

A Correlational and Comparative Study: Career Indecision and Associated Distress among Psychology Students of Universities of Peshawar and Swat

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Keywords	Abstract
Career Distress, Career Indecision, Lack of Readiness, Psychology, University Students.	<i>The study aimed to compare the differences in the level of career distress and situational constraints between final-year psychology students in Peshawar and Swat. Additionally, the study explored whether there was a correlation between lack of readiness and career distress. Data was collected by administering a refined 22-item version of Coping with Career Indecision (CCI) scale to a sample of 87 participants (University of Peshawar students $n = 44$ and University of Swat students $n = 43$). The ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 25 years ($M = 22.53$, $SD = 1.12$) and Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) ranged from 2 to 4 ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.46$). An independent samples t-test was conducted to study the differences in the level of career distress and situational constraints between University of Peshawar and University of Swat students. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between lack of readiness and career distress. Results indicated a lack of significant difference ($p > .05$) in the level of career distress and situational constraints experienced by University of Peshawar and University of Swat students. Lack of readiness showed a significant positive correlation with career distress ($r = .58^{**}$), suggesting that a higher level of lack of readiness is associated with a higher level of career distress. Lack of readiness was found to be a significant ($p < .05$) predictor of career distress.</i>

INTRODUCTION

Students studying in universities go through a process that has multiple problems, such as academic, behavioral issues like exam anxiety, disturbed sleep, isolation, depression, conflicting relationships with parents, deciding on a profession, sexual issues, use of alcohol or substances and emotional problems that they are required to cope with. The most significant area of concern is career-related issues (Korkmaz & Doğanülkü, 2024). With the fast-paced advancements in technology and science shaping the global job market, the selection of a suitable career has become indispensable (Kholifah et al., 2025). For many of the young adults, the process of career decision-making is the foremost developmental task (Priyashantha et al., 2023; Sulistiani & Handoyo, 2018). The happiness and wellbeing of an individual are prominently determined by the well-planned career path, as it influences their life both personally and professionally (Kholifah et al., 2025). Youth experience uncertainty in the critical phase of career-decision-making (He et al., 2025). Career choices don't only include selection of a job; they are defined as a sequence of professional positions occupied by the person throughout his professional life (Kholifah et al., 2025).

The ability of a person's thought processes to incorporate personal knowledge and professional knowledge for making career choices is referred to as career decision-making (Priyashantha et al., 2023). Conversely, career indecision is defined as the inability to make a decision about the vocation one wishes to pursue (Guay et al., 2003). A critical concern for high school and university students is the career indecisiveness, as they become undecided about the career directions they prefer (Priyashantha et al., 2023). Studies have found that individuals in developing countries continuously struggle to achieve prosperity in their careers (Kholifah et al., 2025).

Self-determination motivation primarily influences career decisions (Kholifah et al., 2025). Research indicates that the expansion of educational and vocational options serves as a determinant of career indecision (Priyashantha et al., 2023). The ability of students to make informed choices about careers is further strengthened by their confidence in their problem-solving ability within the context of the job (Kholifah et al., 2025). Recent studies have identified emotional, cognitive, social, and personality factors as key determinants of indecision (Priyashantha et al., 2023).

Psychological well-being plays a critical role in career decision-making, as students with higher levels of adaptability and resilience are more likely to secure jobs align with their interests and competencies (Kholifah et al., 2025). Job search and contemplation about future employability often bring out anxious attitudes and thoughts in students. Discussion about searching for jobs and future employability or an actual search and application for jobs typically makes graduates anxious (Atikah et al., 2023). As negative consequences can follow poor decisions, commitment may lead the students to experience distress and anxiety (Priyashantha et al., 2023). Contemporary studies also emphasize the relationship between students' future employability, the standard of their future employment, and career anxiety (Atikah et al., 2023).

The career development of a student is also influenced by the contextual factors, including their field of study, the obstacles they encounter in their search for a career, and the certainty they have about their career path. Priyashantha et al. (2023) found that all these factors significantly influence career indecision. Another noteworthy contextual factor that may affect an individual's career development is the reaction or response of significant others (He et al., 2025). Literature in career development has highlighted the role of parents in adolescents' and young adults' career development (Guay et al., 2003). In making career choices, some of these factors external to the person influence the anxiety experienced. In addition to a student's outlook on their future and how current behaviors impact career goals, emotional expression and conflict within the family also play a major role (Atikah et al., 2023).

These contextual factors may positively predict the adaptability resources required for a career. For instance, when the relationship is positive with parents or parents display behaviours that are career-specific (Johnston, 2018). High social support, including support from family, friends, the social environment, and parents, has been found to strongly predict career adaptability (Sulistiani & Handoyo, 2018). A negative correlation has been found between healthy family and peer interactions and career indecision (Guay et al., 2003). On the other hand, both internal factors, such as personality and tendency towards trait anxiety, as well as external factors such as the microenvironment (including friends and family) and situational factors, are associated with career anxiety (Atikah et al., 2023).

A person's preparedness to get involved in and progress in the professional world is referred to as career readiness (Rachmawati et al., 2024). Career readiness can be defined as the extent of an individual's willingness to strive for the achievement of their goals (Febriani et al., 2022). To have career readiness, one needs to be equipped with knowledge and skills for the requirements of the job market; additionally, they should be capable of making the required adjustments in the professional environment. Career readiness involves all the experiences; academic, cognitive, social and work skills; and knowledge that can assist a person in his shift from academic journey to professional life and also helps in making the career progression possible within the given circumstances (Rachmawati et al., 2024).

One of the essential elements of career evolution is career readiness. Carefully choosing and preparing for a career is a major developmental task for students (Febriani et al., 2022). Apparently the students graduating from universities are career-ready for the international market. There are expectations that these graduating students are equipped to handle the hurdles of the contemporary world (Rachmawati et al., 2024). But unfortunately, not all students are well prepared for their careers (Febriani et al., 2022). With respect to universities, there is an expectation that the graduates they produce will be ready to enter the professional world. Higher education institutions are frequently criticized for failing to prepare their graduates for professional excellence in the real world (Rachmawati et al., 2024). In the industrial workforce the percentage of university graduate induction has reduced. The lower levels of work readiness in the graduates from universities are one of the major causes of this decline (Husna et al., 2025). A chief source of concern in this area is the existing disconnect between the classroom and the professional setting. Though schools are designed with the aim to help furnish students with essential knowledge and skills for making wise decisions in their future occupations and for advancing their careers, researchers noted a struggle among the graduates to make the transition from academic to professional roles. A division has been observed in the skills acquired in college and the actual skills in the professional setting. Fresh graduates often struggle their theoretical knowledge in practical settings (Rachmawati et al., 2024).

The difficulty of making decisions about a career, avoidance of thoughts regarding the career, or goal-career distress can also be defined as a set of negative emotional states associated with an individual's career, including feelings of helplessness, stress, depression and anxiety (Korkmaz & Doğanülkü, 2024). The prevalence of career distress has increased among young adults (Xu & Yu, 2025). Negative career experiences, such as career indecision, compromise in a career, and encountering barriers in pursuing a career, usually lead to painful consequences like career distress (Creed et al., 2016). There can be a negative influence of career distress on the personal relationships of individuals and the choices they make about their future career (Korkmaz & Doğanülkü, 2024). The definition of students' career anxiety by Saka et al. (2008) considers the feeling of stress and concerns present during the career decision-making process. According to these researchers in this context students' career anxiety refers to the feelings of concerns and experience of anxiety before a person is required to make a decision regarding their career and the anxiety experienced due to the uncertainty in the process of the choice making, the uncertain nature of the future is responsible for this anxiety, it may be a result of lack of ability to make a decision about career. This also encompasses the anxiety of making the wrong choice, which stems from a fear of losing a better prospect and the fear that a decision might fail (Saka et al., 2008). Furthermore, career anxiety refers to the views and concerns students have regarding their future employability (Atikah et al., 2023).

Academic, social, and financial constraints make the university students predisposed to mental health issues. In countries like Pakistan, these problems are further intensified by economic instability and systemic unemployment (Ghilzai et al., 2025). The problems are not limited to a particular region or city of Pakistan, but in fact students across the country are exposed to these pressures. Among students utilizing university counseling services, 21% experienced career distress, making it a leading source of stress in educational settings (Korkmaz & Doğanülkü, 2024). Though researches have been conducted on psychology students to study their stress, anxiety and depression (Naeem et al., 2026), and their career indecision (Akbar et al., 2023), but studies directly comparing the career distress of university students studying Psychology in two different cities within Pakistan have not been conducted. Thus, the current study explores the difference in the level of career distress experienced by students in Peshawar and Swat.

The employment-to-population ratio is very low (39.6%) in youth (15-24 years); this ratio is specifically low for females (18.8%) in comparison to males (59.5%) (Mirza et al., 2017). Uncovering the factors behind career indecision benefit policymakers and career counselors by guiding appropriate interventions. Equipping counselors with this knowledge enhanced the overall effectiveness of their sessions (Priyashantha et al., 2023). The collectivistic social culture of Pakistan is one of the factors that contribute to youth mental health issues by enforcing rigid expectations (Ghilzai et al., 2025). Close socio-emotional bonds among families are common among Pakistanis that are found to be serving as a source of pressure in some circumstances, while at other times they act as a buffer against stress. For Pakistanis, educational and career-related decisions are influenced by the collectivistic features (Zahid et al., 2020). Ghilzai et al. (2025) suggest that researchers in the future include additional psychosocial variables-like pressures in the family, economic dependency, and perceived employability-using a demographically balanced sample. Doing so will help better understand the psychological impact of unemployment in collectivistic cultures. The current study will uncover various situational constraints that may lead to career indecisiveness and thus cause career distress. Because students have a prevalent need for assistance with their career development (Korkmaz & Doğanülkü, 2024), further investigation is necessary. Higher education in Pakistan utilizes models for career guidance that have been imported from countries like the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, and Europe. Though it offers some advantages, it can be a limiting factor, as the situational contexts within Pakistan need to be addressed (Zahid et al., 2020). Inadequate career counseling and lack of self-efficacy have been found through studies to cause problems for students in finding employment in line with their aspirations (Kholifah et al., 2025).

An important feature contributing to increasing the graduates' employment in the workforce is work readiness. There is a need to address the low work readiness of university graduates to prepare them for entry into the workforce (Husna et al., 2025). Although thinking about the future often arouses fear and anxiety among young people, this issue needs active exploration, as it is currently being ignored. Students may be prevented from exploring opportunities in their career due to career anxiety, thus reducing the quality of the decisions they make in their career. This anxiety may be particularly heightened as students reach the end of their academic journey (Atikah et al., 2023). A common cause of stress in academic settings is career distress, as around 25% of students receiving services at the campus counseling centers experience it. Research-identified variables associated with career distress can inform the design of interventions, thereby preventing the negative outcomes experienced by university students (Korkmaz & Doğanülkü, 2024). The non-student population has been the major focus of research studying

career-related anxiety (Atikah et al., 2023). The existing body of research has overlooked the difficulties faced, particularly by psychology students, in this regard. Therefore, this study focuses on the career distress experienced by psychology students nearing graduation.

Objectives

1. To determine and compare the levels of career distress between final-year psychology students in Peshawar and Swat.
2. To identify the primary situational constraints affecting career decision-making among students in Peshawar and Swat.
3. To assess the relationship between the Lack of Readiness subscale of career indecision and career distress across the entire sample.

Research Question

1. Does a statistically significant difference exist in levels of career distress experienced by BS Psychology final-year students from the University of Peshawar and the University of Swat?
2. What is the nature of the relationship between the lack of readiness dimension of career indecision and career distress among BS Psychology final-year students?

Hypotheses

1. There will be a significant difference in career distress scores between psychology students in Peshawar and Swat.
2. Students in Swat will report significantly higher situational constraints compared to students in Peshawar.
3. There will be a significant positive correlation between the Lack of Readiness subscale of career indecision and career distress.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design with a comparative focus.

Sample

A total population purposive sampling technique was used for the selection of participants from the two universities, i.e., the University of Peshawar and the University of Swat. This study invited all 144 students within the sampling frame to participate. This approach was chosen to ensure maximum representativeness and minimize sampling error. Data collection was conducted via an online survey shared through official departmental channels. Participation was strictly voluntary, resulting in a final sample of $n = 87$ participants (representing an overall response rate of 60.4%). At the University of Peshawar, 44 out of 88 students participated (a 50% response rate), whereas at the University of Swat, 43 out of 56 students participated (a 76.8% response rate). Despite the difference in response rates, the nearly identical sample sizes ($n = 44$; $n = 43$) allow for a balanced statistical comparison between the two groups. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 25 years.

Inclusion Criteria: Current full-time male/female students enrolled in the 8th semester of the BS Psychology Program.

Exclusion Criteria: Students who have migrated/transferred from other universities and students with self-reported pre-existing clinical psychological diagnoses.

Instruments

Demographic Sheet: The demographic sheet asked for information regarding the university the student studies in, their gender, age, cumulative grade point average (CGPA), experience status (internship), and their primary career goal.

Coping with Career Indecision Scale: The Coping with Career Indecision Scale is a 22-item multidimensional self-report instrument developed to identify the specific psychological and environmental factors that contribute to career indecision. The scale consists of four validated subscales that include Subscale 1 (Career Distress), Subscale 2 (Situational Constraints), Subscale 3 (Lack of Readiness), and Subscale 4 (Inconsistent Information). Subscale 1 and subscale 2 are adapted from the subjective career distress and obstacles dimension established within the coping framework of Larson et al. (1994). Subscale 3 and subscale 4 are adapted from the systematic Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ) taxonomy formulated by Gati et al. (1996). Career Distress (6 items) measures emotional and physical stress regarding uncertainty in career, Situational Constraints (6 items) measures external hurdles like economic pressures and family obligations, Lack of Readiness (6 items) assesses mental unpreparedness and lack of motivation, and Inconsistent Information (4 items) evaluates confusion resulting from conflicting advice. Participants responses are recorded on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = Not at all like me to 6 = Very much like me). Scores are obtained by summing each of the responses of participants on each subscale; greater perceived difficulty is indicated by a higher score in that particular domain. In the current study, the instrument demonstrated robust psychometric reliability. Internal consistency analyses conducted on the current sample (N = 87) indicated high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficient $\alpha = .91$.

Procedure

In the initial phase of the study, the researchers attained permission from the heads of both the concerned departments. After taking permissions from the concerned authorities, they generated an online Google form. The form containing information regarding the study, its purpose, and the voluntary nature of the participation was filled by the participants. The form guaranteed that their information will be kept anonymous and will only be used for research purposes. The participants were directed to the survey instrument containing the demographic questionnaire and the 22-item Career Indecision (CCI) scale only after they provided the digital consent. The researchers shared the form with the participants through a link. The purpose of adopting the online format was to allow the participants to complete the survey at their own pace and convenience, which usually requires around 5 to 10 minutes completing. The researchers designed the forms in a way that required responses for all items before submission to ensure data integrity by eliminating the missing data. Once submitted, the participants could not make any changes to their responses. In the next phase researchers analyzed the collected data to conclude the results.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics (n=87)

Baseline Characteristic	<i>F</i>	%
University		
University of Peshawar	44	50.6
University of Swat	43	49.4
Gender		
Female	71	81.6
Male	16	18.4
Age		
21	14	16.1
22	37	42.5
23	19	21.8
24	11	12.6
25	6	6.9
Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA)		
2 – 2.50	7	8.0
2.51 – 2.99	30	34.5
3 – 3.50	26	29.9
3.51 – 4.00	24	27.6
Experience Status (Internship)		
With Experience	20	23
Without Experience	67	77
Primary Career Goal		
Clinical Practice	36	41.4
Teaching	5	5.7
Others	46	52.9

The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. The sample consisted of BS Psychology final-year students from the University of Peshawar ($n = 44$) and BS Psychology final-year students from the University of Swat ($n = 43$). A higher number of students were aged 22 years ($n = 37$, 42.5%), followed by students aged 23 years ($n = 19$, 21.8%), students aged 21 years ($n = 14$, 16.1%), students aged 24 years ($n = 11$, 12.6%), with the smallest number of students aged 25 years ($n = 6$, 6.9%). A greater number of participants had their CGPA ranging between 2.51 – 2.99 ($n = 30$, 34.5%), as compared to participants having CGPA between 3 – 3.50 ($n = 26$, 31.1 %), participants having CGPA between 3.51– 4.00 ($n = 24$, 26.4%) and participants with CGPA between 2 – 2.50 ($n = 7$, 8.0%). Most of the participants had no work-related experience ($n = 67$, 77%), whereas a smaller number of participants had some work-related experience ($n = 20$, 23%). Majority of the participants had career goals other than Clinical Practice or teaching ($n = 46$, 52.9%), followed by participants interested in Clinical Practice ($n = 36$, 41.4%) and the least number of participants showed interest in teaching as a future profession ($n = 5$, 5.7%).

Table 2: Career Distress and Lack of Readiness Mean Comparison and T-Test

Logistic Parameter	University of Peshawar		University of Swat		<i>t</i> (85)	<i>P</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Career Distress	21.43	5.98	20.21	6.37	0.922	.359	0.198

Situational Constraints	18.14	5.66	18.33	6.20	-0.149	.882	-0.032
Lack of Readiness	18.93	5.76	19.30	6.57	-0.280	.78	0.031

Table 2 depicts the results of an independent samples t-test comparing the levels of career distress and lack of readiness among final-year BS psychology students at the University of Peshawar and the University of Swat. There was no significant difference ($p > 0.05$) between students of Peshawar ($M = 21.43$, $SD = 5.98$) and students of University of Swat ($M = 20.21$, $SD = 6.37$) in their career distress with $t(85) = 0.922$, $p = .359$. No significant difference was seen between students of Peshawar ($M = 18.14$, $SD = 5.66$) and students of Swat ($M = 18.33$, $SD = 6.20$) in the situational constraints with $t(85) = -0.149$, $p = .882$. Likewise, no significant difference ($p > 0.05$) was found between University of Peshawar students ($M = 18.93$, $SD = 5.76$) and students of University of Swat ($M = 19.30$, $SD = 6.57$) in the lack of career readiness with $t(85) = 0.28$, $p = .78$.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Career Distress and Lack of Readiness

	Variables	<i>n</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	1	2
University of Peshawar	1. Career Distress	44	20.43	5.99	-	-
	2. Lack of Readiness	44	18.93	5.76	.47**	-
University of Swat	1. Career Distress	43	20.21	6.37	-	-
	2. Lack of Readiness	43	19.30	6.57	.68**	-
Overall	1. Career Distress	87	20.83	6.2	-	-
	2. Lack of Readiness	87	19.11	6.14	.58**	-

** Correlation is significant at the $p < .01$ level (2-tailed)

Table 3 is demonstrating a bivariate correlation between career distress and lack of readiness for both the University of Peshawar and the University of Swat, psychology students. It is revealed from the table that a bivariate correlation is statistically significant and notably stronger for University of Swat students ($r = .68$, $p < .01$) in comparison to University of Peshawar students ($r = .47$, $p < .01$). The data also indicates an overall significantly positive correlation between lack of career readiness and career distress ($r = .58^{**}$).

Table 4: Regression Coefficient of Career Distress and Lack of Career Readiness

Effect	B	SE	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²
Lack of Readiness ¹	0.582	0.089	.58	6.55	.000	.34

¹ $F = 42.85$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .34$

Table 4 shows a regression analysis conducted to assess the relationship between lack of readiness and career distress. The table demonstrates that lack of readiness ($B = 0.59$, $SE = 0.089$, $Beta = 0.58$, $t = 6.55$, $p > .001$) was a significant predictor of career distress.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings revealed that there was no significant difference in the level of career distress and the situational constraints experienced by students of Peshawar and students of Swat. Lack of career distress was found to have a significant positive correlation with career distress for both groups. However, the bivariate correlation was statistically significant and

demonstrated a higher magnitude for students of the University of Swat in comparison with the University of Peshawar students.

Psychological distress is interlinked with career indecision, and thus a holistic treatment should be considered for intervention conducted with students for their career (Walker & Peterson, 2012). A prominent reaction to problems experienced by individuals who are in the process of their career development is the career distress (Doğanülkü & Korkmaz, 2024). The negative emotions, anxiety, and depression that result from career distress may affect day-to-day life (Arslan & Bayraktar-Uyar, 2020; Doğanülkü & Korkmaz, 2024). Such feelings negatively affect university students. Career distress is their most common source of stress, affecting about 25% of students who seek psychological help from universities counseling department (Arslan & Bayraktar-Uyar, 2020). Despite it being a common factor affecting young adults, research in the area has been limited. Although career distress is an important construct, its connection with other behaviours, ideas, and outcomes is still unclear. For young individuals beginning their careers, research needs to uncover the antecedents and consequences of their career-related difficulties (Doğanülkü & Korkmaz, 2024).

Table 2 shows the career distress scores between psychology students in Peshawar and Swat. The table shows insignificant results on the independent samples t-test. This study revealed that final-year psychology students at both universities reported moderate levels of career distress, as shown in table 3, with no significant difference between the two institutions. This finding is consistent with previous research conducted in the Pakistani context. For instance, among university students across different regions of Pakistan, psychological factors played a more prominent role than structural demographic factors in shaping their perceptions of employability. In the context of job markets that are unstable, especially in developing countries, subjective perceptions of future career and employability may have a vital influence on the transition from education to work than factors like, gender, province or field of study (Haider & Khan (2025). Suggesting that career distress may be a widespread phenomenon among graduating students rather than one localized to specific geographical areas due to the associated subjective perceptions.

The absence of significant differences between Peshawar and Swat students is particularly noteworthy given the distinct socio-economic and infrastructural contexts of these two regions. Peshawar, as a capital city of the province, offers relatively greater access to career counseling services, internship opportunities, and employment networks compared to Swat. Counseling programs and workshops reduce career decision-making difficulties by fostering career decision-making self-efficacy (He et al., 2025). Career adaptability resources are shaped by training and education (Johnston, 2018). One might expect these disparities to translate into differential career distress levels. However, the findings suggest that in the current era of digital connectivity and social media, students from smaller cities may have similar access to career information and online resources. The fast-paced development of digital platforms has changed the career landscape for youth globally. Digital platforms, including online learning portals, websites for job searches, platforms for freelancing, sites for professional networking, and social media, have transformed the traditional ways of education, skill acquisition, and employment (Rani, 2026). Indecision, stress, lack of planning and knowledge of oneself and environment that have been found as factors associated with career distress (Doğanülkü & Korkmaz, 2024), especially in geographically disadvantaged populations, may be reduced due to access to online resources, thus lowering their career distress.

Furthermore, the moderate level of career distress observed in both samples aligns with developmental theories of emerging adulthood. According to Arnett's (2000) theory, individuals aged 18-25 experience a period of identity exploration, particularly in the domains of work and love. For Pakistani students, this developmental stage coincides with significant familial and societal expectations regarding career choices (Hassan et al., 2024) and financial independence (Haider & Khan, 2025). The moderate distress levels may therefore reflect normative anxiety associated with this life transition rather than pathological levels of concern.

It was expected that University of Swat students would report higher situational constraints compared to their Peshawar counterparts. This expectation was grounded in the recognition that students from less developed regions often face additional barriers (Keshf & Khanum, 2021), including limited access to career guidance, fewer role models in professional fields, and reduced exposure to diverse career pathways. Contrary to our hypothesis (see Table 2), both groups reported nearly identical levels of perceived constraints.

Several explanations may account for this unexpected finding. First, despite being located in a smaller city, the University of Swat has made significant investments in student support services over the past decade. As documented by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC, 2021), universities in less developed districts have received targeted funding to improve career counseling facilities and establish placement offices. These initiatives may have effectively bridged the resource gap between institutions in major cities and those in peripheral areas. As research shows, resources improving the person's career information, understanding of the career, and competencies related to their careers seem to predict a reduction in the anxiety associated with the process of decision-making and regarding the post-education experiences. When schools and educators focus on enhancing both the quality and quantity of resources facilitating the educational environment, it may lead to an improvement in the quality of career decisions by the graduates through the reduction of collective career anxiety (Atikah et al., 2023).

Second, the rise of digital platforms and online career resources has increased access to career-related information (Rani, 2026). Students in Swat can now access the same online job portals, virtual career fairs, and professional networking opportunities as students in Peshawar. This technological parity may explain why perceived constraints did not differ significantly between the two groups.

Third, it is possible that the measure of situational constraints used in this study (CCI) did not adequately capture region-specific barriers. Future research might benefit from incorporating qualitative methods to explore the unique contextual challenges faced by students in different geographical locations, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018).

The most compelling finding of this study was the strong positive correlation between lack of readiness and career distress ($r = .58$, $p < .001$) as shown in Table 3, supporting the third hypothesis, there is a significant positive correlation between lack of readiness and career distress. Accounting for approximately 34% of shared variance, this relationship underscores the critical role that perceived preparedness plays in shaping students' emotional responses to career decision-making. A regression analysis (Table 4) that was conducted to find the relationship

between lack of readiness and career distress showed that lack of readiness was a significant predictor of career distress.

This finding is consistent with an extensive body of international literature. Career construction theory (Savickas, 2005) posits that individuals, who possess greater career adaptability, including readiness to make career decisions, experience less distress when navigating career transitions. Similarly, social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy beliefs in career development, suggesting that individuals who doubt their capabilities to make effective career decisions are more likely to experience anxiety and avoidance. Additionally, research demonstrates that a higher level of autonomy can lead to improved psychological functioning; on the other hand, negative outcomes result from low perceptions of autonomy (Guay et al., 2003).

Career indecision is associated with psychological distress and a decrease in self-efficacy and self-confidence in career planning. Specifically, a lower belief in one's career decision-making abilities is closely tied to experiencing higher levels of career distress within the Pakistani context (Thakur & Shams, 2026). The present study validates these findings in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region, suggesting that the relationship between readiness and distress is robust across different provincial contexts.

The practical implications of this finding are significant. In line with previous studies, the declining presence of higher education graduates in the industrial workforce has been linked to the inadequate work readiness and practical preparedness of university graduates (Husna et al., 2025). Because a lack of career readiness contributes substantially to career distress, interventions to enhancing students' preparedness can effectively reduce this distress. Career education programs, mentoring initiatives, and structured guidance interventions have demonstrated efficacy in improving career readiness among Pakistani students (Hassan et al., 2025). Universities in both Peshawar and Swat might consider implementing or strengthening such programs to support their final-year students.

CONCLUSION

Graduating students are worried about their future careers. This is a time where they need to make important decisions regarding their professional life. Particularly in Pakistan, many of these students do not have work-related experience. They may find themselves experiencing multiple situational constraints. These factors may lead them to experience career distress. The current study compares the career distress and situational constraints of final-year students in Peshawar and Swat. Because Peshawar is the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and has access to different resources, it is believed that the students may be more equipped to handle career-related distress. But the study revealed a lack of significant difference in career distress and situational constraints between students of the University of Swat and the University of Peshawar. Given the insignificant results, it can be concluded that career distress workshops and training should equally focus on students from both cities.

Another aim of the study was to determine if there was a correlation between lack of career readiness and career distress. In general a significant correlation was found between lack of readiness and career distress in the groups, in fact a regression analysis revealed that lack of readiness significantly predicts career distress, however the students of University of Swat

showed even a stronger correlation in comparison to University of Peshawar students. This finding is highly significant, as it can inform support services for individuals experiencing career distress. Literature suggests that inadequate career counselling can contribute to the difficulties students experience in securing employment that matches their aspirations. When counsellors understand the factors that increase indecisiveness and career distress in graduates, they can increase the effectiveness of counselling sessions by focusing on those factors. In light of the current study, there is a strong need for targeted programs to address the lack of readiness in career development to help students avoid career distress and prepare them for the potential challenges in their future careers.

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