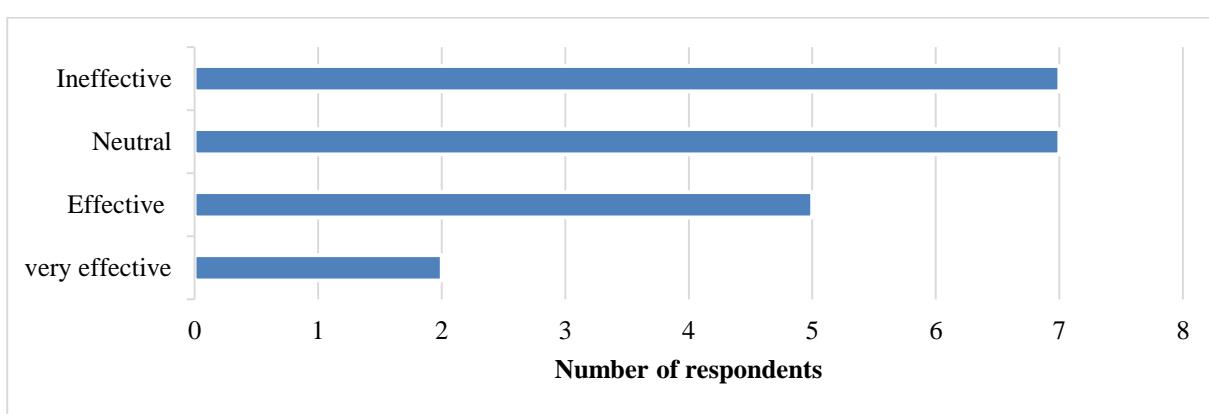


Figure 2: Effectiveness of current career guidance programs in selected schools

Theme 3: The role of career guidance in helping learners prepare for tertiary education

The study sought to understand the role of career guidance in preparing learners for tertiary education. Data were collected by interviews with fifteen (15) secondary school learners, three (3) Life Skills teachers, three (3) school principals and five (5) first year university students. When learners asked about the role of career guidance, have generally expressed that career guidance played a critical role in helping them to make appropriate decisions for their future studies and their future careers. Some learners indicated that:

Learner 2: *“Career guidance is there to guide learners into making the right choices.”*

Learner 4: *“It makes sure learners choose careers that suit their personality.”*

Learner 10: *“It directs learners into fields of study they are not aware of.”*

Five Life Skills teachers echoed similar sentiments but added more nuanced insights. One teacher from school B stated that *“it offers opportunities for them to explore different options in their field that they could not have thought of.”* Life Skills teachers' responses indicated that career guidance expand learners' horizons beyond what they might learn from family or media. However, another teacher from school C offered a critical perspective by stating that *“sometimes career guidance informs learners and sometimes it misleads and confuse learners.”* All the three (3) school principals agreed on the value of career guidance, Principal 2 and 3 stated that *“it helps learners to make informed decisions.”*

Theme 4: The implementation of career guidance in schools

The study sought to find out how career guidance programs were implemented in schools. Data were collected by interview with fifteen (15) secondary learners. Thirteen (13) of fifteen (15) secondary learners agreed that career guidance was primarily delivered through Life Skills lessons.

Learner 6: *“career guidance is implemented through a variety of career fairs as well as by Life Skills teachers through her class teaching.”*

Learner 10: *“our Life Skills teacher gives us pamphlets from different institutions.”*

Learner 5: *“apart from the information we get from our life skills, visitors from Namibian Institute of mining and Technology came to our school to talk about available careers at a Keetmanshoop campus.”*

However, one learner from school 3 indicated lack of exposure by saying that *“to be honest, we are not given any career guidance since I came to this school.”* These responses had shown a variation in implementation across schools. While some schools actively promoted career guidance through Life Skills classes and external visitors from different institution of higher education. It seems that there some schools that offered minimal or no structured career guidance programs. This study further sought to understand the involvement of the stakeholders such as counsellors, Life Skills teachers, government agencies, NGOs, as well as Universities and colleges in the implementation of career guidance programs. The questionnaires were assigned to principals and Life Skills teachers. The data as presented in Figure 3, underscores the vital role of Life Skills teachers in delivering career guidance in most schools, as learners depend heavily on this subject for structured support, despite supplementary efforts like pamphlets, guest speakers, and career fairs being inconsistently applied.

Data indicated a limited focus on familiar careers, restricting students' awareness of wider tertiary education options. External involvement is minimal, with some schools reporting no support from university officials, NGOs, or dedicated career counsellors, highlighting the under-resourced and uneven implementation of career guidance. These findings emphasize the need for a more comprehensive, inclusive approach that involves trained guidance personnel, partnerships with tertiary institutions, and broader access to career information.

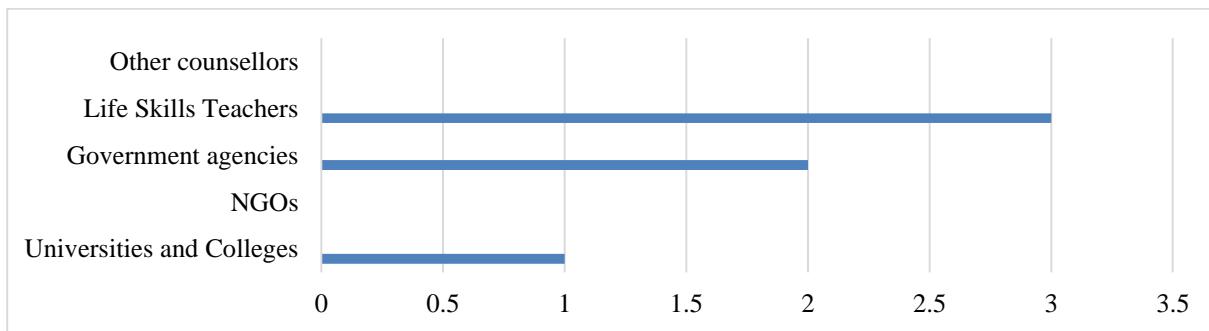


Figure 3: Stakeholders involved in career guidance programs

Theme 5: The challenges in the delivery of career guidance to learners

The study further sought to understand the challenges encountered in the implementation of career guidance programs in schools. Data were collected from fifteen (15) learners, five (5) first year university students, three (3) Life Skills teachers and three (3) principals. The questionnaire assigned to all the participants.

The findings presented in Figure 4, highlight key challenges in providing effective career guidance, mainly citing lack of resources, limited time, and shortage of qualified counsellors as major barriers, especially in under-resourced schools. Limited external support and community collaboration were also noted.

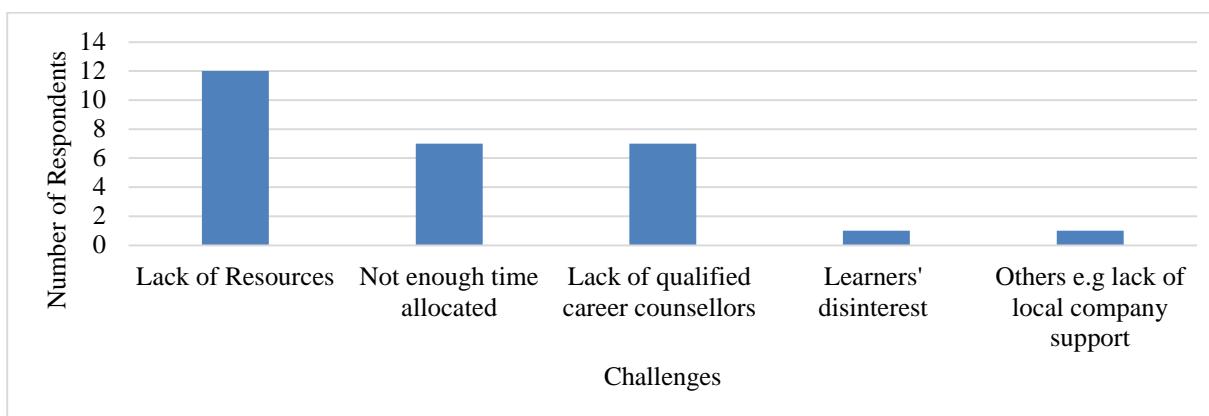


Figure 4: The challenges in the delivery of career guidance to learners

Theme 6: Strategies for improving career guidance in schools

The study went further to establish strategies for improving the career guidance in schools to prepare learners for tertiary education. Data were collected by interview with fifteen (15) secondary learners, three (3) Life Skills teachers, five (5) first year university students and three (3) school principals. The findings revealed that there is need for earlier, more accessible, and comprehensive career guidance programs in schools. Thirteen of Fifteen secondary learners emphasised the importance of visitation from universities and college representatives and recommend that schools should host such interactions to explain available programs and admission requirements for the various institution of higher education. Ten (10) of fifteen secondary learners also suggested the distribution of

career pamphlets, organization of career exhibitions, and training in research skills to help them independently explore various courses offered by different tertiary institutions. Additionally, one learner from school 10 proposed that *“career aptitude or interest tests be introduced to help match learners’ strengths with appropriate career paths.”* That highlighting the desire for personalised guidance in school. From three (3) Life Skills teachers and three (3) principals, there is call for starting career guidance as early as Grade 9, with some advocating for even primary-level introduction. Teacher 4 emphasised that, *“there is a need for dedicated funding to support extended career days involving external experts and interactive activities.”* Principal 2 suggested that *“aligning subject combinations with tertiary requirements, integrating career topics across*

curricula, and using aptitude tests for personalisation." Four out of five first-year university students expressed a desire for more structured, consistent guidance, mentorship opportunities, and insights into practical issues such as financial planning and job market trends, underscoring the importance of a holistic, continuous, and contextually relevant approach to career education.

Discussions

Awareness and provision of career guidance

The study revealed that although most learners were aware of career guidance services at their schools, the implementation of these services is not consistent and largely informal and hindered by constraints such as limited time and lack of specialised training among educators. As revealed by teachers and principals, career guidance was mostly incorporated into Life Skills lessons but seems to be insufficiently resourced and often introduced too late, typically in the final years of secondary schooling, to effectively support informed decision-making. First-year tertiary students echoed these concerns, noting that career guidance was neither comprehensive nor timely enough to influence their choices or prepare them adequately for higher education and future careers. These findings echo prior research in similar contexts, such as Ntalasha (2015), who describes school-based career guidance in Namibia as underdeveloped and lacking formal structure, often resulting in limited exposure for learners. Likewise, Mativo et al. (2017) emphasize that inadequate teacher training and institutional support hinder the development of effective career guidance in African secondary schools.

The current study's results diverge from international best practices, like Watts and Sultana (2004), who advocate for continuous, early-stage guidance, arguing that delaying this process diminishes its long-term impact. In the local context, guidance is primarily limited to late secondary school years, reducing its potential influence on learners' career planning and motivation. From a theoretical standpoint, the lack of consistent and early career guidance hampers the development of learners' self-efficacy and outcome expectations, as outlined in Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Hukins 2014). First-year university students' responses similarly indicating that insufficient guidance diminishes their ability to explore interests and make well-informed choices.

Unlike more advanced systems with institutionalised partnerships and support from tertiary institutions and industry, schools in the Hardap region lacked such mechanisms, which aligning with Salami (2008), as highlighted that there is a resource constraint in sub-Saharan Africa's career guidance services. Overall, these findings underscore the urgent need for structured, early, and well-resourced career guidance programs that promote student agency, motivation, and better alignment with individual interests and labour market demands.

Effectiveness of career guidance programs in schools

The findings indicated that only about a few of participants perceive their school's career guidance programs as effective, while most of them viewed it at neutral or ineffective level. This mixed perception suggested that although some learners could benefit from the available interventions, many of them remained unconvinced of the relevance or impact of career guidance programs in schools. Such scepticism aligns with Mativo et al. (2017), as noted that the effectiveness of career guidance in African schools is often compromised by inconsistency in implementation of programs and lack of contextual tailoring programs to respond to the students' needs.

This limited impact can be attributed to systemic issues such as insufficient training for Life Skills teachers, inadequate institutional support, and the provision of outdated or generic information. Ntalasha (2015) highlighted similar challenges in Namibian schools, where career guidance is often regarded as an ancillary service rather than a core educational function, resulting in guidance that is either too late or too superficial. Moreover, all the fifteen (15) first-year university students reported receiving career guidance only in their final secondary school year, contradicting recommended best practices by Gysbers (2005), who advocated for developmentally appropriate, continuous, and integrated guidance throughout schooling.

From the perspective of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) in Hukins (2014), such fragmented and ineffective guidance can negatively impact learners' self-efficacy and outcome expectations, crucial components for successful career decision-making. When guidance lacks clarity and structure, learners may struggle to develop a clear understanding

of their abilities and opportunities, hindering their capacity to set realistic goals and exercise personal agency. The large proportion of neutral responses could also reflect confusion or limited awareness of what career guidance should involve. Similarly, Salami (2008), stresses that meaningful guidance requires learners to understand its purpose. Therefore, it is deemed necessary that improving training, ensuring consistent delivery, and aligning guidance with learners' needs and the labour market are essential steps toward strengthening these programs in the Hardap region.

The role of career guidance in helping learners prepare for tertiary education

The study findings indicated that learners, Life Skills teachers, and school principals recognised career guidance as a vital tool in preparing learners for tertiary education, positively influencing their self-awareness, career exploration, and decision-making. Learners particularly valued how guidance helped them align their personalities and interests with suitable career paths, fostering a sense of purpose. This aligns with the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which emphasizes that well-delivered guidance can enhance self-efficacy and increase awareness of diverse opportunities, thereby broadening students' occupational aspirations and encouraging exploration of unfamiliar fields (Lent et al., 1994; Pan & Sun, 2018).

However, concerns raised by Life Skills teachers about the potential for confusion when guidance is poorly organised highlighted the importance of structured, quality programs in schools. Unsystematic or poorly planned guidance, according to Watts and Fretwell (2004), can cause indecision and anxiety among students, especially when messages conflict or information is insufficient. However, school principals acknowledged the value of career guidance in helping learners make informed choices, but many schools in the Hardap region lacked formal structures or dedicated staff to deliver comprehensive guidance, affecting its impact. Ultimately, the effectiveness of career guidance in preparing learners for higher education hinges on its quality, structure, timeliness, and individualisation, otherwise, even well-intentioned efforts risk confusion and misinformation.

The implementation of career guidance in schools

The findings reveal significant variability in how career guidance was implemented across secondary schools in the Hardap region. While ten (10) of fifteen (15) secondary learners acknowledged that guidance is mainly delivered through Life Skills Education, supplemented by activities like career fairs and guest speakers, its application remained inconsistent. Some learners reported receiving no career guidance at all, highlighting a gap between policy and practice, and indicating that the existing framework was often fragmented and unevenly executed. These observations align with Nokuri (2020), who notes that despite policies encouraging career guidance in Namibia, many schools struggle with delivering consistent and structured programs. The heavy reliance on Life Skills teachers, who may lack specialized training or sufficient resources, further hampers effective delivery (Maunga, 2018).

Responses from first-year university students suggest that their exposure to career options are mostly limited to teachers' personal experiences or knowledge, often centred on familiar careers like teaching and nursing. Watts and Fretwell (2004) warn that guidance based on anecdotal information risks leading learners to make poorly informed decisions, underscoring the need for systematic guidance approaches. Furthermore, the limited involvement of external stakeholders significantly constrains the potential of career guidance programs. While two (2) of three (3) schools occasionally involved university and ministry officials, the absence of NGOs, career counsellors, and industry partners diminishes the holistic nature of career development. The integration of diverse voices from higher education, industry, and psychological support services is essential for effective guidance (OECD, 2004). From a Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) perspective, such inconsistent implementation hinders the development of learners' self-efficacy and realistic career expectations (Lent et al., 2000). Overall, the findings emphasised the urgent need for a more coordinated, resource-supported, and stakeholder-inclusive approach to career guidance in Namibian schools.

The challenges in the delivery of career guidance to learners

The findings from questionnaire indicated that the delivery of effective career guidance in schools in the Hardap region faced significant systemic and resource-related obstacles. The most frequently reported barrier was the lack of resources, which aligned with studies like that of Nokuri (2020) and Makura (2017) that highlighted the struggle of underfunded schools, especially in rural areas, to provide essential materials such as career booklets or internet research tools. Additionally, the limited time allocated for career guidance and the absence of qualified counsellors are some of the challenges established by this study. From other related studies, it was established that career guidance was not sufficiently prioritised or supported by trained professionals, (Mapfumo & Nkoma, 2013).

Furthermore, a study by Wang and Deng (2022) stated that generally learners are receptive to guidance when it is relevant, personalised, and well-delivered. Another critical issue was the lack of partnerships with local companies and community organisations as well as local businesses which are limits real-world exposure for learners. Watts and Fretwell (2004) emphasised that school-industry collaborations can significantly enhance the effectiveness and experiential nature of career guidance. From the perspective of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), these barriers serve as environmental constraints that hinder the development of learners' self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal-setting behaviours, (Lent et al., 2000). Without access to qualified mentors, up-to-date information, and diverse career role models, students' ability to build accurate career identities and make well-informed educational decisions becomes compromised. Addressing these challenges requires better resourcing, institutional prioritisation of career guidance, and active engagement with external stakeholders to broaden students' career exposure and support their development.

Strategies for improving career guidance in schools

The study revealed a consensus among learners, teachers, principals, and first-year university students on the importance of early, structured, and comprehensive career guidance to facilitate learners' transition into tertiary education. Learners specifically emphasised

the need for university representatives to visit schools and provide detailed information about courses and admission criteria that sentiment is aligning with Oduaran and Bhola (2006), who highlighted the value of partnerships with tertiary institutions. Additionally, learners proposed career exhibitions, pamphlets, aptitude tests, and research skills training, supporting Maree (2013) view that career guidance should empower learners with both information and skills for self-assessment. The inclusion of aptitude tests also reflects the Social Cognitive Career Theory's (SCCT) focus on developing self-efficacy and personal agency, facilitating more informed and confident career decisions (Lent et al., 2002). Teachers and principals echoed these ideas, advocating for starting career guidance as early as Grade 9, integrated across the curriculum, and supported by continuous assessments and training. The suggestion to link subject choices to tertiary requirements addressed a crucial issue in Namibia's education system, where subject selection can restrict future educational opportunities, as it was supported by Van Esbroeck (2008).

The call for earlier intervention and career development embedded in the curriculum supports a holistic approach as recommended by UNESCO (2018). First-year university students added their voices, emphasising the need for consistent guidance sessions, mentorship programs, and insights from professionals and alumni, including practical topics like financial planning and labour market trends. Similarly, Nel, Troskie-de Bruin, & Bitzer (2014), stressed the importance of experiential and socio-economic guidance in shaping informed career paths among students.

Conclusion

The study highlighted that career guidance is essential for preparing learners in the Hardap region for tertiary education and helping them to make informed career choices. However, its current implementation is limited in scope and effectiveness. Career guidance is primarily delivered through Life Skills lessons with minimal involvement from external stakeholders like universities and professionals. Challenges such as resource shortages, limited time, and inadequate teacher training further undermine its impact. Despite these hurdles, learners expressed a strong desire for more engaging and comprehensive

initiatives, including career fairs, university visits, and access to diverse resources. The study established that there is a need to enhance career guidance structure, provide adequate resources, and to develop collaborative approach with other stakeholders. It was also concluded that career guidance should start at lower grades.

Recommendations

- Schools should introduce career guidance at early stage, starting from Grade 8 or 9, to give learners ample time to explore and make informed decisions about their careers.
- Schools should strengthen partnerships with external stakeholders such as universities, colleges, industry professionals, and government agencies to facilitate regular visits, career fairs, and firsthand exposure to diverse career opportunities.
- The Ministry should provide ongoing training and support for teachers to integrate career guidance across various subjects and ensure they deliver accurate, up-to-date information.
- Institution of higher education should improve access to current career resources, including printed materials, digital tools, and internet facilities, to enable learners to conduct self-directed career research.
- Schools should allocate sufficient time to extra-curricular activities for comprehensive career activities such as workshops, mentorship programs, assessments, and one-on-one counselling to enhance learner engagement and informed decision-making.

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