

Factors Affecting Individual Career Management among Undergraduates in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This research aims to examine the factors that affect undergraduates' perception towards career management in Malaysia's higher education institutions. A correlation study was conducted in 16 private higher education institutions. Samples of 150 undergraduates were involved in this study. The findings suggest that individual-related factors (self-efficacy and outcome expectations) and social-related factor (peer influences) have positive relationship with individual career management. The research findings are useful to organizations (i.e., potential employers) to have better understanding towards career management trends among undergraduates who are the potential employees to join the labor market upon graduation. The appropriate Human Resource Development interventions should be implemented to support their career planning and development in the future.

Keywords Individual factors, Social factors, Undergraduates, Private higher education institutions.

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The rapid changes in business environments had impacted labor markets in a more complex and uncertain manners nowadays (Wilton, 2011). As a consequence, employees are required to become more self-reliant in managing their careers and to assume 'ownership' of career management (Briscoe and Hall, 2006). This requires employees to accept individual responsibility for developing the capability to gain and maintain employment and for their long

term career management (Hall, 2002). There is a growing interest in the study of individual career management as one of the primary functions of human resource development (HRD) (Hite and McDonald, 2008). Thus, individual career management has become a new career trend in the recent two decades.

The modernization of education system has improved the multi-faceted skills among graduates for articulating and satisfying their own career management needs as well as the performance requirements of the organizations (Wilton, 2011). King (2004) suggested that employees (typically young graduates and higher-skilled workers) have *“internalized message about the decline of traditional career for favouring jobs that offer employability rather than career progression”* (pp. 9). They are more confident to manage their career development effectively and to adapt the discernible patterns of career streams in the twenty-first century.

Recent study indicated that there are 53,000 graduates that remain unemployed after graduating. There are between 30% and 40% graduates that have no jobs offered after completing their studies or are in fields that do not commensurate with what they have studied. The unemployment rate was 3.3% in 2013 among graduates (Malaysia Statistics Department, 2013). The Malaysian government has been putting effort to provide reskilling and upskilling training programs to the graduates. In 2013, RM330 million funds under the Skills Development initiatives were aimed to provide assistance to graduates in skill training programs (Malaysia Statistics Department, 2013). In addition, RM30 million was allocated for Industry Academia Collaboration program whereby universities, government and industries will collaborate to develop the curriculum for internship and industrial training programs under Malaysia Budget 2015.

In view of this issue, it is important to examine the career perceptions among undergraduates towards their career management in a contemporary perspective. Hence, this study aims to examine the individual and social-related predictors of perceived individual career management of undergraduates in higher education institution. The study extends existing knowledge of career management, particularly in the aspect of career management in business organizations.

The paper is organized as follows: We begin by reviewing the definition of individual career management, followed by presenting related empirical studies on the association between independent variables and career management. The next section describes the methodological aspect of this research, followed by the research findings and discussion. We conclude the paper by outlining the implications of the study for research and management practices as well as the limitations and directions for future studies.

Literature Review

Individual Career Management

Based on a research by Sullivan & Arthur (2006), it is common for today's employees to experience multiple careers and multiple job movements during their working years. Today's

professionals manage their own career paths, while creating a boundaryless career as they seize new and different job opportunities to obtain training as well as to enhance their marketability. However, in reality not all individuals are equally adept at making such career decisions. Some are unable to find appropriate jobs even after multiple job changes. Similarly Singh and Grenhaus (2004) revealed that individuals who used rational career decision-making made more efficient job decisions. Weng & McElroy (2009)'s research findings, stated that career self-management (i.e., individual career management) activities resulted in enhancing a clear, specific expectation by the employee as to what their vocational self-concept is. Hence career management programs are required to be custom-made to the individual employee.

King (2003) revealed that graduates appear to "pay lip service to the idea of the new career but nonetheless expect to progress in a more conventional manner" (pp.17). The study further explained that most of the graduates will be expected to take responsibility for planning and managing their careers and focus on employability as a source of security and career growth. In a similar vein, Anakwe, Hall and Schor's (2000) empirical study on Master in Business Administration students and graduates found that the acquisition and utilization of skills that foster self-management and interpersonal management were more likely to enhance individual career management. Both individual and social related factors are considered as important influencing variables to individual career management.

Underpinning theory: Social cognitive career theory (SCCT)

SCCT considers the importance of personal agency in career decision making process. There is influence of both internal (dynamic aspects of self-behavior) and external factors (situation) on personal agency to achieve career goals. In particular, we deduced both individual-related and social-related variables from the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent, Brown and Hackett, 1994). Lent et al. (1994) highlighted individual perspective is the central of socio-cognitive mechanisms to influence vocational interest, choices and career achievement. Individual-related factors such as self-efficacy and outcome expectations are important to influence individual career actions and development. Whereas, the contextual affordances are described as distal in nature to influence individual's interests and self-cognitions in career actions (Lent & Brown, 2002). The model proposes that individuals are more likely to take actions to achieve their career goals if they have access to environmental (i.e., peer group) support and resources to pursue the goals (Lent & Brown, 2006). Given the growing empirical evidence supporting SCCT in explaining career management, SCCT elements should be considered when identifying predictors of individual career management. As suggested in SCCT, this study recognizes the importance of individual differences such as personal predispositions in shaping and transforming career interests into action. Such career action can be conceptualized proactively in managing their career management (Lent et al., 1994). Despite individual's responsibilities as the key elements in individual career management, peer influence as the contextual factor will always affect individual career management decision (Hall, 2002). According to Harter (1999), peer and friends have a significant influence on an individual's development and social adjustment and it is confirmed by developmental psychologists.

Self-Efficacy

According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy is the individual's judgment regarding the ability to perform a task at certain level with the required behavior to achieve targeted performance. This kind of cognitive structure is accumulated through experience learning, which will affect the ability and expectation of a person to perform a task successfully (Bandura, 1986). Lapan (2004) explained that a person's self-efficacy will have significant influence on his or her career actions, and performance. Therefore, self-efficacy is a crucial factor in determining individual career management and how individuals build confidence and perceive their abilities in career management.

Bandura (1982) explained the four important elements of self-efficacy, namely (i) the past performance accomplishment, which is believed that past performance accomplishments influence career exploration; (ii) vicarious learning experiences through observing the performance of role models and learn them. Through vicarious learning, an individual is able to have persistence in their efforts by observing others perform successfully; (iii) verbal persuasion such as social influences in response to an individual's abilities and encouragement from third party. Lastly, (iv) positive emotional arouse which motivates individual to perform the task successfully and increases the feeling of satisfaction from doing the task. In general, it is believed that self-efficacy will always influence an individual's career management in future.

Stucliffe and Vogus (2003) found that self-efficacy affects individuals' commitment to explore and attain their career goal. Individuals who are committed to their career goals are more likely to take responsibilities in developing their career endeavor. Nasta (2007) also found significant positive relationship between self-efficacy and career management among 259 college students ($r=.56, p<.05$). Based on these related empirical evidences, we propose the following hypothesis to examine the relationship between self-efficacy and individual career management.

Hypothesis 1: Self-efficacy has positive relationships with undergraduates' perceived individual career management.

Outcome Expectation

Bandura (1997) pointed out that outcome expectation as an estimation of a certain behavior that will result in a certain outcome. It is an outcome expectation belief of the result of a behavior that accrues to a person. Schunk's (1991) study highlighted that the outcome expectation theory is based on the expectancy-value theory which explains that a person's behavior is a combination of (1) people's expectations of having a particular outcome as a medium of performing behavior and (2) the extent that they value those outcomes. The theory explained when an individual anticipates to achieve various goals in specific situation; they will make judgment of the likelihood of the outcome to be attained. They will not attempt which is perceived unattainable because of low motivation to perform it.

A cross-sectional study by De Vos et al. (2009) involving 809 employees from six different industries in Belgium found that outcome expectation was positively correlated with individual career management towards HRD practices ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$). The finding is consistent with Lent et al.'s (1994) study which supported the outcome expectation and exerts a direct effect on career choice goal. Hence, the identification of outcome expectation could explain an understanding in predicting perceived individual career management. Based on the above discussion, this study hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 2: Outcome expectations have positive relationships with undergraduates' perceived career management.

Peer Influences

DeFillippi & Arthur (1994) explained that interpersonal relationships through networking (i.e., peer relationship) are considered to be a specific career competency vital for managing one's career. According to Harter (1999), developmental psychologists confirm that peers and friends have a significant influence on an individual's development and social adjustment. Epstein (1983) supports that high performance achieving friends have a strong impact on the friends' satisfaction with school, educational expectations, examination results, and standardized achievement test scores when they are in their early years. In 1997, Hartup & Stevens' study explained that most of the young adults spent 29% of their awake times with their peers. As a result, the chances for them to discuss about their career management with their closer friends are relatively higher as compared to those who discuss with their parents. Berndt (1996) supported peer support as an important factor to assist individuals when they face career indecision problem. Bandura (1997) also explained that when the individual is encouraged and motivated by others, they are capable to accomplish a task successfully. Hence, this kind of support will enhance an individual's self-efficacy belief.

Lindholm and associates (2002) conducted a survey on a group of college students in 2002. The findings concludes that the socialization process affects one's perceived career opportunity which ultimately can lead to changes in one's career choice and development (Astin, 1984). Later in 2004, Forret and Dougherty's (2004) empirical study explained that peer influence as part of networking relationship showed perceived career success among 1180 business school graduates from a Midwestern State University, United States. Thus, we expect peer influence to have positive relationships with undergraduates' perceived career management. Based on the above discussion, this study hypothesized that

Hypothesis 3: Peer influences have positive relationships with undergraduates' perceived individual career management.

The research framework

The research framework consists of individual (i.e., self-efficacy and outcome expectation) and social related factor (i.e., peer influence) as the independent variables and individual career management as the dependent variable. The study hypothesizes that there are significant relationships between individual and social related factors and individual career management. The research framework is shown in Figure 1.

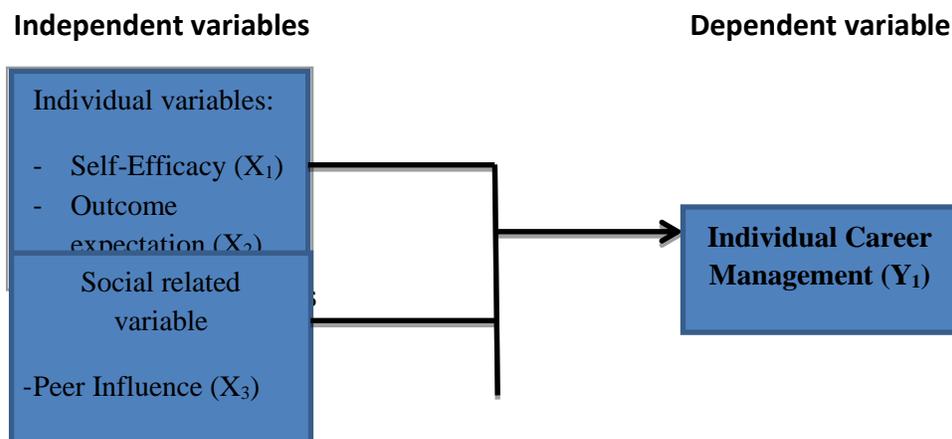


Figure 1. The research framework

Methodology

Population, sampling and data collection procedures

The population consisted of undergraduates in higher education institutions in Malaysia. Stratified random sampling (Ary et al., 2010) technique was used in this study. Sample sizes of 150 respondents were involved in the present study. The data collection was based on a self-administered questionnaire. The sampling frame for this research project consists of undergraduates from different study fields such as business and finance, engineering, law, medicine, pre-U, design, communication, computing and IT, education, hospitality and tourism, biosciences, social science and art, and accountancy. The purpose of data collection was explained clearly on the cover of the questionnaire together with instructions and assurances of the confidentiality of the data collected.

Instruments

In this study, the content validity test was done through verification by a panel of judges who were academics in the field of Human Resource Department who specialized in career management. Some of the statements were modified based on the suitability to the local context and the objective of the study as highlighted by the panel of judges.

Individual Career management. Individual career management was measured by adopting eleven items scale to access each of the aspect of career planning and tactics by Open (1994). All items were measured using a 5 point Likert scale with values ranging from 1="very true to me" to 5="very untrue to me". Sample item is "I have definite goals for my career over my lifetime". The Cronbach reliability in this study was .84.

Self-efficacy. Eight items of Career Decision Self-efficacy Scale- Short Form (CDMSE-SF) was used to measure the sources of career efficacy belief. The shortened version of OCCSEFF were adapted and adopted from Betz, Klein and Taylor (1996) for occupational domain and it is appropriate to examine individual's work value and commitment. All items were measured using a 5 point Likert scale with values ranging from 1="strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree". Sample item is "If I am in trouble at work, I can usually think of something to do". The Cronbach reliability in this study was .94.

Outcome expectation. To analyze the relationship between outcome expectations and individual career management, Student Outcome Expectations Scale (SOES) was used. Items for this measurement were adapted from Hackett and Lent (1992) and Betz & Voyten (1997). A five-items scale of outcome expectation were adapted from Betz and Voyten (1997). All items were measured using a 5 point Likert scale with values ranging from 1="strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree". The Cronbach reliability for SOES is 0.84. Examples of questions used are: "Getting my degree means I will be able to achieve my future goals" and "Earning my undergraduate degree will fulfill my more immediate personal and professional needs"

Peer influences. To access peer, Career- Related Parent Support Scale was adapted and modified from Kram & Isabella (1985) to assess undergraduates' perceptions of peer support on career decision. All items were measured using a 5 point Likert scale with values ranging from 1="strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree". The reliability (Cronbach alpha) for this scale is 0.82. Examples of the questions are: "I would like my peers to be more supportive of my interests and/or activities" and "My peers understand me because I find it easy to communicate with them"

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software version 23. Descriptive analysis was conducted to analyze the demographic and profiles of respondents. The data were normally distributed within the range of -1.0 and +1.0 of standard deviation. With the normally distributed data, parametric tests were conducted in the study. The objective of this study was to investigate if there is influence of individual and social related factors on perceived individual career development among undergraduates. Multiple regression (MLR) analysis was used to examine the association between these independent variables and dependent variable (Hair et al., 2010).

Results and discussion

Demographics profiles

The results indicated that 54% of respondents were male and 46 % were female. All the respondents were generation Y. About 60 percent were in age group between 20 to 22, followed by 25 percent between 23 to 25, 9 percent between 17 to 19 and 4 percent who is above 29 years old.

The correlation analysis in Table 1 shows that three independent variables were statistically significant and positive related to individual career management (self-efficacy, $r = 0.575$, $p < 0.01$, outcome expectation, $r = 0.277$, $p < 0.01$ and peer influence, $r = 0.283$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, all the hypothesized (H1, H2, H3) were supported. Specifically, self-efficacy had the strongest significant association with the dependent variable (individual career management).

Variable	Means	SD	1	2	3	4
Individual career management	3.83	0.46				
Self-Efficacy	5.36	0.572	0.575**			
Outcome Expectation	4.32	0.463	0.277**	0.187**		
Peer influence	3.52	0.397	0.283**	0.111	0.075**	-

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 1. Relationship between individual, social related and individual career variables.

Table 2 shows the Multiple Linear Regression between the independent and dependent variables. R^2 is 0.323, which indicates that 32.3% of the variance in perceived individual career management was significantly explained by the three independent variables. R (Multiple correlation coefficient) is 0.569; hence there is a positive and moderate correlation between three independent variables (self-efficacy, outcome expectation and peer influences). Besides, the F -value is 23.266 ($p < 0.001$). Hence, the regression model fits the data and there was statistically significant contribution of independent variables toward perceived individual career management. Self-efficacy has the highest β value of 0.485, which indicates that self-efficacy has the most significant relationship towards individual career management. It is followed by outcome expectation with the β value of 0.174 ($p < 0.001$), where peer influence has the lowest β value which is .057 ($p < 0.005$).

The study found that individual and social related factors were found statistically significant to influence individual career management among undergraduates. The findings of present study was consistent with Lapan's (2004) and Harriet's (2012) research who argued that individual (self-efficacy and outcome expectation) and social (peer influence) related variables were particularly critical in shaping self-managed career among employees because individuals must take charge and be responsible for their career planning and management. The undergraduates believed that both initiatives and self-confidence are important to pursue their career growth in the future.

Item	Beta value(β)	<i>p</i> -value
Self-Efficacy	0.485	0.000
Outcome expectation	0.174	0.000
Peer Influence	0.057	0.011
F	23.266	
R	0.569	
R ²	0.323	
Adjusted R ²	0.477	

Table 2. Multiple Linear Regression analysis

Implication on Human Resource Management (HRM)

With regards to the implication of the research results, HRD practitioners from organizations, student affair counselors and academics from higher education institution may use the current study outcomes to obtain a better understanding of the existence of individual career management, and acknowledge the importance of individual career trends in the modern vocation environment. It is noteworthy to pay attention to this new career concept characteristics, particularly self-invention, autonomy and self-directed which are driven by an individual's initiatives rather than depending on organizations. Human Resource practitioners and relevant parties from higher education institutions should take appropriate strategies to encourage undergraduates to be responsible to manage their career upon graduation.

The study reveals that self-efficacy is one of the key prospective factors that could affect individual career management. The higher the level of confidence an individual possesses based on the past accomplishment experiences, the stronger belief of his or her self-efficacy in career management. For an instance, if an undergraduate achieved good result in his or her academic performance, he or she will have a higher level of confidence towards their future career accomplishments. With the level of confidence the undergraduate possesses based on past performance accomplishment, the undergraduate will anticipate more in his or her career management rather than depend on others to develop their career paths. In addition, undergraduate who is expecting a degree will consequently produce desirable outcome in their career management. Undergraduates who have higher intentions to complete the degree apparently believe that the degree will hold some value for them in their career related decision. For example, undergraduates who obtained a bachelor's degree would enable them to achieve future goals and would anticipate better career success.

Hence, a counsellor or advisor may provide support and guidance to students in order to build career self-efficacy and enhance individual's outcome expectation towards career growth. Counsellors may assist undergraduates to be more aware of their career management by helping them differentiate career choices and options that they are interested in. Counsellors could help undergraduates to engage in their career exploration process by examining the linkage between the efforts they asserted to obtain the degree qualification and the benefits

derived from the acquired academic achievements (e.g., occupational benefits and compensations). In other major studies, Bandura (1997) agreed with the statement that people who have outcome expectation are very dependent on their judgment of what they can achieve. Thus, Human Resource practitioners may emphasize efforts in enhancing individual's career management needs by designing counselling programs to assist those with high levels of career indecision. Counsellors need to assist employees in matching their career inspirations with the dynamically changing workplaces and calibrating their career self-efficacy and outcome expectations with environmental opportunities. As for undergraduates themselves, they should be more proactive to take part in non-academic activities apart from working hard to achieve a good grade in academic. They should empower their field of studies well in order to enable them to apply the knowledge in the workplace when they start their careers.

The studies also found that peer influences play an essential role to affect individual career management. According to Hartup and Stevens (1997), teenagers spend 29% of their awake times with their friends. As a result, they have the chance to share their thoughts about their career planning with their friends and know more about themselves. With the support and counselling from the friends, it helps to facilitate a person's commitment to his or her career management. There is a need of emotional support from peers, which will be able to encourage individuals in their career management. Therefore, undergraduates should establish and maintain their friendship and networking with others while pursuing their undergraduate education in private higher education institutions. Such social relationship can begin within the campus to enhance networking between undergraduates at the varsity level. As employability is the key success factor in contemporary career management, organizations can provide necessary assistance to new employees (fresh graduates) in order to help them to identify the required skills with continuous support learning through mentoring program, virtual career management counselling and other relevant human resources practices.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Despite the several implications of this study, some limitations need to be addressed. Firstly, the study shares the limitation as others which employ cross-sectional designs. Therefore there is no causality implied on the relationships between the independent variables and dependent variables. The researchers realized that the patterns of correlations and findings may vary according to circumstances which particularly, will affect the findings of the research. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other industries such as public sector.

Secondly, since self-administrated questionnaire is used to collect data in this research design, therefore, the data accuracy depends on the respondents' honesty and willingness in answering the questionnaires. This may cause differences in some common method variance in the data analysis. Moreover, the data may be subjected to biasness and quality of attention due to the structure of the questionnaire and personal filters. However, complete instructions were given

in each section of the questionnaire to minimize the respondents' ambiguity and misinterpretation (Williams, 2003).

To overcome the abovementioned limitations, it is recommended to enlarge the sample size with more comprehensive criteria in the research design. Besides, some demographic variables such as undergraduate program background, past working experiences and involvement in varsity's curriculum may be considered as independent variables of individual career management in future studies as explained by Harrington and Hall (2007) as demographic factors may have potential influence on the individual career management. Moreover, future study may discuss the negative effects of individual career management such as stress, job insecurity and decline in employability due to the changes in employment relationship. Such discussion may provide new insights for new career concepts stressing on individual responsibilities.

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