“It is a very difficult process”: career service providers’ perspective on career counseling in Pakistani universities

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Career guidance and counseling (CGC) is needed by many university students in Pakistan. Career service providers (CSPs) can offer appropriate services if they have a sound understanding of CGC needs of students. This study explores perspectives of CSPs working in Pakistani universities about career needs of their students, services offered to their students and the challenges encountered in this process. Qualitative semi-structured interviews with seven CSPs working in two major cities of Pakistan were carried out. Thematic analysis revealed variety of needs (like self-awareness, decision making), services (like one to one counseling, career fairs, seminars) and multiple challenges (like unrealistic expectations of students, insufficient resources) regarding CGC. Results are discussed along with thematic maps. Research implies that CSPs could expand and promote their services; CGC could be customized as per local community needs; parental concerns could be dealt with CGC; CGC could be aligned with academia as well as industry. Future research could look into planning, execution, impact and comparisons of indigenous CGC services.

1. Introduction

Careers are crucial components of our lives; they provide a purposeful direction to the individual; they offer productive boost to the national economy (Hughes et al., 2002). Every individual’s career is not well-organized. Career service providers can be helpful for such individuals. According to National Career Development Association (NCDA) a certified career service provider is any person certified by a certifying body to offer career services in varied roles and settings (NCDA, n.d.). In present article the term career service provider (CSP) refers to any professional who offers career related services, no matter what their education, training, certification, experience or job designation is.

1.1. What are the competencies for a CSP?

The role of a CSP varies as per the place of their employment. A university level career service provider has mainly two roles i.e. to bridge education-employment gap and to meet the ever changing demands of current times (Yoon et al., 2018). These demands vary and hence a lot of competencies are considered necessary for the CSPs.

Different countries and accrediting bodies have identified different competencies. Global Career Development Facilitator (GCDF) highlights twelve competency areas for career service provision based on their global commonalities. These include knowledge related competencies like career development models, labor market, ethical issues, working with diverse clients; and skill related competencies including technology usage, public relations, helping skills, conducting assessments, training clients, implementing their career program, consultancy, employability skills (Center for Credentialing and Education, n.d.). These competencies, if possessed by the CSP, ensure improved service provision.

Though professionals from diverse backgrounds can potentially help diverse clients but competencies endorsed by a professional accrediting body can formulate and foster credibility. This in turn assures the employer as well as the service consumers regarding abilities of CSPs (Hiebert and Neault, 2014).

In addition to accreditation from central bodies, other ways to enhance credibility of service provider and quality of service include appropriate legislature, mandatory licensure, adherence to quality standards, registration of professional CSPs etc (Vuorinen and Kettunen, 2018).

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1.2. What should a CSP know about career needs of students?

It is vital for university level CSPs to grasp the depth and breadth of career related needs of students. Research shows that students value CGC regardless of their educational year and they wish to have close connections with CSPs (Cojocariu and Cojocariu, 2015). They want a wholesome CGC program focusing on professional and personal aspects which is fully integrated with university education (Cojocariu and Puui, 2014). They desire practical opportunities in addition to the theoretical education (Litoiu and Oproiu, 2012).

1.3. What services should the CSP provide to address career needs?

Career services offered by CSPs should have variety in order to cater to the diverse needs. Services should include counseling, conducting assessments, sharing employment information, arranging career fairs, organizing workshops and trainings, introducing internship opportunities, helping with first job choice, facilitating in job application process (Yoon et al., 2018).

Additionally, the theoretical models followed for service provision should be indigenized and not just copied from other nations (Sun and Su, 2020). Career services are available in many countries of the world. Respective governments have established organizations and associations for CGC provision in accordance with their national or local policies (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, n.d.; National Careers Service, n.d.; U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

In recent times, UK, France, Germany have expanded their CGC services whereas countries like Austria, Finland, Greece, Italy, Norway etc. are establishing their CGC services at higher education level (Sultana, 2004). Internationally renowned universities like University of Oxford (n.d.), Stanford University (n.d.), The University of Melbourne (n.d.) have their own career centers for facilitation of students. A wide variety of services ranging from one-on-one (personal guidance sessions etc.) to group level (job fairs etc.) services are offered to the students.

1.4. How needs and services are identified?

Career offices try to offer and modify their services as per the needs of the students. Program evaluation and need assessment are carried out for this purpose (Gladding, 2009). A need assessment has three main stages i.e. planning the assessment by identifying goals, target population, methodology etc.; implementing the plan by collecting and analyzing the data as per methodology; utilizing the results to make new plans or modify old ones (Hammond, 2001).

1.5. What career services are available at international level?

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1.6. What is the significance and availability of career services in Pakistan?

In Pakistan, the largest part of the population consists of youth (15–29 years). Engaging them in appropriate educational, employment and engagement activities can foster their development (United Nations Development Program, 2018). From this chunk of youth, those attending universities are apparently more likely to contribute to national prosperity (United Nations Development Program, 2018). But lack of appropriate guidance and career related services might lead them astray. Therefore, provision of suitable career counseling to university students is the need of the hour.

However, in Pakistan career counseling is an emerging field. Its research and practice is still limited. CSPs are not abundantly available. Some educational institutions have started offering CGC services to their students. CSPs are hired for providing the services. But it is hard to claim anything about the quality of CGC services or the credentials of CSPs as there is no central body to govern them and no national policy to guide them (Zahid et al., 2020).

In order to provide appropriate career services, thorough need assessment should be conducted first (Kavale, 2012). But indigenous research regarding career needs and services is sparse as is the case for most developing nations (Richard, 2005). One indigenous study showed that career offices, though established in some universities, had low utility because the service providers failed to build close interaction with students (Bilal and Malik, 2014). In the absence of proper career services, students consulted other potentially helpful resources like their teachers (Khan et al., 2012) who may or may not be the best person for the job.

It is therefore imperative to understand CSP's perspective about the career needs of university students as it is likely to determine the variety and quality of career services offered by them. Consequently, the whole career counseling process would be affected by the understanding of CSPs. Thorough understanding might be helpful to ensure appropriate services, attracting more students to CGC, whereas superficial understanding might repel the students. Hence, examining needs and services from CSPs' point of view is highly significant. To the best of researchers' knowledge, no such research has been conducted in Pakistan so far. Thus such a research is highly necessary and we are aiming to fulfill this gap through present article.

2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore CSPs perspective regarding CGC needs experienced by university students, the services they offer to students in order to meet those needs and the challenges encountered in this process. Hence, following research questions would be addressed:

- According to CSPs, what are career needs of undergraduates?
- How are CSPs providing their services for fulfilling the needs?
- How do CSPs manage the challenges faced in career service provision?

3. Method and research design

It was a qualitative exploratory research as open ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face. Exploratory research gives free reigns to extensively study a topic (Siebkins, 2001) and usually generates fresh data which is then coded without following pre-determined codes (Guest et al., 2012). Hence, CSPs’ perspective about career needs and career services in universities was explored in great detail by collecting first-hand data.

3.1. Sample and sampling strategy

Purposive and convenient sampling strategy was used. Those universities which were located in either of the two major cities of Pakistan, and which employed CSPs, were purposively shortlisted. For this study, CSP could be any one providing career services at the university, irrespective of their job designation. As per convenience CSPs were contacted via emails or phone calls, explaining the purpose of study and requesting their participation. Interview time and date was set with those who responded positively.

Sample consisted of seven CSPs from six universities (See Table 1). One CSP was selected from each of the five universities whereas two CSPs were selected from the sixth university on the basis of availability as CSPs are few in number in Pakistan. Number of interviews was determined through data saturation (Guest et al., 2012). Data saturation was achieved after seven interviews as no new information was appearing (Seidman, 2006); therefore, further interviews were not conducted.

Inclusion criteria for CSPs was that they should be working in their university for at least one year; and they should have at least weekly-
basis interaction with students regarding career related matters i.e. career counseling, career advisory, mentoring, guidance, placement.

CSPs varied a lot in terms of their educational qualification as most of them were not professionally qualified for providing career services. Their job roles also varied extensively as those having job title of lecturer or research assistant also had career service provision in their job role (See Table 1).

### Development of interview protocol

Interview protocol had open ended questions regarding career needs of students and career services offered by the university (Appendix A). Extensive list of questions was noted through brainstorming. Any overlapping or repeated questions were then merged or deleted. Relevant literature was also consulted to be sure that no important area was untouched (Chircu, 2014; Cojocariu and Puiu, 2014; Crisan et al., 2015; Lent and Brown, 2012; Litoiu and Oproiu, 2012; Richard, 2005; Sultana, 2004; Sun and Yuen, 2012; Szilagyi, 2008). Interview protocol was reviewed protocol by a teacher and a career counselor. The protocol was finalized after aligning with research ethics of APA.

#### Procedure

Research plan and interview protocol was reviewed and approved by departmental committee. First author conducted all the interviews. Before each interview, informed consent prepared in light of APA's ethical code was signed by every respondent. It included information regarding research purpose, approximate interview time, right to withdraw, need for audio recording, anonymous reporting and safe storage of data. Interviews ranged from 36 to 55 min with an average of 45 min. On interview completion, each CSP was given small participation incentive i.e. writing pen, notepad. Recorded interviews were then safely stored and transcribed word to word, while translating any Urdu (national language of Pakistan) responses into English while keeping the meaning intact.

#### Ethical approval

The study was planned and conducted in accordance with APA's ethical guidelines. It was also approved by Departmental Ethical Review Committee for being aligned with research ethics of APA.

### Data analysis, credibility and dependability

Data was analyzed by thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines (See Table 2). To strengthen credibility and dependability, different steps suggested by Guest et al. (2012) were followed. Credibility was ensured by assessing face validity of interview protocol (Guest et al., 2012). As it was

| Code | Job designation | Job role | Qualification | Years in job | Gender |
|------|-----------------|----------|---------------|--------------|--------|
| C1   | Assistant Manager/Research Associate Career Development Center | Organize seminars, workshops, meetings, round tables | MBA; MS in Human Resource | 4 | Male |
|      |                  | Coordination |               |              |        |
|      |                  | Quality assurance |             |              |        |
|      |                  | Assist in university-industry collaboration |            |              |        |
| C2   | Director Office of Career Services | Advisory | MBA | 2 | Male |
|      |                  | Supervising career services |               |              |        |
|      |                  | Placement services |             |              |        |
|      |                  | Advocacy |               |              |        |
| C3   | Officer student affairs and career services | One to one counseling | MS Career Counseling and Education | 1 | Male |
|      |                  | Student training and development |               |              |        |
|      |                  | Industry academia linkages |             |              |        |
|      |                  | Group counseling |            |              |        |
| C4   | Lecturer (Psychology) | Lecturership | MS Career Counseling and Education | 2.5 | Female |
|      |                  | Career Counseling of Students |               |              |        |
|      |                  | Networking with industry |             |              |        |
|      |                  | Conducting seminars in and out of university |            |              |        |
|      |                  | Research supervisor |            |              |        |
|      |                  | Arranging internships |            |              |        |
| C5   | Deputy Director Career Development Center | Capacity building, soft skill training of students | MA (Public Administration); Career Counselor (Certified); Negotiator (Certified) | 15 | Female |
|      |                  | Career coach |               |              |        |
|      |                  | Training on interview techniques |             |              |        |
|      |                  | One-to-one resume critiques |            |              |        |
|      |                  | Focus group discussion |            |              |        |
| C6   | Assistant Director Career Development Center | Workshops | MSC (Psychology); Postgraduate Diploma (Career Counseling; Psychology) | 2 | Female |
|      |                  | Focus group discussions |               |              |        |
|      |                  | One to one counseling |             |              |        |
|      |                  | Administrative duties |            |              |        |
| C7   | Manager Placement | Guiding, training students | MBA | 2 | Female |
|      |                  | Creating employment opportunities |               |              |        |

### Table 1. Demographics of CSPs.

| Code | Job designation | Qualification | Years in job | Gender |
|------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|--------|
|      | Manager Placement | MBA | 2 | Female |

### Table 2. Phases of Thematic Analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

| Phase | Task | It was done by… |
|-------|------|-----------------|
| 1     | Get familiar with data | Transcribing data and reading whole data twice |
| 2     | Generate initial codes | Noting potential codes on margins; Noting relevantverbatim under same code i.e. data collation |
| 3     | Search themes | Reviewing collated data to merge codes into themes |
| 4     | Review themes | Reviewing themes and the data grouped under it; Drawing thematic map to understand link among themes |
| 5     | Define and name themes | Refining themes continuously; Looking at the verbatimsto come up with an appropriate title for theme |
| 6     | Produce the report | Writing detail of all steps and stages along with relevantverbatim |
approved by departmental panel as well as a counselor and a teacher, hence its face validity was high.

To enhance dependability, data was consistently dealt with (Guest et al., 2012). Further, complete research process was extensively explained to make it easily understandable. Moreover, intercoder agreement was also calculated as per Guest et al.’s (2012) recommendations. All seven interviews were first coded by the researchers. Owing to the length of interviews all of them couldn’t be re-coded; hence, only one interview was re-coded by an independent research expert. Percent agreement was manually computed to be 90.7% where 80% or above is considered good agreement (Guest et al., 2012). Hence, the study was made credible and dependable by taking the mentioned steps.

4. Results

Thematic analysis of interview data resulted in two major themes. First theme is ‘perception about students’ and second theme is ‘CGC in universities’. Following part covers the details of the two themes and the relevant subthemes. Relevant verbatim quotes have been included to illustrate themes and sub-themes. Thematic maps are also presented to present figural display of themes.

4.1. Perception about students

CSPs perceived that undergraduates had several CGC needs. Numerous sources of guidance and information were available which they could utilize to fulfill the needs they faced (See Figure 1).

4.1.1. Needs of undergrad students

CSPs felt that university level students had numerous career related needs which are elaborated further.

4.1.1.1. Need for self-awareness.

CSPs were of the view that undergrads’ self-awareness was far from perfect. Undergrads were perceived to be unsure of their needs and wants. A CSP remarked about the undergraduates, ‘There is no self-awareness’ (C5), while another pointed out the flimsy state of self-awareness in those students who were going to graduate very soon, ‘You are about to graduate in a domain which you may love, which you may not love... maybe it is as per your aptitude or not, you don’t know... What you want to do is a very advanced question. First of all you have to know who you are and what is your passion?’ (C2).

4.1.1.2. Need to have sense of direction.

Undergraduates were considered either partially or completely directionless about their
careers. They were perceived to be unsure of their domain i.e. whether to pursue studies or job, whether to opt for a specialized degree or a double degree, whether to go for entrepreneurship or not etc. A CSP commented on this deplorable condition, ‘Very little percentage of students knows which domain they want to pursue. We can suppose that 40% students are aware. 30% don’t know at all. Remaining 30% have no idea yet’ (C6). Most students were going forward with their under-graduation in a mindless fashion without having a definite path ahead of them.

4.1.1.3. Need for decision making. CSPs perceived that students were oblivious to career decision making, its process and the factors that should be considered for it. A CSP emphasized it, ‘Career development is heavily dependent on the decision making process. Many of the students do not even know what a decision-making process is’ (C5). Instead, majority of students made decisions which were not well informed, ‘In fact the statistics I have are that in Pakistan only 7% students take informed decisions about what they want to study’ (C2). Well-thought decisions were seldom made by undergraduates.

Decisions were excessively influenced by external factors e.g. parents, family, relatives, friends, peers, society etc. instead of personal interests and abilities. ‘Their decisions are due to social pressures and not due to their own interests or skills’ (C3), stated a CSP whereas another mentioned ‘When students start university some of them know what they want to do. Some of them do what their friends are doing. Some follow what their parents wish for them’ (C6). Appropriate decision making is hardly practiced by students.

4.1.1.4. Emotional and psychological needs. Students’ needs sprang from the various pressures they faced e.g. academic, emotional, psychological, financial, uncertainty of future etc. Unfortunately, many were unable to identify them, ‘The bad luck is that they are not aware of it that they are undergoing stress, anxiety, depression’ (C4).

Excessive respect of a few careers in society and depreciation of other careers also added to their psychological troubles as an interviewer commented ‘All the issues of anxiety, depression are due to social pressures. There is a mindset that if a person isn’t becoming an engineer then he must be useless; if he is doing arts, he must be very dull in studies. We need to change this (mindset)’ (C7).

4.1.1.5. Need to know information and value of internships. Internships and placements are compulsory for majority of undergraduates but they lack suitable information regarding internships e.g. availability, suitability and application process etc. Students considered internships to be a hassle and a degree prerequisite. ‘If you don’t go for placement and you are isolated then would you know about employers expectations’ (C3), mentioned one CSP while another stated ‘It takes time (for them) to understand that this (internship) is important, (then they realize) I have to do internship even if it is unpaid because I have to develop certain skill level, I have to understand the environment where I will work’ (C2).

4.1.1.6. Need to know industrial requirements and employers’ demands. CSPs believed that undergraduates had a weak idea of employer’s and industrial expectations. Industries looked for combination of sound knowledge base, clear conceptual foundation, practical application of the memorized knowledge, variety of skills and amicable attitude as evident by this comment, ‘Industry are rejecting 3.9 CGPA or 4 CPA individuals because they are saying (that) they are bookish, they are self-absorbed, they are self centered, there is no team work, there is no sense of responsibility and awareness of the society and they can’t hire individuals that are robots. (Industry says) ‘We want people who have 3.5 CGPA, fine. They (should) have got a huge set of skills that are involving people management, technology, enterprise, initiative, time management.’ IT awareness, learning capabilities’… Generally a lot of industrial people have also complained about the attitude of the students’ (C5). Overall, industries wanted to hire those who had the right skills, the right education, as well as the right attitude.

4.1.1.7. Need for job search skills. Undergraduates did not know how to look for a job, how to apply for it, how to prepare for the recruitment process, how to highlight strengths etc. as one interviewee stated, ‘They have no idea about job hunting. They think that the jobs being published in newspapers are enough. But there are a lot of other resources like reference based, internal recruitment, third party recruitment. You can reach out to the employer yourself. If the employer is calling, then they will be calling 10 other potential candidates like you. So why not approach the employer yourself and give them a proposal for something’ (C3).

Students are often ill-prepared regarding significant job search skills e.g. interview, resume writing etc. as a CSP highlighted, ‘They will pick any format (for resume) from google. We end up seeing lots of CVs on daily basis. At times they put their name in very big font at the top, right. You will be scared to see it. When they go for the interview and the interviewer is asking them certain questions and they feel that they don’t know answers, (then) if they don’t have sufficiently strong personality and cannot handle (interview) questions, it creates problems for them’ (C2).

4.1.1.8. Need for detailed information. CSPs considered that many students just enrolled in their degree programs because of lack of information about available options, personal interest and capability. Their decisions based on surface-level information caused problems which could have been avoided by getting in-depth information in the first place. A CSP mentioned, ‘They would know whatever you will ask them as they have google (for answers). What they lack is depth in that’ (C2).

4.1.1.9. Educational needs. CSPs thought that many factors contributed to educational needs of students e.g. outdated curriculum, conventional teaching styles, poor connectivity between theory and practical skills etc. Education should be complemented by their skills, passions and capabilities as a respondent stated, ‘Students need to look into their skills… If they can develop a match between their degree and their skills that is wonderful’ (C4). Array of educational needs could pose multiple problems for students.

4.1.2. Multiple guidance and information sources. CSPs viewed that family, relatives, teachers, CSPs, friends, peers, seniors, technology etc. were all easily available and regularly sought by undergraduates for help. However, information from these sources might clash if it is subjective in nature, ‘The misleading information in the society which is being shared by our parents sometimes, sometimes by friends (or) our class fellows, that misleading information actually confuses the students’ (C4). Hence, resources were multiple but not always helpful.

4.2. CGC in university. It is the second major theme of this study. CGC should be part and parcel of every university. Provision of CGC at university level is the primary responsibility of CSPs. The kind of services offered in universities, the role of CSPs in provision of those services and the challenges encountered in this process are all included in this theme (See Figure 2).

4.2.1. Roles, responsibilities and qualities of CSPs. CSPs highlighted various traits required to be a professional e.g. trustworthy, open minded,
optimistic, well-informed, detail oriented, honest, encouraging, interested, responsible etc. These traits can help to harness the true potential of students.

Roles of CSPs might change according to students’ requirements like guidance, counseling, training, coaching, educating etc. Similarly their responsibilities might include providing in-depth information by going one step ahead of the students’ query, offering wholesome guidance by taking into account all relevant factors, making aware of applicable rules and requirements, pointing out potential hazards etc.

Quote by a CSP well-encompasses the variety and extent of responsibility, ‘Being a career counselor, this is also your responsibility to see that what will be the number of students in a particular field... you also have to make the student aware that what potential will be required for it. You also have to advise about that. Rather after 5 years when the student graduates and sees that there are 100 other just like him so where would he fit-in?’ (C5).

4.2.2. Services in CGC. CSPs mentioned that diverse career services were provided to encompass all career related matters of students like one to one counseling sessions, focus group discussions, workshops, seminars, career-help materials, CV writing, interview preparation, mock interviews, career assessments, job search, recruitment drives, job fairs, internships etc. One respondent shared their multi-stage process, ‘We have set up career development plan. Step 2 is career skills inventory, step 3 is career choosing, step 4 is employability skills, step 5 is internships, step 6 is resume writing, step 7 is interview skills and then we proceed on and hand the student over to institution’s placement office where recruitment drives and other activities are setup for the students’ (C5). Thus, in an attempt to help students an amalgamation of services was usually set up.

4.2.3. Challenges in CGC provision. CGC service provision involved multiple challenges and difficulties which CSPs had to tackle for appropriately delivering the services.

A major challenge was involving disinterested and irresponsible students in CGC process. A respondent frustratingly stated, ‘We offer a lot of programs. If you are asking me the question whether the students come there and are responsible; (the answer is) No!’ (C5), while another shared, ‘Even when students know that a person relevant to their field is conducting a workshop or session (in the university), they still don’t bother (to attend). They are roaming here and there’ (C1).

Lack of awareness, active effort and application on the students’ part was also an issue. ‘Career services aren’t available in the universities. And even if they are available then students aren’t aware of their own (career) needs’ (C3) complained a respondent while another lamented about potential wastage of CGC, ‘Despite of all the counseling and everything, if they are not applying it then the whole counseling effort goes to waste. So this is a challenge which we face’ (C2).

Unrealistic expectations of the students also turned into a barrier for CGC. An interviewee mentioned it in these words, ‘So 99.9% come up to the university with these premonitions that we have come to this institute, now we will get good grades and after 4 years we will graduate and get a superb job and that is the end of the process’ (C5). This was a challenge for CGC provision as students didn’t understand that reality was not that straight-forward.

Limited fields were given the prestige of a full-fledged career which limited the career options and hindered CGC process. ‘In other countries even sports is a full career. And here we say that (getting) education is (the only) career’ (C2), commented a CSP.

Late realization, procrastination and poor decisions on the part of students posed another prominent challenge as one respondent said, ‘Most of the students realize (importance of career counseling) in their final semester or in the final year’ (C1). Then CSPs couldn’t undo students’ poor decisions; hence they had to make the best of the botched scenarios.

Another hurdle was the gap in communication of CGC services to the students as one interviewee stated, ‘Turn out rate is not a lot because only a small number of students have joined (our social media) page... We have to use some marketing strategies to make the students aware that how we can facilitate them’ (C6).

Limited resources, limited CSPs, and limited acceptance of CGC presented another challenge as they were barriers in provision of CGC up to the required standard. A CSP quoted, ‘It (career counseling) is direly needed but it is not available to the students due to limited resources of the university or due to limited acceptance of career services in the university...(plus in university) there should be a student to counselor ratio’ (C3). In short, these challenges need to be managed for CGC provision.

5. Discussion

This section presents summarized results followed by discussion.

Two main themes were identified from the results. First theme is relevant to the perception of CSPs about students. Its two subthemes consisted of wide-ranging CGC needs of undergrads and the variety of guidance and information sources available to them.

Under-graduation is a transition period of life. It is often observed that undergraduates are trying to attain professional education, to figure out their career path and to move from student life to work life smoothly. Understandably, they might experience several needs along the way. In current research, CSPs identified many needs in the undergrads including need for self-awareness, sense of direction, decision making, detailed information, knowledge of internships, knowing industrial requirements, job search skills, right education, and emotional plus psychological needs.

Most of these needs are interconnected and interdependent. But poor self-awareness might be the core need as improper self-awareness is linked with low performance in academics and other areas of life (Kay, 2017). Poor self-awareness might lead to poor decisions, vulnerability, disengagement, poor emotional management (Kay, 2017), low creativity, low confidence (Silvia & O’Brien, 2004), insufficient well-being in general and at work (Sutton et al., 2015). Poor self-awareness might arise from a number of factors but indentigenously the over-emphasis on rote learning might be leading to flimsy self-awareness. In Pakistan it is a common observation that students are often told by parents to focus solely on their grades while ignoring their co-curricular or extra-curricular activities. This often robs them of the chance for exposure, consequently leading to a limited understanding of personal interests, preferences, strengths and weaknesses. Hence many students are unsure of their self, their career of choice and the direction they want to pursue even at undergrad level.

Another indigenous factor which might explain several career needs of undergraduates (e.g. information about internship, industrial requirements, job search skills etc.) is theoretical focus of curricula and degree programs. In Pakistan degree programs and curricula are not always balanced in theory and practice. Sometimes, when curricula have practical elements, then factors like resource constraints, poor pedagogies and disinterest of students might not lead to the desired integration of theory with practice. Consequently, Pakistani undergraduates are seldom aware of the practical demands of future jobs; they don’t understand which internships or other practical experiences will supplement their education and buttress their future prospects. International research shows that new skills and practical approaches must be learnt in order to stay relevant in the rapidly changing job market (Rainie and Anderson, 2017) but all degree programs are not imparting the required skills in their students (Sullivan, 2010).

Emotional and psychological needs of students have been identified internationally as well as nationally. Among other factors academic burden, high expectations and financial constraints contribute to several
mental health issues in students (Storrie et al., 2010). Students might be experiencing more distress than the normal population (Stallman, 2010) but this is not the case for all countries (Nerdrum et al., 2006). In Pakistan, extensive mental health concerns arise in students from medical or related fields (Azad et al., 2017; Syed et al., 2018; Rehmani et al., 2018).

In this study, the second theme and its three subthemes were relevant to status of CGC in universities. First subtheme was about the roles, responsibilities and qualities of CSP. Second subtheme included CGC services offered in universities.

According to NCDA a CSP can operate with various job titles and roles (NCDA, n.d.) and offer different services (Berkeley University of California, 2019; Center for Credentialing and Education, n.d.; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2019) provided that they have the required career counseling competencies (Hiebert, 2006; NCDA, n.d.). Relevant and adequate knowledge, various skills and personal characteristics determine the competence of a CSP (Hiebert, 2006; Gladding, 2009; American Counseling Association, n.d.).

At the national level, CSPs are functioning under diverse roles and offering variety of services. However, their career counseling competencies are not beyond question. As obvious from the demographic table, people with no specific career counseling education, training or experience were working as CSPs in universities, situated in two major cities of the country (particularly C1, C2, C7). It is commonly observed and experienced by authors of this study that career counseling is not widely accepted in our indigenous society. However, owing to the emerging trend and the demand of students, educational institutions have started offering CGC services. But institutions and authorities mostly use it as a gimmick to attract students and to lure in parents who want the best for their children. In reality, CGC services might be substandard particularly if the appointed CSPs lack basic CGC competencies. Additionally, there is no national level governing body to regulate CSPs and their services. Many CSPs are self-proclaimed without appropriate qualification, training or supervision. Their practice does not necessarily follow the basic guidelines of counseling; they might not know any required competencies or ethics. So, currently anyone might work as a CSP and claim to offer any kind of services without any repercussions in Pakistan.

Second theme of this study had a third subtheme as well which covered the challenges faced by CSPs. Disinterest of students, insufficient awareness, inadequate effort, limited practical application of knowledge, unrealistic expectations, procrastination and poor decisions posed challenges for CSPs. Gap in communication of available CGC services was also a challenge. Challenges also included limited acceptance of CGC, limited CSPs and material resources, and narrowed career options.

Some of these challenges might be specific to countries with similar demographics. Nevertheless, in many countries CSPs have to tackle resistance of clients, deal with other important individuals like parents, partners etc. in their clients’ lives, handle the demand for sharing advice, work through the differences in clients, find other sources of support (Nathan and Hill, 2006), engage students in the available career services and make them aware of the importance of services (Garner et al., 2011).

In Pakistan, it is commonly observed that several factors affect the career related matters of undergraduates e.g. parental pressure, societal expectations, over emphasis on medicine and engineering fields, inadequate guidance and incomplete information by others who might be well-meaning but not well-educated, imposed decisions, low self-agency of students etc. Collectivistic culture of Pakistan might be the root-cause of these factors. In such cultures, the CGC services should try to incorporate familial influences, instead of rejecting them for the sake of individuality (Hiebert and Neault, 2014) which might be a foreign concept for local students.

At times, stigma might be attached with seeking career help (Garner et al., 2011). The same has been observed by authors in the local society where CGC is deemed unnecessary by many individuals. Therefore, in Pakistan many institutions fail to provide the required resources to their career offices; many career centers fail to reach their target students due to unsuccessful communication; many undergraduates fail to contact the CSPs at the right time. In these circumstances, CSPs could try to bridge the student-counselor gap (Garner et al., 2011) and focus on self-agency of their students, rather than trying to ensure the perfect career for every student after university (Kriseshok, 2001). Career services should be offered under culturally appropriate systems while managing all those local factors which could impact their career related matters (Hiebert and Neault, 2014).

6. Conclusion

Current study explored the perspective of CSPs about CGC needs of undergraduates. Various CGC needs, currently offered services and the challenges in service provision were identified. Results could help in developing new CGC programs or renewing the current services leading to positive outcomes for service providers as well as service consumers.

6.1. Limitations

Social desirability might have influenced the CSPs to some extent, portraying their services as comprehensive while nominating students or institutional management for any challenges faced in service provision.

6.2. Recommendations and implications for policy and practice

Research findings could be utilized in a number of ways to improve CGC in Pakistan and other countries with similar socio-economic and cultural demographics.

Research implies that CGC needs of students should be appropriately assessed by CSPs of their respective institutions. Indigenous and culturally sensitive CGC services should be offered to meet the identified needs. Comprehensive CGC plan should be designed encompassing all students of the institution i.e. aspiring students, different semesters, fresh graduates, alumni etc. CGC services should be diverse and interesting in order to attract more and more students. CGC services like seminars, programs, mock interview sessions should not clash with other mandatory academic activities of students. Otherwise, it would be hard for the students to avail the services.

In order to manage parental pressure, Parents could be kept in loop regarding their child’s career development. CSPs could conduct awareness sessions with them; they might feel heard; it might give them a chance to clarify their apprehensions and expectations. To handle the societal emphasis on some fields like medicine and engineering, CSPs could spread awareness about other subjects and their possible careers which are equally beneficial and lucrative but less-known by majority population. This could be done by utilizing various social media platforms, by holding open-house career related awareness sessions, by covering stories of successful alumni from various fields etc.

Common CGC needs, services, and their benefits could be rigorously communicated via social media platforms, regular emails, posters, pamphlets etc. to increase need awareness and to market the offered services. This is likely to increase the number of students seeking CGC services.

Another implication for teachers, CSPs and institutional management is to act as a bridge between academia and industry. Teachers should emphasize skill development in students and incorporate practical work with theoretical work. CSPs should communicate industrial requirements to teachers as well as students. Institutional management should try to formulate functional linkages with industry. This would help students to make smooth transitions from academia to industry.

Academic institutions should also consider industrial requirements in their academic planning and allow students to consider industrial problems for their Final Year Projects or research projects. Moreover, academic institution should allocate required resources including adequate number of qualified CSPs to ensure quality and quantity in CGC service.
Institutions should also adopt policies to hire professionally trained CSPs having appropriate academic degrees.

Governmental bodies like Ministry of Education should also initiate policy making regarding CGC provision. Policies should be made and implemented for providing CGC to students in schools, colleges and universities so that all students could utilize it despite their socio-economic and educational background. All academic institutions should be bound by such policies to offer relevant CGC to its students. Policy should also establish student-CSP ratio as a single CSP would be insufficient to cater to large number of students. Professional standards for a CSP should also be clarified like minimum level of education, training, experience and ethical boundaries. Such policies could be beneficial for spreading CGC services far and wide.

6.3. Direction for future research

Further research could be carried out regarding planning, implementation, assessment and impact of localized CGC services in short and long term. Extensive qualitative research could be carried out to compare local-level CGC services and challenges to the services and challenges in other countries. Comparisons and contrasts could also be drawn between current research and other relevant researches of the past to find out about needs, services and challenges regarding CGC. Research could also assess CGC needs and services at pre-university and post-university levels. Quantitative measures to assess CGC needs could also be formulated.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Zehra Keshf: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.
Saeeda Khanum: Conceived and designed the experiments; analysis tools or data.

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Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

Appendix A

1. Do the students at your university need any help or guidance currently or in future regarding their careers?
   o Are they facing any difficulty in this regard?
2. Are they aware about their skills, abilities and interests well enough to make career related decisions?
   o Do they know how to develop their interests, skills and abilities for their career in the long term?
3. Are their current or future career goals in line with their skills, abilities and interests?
4. Do they know what educational requirements are there for their desired career?
5. What are their current or future challenges and needs in academis or education?
   o In terms of subject choice
   o In terms of further study options
   o In terms of financial aids
   o In terms of specialization choice
6. Do they have all the information and guidance for planning their future career?
   o Choosing internships, placements (or any other work experience)
   o Exploring various career options
   o Educational and skill requirement for your targeted career
   o In terms of information about future job opportunities and information of labor market (what are required by employers/workplaces and what are the trends in labor market)
   o In terms of career path/future plan and development
   o In terms of strategies for planning your careers
7. Do they have information and practical skills that the employer might demand or expect from them?
   o In terms of practical knowledge needed at workplace
   o In terms of skill development e.g. decision making skills, leadership skills, team player skills, communication skills, time management, goal setting.
   o In terms of market requirements i.e. what employers demand and expect
8. What skills are needed for job search and do you think the students have them?
   o In terms of CV writing
   o In terms of interviews
   o In terms of searching and approaching prospective employers
9. Do they face any emotional challenges regarding future career development?
   o Anxiety management
   o Stress management
   o Interpersonal relations with colleagues
   o Personal-professional balance etc.
10. Do the career needs vary or remain stable in early vs. late years of university?
    o What might be their career counseling needs in upcoming university years?
    o What were their career counseling needs in early years of university?
11. What ways are used to address career related needs of university students?
    o Can there be any other ways to fulfill their career related needs?
12. What is the usefulness of career guidance and counseling services at university level?
    o Should it be provided at university level?
13. Do you think you and other career professionals at university level understand career related needs of university students?
    o What career services are offered to students at your university?
    o What steps are taken to address these needs?

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