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Career Exploration as a Pathway to Career Adaptability among Malaysian form Six Students: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Career exploration and career adaptability are central to student's educational and occupational transitions, yet their developmental relationship requires further theoretical clarification. Career construction theory conventionally positions adaptability resources as antecedents of exploratory behaviour. However, this sequence does not fully explain whether information and experiences gained through purposeful exploration may contribute to subsequent changes in those resources. This issue is particularly relevant to Malaysian Form Six students, who must evaluate personal aspirations, higher education requirements, and occupational opportunities during a three-semester pre-university pathway. Through an integrative conceptual synthesis of career exploration scholarship, career construction theory, social cognitive career self management and selected empirical evidence, this article develops a conditional feedback framework. It distinguishes self-exploration from environmental exploration and considers their potentially different relationships with career concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. The framework proposes that exploration may contribute to later adaptability when students obtain credible information, critically appraise their experiences, and identify feasible actions. Four propositions address differences between exploratory domains, conditional resource consolidation, potentially reciprocal temporal relationships, and contextual inequalities in opportunities to explore. Implications for career guidance and priorities for measurement, longitudinal, and intervention research are discussed. The proposed relationships have not been empirically validated among Malaysian Form Six students and should be regarded as testable conceptual propositions rather than established causal effects.

Keywords: Career Exploration, Career Adaptability, Career Construction Theory, Form Six, Stpm, Pre-University Education, Malaysia

Introduction

The transition from secondary education to further study requires students to make interconnected decisions about programme eligibility, educational costs, personal interests, and future occupations. Career exploration refers to activities through which students investigate themselves and their educational and occupational environments. Career adaptability, by contrast, concerns the psychosocial resources used to manage vocational

tasks and transitions (Stumpf et al., 1983; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Although both constructs are important, treating them as interchangeable obscures the processes through which students prepare for consequential career decisions.

The central conceptual problem concerns the direction of their relationship. Career construction theory generally places adaptability resources before adapting responses such as exploration. Students who possess concern, control, curiosity, and confidence may therefore be better positioned to investigate alternatives (Savickas, 2013; Hirschi et al., 2015). Yet exploration can also expose students to new information about their capabilities, opportunities, and constraints. The established sequence does not, by itself, resolve whether interpreting these experiences can modify adaptability resources during subsequent developmental periods. Nor does the frequency of exploration establish that meaningful learning or resource development has occurred.

This problem warrants particular attention in the Malaysian Form Six context. Form Six is a three-semester, post-SPM pathway leading to the Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) (Government of Malaysia, 2026). Students must evaluate post-STPM options while continuing their academic studies, often by comparing personal aspirations with admission requirements and available support. Access to reliable information and guidance may differ, and an exploratory experience may clarify a pathway, expose a constraint, or increase uncertainty. Evidence from university students, graduates, or employees cannot be assumed to establish the same developmental processes among Form Six students. The unresolved issue is therefore not simply whether students explore, but how the quality and interpretation of exploration may relate to later adaptability resources in this distinct educational setting.

This article addresses that issue by developing a bounded conceptual account of conditional feedback between career exploration and career adaptability. It first distinguishes exploratory behaviours from adaptability resources, including the difference between curiosity as a resource and exploration as an action. It then proposes that credible information, reflective appraisal, and feasible next steps may enable exploratory experiences to consolidate selected adaptability resources, while existing resources continue to facilitate subsequent exploration. Finally, it formulates testable propositions and implications for guidance in the Form Six context. The article advances theory through critical integration rather than reporting empirical estimates or claiming a systematic review.

Approach to Conceptual Synthesis

The article adopts an integrative conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic literature review or a quantitative meta analysis. Its theoretical anchors are the Career Exploration Survey tradition, subsequent work on reflective and environmental exploration, career construction theory and the career adaptation sequence, and the social-cognitive model of career self-management (Stumpf et al., 1983; Flum & Blustein, 2000; Lent & Brown, 2013; Savickas, 2013). Empirical studies are used selectively to evaluate the plausibility of the proposed relationships, identify competing explanations and highlight developmental and contextual boundary conditions. This approach is appropriate for a question involving competing causal orderings and distinctions between related constructs, it does not permit claims about literature exhaustiveness or pooled effect sizes.

The synthesis is organised around four analytical tests. Conceptual coherence asks whether exploration and adaptability are defined without overlap. Temporal plausibility examines whether prior adaptability can lead to exploration, whether exploration can precede subsequent changes in adaptability or whether both processes reinforce one another. Contextual applicability evaluates whether international evidence illuminates Form Six transitions without overstating population equivalence. Finally, practical usefulness asks what a counsellor could change in an intervention if exploratory activity and psychological resources were regarded as distinct but mutually responsive. Priority is given to original theory and measurement publications, relevant longitudinal studies, contemporary adolescent research, and Malaysian educational context documents. The resulting framework should be interpreted as a set of propositions requiring future testing, not as an established explanatory model.

Form Six as a Distinct Career-Development Context

The Malaysian Form Six pathway follows the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and prepares students for STPM over approximately one and a half years in three semesters. It is offered through dedicated Form Six colleges and schools providing the programme (Government of Malaysia, 2026). Admission to Form Six does not settle student's longer term educational or occupational choices. They must still assess the suitability of subject combinations, higher education entry requirements, programme costs, and occupational qualifications. These decisions are made within a relatively short transition period while students manage demanding academic responsibilities.

Three contextual features make exploration especially relevant. First, students must consider post STPM pathways before their present programme is complete. Second, their decisions require both self exploration, which concerns interests, values, perceived capabilities, and aspirations and environmental exploration, which concerns programmes, eligibility, scholarships and occupational realities. Third, access to credible information, career activities, and knowledgeable adults may vary across students and institutions. Consequently, differences in exploratory engagement may reflect opportunity as well as motivation. More frequent searching does not necessarily indicate that information has been understood or translated into a feasible decision.

Research involving adolescents supports examining career development before university graduation, but it does not establish the proposed feedback process in Malaysian Form Six students. Associations between career adaptability, identity development, and decision-making difficulties vary across outcomes and adaptability dimensions (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2015; Karacan-Ozdemir, 2019). Studies involving high school students likewise caution against treating the four adaptability resources as interchangeable (Pellegrino et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2025). These findings justify a context-sensitive conceptual inquiry into whether self-exploration and environmental exploration may have different implications for subsequent adaptability, and under what informational and institutional conditions such implications might emerge.

Distinguishing Career Exploration from Career Adaptability

Career exploration as reflective and information-seeking activity

Career exploration refers to activities through which individuals learn about themselves and educational or occupational environments in ways relevant to career decisions. The foundational Career Exploration Survey treats exploration as a differentiated process that includes activities, beliefs and reactions rather than as a single undifferentiated tendency (Stumpf et al., 1983). Flum and Blustein (2000) further position exploration within identity development and sociocultural contexts, emphasising the meaning attached to exploration, not merely the accumulation of facts. Jiang et al. (2019), in a broad review, similarly call attention to changing career contexts, developmental dynamics and more careful study of mechanisms.

For conceptual clarity, the present framework focuses on two broad behavioural domains. Self exploration comprises deliberate reflection on interests, values, strengths, limitations, and preferred identities. Environmental exploration comprises the purposeful collection, evaluation, and comparison of information about educational and vocational opportunities. These domains are complementary but not identical. Xu et al. (2014) found that both environmental and self exploration were related to information deficit difficulties, whereas self exploration had a distinct association with information inconsistency among Chinese university students. More recently, Nauta (2024) reported that an expected exploratory action pathway was supported for self exploration but not environmental exploration in a short term study of US college students. These findings caution against treating all exploratory actions as interchangeable.

An additional distinction concerns intensity versus quality. Repeatedly scrolling career-related videos is not necessarily equivalent to evaluating verified programme requirements or comparing occupational demands against one's skills. Likewise, extensive introspection without confronting external information can reinforce a narrow or inaccurate career narrative. The relevant developmental process therefore includes both engagement and interpretation. Exploration is better understood as an activity whose informational and psychological value varies by purpose, credibility, integration, and opportunity, rather than as a uniformly beneficial count of actions (Flum & Blustein, 2000; Jiang et al., 2019).

Career Adaptability as Four Psychosocial Resources

Career adaptability concerns resources used to address vocational tasks, transitions, and uncertainties. In career construction theory, these are conventionally described as concern, control, curiosity and confidence (Savickas, 1997, 2013). Concern reflects an orientation to and preparation for the future; control denotes personal responsibility and agency in shaping decisions, curiosity indicates openness to possible selves and environments and confidence refers to perceived capacity to carry out relevant actions despite difficulties. The Career Adapt Abilities Scale operationalises these domains as psychosocial resources and has been examined across national contexts (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Porfeli & Savickas, 2012).

Conceptual overlap is especially consequential for curiosity. A student can be interested in unfamiliar career options without having investigated them, just as a student may perform an assigned career-search task without genuine curiosity. The former describes a resource or orientation, the latter is observable adapting behaviour. Hirschi et al. (2015) demonstrated

that resource measures and measures of adapting are related but empirically distinguishable. Consequently, the proposed model does not define environmental exploration as the curiosity dimension of adaptability, nor does it use the frequency of exploration as a substitute for the CAAS. It instead treats curiosity as a possible motivational resource that can initiate exploration and potentially be reinforced by it.

The importance of retaining dimensions is supported by evidence that different adaptability resources have different associations with developmental outcomes. For example, Alexander et al. (2025) reported that control and confidence, but not concern and curiosity, were associated with lower career anxiety among Australian tertiary students. Karacan-Ozdemir (2019) observed differentiated associations between the four resources and types of decision-making difficulty in a Turkish high-school sample. Such results make an undifferentiated assumption that every exploratory activity strengthens all four resources equally difficult to defend.

The Directionality Problem: From Resources to Actions and Back

The established resource to response pathway

The career construction adaptation sequence offers a clear starting point: adaptability resources facilitate adapting responses, including career exploration, and these responses are implicated in subsequent adaptation results (Savickas, 2013; Hirschi et al., 2015). A meta-analysis by Rudolph et al. (2017) found that career adaptability is associated with adaptivity, adapting responses, and adaptation results, supporting the value of treating these categories as related yet distinct. On this account, students who are concerned about their future, willing to exercise control, curious about alternatives, and confident in coping with difficulties may be more likely to engage in effective exploration.

Empirical studies are consistent with the plausibility of this ordering. Ma et al. (2023), in a study of Chinese undergraduates, examined career adaptability as a mediator between perceived organisational support and career exploration. Their results align with adaptability as a resource that facilitates exploratory behaviour. Work on career development interventions likewise suggests that adaptability resources are amenable to intentional support, although evidence regarding specific programmes and populations should not be assumed to generalise directly to Form Six students (Koen et al., 2012; Turan & Çelik, 2023). Thus the present article does not claim an exclusive exploration-to-adaptability direction.

Why feedback from exploration remains theoretically plausible

A developmental sequence need not end when exploratory behaviour occurs. Students may use information gained from a counsellor, an admission requirement, or an occupational encounter to revise their understanding of what is possible. Such revision could influence subsequent future planning, perceived agency, openness to alternatives, or confidence. However, obtaining information is not equivalent to consolidating adaptability resources. The proposed feedback depends on interpretation and opportunities for meaningful action, and its direction may differ across experiences.

Longitudinal evidence makes reciprocal development plausible without demonstrating the specific relationship proposed here. Guan et al. (2017) examined reciprocal links involving future work self and career exploration. Negru-Subtirica et al. (2015) reported reciprocal

associations between career adaptability and vocational identity among adolescents, while Volmer et al. (2023) examined reciprocal effects involving adaptability and occupational self-efficacy among employees. These studies concern related but nonidentical constructs and populations. They support investigating temporal feedback rather than assuming that exploration directly causes later adaptability among Form Six students.

The more defensible proposition is conditional: exploratory experiences may contribute to changes in selected adaptability resources when students evaluate credible information and identify feasible next steps. Discovering an accessible pathway may support planning and confidence, whereas conflicting advice or an inaccessible opportunity may increase uncertainty or diminish perceived control. The possibility of unchanged or weaker resources is integral to the framework rather than an exception to be disregarded.

Other temporally ordered studies of career development further underscore the need for caution. Guan et al. (2013) examined adaptability, job search self efficacy, and employment outcomes among graduates, while research discussed by Xin et al. (2023) and Zhang et al. (2022) concerns exploration and subsequent career-related processes in other populations. Johnston (2018) identified conceptual and methodological challenges in adaptability research. Together, these sources motivate an explicit test of rival temporal explanations but do not establish the direction, size, or generalisability of the proposed Form Six feedback pathway.

A Conditional Exploration Adaptability Feedback Framework

Figure 1 summarises two linked developmental possibilities. In the established resource-to-response pathway, adaptability resources support self exploration and environmental exploration. In the proposed feedback pathway, exploratory experiences provide information that students appraise in relation to their aspirations, constraints, and feasible next actions. Depending on the credibility of that information and the opportunities available, subsequent adaptability resources may strengthen, remain unchanged or weaken. The framework retains exploration and adaptability as distinct focal constructs. Reflective appraisal, information credibility, guidance access and actionable agency are proposed explanatory conditions, not additional validated latent variables.

CAREER ADAPTABILITY RESOURCES | concern · control · curiosity · confidence

↓ resources support adapting action ↑ conditional feedback after interpretation

CAREER EXPLORATION | self-exploration · environmental exploration

Exploratory information → reflective appraisal → feasible next action → potential resource consolidation

Figure 1 Proposed conditional feedback between career adaptability and career exploration

Note. The upward pathway is a theoretical proposition, not an empirically established causal effect. Information quality, opportunity access, agency, and guided reflection may enable or constrain the feedback process.

How Self-Exploration Might Consolidate Adaptability

Self exploration involves reflecting on interests, values, perceived strengths, limitations and possible futures. When students use such reflection to identify meaningful educational directions, it may support concern through clearer preparation and control through greater

ownership of decisions. Recognition of manageable capabilities may also support confidence. These are proposed changes in adaptability resources, not properties automatically produced by reflection. Longitudinal research on vocational identity provides a relevant developmental rationale (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2015), while evidence discussed by Nauta (2024) cautions against treating self-exploration and environmental exploration as functionally identical.

Reflection may also reinforce stereotypes, overly restrictive aspirations, or self doubt. A disappointing examination result, for example, need not establish permanent unsuitability for an occupation. Without credible external information, a coherent self description may still lead to inaccurate conclusions. Guided self-exploration should therefore encourage students to treat initial interpretations as propositions to be checked against educational and occupational evidence.

How Environmental Exploration Might Consolidate Adaptability

Environmental exploration involves comparing programme entry requirements, qualifications, financial support, and occupational expectations. This activity may translate general aspirations into more specific plans and achievable tasks. Such progress could support concern, confidence or curiosity, but only when the information is credible and useful to the student's circumstances. Unreliable sources, contradictory advice, financial barriers, and information overload may instead increase uncertainty or reduce perceived control. The quantity of information accessed is therefore not a sufficient indicator of developmental benefit.

Studies cited in the exploration literature report differences across exploratory domains and career decision making outcomes (Xu et al., 2014; Nauta, 2024). Associations involving career adaptability dimensions and anxiety also differ across resources (Alexander et al., 2025). These findings do not establish a causal effect of environmental exploration on adaptability. They support examining information quality, interpretation and the particular adaptability resource of interest rather than assuming that all exploratory activity is uniformly beneficial.

Conditional Consolidation, Not Inevitable Improvement

Three proposed conditions shape the feedback process. Information credibility concerns the accuracy and relevance of educational and occupational evidence. Reflective appraisal concerns whether students interpret their experiences in relation to realistic possibilities rather than treating a single encounter as definitive. Actionable agency concerns whether students can identify or obtain support for a feasible response. For example, recognising a preferred programme that is financially inaccessible may increase awareness without increasing control. Guidance and opportunity structures may therefore influence whether exploration is experienced as useful or discouraging.

The framework explicitly permits positive, neutral, and negative feedback. Exploration may consolidate resources when students develop a credible plan, leave them unchanged when information adds little, or weaken confidence when barriers seem insurmountable. This bounded claim is consistent with the wider understanding of adaptation as situated within personal and contextual demands (Nalis et al., 2022). Whether these proposed conditions operate as measurable explanatory mechanisms remains an empirical question.

Propositions for Theory and Research

Proposition 1 : Self exploration and environmental exploration are expected to show distinguishable associations with concern, control, curiosity, and confidence among Malaysian Form Six students. The direction and strength of these associations need not be uniform.

The two exploration domains differ in their informational targets. Reflective self-appraisal may relate more closely to ownership of decisions and future orientation, whereas environmental search may relate to planning and task-specific confidence. Findings discussed by Xu et al. (2014) and Nauta (2024) warrant analysing these domains separately. The proposed differences require empirical evaluation and should not be treated as established dimensional effects.

Proposition 2 : After accounting for prior adaptability, purposeful exploration may predict subsequent changes in selected adaptability resources when students meaningfully appraise credible information and identify feasible career-related actions.

This proposition captures the framework's distinctive feedback claim without replacing the established resource to response sequence. Longitudinal research could test whether exploration precedes within-person resource change and whether information utility and reflective appraisal help explain variation. Positive change is not assumed in every case. Null or negative associations would clarify the proposed pathway's limits.

Proposition 3 : Career adaptability and career exploration may exhibit reciprocal temporal associations, with pathways differing across exploration domains, adaptability dimensions and stages of the Form Six transition.

Concern or curiosity may facilitate initial exploration, while information obtained later may influence planning, perceived control, or confidence. Research on related reciprocal career processes supports the plausibility of such a sequence without testing this exact relationship (Guan et al., 2017; Negru-Subtirica et al., 2015; Volmer et al., 2023). Competing longitudinal models should therefore be compared rather than assuming reciprocity in advance.

Proposition 4 : The association between exploration and subsequent adaptability may vary with the accessibility and credibility of career information, availability of guidance, and opportunities for feasible action.

Students engaging in similar amounts of exploration may encounter unequal informational and institutional resources. Evidence concerning contextual support and career development motivates consideration of these conditions (Ma et al., 2023; Nalis et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2024). Their specific explanatory roles in the Form Six setting remain untested. This proposition addresses the conditions surrounding feedback rather than duplicating the developmental process specified in Proposition 2.

Implications for Career Guidance and Counselling

Career guidance informed by the framework should extend beyond encouraging students to collect information. A purposeful exploration cycle may begin with a clear decision question,

followed by reflection on interests and capabilities, comparison of credible educational and occupational sources, appraisal of constraints, and identification of a feasible next action. A student considering a health profession, for example, could compare official entry requirements with current subject preparation and discuss realistic alternatives with a counsellor. Revising an initial aspiration may itself represent informed decision-making rather than failure.

Differentiating adaptability resources may support more focused counselling activities. Concern may be addressed through future planning and decision timelines, control through supported ownership of choices, curiosity through guided encounters with unfamiliar options, and confidence through manageable information-seeking tasks and feedback. These are theory-informed suggestions, not interventions proven effective among Form Six students. Evaluation should examine the intended resource rather than assume that change in one dimension represents improvement in all four.

A feasible school or college approach could combine brief self-reflection, verification of official programme information, a structured comparison of alternatives, and guided appraisal of next steps. Digital access alone should not be equated with comprehension. Students with limited connectivity, professional networks, or guidance opportunities may require supported access to credible resources. Equitable opportunity is therefore part of the proposed developmental conditions rather than an optional consideration.
Intervention studies suggest that adaptability can be addressed through intentional developmental activities in other educational and transition settings (Koen et al., 2012; Turan & Çelik, 2023). They do not validate the particular activity sequence proposed here. Before wider implementation among Form Six students, the approach would require pilot evaluation of acceptability, comprehension, feasibility, and unintended effects, including excessive decision pressure or information overload.

Agenda for Empirical Evaluation

Measurement and discriminant validity

Future studies should first establish that exploration and adaptability are empirically distinguishable in the target population. Exploration measures should assess self-exploration and environmental exploration with a defensible reference period and wording relevant to post-STPM decisions. Adaptability should be assessed through concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Stumpf et al., 1983; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Confirmatory factor analysis can evaluate measurement structure, while discriminant validity assessment should distinguish exploratory actions from curiosity as a resource. Similar item wording concerning information seeking may inflate associations and requires careful scrutiny.

Competing longitudinal explanations

Cross-sectional associations cannot establish whether adaptability precedes exploration, exploration precedes changes in adaptability, or both processes operate reciprocally. Repeated measurements across the Form Six pathway could compare these rival temporal models. Where data and sample size permit, analyses should distinguish stable between-person differences from within-person change and assess whether the measurement intervals are developmentally meaningful. Findings on reciprocal career processes motivate this approach but remain context-sensitive (Guan et al., 2017; Volmer et al., 2023). Model

selection should follow theory and falsifiable predictions rather than statistical significance alone.

Context, intervention, and explanatory limits

Research should distinguish exploratory frequency from informational credibility, reflective appraisal, and the feasibility of subsequent action. These proposed conditions should not be labelled established mediators or moderators without theoretical and measurement justification. Studies may examine variation by guidance access, academic stream, and transition stage, subject to adequate samples and measurement equivalence. Carefully evaluated guidance activities with appropriate comparison conditions could test whether structured exploration affects later adaptability more convincingly than observational designs alone. Interviews could also clarify when students experience exploration as empowering, confusing, or discouraging. Contrary findings would refine rather than merely disconfirm the framework's contextual boundaries.

Boundaries of the Conceptual Argument

Several limits qualify this conceptual contribution. First, the article is an integrative synthesis rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis, and its purposive literature selection does not establish exhaustive coverage. Second, findings from adolescents, university students, graduates, and employees in other settings cannot establish effect sizes, prevalence, or causal relations among Malaysian Form Six students. Third, the two-domain distinction between self-exploration and environmental exploration simplifies a broader literature involving differences in timing, intensity, purpose, and information quality. Fourth, reflective appraisal, information credibility, guidance access, and actionable agency are proposed explanatory conditions rather than validated Form Six-specific measures or established mediating mechanisms.

The reciprocal feedback claim is also provisional. Longitudinal evidence showing only adaptability-to-exploration effects would weaken it. Likewise, exploration associated with lower confidence under restrictive opportunity conditions would indicate an important boundary rather than an anomalous result to disregard. The framework deliberately allows resources to strengthen, remain unchanged, or weaken. Its value lies in making these possibilities explicit and open to empirical testing.

Conclusion

Career exploration enables Malaysian Form Six students to evaluate personal aspirations against educational and occupational realities, while career adaptability provides the psychosocial resources with which they approach those tasks. The central theoretical problem is that the established resource to response sequence does not fully address whether purposeful exploratory experiences can also shape subsequent adaptability resources. This article proposes a conditional feedback account that preserves the distinction between exploration and adaptability and recognises their potential developmental interdependence. Self exploration and environmental exploration may have different implications for concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, depending on information credibility, reflective appraisal, guidance access and feasible action. The four propositions offer a basis for focused counselling practices and for future measurement, longitudinal, and intervention research. Because the framework has not been empirically validated among

Malaysian Form Six students, its contribution is a theoretically grounded and falsifiable explanation rather than a claim of demonstrated causal effects.

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