ASSESSMENT OF CAREER CHOICES AND PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION GOALS FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: Career assessment is an important process that helps individuals reflect on their experiences, skills, and achievements in the professional field. It aids in identifying strengths and weaknesses, facilitating decision-making for future development (Super, 1990). On the other hand, the goal of professional orientation is a necessary step for those who wish to build a successful career. This process involves exploring various possibilities, setting clear objectives, and developing a plan to achieve them (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000). Together, these two concepts help individuals create a clear pathway to professional success.
The methodology used in this study is qualitative. The aim of the study is to analyze the goal of professional orientation among students based on their career assessment. The sample consists of 1,394 students from various cities in North Macedonia, including 895 females and 499 males, aged 14-19 years. Career assessment was reported by students with a mean score (M=14.00), a minimum value (Min=5.00), and a maximum value (Max=20.00). The majority, 34.3%, plans to pursue university studies, 3.2% plan to pursue non-formal education (vocational training), 18.3% stated it is too early to think in this direction, while 4.3% do not plan to pursue university studies. ANOVA showed significant statistical differences ($p<.000$) among students with different mean career assessment scores regarding their goals for professional orientation.
Keywords: career assessment, professional orientation, university studies

1. INTRODUCTION

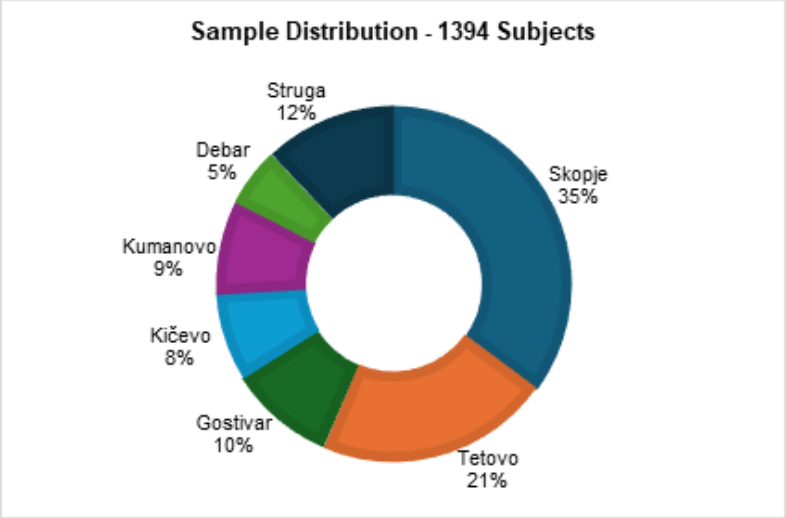
The transition from adolescence to adulthood represents a critical period marked by significant psychological, social, and academic challenges, including the selection of a career path. High school students face the dual challenge of identifying their professional aspirations while aligning them with their individual skills, interests, and values. Career choice is not merely a decision-making process; it is deeply rooted in developmental, cognitive, and social frameworks that influence self-concept, future planning, and personal identity. Theoretical frameworks such as Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (Super, 1990) and Holland's Theory of Vocational Personalities in Work Environments (Holland, 1997) provide robust foundations for understanding the dynamics of career decision-making. Super emphasizes the developmental nature of career planning, proposing that individuals pass through stages—growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement—that shape their professional trajectories. During adolescence, the exploration stage is particularly salient as students assess their abilities, preferences, and aspirations. Holland's theory posits that career satisfaction is maximized when there is congruence between an individual's personality type and the work environment. The six personality types outlined by Holland—Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional (RIASEC)—serve as a framework for aligning personal attributes with career options. From a psychological perspective, career development is closely intertwined with self-efficacy and motivation. Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Career Theory highlights the importance of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals in shaping career decisions. Adolescents with higher self-efficacy are more likely to engage in exploratory behaviors, seek relevant information, and persist in the face of obstacles. Recent studies (Di Maggio et al., 2021; Lent et al., 2020) underscore the role of career self-efficacy in enabling students to overcome barriers and achieve clarity in career goals. Additionally, the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as conceptualized by Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory, remains crucial. Contemporary research by Howard et al. (2021) highlights the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation in adolescents to enhance their engagement in career exploration and decision-making processes. Environmental and contextual factors also play a pivotal role in shaping career choices. For instance, parenting styles significantly influence students' goal orientations. Research by Kosterelioglu (2018) revealed that democratic and overprotective parenting styles positively impact students' learning-approach orientations, whereas authoritarian parenting styles are more associated with performance-approach orientations. Recent findings (Datu et al., 2022) suggest that parental involvement and support can enhance adolescents' resilience and motivation in career decision-making. Furthermore, students with an internal locus of control face fewer difficulties in making career decisions compared to those with an external locus of control (Bacanlı, 2012). In terms of academic and professional development, mastery goal orientations are positively correlated with academic success, whereas performance goal

orientations have a more complex relationship with achievement, sometimes increasing anxiety and avoidance behaviors (Hulleman et al., 2010). Studies such as those by King and McInerney (2022) emphasize the role of fostering growth mindsets and mastery-oriented approaches to help students achieve sustained success. Such findings underscore the importance of providing equitable access to career counseling resources and fostering a growth-oriented mindset among high school students. Given these theoretical and empirical underpinnings, the assessment of career choices and professional orientation goals necessitates a multidimensional approach. Tools and methods that evaluate students' interests, aptitudes, and personality traits, while also considering their socio-emotional contexts, are essential for fostering informed and intentional career decision-making. The integration of psychological theories with practical assessment strategies can help high school students navigate the complexities of career planning, empowering them to make choices that are both personally fulfilling and professionally viable. A comprehensive, theory-driven approach not only empowers students to make informed career choices but also fosters the development of self-efficacy and resilience, equipping them to navigate the evolving demands of the modern workforce with confidence and purpose.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this study is qualitative. The aim of the study is to analyze the goal of professional orientation among students based on their career assessment. The sample of this study consists of 1,394 students from various cities in the Republic of North Macedonia, including 895 females and 499 males, aged 14-19 years (Figure 1). Approximately 29% of the participants were third-year students, 30% were in their fourth year, 18% were second-year students, and 22% were in their first year. Regarding school type, 59% of the participants attended vocational schools, which included tracks in medical, economic, technical, and agricultural fields, while 41% were enrolled in general high schools or schools specializing in mathematics and natural sciences. The questionnaire was administered online within school premises, with professional staff or classroom teachers sharing the link and assisting students in completing it. The instrument used in the study was based on the research of Abubakar, I. A. (2019). Career guidance services in public senior secondary schools in Kano, Nigeria and then adapted to the needs of our research and resulted in good reliability (α =.82).

Figure 1. Sample of the study



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3. RESULTS

In Table 1, the descriptive results of the career assessment variable are presented, with the mean found to be M = 14.00, a minimum value of Min = 5, and a maximum value of Max = 20.

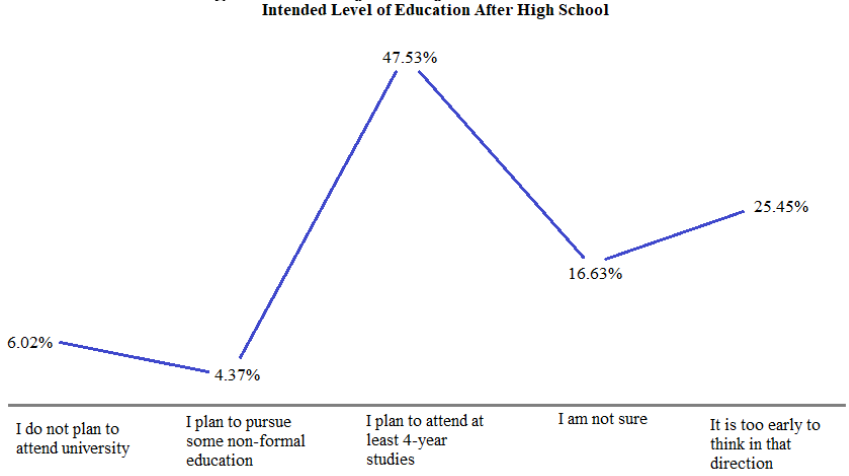
Table 1. Descriptive analysis of career assesment

Descriptive statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Career Assessment	1040	5	20	14.00	3.051
Valid N (listwise)	1040				

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The majority, 47.53%, plan to pursue university studies, 4.37% plan to undertake non-formal education (vocational training), 25.45% have stated that it is too early to think in this direction, while 6.02% do not plan to pursue university studies (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Goal for Professional Orientation



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Regarding the mean career assessment scores based on the goal for professional orientation, we can observe that the highest means were achieved by students aiming to pursue non-formal education (vocational training) and those planning to attend university studies, with both groups having a mean score of M = 14. On the other hand, students who do not plan to attend university achieved a lower mean score of M = 12.80. These results were also confirmed by statistical analysis using ANOVA, which showed a significant value of $p < .000$ (Table 3).

Table 2: Mean Career Assessment Scores Based on Professional Orientation Goals

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min.	Max.
I do not plan to attend university	84	12.80	3.418	5	20
I plan to pursue some non-formal education	61	14.13	3.514	5	20
I plan to attend at least 4-year studies	663	14.47	2.851	5	20
I am not sure	232	13.06	3.021	5	20
Total	1040	14.00	3.051	5	20

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Table 3: ANOVA of Career Assessment Based on Professional Orientation Goals

ANOVA					
Career Assessment					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	473.217	3	157.739	17.763	.000
Within Groups	9199.774	1036	8.880		
Total	9672.991	1039			

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4. DISSCUSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the relationship between career assessment and professional orientation goals among high school students in North Macedonia. The results suggest that students with higher career assessment scores are more likely to articulate clear professional orientation goals, such as pursuing university education or vocational training. These findings align with Super's (1990) Life-Span Theory, which highlights the importance of self-concept and career maturity during adolescence, as well as Holland's (1997) RIASEC model, which underscores the alignment of personality traits with career choices. Globally, the observation that 47.53% of students aim to pursue university education reflects trends reported in similar studies. For example, Bacanlı (2012) linked higher career clarity with aspirations for higher education, suggesting that as students gain a clearer understanding of their skills and interests, they gravitate toward academic goals. However, the 25.45% of students who feel it is "too early to think in this direction" points to cultural and systemic factors, such as limited early exposure to career guidance programs. This trend resonates with findings by Abubakar (2019), who noted that the lack of adequate career counseling in Nigerian schools impairs students' ability to make informed career choices. Similar systemic gaps may be influencing students in North Macedonia, where access to career education remains uneven. Interestingly, students aiming for non-formal education (4.37%) achieved comparable career assessment scores to those planning to pursue university education. This underscores the significance of alternative educational pathways, where personal interests and motivation drive career planning, regardless of societal emphasis on formal education. This finding corroborates Kosterelioglu's (2018) research, which highlighted the pivotal role of intrinsic motivation and personal interests in shaping students' career trajectories, suggesting that diverse educational options should be equally supported and valued. Moreover, the statistically significant differences in career assessment scores ($p < .000$) across professional orientation goals align with Hulleman et al.'s (2010) emphasis on the role of mastery-oriented goals in fostering proactive career planning. Mastery-oriented students often engage more deeply with the career decision-making process, as they are intrinsically motivated to align their aspirations with long-term success (King & McInerney, 2022). From a theoretical perspective, these results extend existing frameworks by emphasizing the interaction between individual and contextual factors in shaping career development. They reaffirm the relevance of Super's developmental stages, particularly the exploration stage during adolescence, as well as Holland's personality-environment fit, which explains the importance of aligning personal traits with career options. Additionally, the findings support Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Career Theory, which highlights the role of self-efficacy and outcome expectations in career decision-making. Recent research (Di Maggio et al., 2021; Lent et al., 2020) further validates these theoretical principles, showing that higher self-efficacy and well-formed career expectations significantly enhance career clarity and goal setting. Overall, these findings highlight the need for comprehensive career guidance programs that account for both individual aspirations and contextual influences. Providing students with equitable access to career counseling and exposure to diverse career pathways can help bridge systemic gaps, ensuring they make informed decisions that align with their personal and professional goals.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to career development literature by highlighting the importance of integrating contextual factors such as socio-economic conditions and cultural values into established theoretical frameworks. It demonstrates that while universal principles like career maturity and personality-environment fit are valid, their application must be tailored to account for regional and cultural variations. This research underscores the need for a more holistic approach that bridges developmental, motivational, and social perspectives in career theory.

Practical Implications

Practically, the findings emphasize the need for tailored career guidance programs in schools. These programs should not only address students' self-assessment and goal-setting but also promote awareness of diverse educational pathways, including vocational training and non-formal education. Policymakers and educators should prioritize early career counseling to mitigate the uncertainty expressed by many students and equip them with the tools for informed decision-making. Additionally, fostering collaboration between schools, families, and community stakeholders can enhance support systems for students. Given the critical influence of family on career decisions (Kosterelioglu, 2018), parental involvement in career counseling initiatives may enhance their effectiveness. Furthermore, integrating experiential learning opportunities, such as internships and mentorship programs, can help students bridge the gap between academic concepts and real-world applications. Research by Wang and Degol (2021) highlights the importance of aligning career guidance with students' individual interests and strengths to maximize engagement and long-term success. In conclusion, this study underscores the critical role of career assessment in fostering professional orientation goals among high school students. By comparing the results with prior studies, it becomes evident that both universal principles and contextual factors shape students' career trajectories. Addressing these dimensions through comprehensive guidance programs can empower students to make informed, confident, and fulfilling career decisions. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to evaluate

the long-term impact of career assessments on academic and career outcomes. Moreover, cross-cultural comparisons can provide deeper insights into how different socio-economic and educational systems influence career planning, ultimately contributing to more effective global strategies for career development

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