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Cases from different regions

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Career counselling at Indian universities from a gender viewpoint: Cases from different  
regions

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**Career counselling at Indian universities from a gender viewpoint: Cases from different regions**

**Abstract**

Career studies indicate that individuals are increasingly responsible for their own careers, which seem to be more diverse than ever. This raises a question for universities regarding how they can develop their career counselling services so that students receive the help and guidance they need to manage their careers. Previous studies show that women have more difficulties advancing in a career than men. To increase women's career opportunities and empower them to participate in working life, ultimately increasing gender equality in society and at work, women's career counselling at universities needs special attention.

In this study, career counselling at Indian universities in different regions is analysed using a case study approach. The paper starts by describing the main obstacles to women's career development in India, followed by a presentation of the case study results. In the case study, the following three questions are answered: What kind of career counselling services do Indian universities offer? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the universities' career counselling services? How is gender taken into consideration in these services? This study contributes to the literature on women's career development from the viewpoint of university career services by highlighting the often-overlooked contextual nature of the topic. Seen from a practical management viewpoint, this study offers insights into how to advance women's employability, social mobility, wellbeing and inclusion in working life in the Indian context. Such advances can improve labour market effectiveness as well as social and economic development in India.

Open-ended interviews and documentary data were used to produce the data, and content analysis was applied to analyse it. In India, it is significantly more difficult for women to advance in

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a career than it is for men. Many female university alumni work for only a limited time after graduation and then focus on family. It is a strength of Indian universities that they have career counselling services available and close connections with places of employment. A weakness is that, typically, little attention is paid to the gender perspective in counselling.

*Keywords:* career counselling, case study, gender, India, university

### **Introduction**

Most career theories are based on the ideas of stability and continuity. However, recent career studies indicate that individuals are increasingly responsible for their careers, which seem to be more diverse, changing and insecure than ever (Savickas et al., 2009). To thrive in this changing career context, people need career competencies that can help them be proactive and adaptable in identifying career opportunities (Akkermans et al., 2012). Seen from the viewpoint of universities, which is the focus of this paper, this raises a question regarding how universities can develop their career counselling services so that students receive the help and guidance they need to manage their careers.

Due to a secondary socialization process (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), a student's professional identity is created to a great extent during her years at university. Therefore, the years when a student studies at university are a significant, even transformative, phase in her life that affects competency and motivation to make career decisions and prepare for a new career path and life situation after graduation. Effective career guidance and counselling is an important mechanism to help students prepare for their future working life.

Previous studies show that women have more difficulties advancing in a career than men, and family responsibilities affect women's careers more than men's (Budhwar et al., 2005; Heikkinen et al., 2014, 2017; The Global Gender Gap Report, 2018). Young women in particular have more difficulties than men after graduation in terms of starting their career due, for example, to expected future family responsibilities (Vuorinen-Lampila, 2016; Tiwari, 2019). However, prior research shows that various forms of gender-sensitive developmental activities, such as mentoring and training, can support women's careers and their participation in working life (e.g., Bova, 2000; Lämsä & Hiillos, 2008; Petrovic, 2015; Lämsä & Savela, 2019). So, it can be argued that to increase young women's career opportunities and empower them to participate in working life, and

ultimately increase gender equality in society and places of employment, career guidance and counselling targeted specifically to female students at universities needs special attention.

### **Aim of the study**

The aim of this study is to produce knowledge of career counselling and guidance services at universities. To reach this goal, we analyse the services at Indian universities in different regions using a case-study approach. The paper starts by describing the main obstacles to women's career development in India, followed by a presentation of the case study results. In the case study, the following three questions are answered:

- What kind of career-counselling services do Indian universities offer?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the universities' career-counselling services?
- How is gender taken into consideration in these services?

According to Akkermans & Kubasch (2017), the main emphasis in the field of career and gender research has been on what women need to do to be successful in a career. In line with their argument, we believe a crucial next step is to investigate the role of other actors concerning this topic. Therefore, in this study, we contribute to the literature by exploring universities as crucial actors in supporting women's career development and conduct a situational analysis of the universities' counselling and guidance services.

This case study offers insights and ideas to university management regarding how universities can advance young women's career competencies, employability, wellbeing and inclusion to succeed in their future working life in India. University career guidance and counselling services are important not only for meeting students' personal needs but also to encourage sustainable development and equality in workplaces and society (Van Esbroeck, 2002).

Quick changes in working life and career paths as well as a competitive labour market have created challenges for university graduate employability (Bates et al., 2019), not to mention economic and equality pressures to increase women's labour market participation in different parts of the world (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2018). Currently, career theory and models apply most closely to the lifestyles of white men. Pointing out the necessity of adapting existing models to better include the life realities of women, Pringle and McCulloch (2009) have emphasized the need to pay attention to the viewpoint of women in career studies.

Also, the influence of sexism and racism (Pringle & Mallon, 2003) on women's career issues still tends to be underestimated and should be taken into account, providing women-empowerment activities, mentoring and/or networking as a counterweight. In this paper, we bring a gender perspective to the topic in the context of university career counselling and guidance. We also contribute to the literature by highlighting the often-overlooked contextual nature of career issues in previous studies (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017) and investigate the topic in the Indian context.

### **Literature review**

#### **Career counselling**

A well-known definition from Kidd (2006) has conceptualized career counselling and guidance broadly and defined it as a one-to-one, usually ongoing interaction between counsellor (practitioner) and counsellee (client) involving the application of psychological theory and a recognised set of communication skills. Traditional career-counselling theory relies on the idea of matching (Kidd et al., 1993). This means that counselling is seen as a process of decision making in which counsellees are evaluated by the counsellor and then matched to the best solution offered by the counsellor. The counsellor's view is hardly ever questioned, and in this type of matching theory, the counsellee is regarded as a passive object of the counsellor's exercise of power (Lämsä & Hiillos, 2008). The primary focus is on helping the counsellee, such as a female university student,

make career-related decisions and deal with career-related issues under the counsellor's guidance. Despite its popularity, matching theory has been claimed to be very counsellor-dominated and has been criticized for not listening prominently to the counsellee's voice (McMahon et al., 2002).

Recent years have seen a call for a contextual mindset in career research in which the understanding of career development and factors related to development are based on the idea that career development does not happen in a vacuum (Savickas et al., 2009; Heikkinen & Lämsä, 2017). Instead, individuals in career issues are seen as interacting with and within their social, institutional and cultural contexts (Patton & McMahon, 2017; Litano & Major, 2016). This viewpoint regards career counselling and guidance as not only an intra-individual developmental process but one in which the person is seen as an open system, constantly interacting with various factors in the environment while seeking solutions in his or her career and gaining the necessary skills to prepare for a career.

Following Savickas et al. (2009), we accentuate that human behaviour in a career context is not only a function of the person but also of the environment. For example, no matter how stable a young Indian woman's characteristics might be, not only counselling services but also the woman's living environment and its circumstances affect her career skills and decisions (Tiwari, 2019). From this viewpoint, career development is seen as a part of the process of human development in a specific context rather than a process with a singular outcome (Litano & Major, 2017).

In this paper, we see both career and career counselling and guidance as active meaning-making processes that evolve over the life course embedded in context (Savickas, 1995; Savickas et al., 2009). This idea stresses three main tasks that are crucial to career counsellors: 1) to enter into sensible and trustworthy communication with the other, 2) to develop a mutual understanding of the particular difficulty that the other faces and 3) to plan and construct, together with the counsellee,



projects that are designed to increase responsibility and personal control, increase the other's meaningful participation in social life and move toward a preferred future (Peavy, 1998).

In sum, career counselling and guidance in general are facing a paradigm change. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the focus was mostly on helping people find paid employment, which, if done correctly, could lead to a lifelong work relationship. Fitting with this perception, the counselling approach adopted 'trait-factor' theories based on the assumption that work-related characteristics are stable over a lifetime (Savickas et al., 2009). According to Arthur et al. (1999), two essential elements have been missing in this process: first, the subjective meaning of 'life' and 'work' and second, a sense of the dynamic interplay between life episodes and the context of the career itself.

### **Obstacles to women's career development in India**

According to the Global Gender Gap Report (2018), India ranks 108 out of 149 countries worldwide in gender equality. In gender equality concerning economic participation and opportunity, the country ranks 142, and in educational attainment it ranks 114. In India, the work participation rate of women is approximately 30 per cent compared to men, which is 80 per cent (India Labour Market Update, 2017). In rural areas, women are mainly involved as cultivators and agricultural laborers. In urban areas, women typically work in unorganized sectors, such as household industries, petty trades and services and construction.

Although the Indian government currently emphasises women's empowerment and equal opportunity in society, women's career development is more problematic compared to men, and women face significant difficulties attaining decision-making positions in their working life (Kumbhar, 2013; Tiwari, 2019). Advancing women's economic participation and careers is not just a matter of social justice and equality. Women are an important human resource in society and at work, and their talents need to be utilized to advance the economic growth and development of the country and its institutions (Kumbhar, 2013).

Various factors affect women's ability to start and advance in a career in the Indian context. According to Agarwala (2008), who investigated MBA students in India, competency and student's "father" are important factors affecting the career choices of Indian students. In a study by Agarwala (2008), women said they experience career barriers that men do not face. For example, women are evaluated according to stricter criteria compared to men. Tiwari (2019) also showed in her study that especially father's/grandfather's influence on girls' career choice in India is a long process which starts before university studies. Budhwar et al. (2005) and Kumbhar (2013) argued that the traditional mindset and gender-based stereotypes in Indian society that favour men over women are crucial obstacles to women's economic participation and career development.

Kumbhar (2013) also noted that women in the Indian context face problems when trying to set an agenda for their life. The lack of role models, limited access to education and the scarcity of social networks related to work are significant barriers, which means many women in India are not aware of their potential, suffer low self-confidence and low risk tolerance (Kumbhar, 2013). Traditional gender roles and family relationships have a significant effect on the career choices of Indian women and make it difficult for them to integrate work and family. Educated women often decide to leave their career to take care of children, family members and household (cf. Ronzio, 2012).

Additionally, women often experience sexual harassment and teasing in the workplace in India, which is a violation of their right to dignity and equality. It is argued that this harassment is based in the dominance of patriarchy in the society, which sees men as superior to women. As a result, violence against women is understood as acceptable and 'natural' (Handbook on Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace, 2015, p.1). A risk of facing sexual harassment causes various physical and mental problems for women and can prevent them from participating in working life.

### **Methods**

In this study, an explorative case study approach was applied, because our purpose was to seek new insights into and discover general information on the topic (Saunders & Lewis, 2012) to be help us assess the contemporary situation of career counselling and guidance services at the studied Indian universities and produce knowledge on how to improve these services. Two universities represent our cases. The universities were selected for this study, because during the research process, they participated in an international R&D project that aimed to support young women's career development in the university system and examine career barriers to women in India. These universities showed a motivation and willingness to promote the aim; thus, to our understanding, they can be considered forerunners in their context, at least to some extent. That said, no comprehensive information about applying a gender perspective to career counselling and guidance in Indian universities is available.

The case universities are located in different parts of the country. They have operated for several decades and are highly ranked in their fields. The institutions have active contacts with various stakeholders, such as alumni, industry and civil society. Moreover, they are active in social-responsibility initiatives. Later in this paper, the acronyms A and B are used to represent the two cases.

We used data triangulation to increase the trustworthiness of this case study, so the data were gathered from multiple sources (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, p.116-117). Five open-ended individual interviews; two focus-group interviews, including 13 participants altogether; a roundtable discussion, including 14 people; and documentary data (website information, project plan, organizations' internal communication material) were used to produce the data, and content analysis, which is a method that concentrates on analysing texts, not numbers (Saunders & Lewis, 2012), was applied to analyse it.

### **Results**

Since its establishment, case A has been engaged in students' career-management activities. Career services have been offered for approximately the last two decades. The career-management organization includes managers and faculty from the university as well as external members, such as industry experts, company representatives and medical and psychological experts. The university has developed a centre that is responsible for career-boosting activities, such as active company relations to offer opportunities for internships and post-graduation employment for students. The centre's scope has been expanded over time to various other activities, such as short-term corporate projects, recruitment training and special sessions for females for social engagement. The scope covers professional and personal counselling and capacity-building programs.

The centre is an important strategic function of the university, and its activities are regularly evaluated and developed. In general, the centre aims to build up students' all-round competence from the industry's point of view and adds value to the students through its diverse interventions. The centre has offered counselling and support services to alumni as well. However, because it focuses more on services to students, for some years now, alumni career services have been delegated to the independent alumni association.

Career counselling and guidance starts at the beginning of the program of study, when students arrive on campus. The program continues throughout their studies and offers various types of activities to students. For example, senior alumni and leaders from industry make presentations, and students are offered personal testing to improve their self-awareness and self-reflection capacity and to support their understanding of their potential during their studies and their future career. In addition, a summer internship workshop is organized to help students prepare for their future working life and its requirements.

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Regular counselling sessions and discussions with small groups of students conducted by faculty member are also used. Health care professionals are available around the clock to handle any queries from students pertaining to their physical and mental well-being. Women's special needs are given some attention in the health care services. A committee has been created to handle issues related to sexual harassment. To ensure the safety and security of female students, during the off-campus selection process/visits, the university provides logistical support through its regular vendors.

All in all, a strength of the career counselling services offered by case A is that the institution takes a professional management approach to counselling and guidance, including a permanent and well-established organising body representing various relevant actors to support students in their career planning and aspirations. Additionally, multiple forms of career-support activities are made available to students. Another important strength is that the centre responsible for career counselling and guidance activities acts in close cooperation with external stakeholders, especially industry and alumni.

Seen from a gender viewpoint, the institution recognizes the importance of this perspective and pays close attention to it in many of its activities. However, with the increasing number of female students in the institution, it is challenging to make career counselling and guidance processes more supportive to female students, especially considering their specific career requirements. One challenge is to advance the services that acknowledge that the majority of students have no work experience. Additionally, female students' empowerment to participate in different campus activities could be stronger. The development of the students' stress-management skills also merits further attention. Finally, because the students come from different parts of the country and from different linguistic groups, cultural sensitivity and tolerance is an issue.

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Case B has a systematic counselling policy, organization and procedure, which provide a platform for students to share their problems, aspirations and interests related to academic and non-academic matters. Moreover, the system involves monitoring the students' academic progress and identifying different learners to offer them suitable assistance and an environment to grow and prosper. Finally, the aim is to cultivate a higher degree of professional responsibilities and impart these values to the students.

A key activity of career counselling and guidance is mentoring; the aims and process of which are defined explicitly. A mentoring process that follows the students' course of studies is designed for the entire university, but different departments can modify the process according to their needs and requirements. The approach to mentoring is processual by nature and contains several steps, from the training and cultivation of faculty members to become mentors and meet the students' needs, aspirations and challenges to the evaluation and continuous development of the process. The mentoring policy is generally reviewed after a period of one year, following the institution's quality-assurance system.

Typically, a group of mentees consist of 20–25 students, and an individual faculty member acts as mentor to the group. The goal is for the same faculty member to remain as the mentor for the group throughout its tenure at the institution. This university also provides the services of a professional counsellor, who visits different institutes regularly. However, students tend to prefer going to their mentor or other faculty member, who they know better and feel comfortable with, to discuss their problems. The faculty members counsel the students on various issues, such as helping them with career issues, selecting an area of specialization, choices concerning practical placements and support regarding personal problems.

Seen from the viewpoint of gender, the university also has a unit called the Women Development Cell, which provides sessions on gender sensitization, self-defense and self-

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exploration for students as well as staff. Additionally, a sexual harassment prevention cell operates at the university. It prevents discrimination and sexual harassment based on gender. It lays down procedures for the prohibition, resolution, settlement and prosecution of acts of discrimination and sexual harassment against women by students or employees. Special committees deal with cases of discrimination and sexual harassment reported by teaching and nonteaching staff members or students.

A strength of this institution is that it has a systematic, processual and well-developed approach to career counselling and guidance services, especially in the field of mentoring. This approach is based on a quality-management system. Furthermore, the organising of the counselling and guidance services is clear, and the responsibilities of different actors are explained well. One strength is that specific cells have been set up to build a safe and non-discriminatory environment for students and staff. The university adopts a gender perspective particularly through the activities of the cells, but no systematic attention to gender is taken into consideration in the mentoring procedure.

**Concluding remarks and recommendations**

The university experience is commonly identified as a transitional phase in a student's life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). For many female (as well as male) students, it may be their first time away from family restrictions and their first opportunity to live an independent life. It is also a transitional period in terms of economic status, wherein students are financially dependent on their family but must also learn to manage their expenses, seeing as they are staying away from home. Also, during this period, they are introduced to wide range of professional courses under the programs offered to them. At times, this adds to the stress and anxiety factors amongst the students. When all these issues are counselled effectively in a gender-sensitive way, students may be transformed into sound professionals, as per the demands of society and work.

In this case study, we assumed that career counselling and guidance is a context-situated phenomenon that is affected by many factors outside the counselling process (Savickas et al., 2009). Our research leads us to suggest that building a holistic career-counselling and guidance system is needed instead of the traditional idea of seeing counselling as a one-to-one relationship between counsellor and counsellee based on psychological theory (Kidd, 2006). We recommend that career competencies (Arthur et al., 1995; Akkermans et al., 2012), such as female students' reflective, communicative and networking as well as behavioural competencies, can offer an interesting and multidisciplinary perspective to help develop this model. Additionally, special training, such as entrepreneurship and job-search training, can be part of the model. Finally, we recommend that the model's theoretical background is explicated in order to build a credible foundation. In the Indian context especially, the role of family in regard to female students' career choices as well as the problem of sexual harassment need special attention.

This case study implies that an important strength of the studied Indian universities is that they have career counselling and guidance services available. A weakness is that, typically, little attention is paid to a gender perspective in counselling and guidance. Although gender is taken into consideration to some extent, a systematic research-based view to how and why to deal with gender is not evident. That said, multiple services are offered, and they are well organized as well as continuously evaluated and developed. The services are also conducted in close connection with employers and other stakeholders. To conclude, we think the case institutions have a positive attitude and many existing effective career counselling activities that form an excellent basis to develop their career-counselling and guidance services from a gender perspective.

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