

A Conceptual Framework for Integrating Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy into Career Readiness Intervention

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Abstract

University students often struggle with challenges that are frequently rooted in irrational beliefs about career myths and maladaptive cognition regarding career and the work world which impact negatively on career decision-making. While traditional career readiness programs aim to develop skills and competencies, they often overlook the cognitive and emotional barriers that hinder effective career decision-making. This conceptual paper proposes the integration of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) into career readiness interventions to address these underlying psychological factors. REBT, developed by Albert Ellis, emphasizes identifying and challenging irrational beliefs that lead to maladaptive emotional and behavioural outcomes. By applying the ABCDE model (Activating event – Belief – Consequence – Disputing belief – Effective new belief), educators and career counsellors can help students reframe unhelpful thoughts. This paper outlines a theoretical framework for embedding REBT principles into career readiness modules and discusses practical strategies for implementation in higher education settings. The proposed approach aims to foster a more holistic development of students by equipping them not only with career-related skills but also with the psychological skills necessary for navigating an uncertain and complex world of work. Future directions for research and practical implications for career counselling are also discussed.

Keyword: Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, Irrational Career Beliefs, Career Readiness, University Students, Intervention

Introduction

In an increasingly volatile and competitive job market, university students face mounting pressure to make confident and well-informed career choices. However, many students struggle with career indecision, low self-confidence, and fear of failure, which are psychological challenges that cannot be addressed solely through skills training or

information dissemination (Lee et al., 2024; Priyashantha et al., 2023; Wan & Liu, 2024). To enhance graduate employability, universities have actively implemented various initiatives, including career counselling, career guidance services, career fairs, workshops, and other developmental programs (Jelas et al., 2014). Concurrently, Malaysia has also introduced national-level strategies such as the Graduate Employability Strategic Plan 2021–2025, which emphasizes the importance of aligning training, knowledge, and skills with current labor market demands (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2021).

Despite these efforts, a critical gap remains, in which many career readiness programs still emphasize external skills development while overlooking the internal cognitive and emotional barriers that prevent students from effectively navigating their career paths. These psychological obstacles can inhibit students from fully benefiting from institutional support, rendering many well-designed interventions less effective than intended. Career readiness is not merely about skill acquisition, it is a developmental process encompassing attitudes, values, and competencies that enable individuals to transition confidently into the workforce (Daniels & Brooker, 2014; Mansor & Tan, 2009; Moore & Morton, 2017).

One critical yet underexplored factor contributing to career readiness is the presence of irrational career beliefs, also referred to as dysfunctional career beliefs which are rigid, illogical, and self-defeating thoughts that influence how students interpret academic and career-related challenges (Ogbuanya et al., 2018; Otu & Omeje, 2021). In addition, irrational career beliefs also defined as negative opinions and attitudes regarding career development (Sangma & Arulmani, 2013). These beliefs may manifest in various forms, such as catastrophic thinking (“If I choose the wrong career, my life is ruined”), low frustration tolerance (“Career planning is too hard; I can’t handle it”), or self-worth conditioning (“My worth depends on landing a prestigious job”). Operationally, irrational career beliefs consist of negative thoughts, opinions, demands, rules, and attitudes held by undergraduate students concerning their careers.

Research has shown that irrational beliefs are associated with low self-esteem, heightened career anxiety, poor decision-making, and weak goal commitment, all of which hinder students’ career development (Carr, 2004). Moreover, they often elicit unhealthy emotional responses to career-related situations. Left unaddressed, these beliefs lead to emotional distress and reduced motivation (David et al., 2009). Similarly, a previous study explained that when recent graduates hold irrational career beliefs, they tend to avoid taking proactive steps toward achieving their career goals (Otu & Omeje, 2021). This highlights an urgent need to integrate psychological support, particularly cognitive restructuring, into career readiness efforts.

To address this psychological dimension of career development, this paper proposes the integration of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) into career readiness interventions for university students. Developed by Albert Ellis, REBT is a cognitive-behavioural approach that helps individuals identify, challenge, and replace irrational beliefs with more rational and constructive alternatives (Ellis & Dryden, 2007). Although well-established in clinical settings, REBT remains underutilized in career intervention programs, despite its potential to improve students’ self-esteem, emotional resilience, and confidence in career decision-making.

This paper introduces a novel conceptual framework that integrates Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) into career readiness interventions to address a significant gap in current practices. While existing programs emphasize skill development and market alignment, they often overlook deeper psychological factors such as irrational career beliefs, fear of failure, and low self-worth, factors that critically undermine students' decision-making capabilities and career motivation. REBT, a structured and action-oriented approach, offers a theoretically grounded method for helping students identify, challenge, and replace self-defeating beliefs that hinder their career development. Integrating REBT into career readiness efforts is especially timely in the post-pandemic era, where rising mental health concerns and labor market volatility have increased the urgency for holistic interventions. By focusing on psychological aspects of career readiness, this framework aspires to foster more self-assured, emotionally resilient, and career-ready graduates.

Significance of Study

This conceptual framework contributes significantly to both career development literature and counselling practice. It responds to a pressing need to bridge the gap between psychological readiness and employability skills in university settings. By focusing on irrational career beliefs, which are rigid, illogical thoughts that undermine self-esteem and motivation, the framework provides a theoretically grounded alternative approach that integrates cognitive restructuring into career education.

The proposed framework is beneficial to multiple stakeholders. Undergraduate students stand to gain enhanced self-awareness, decision-making confidence, and coping strategies in managing career-related stress. University counsellors and educators can adopt REBT techniques to enhance the effectiveness of their intervention strategies, while institutional leaders and policymakers can align this approach with broader graduate employability frameworks.

The utility of REBT lies in its structured, action-oriented nature, which can be effectively integrated into existing career counselling sessions, group interventions, or psychoeducational modules. As such, this framework has the potential to improve not only students' career readiness but also their overall psychological well-being, both of which are essential in today's complex, competitive employment landscape.

Literature Review

Career Readiness

Past studies found that undergraduate students have low and moderate career readiness (Goodridge, 2018; Jingwen et al., 2023). Career readiness refers to an individual's preparedness to engage in career-related tasks such as exploration, planning, and decision-making (Noor Mala & Azman, 2019; Maznizam & Abdullah, 2016). Mahmud et al. (2019) defines career readiness as a psychological construct that integrates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, which collectively influence a person's capacity to plan for, explore, and make career-related decisions. In general, career readiness encompasses not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills for employment, but also the psychological preparedness to make informed and confident career decisions.

According to Chason et al. (2013), the ability to make career decisions is influenced by career-related thoughts, including beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and expectations. When these thoughts become dysfunctional or irrational, such as rigid, pessimistic, or fear-driven thinking, which can impair an individual's problem-solving and decision-making abilities (Paivandy et al., 2008). Identifying and addressing such irrational career beliefs is essential for designing effective interventions to support career development (Andrews et al., 2014; Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou et al., 2012).

Irrational Beliefs

Irrational beliefs are rigid, illogical, and maladaptive cognitive patterns that distort perception and contribute significantly to emotional distress and behavioral dysfunction (Ellis, 1962; Ellis et al., 2010). These beliefs are often rooted in absolutist thinking and are characterized by tendencies such as catastrophizing, low frustration tolerance, and global evaluations of the self and others (Dryden, 2009). Common cognitive distortions include internal messages such as "I must always succeed to be worthwhile" or "If I fail, it means I am a complete failure." Such beliefs have been shown to impede emotional regulation, impair problem-solving, and hinder both academic performance and social functioning (Turner & Barker, 2014).

The undergraduate phase of life represents a particularly vulnerable period for the development and reinforcement of irrational beliefs. Emerging adulthood, typically spanning ages 18 to 25, is marked by identity exploration, increasing independence, and a high degree of uncertainty about one's future (Arnett, 2000). Within this context, students face mounting academic pressures, peer and familial expectations, and the challenge of making critical life and career decisions, which these factors which can trigger or exacerbate irrational beliefs (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2015). Research has indicated that students with low psychological flexibility, defined as the capacity to remain in contact with present-moment experiences while pursuing valued goals, are more prone to psychological distress when confronted with such demands (Bond et al., 2011).

Irrational beliefs often become more salient during transitional or high-stakes periods, such as examination seasons, academic failure, or impending graduation (Turner et al., 2024). Irrational beliefs typically arise from misinformation, preconceived assumptions, or insufficient knowledge, and are often unrealistic or impractical in nature (Ellis et al., 2009). An individual's belief system significantly influences behavior and can shape emotions, motivation, interests, skill development, stress levels, career decisions, and overall career progression (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2011; Galles & Lenz, 2013; Jamali et al., 2015). These irrational beliefs generally fall into four primary categories: demandingness, which involves rigid expectations about how things should occur; catastrophizing, which entails exaggerated perceptions of negative outcomes; frustration intolerance, which reflects an inability to tolerate discomfort or setbacks; and self-downing, characterized by harsh self-criticism and negative self-evaluation (Hyland et al., 2017).

The Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) framework, developed by Ellis in 1950s posits that it is not merely events themselves that cause emotional disturbances, but rather the irrational beliefs individuals hold about those events (Ellis, 1994). REBT-based interventions have demonstrated effectiveness in helping individuals, particularly students, challenge and reframe maladaptive beliefs, thereby improving psychological resilience and academic

functioning (DiGiuseppe et al., 2013). As such, identifying and addressing irrational beliefs among undergraduates is essential for the development of targeted interventions aimed at enhancing rational thinking, emotional well-being, and adaptive functioning.

Irrational Career Beliefs

While irrational beliefs can influence a range of personal domains, their impact on career development is particularly significant among university students. Irrational career beliefs are maladaptive cognitions related to career choices, expectations, and outcomes. These beliefs are often absolutist and inflexible, rooted in unrealistic standards and distorted perceptions of success and failure. Examples include statements such as “There is only one perfect career for me,” “If I make the wrong choice, my future is ruined,” or “I must be successful immediately after graduation, or I am a failure.” Such cognitions can create psychological barriers that hinder effective career exploration and decision-making (Creed et al., 2004; Paivandy et al., 2008).

Undergraduate students are particularly susceptible to irrational career beliefs due to the developmental challenges and external pressures associated with emerging adulthood. During this transitional period, students are often expected to make critical career decisions despite limited life and work experience (Gati et al., 1996). Research has shown that irrational career beliefs are closely associated with career indecision, lower career decision-making self-efficacy, and reduced career adaptability (Amundson, 1997; Mitchell, 1996; Saunders et al., 2000). Students who hold such beliefs may prematurely dismiss alternative career paths, experience heightened anxiety about making the “right” choice, or procrastinate on taking action due to fear of failure. This cognitive rigidity can result in avoidance behaviors, poor decision-making, and diminished motivation to engage in career-related activities.

From a theoretical perspective, Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) provides a useful framework for understanding and addressing irrational career beliefs. According to Ellis (1994), irrational beliefs are central to emotional disturbance and can be effectively challenged through disputation and cognitive restructuring. Applied to career counseling, REBT-informed interventions aim to help students replace maladaptive career beliefs with more rational and flexible thinking. This, in turn, fosters greater confidence, emotional resilience, and effective decision-making in the career domain (Lent et al., 1994; Neenan & Dryden, 1999).

Given the significant impact of irrational career beliefs on students’ psychological well-being and career development, addressing these maladaptive cognitions should be a core component of career readiness interventions for undergraduate students. Interventions grounded in REBT offer a theoretically and empirically supported approach to facilitating cognitive restructuring, thereby enabling students to approach career decision-making with increased flexibility, confidence, and self-efficacy. Integrating REBT principles into university-based career readiness interventions may enhance students’ capacity to navigate complex career transitions and adapt more effectively to the evolving demands of the workforce.

Effect of REBT-Based Interventions on Irrational Career Beliefs

A growing body of empirical research supports the effectiveness of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) in addressing irrational beliefs, particularly in career contexts. Ifeanyieze et

al. (2021) demonstrated that Rational Emotive Career Education (RECE) significantly reduced irrational career beliefs among Agricultural Science Education students in Nigerian universities, with effects sustained at a 3-month follow-up. Similarly, Ogbuanya et al. (2018) found that REBT produced enduring reductions in irrational career beliefs among technical college students, confirmed at both 3- and 6-month follow-ups. Otu and Omeje (2021) also reported significant reductions in dysfunctional career beliefs among unemployed graduates who underwent Rational Emotive Career Coaching (RECC), suggesting the intervention's applicability beyond traditional student populations.

REBT's application has extended beyond student populations. Victor-Aigbodion et al. (2023) examined REBT among depressed medical students, reporting sustained reductions in both depression and irrational beliefs. In the workplace domain, Iliya et al. (2023) investigated the impact of REBT on work-related irrational beliefs among electrical and electronic technology educators, revealing significant cognitive restructuring effects post-intervention. Although these studies were not exclusively career-focused, they further affirm REBT's potential in enhancing psychological resilience and decision-making capacity in high-stakes environments.

REBT's influence extends beyond belief restructuring. Chrysidis et al. (2020) applied one-on-one REBT with American football athletes, finding improvements not only in irrational beliefs but also in self-efficacy and self-determined motivation. In a school-based context, Mahfar et al. (2014) reported that the Rational Emotive Education Module significantly decreased irrational beliefs and stress among adolescents in fully residential schools in Malaysia.

Most studies employed experimental or quasi-experimental designs with pretest-posttest and follow-up assessments, ensuring internal validity. Repeated measures ANOVA and MANCOVA were commonly used to assess changes over time. Measurement tools varied by context: the Attitude and Belief Scale-2-Abbreviated Version (ABS-2-AV) and Career Engagement Scale (CES) were used by Ifeanyieze et al. (2023), while Otu and Omeje (2021) developed the Dysfunctional Career Beliefs Scale (DCBS). Other instruments included the Career Beliefs Inventory (CBI), Career Belief Patterns Scale (CBPS-2), Irrational Beliefs Inventory (IBI), and domain-specific tools such as the Work Irrational Beliefs Questionnaire and the Sport Motivation Scale-28.

Follow-up periods varied across studies. Otu and Omeje (2021) conducted a one-month follow-up, while Ogbuanya et al. (2018) implemented both 3-month and 6-month follow-ups. Uniquely, Chrysidis et al. (2020) included a one-year maintenance phase. These longitudinal assessments provide strong evidence of the sustained impact of REBT interventions.

Several limitations are common across studies. Most of the existing research was geographically concentrated in Nigeria, with only a limited number of studies conducted outside Africa. This concentration raises concerns about the generalizability of findings to other cultural, educational, and labor market contexts. Notably, research in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia, on the application of REBT-based interventions for career development remains limited and relatively underdeveloped. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no studies in Malaysia have specifically investigated the effectiveness of REBT-based interventions in reducing irrational career beliefs among university students. Aside

from the school-based study by Mahfar et al. (2014), which focused on stress and general irrational beliefs among adolescents, and Ern and Yaacob (2017), which examined the use of REBT to improve self-esteem by disputing irrational beliefs, there appears to be a lack of research in the Malaysian context that specifically addresses the application of REBT in career development settings. This represents a significant gap, given Malaysia's diverse higher education landscape and the unique psychosocial challenges faced by its student population.

Moreover, target populations in most studies were narrowly defined, such as students in specific academic disciplines, further restricting the broader applicability of results. Additionally, while some studies utilized context-specific instruments like the DCBS, others relied on generalized measures that may not accurately reflect career-specific irrational beliefs. Finally, long-term follow-up and booster sessions to reinforce gains remain underutilized across literature. Therefore, there is a need for future studies in Malaysia to evaluate the effectiveness of REBT-based career interventions, using culturally sensitive and career-specific instruments, while incorporating diverse student populations and extended follow-up periods.

Conclusion and Future Recommendation

This conceptual paper has explored the effectiveness of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)-based interventions in addressing irrational career beliefs. A growing body of empirical evidence from international studies has demonstrated the sustained benefits of REBT in restructuring dysfunctional beliefs and promoting adaptive career behaviors. However, aside from a few general applications in Malaysia, such as the school-based study by Mahfar et al. (2014) and the self-esteem-focused intervention by Ern and Yaacob (2017), there is a notable lack of research that specifically examines the effectiveness of REBT within Malaysian career development settings.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no studies in Malaysia have directly assessed the application of REBT for reducing irrational career beliefs to enhance career readiness among university students. This represents a significant gap, especially considering Malaysia's diverse higher education landscape and the complex psychosocial challenges its students face in navigating career decisions. Therefore, there is a need for future studies that investigate the contextual relevance and effectiveness of REBT-based career interventions within Malaysian universities. Such research should incorporate culturally sensitive approaches, career-specific measurement tools, and post-intervention strategies to reinforce intervention outcomes over time.

This paper contributes meaningfully to the field of guidance and counselling by synthesizing existing research on the use of REBT in addressing irrational career beliefs and promoting career readiness among undergraduate students. It offers a comprehensive analysis of how such beliefs can impact key psychological outcomes related to career development, including decision-making difficulties and fear of failure. Through critical evaluation of prior studies, the paper identifies significant gaps in the literature and underscores the need for contextually grounded research within the Malaysian higher education system. Furthermore, it emphasizes the theoretical utility of REBT in understanding and disputing irrational beliefs, which are central to fostering adaptive career behaviors. REBT also elucidates the mechanisms through which irrational career beliefs negatively influence career decision-

making, reinforcing the need for interventions targeting these beliefs to enhance career readiness.

The support of university counsellors is essential for the effective implementation of such interventions. Additionally, policymakers, particularly the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, play a crucial role in endorsing and institutionalizing evidence-based career readiness programs. A collaborative effort among educators, counsellors, and policymakers is vital to strengthening the psychosocial well-being and career preparedness of Malaysia's future workforce.

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