

Bridging the Gap: Enhancing Career Counseling Services for Chinese Students in Malaysian Universities

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Abstract

The career development of Chinese international students in Malaysia is significantly influenced by their ability to access and engage with career counseling services. However, these services are often underutilized due to cultural, linguistic, and institutional barriers. This study explores the expectations, perceptions, and barriers experienced by Chinese students at Universiti Putra Malaysia regarding career counseling. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews with eight students revealed that while they recognize the benefits of career counseling, significant challenges limit their access. Key barriers include cultural stigma associated with seeking help, language difficulties, and a lack of culturally tailored services. Participants expressed a need for more personalized and culturally relevant counseling, particularly through the availability of Mandarin-speaking counselors and resources that address their specific needs. The findings suggest that Malaysian universities can better support Chinese international students by adopting a more culturally sensitive approach, including enhanced outreach and tailored services. This study provides practical recommendations for improving the effectiveness of career counseling services, ultimately empowering Chinese students to achieve their academic and career goals in Malaysia.

Keywords: Chinese International Students, Career Counseling, Cultural Barriers, Qualitative Study, Culturally Sensitive Services.

Background

The global trend of increasing international student mobility has brought about significant changes in higher education systems worldwide. Malaysia, as a rapidly growing hub for international education, has attracted a large number of students from various countries, with Chinese students representing one of the largest international student populations. These students face unique challenges in adapting to new cultural and educational environments, which significantly impact their academic and career outcomes.

Career counseling services are crucial for supporting international students in navigating these challenges, particularly in making informed career decisions that align with their academic achievements and personal aspirations. However, research indicates that these services are underutilized by Chinese international students in Malaysia, despite the critical role they play in students' overall well-being and future success. This underutilization can be attributed to various factors, including cultural differences, language barriers, and a lack of awareness or perceived relevance of these services to their specific needs. Understanding these factors is essential for improving the accessibility and effectiveness of career counseling for this student demographic.

The current literature predominantly focuses on the experiences of Chinese international students in Western countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. However, there is a noticeable gap in research concerning Chinese students in Malaysia, a context that presents its own unique set of challenges and opportunities. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing tailored interventions that better support Chinese students in their academic and career journeys.

Objectives

This study aims to explore the expectations, perceptions, and experiences of Chinese international students in Malaysia regarding career counseling services. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To understand the perceptions of Chinese international students in Malaysia towards career counseling.
2. To identify potential misconceptions and barriers that hinder their utilization of career counseling services.
3. To explore strategies for enhancing the effectiveness and accessibility of career counseling services for Chinese international students in Malaysia.

By achieving these objectives, this study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge on international student support services and provide practical recommendations for universities and counseling practitioners in Malaysia. The findings are expected to inform the development of more culturally sensitive and student-centered career counseling practices that cater to the diverse needs of Chinese international students.

Literature Review

Career counseling has increasingly been recognized as a vital component of student support services, especially for international students navigating complex academic and career landscapes. Recent studies highlight the growing importance of career counseling in helping students make informed decisions that align with their long-term goals (Jiang et al., 2019; Santilli et al., 2022). Career counseling encompasses a range of services, including career planning, job search strategies, skills assessment, and decision-making support, all of which are essential for students facing the uncertainties of an unfamiliar job market.

For Chinese international students, the value of career counseling is amplified by their unique cultural background and the significant differences between their home and host countries. Wong and Yuen (2019) emphasized that effective career counseling not only addresses career-related concerns but also contributes to students' overall psychological well-being by helping them adapt to new cultural contexts.

Chinese international students in Malaysia encounter a myriad of challenges that influence their academic performance and career development. One of the most pressing issues is the acculturative stress associated with adapting to a new cultural and educational environment. Lashari et al. (2022) found that language barriers and cultural differences significantly contribute to the stress levels of Chinese students, impacting their academic success and willingness to engage with support services, including career counseling.

Acculturative stress is compounded by the intense competition in the job market, both in Malaysia and back home in China. With China's job market becoming increasingly saturated, the pressure on Chinese students to secure high-paying, stable jobs is immense (China Daily, 2023). This pressure often leads to anxiety and a fear of failure, which can discourage students from seeking help. Furthermore, the study by Zhai et al (2021), highlighted the financial pressures faced by Chinese students, who often view their international education as a significant investment. The fear of not getting a return on this investment adds another layer of stress, making career counseling even more critical.

Another significant barrier is the lack of awareness and understanding of the available career counseling services. A study by Saravanan et al (2019), revealed that many Chinese students are either unaware of these services or do not fully understand how to access and utilize them effectively. This lack of information, combined with cultural stigmas around seeking help, particularly in mental health and career guidance, results in low engagement with these services.

Cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping the career counseling needs of Chinese international students. Chinese culture places a strong emphasis on educational achievement and career success as a means of honoring the family, which can influence the career choices of Chinese students (Chen, 2022). This cultural expectation often leads to a preference for careers perceived as prestigious or financially secure, sometimes at the expense of the student's personal interests and passions.

Kwong (2018), explored the concept of filial piety and its impact on career decision-making among Chinese students. The study found that many Chinese students feel obligated to choose careers that are in line with their parents' expectations, which can lead to internal conflict and dissatisfaction. This cultural pressure underscores the importance of culturally sensitive career counseling that recognizes and addresses these unique challenges.

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), continues to be a relevant framework for understanding career development, particularly among diverse populations. SCCT emphasizes the interaction between personal attributes, environmental factors, and learning experiences in shaping career decisions (Lent & Brown, 2019). The theory's focus on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine the career development of Chinese international students.

Recent applications of SCCT in the context of international students have highlighted its effectiveness in addressing the specific challenges faced by this group. Domínguez et al. (2022) applied SCCT to study the career development of international students in the United States

and found that self-efficacy and perceived barriers were significant predictors of career outcomes. This aligns with findings from Chu (2019), who noted that Chinese students' self-efficacy is often undermined by language barriers and cultural differences, affecting their confidence in making career-related decisions.

The SCCT framework is particularly useful for understanding how Chinese international students in Malaysia navigate their career paths. The theory's emphasis on contextual factors, such as social support and perceived barriers, helps to explain the low utilization of career counseling services among this group. By applying SCCT, this study aims to uncover the specific barriers that Chinese students face and to develop strategies for enhancing their engagement with career counseling services.

Recent studies have provided deeper insights into the career counseling needs and challenges of Chinese international students. Lee et al (2019), conducted a study in the UK, exploring the career decision-making process of Chinese students and found that many students struggle with balancing personal aspirations and family expectations. The study highlighted the need for career counselors to consider the cultural context when advising Chinese students.

Similarly, a study by Plewa (2021), in Australia emphasized the importance of culturally tailored career counseling services. The research showed that Chinese students are more likely to engage with career counseling when the services are delivered by counselors who understand their cultural background and the specific challenges they face.

In Malaysia, a study by Li et al. (2021), focused on the underutilization of career counseling services by Chinese students. The study identified several barriers, including language difficulties, cultural stigmas, and a lack of culturally competent counselors. The authors recommended the development of targeted outreach programs and the inclusion of Mandarin-speaking counselors to improve service utilization. These recent studies underscore the importance of culturally sensitive career counseling that addresses the unique needs of Chinese international students. They also highlight the gaps in current services and the need for further research to develop effective interventions.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, which is well-suited to explore the nuanced experiences and expectations of Chinese international students regarding career counseling services in Malaysia. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the participants' perceptions, challenges, and recommendations, providing rich insights that quantitative methods may not capture. The study is grounded in a constructivist philosophical worldview, which posits that reality is constructed through individual experiences and interactions with the world (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This perspective informed the study's design, data collection, and analysis, ensuring that the voices of the participants were central to the research process.

The participants for this study were selected using a combination of social media snowball sampling and purposive sampling strategies. This approach was chosen to effectively reach a diverse group of Chinese international students who are currently studying at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

Social Media Snowball Sampling: Social media platforms, particularly WeChat, were utilized to recruit participants. WeChat is widely used by Chinese students abroad, making it an effective tool for reaching potential participants. Recruitment information was disseminated through WeChat groups specifically created for Chinese students at UPM, which helped to rapidly expand the participant pool.

Purposive Sampling: To ensure that the study captured a wide range of experiences, purposive sampling was used to select participants with specific characteristics. These characteristics included different levels of study (undergraduate, master's, and PhD), various academic disciplines, and a range of experiences with career counseling services. This strategy ensured that the sample was diverse and representative of the broader population of Chinese international students at UPM.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which were designed to elicit detailed responses from participants about their experiences and expectations regarding career counseling. The interview guide included 15 open-ended questions, covering topics such as participants' perceptions of career counseling, their experiences with career counseling services, and the barriers they faced in accessing these services. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to explore relevant issues as they arose during the conversations, providing a more comprehensive understanding of each participant's perspective.

Interview Procedure: Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted either in person or online, depending on the participant's preference. Online interviews were conducted via Zoom to accommodate participants' schedules and to ensure their comfort during the interview process. All interviews were conducted in the participants' native language (Chinese) to ensure clarity and ease of expression.

Informed Consent and Confidentiality: Before each interview, participants were provided with an informed consent form, detailing the purpose of the study, the nature of the questions, and the measures in place to protect their confidentiality. Participants were assured that their responses would be anonymized, and pseudonyms were used in all reporting to protect their identities. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis.

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method widely recognized for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and its ability to provide a detailed, nuanced account of the data.

Transcription and Initial Coding: The first step in the analysis process involved transcribing the audio recordings into text. The transcriptions were then uploaded into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitated the organization and coding of data. The initial coding involved a detailed review of the transcripts, during which significant statements related to career counseling were identified and labeled with relevant codes.

Theme Development: Following initial coding, the codes were grouped into broader themes that captured the underlying patterns in the data. This process involved identifying connections between codes and clustering them into coherent categories that reflected the participants' shared experiences and perspectives. The themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data.

Validation and Refinement: To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, a member checking process was conducted. Participants were provided with summaries of the themes derived from their interviews and were invited to provide feedback on the accuracy and interpretation of the data. This feedback was incorporated into the final analysis, ensuring that the participants' voices were accurately represented.

Ensuring the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative research is crucial for establishing the credibility of the findings. This study employed several strategies to enhance its rigor, including member checking, peer debriefing, and the code-recode strategy.

Member Checking: As mentioned earlier, member checking was used to validate the findings with the participants, allowing them to confirm the accuracy of the data and interpretations. This process helped to minimize researcher bias and ensured that the participants' views were authentically captured.

Peer Debriefing: Throughout the research process, the researcher engaged in regular debriefing sessions with peers and supervisors who were experienced in qualitative research. These sessions provided opportunities for feedback and reflection, helping to identify and address potential biases or blind spots in the analysis.

Code-Recode Strategy: To ensure consistency in the coding process, the researcher revisited the data multiple times, re-coding the transcripts to verify the accuracy and reliability of the codes. This iterative process helped to ensure that the coding was thorough and that the themes were grounded in the data.

Participant Autonomy: Participants were fully informed about the nature of the study and their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The researcher made every effort to create a non-judgmental environment, encouraging participants to express their views openly.

Confidentiality and Data Security: All data collected during the study, including audio recordings and transcripts, were securely stored in encrypted files accessible only to the researcher and the supervisor. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all personal information was kept confidential.

Findings

This section presents the findings from the qualitative research conducted on the career counseling expectations of Chinese international students in Malaysia. The analysis focuses on the participants' perceptions of career counseling, the barriers they encounter, and their suggestions for improving these services. The findings are discussed in relation to the existing literature and the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) framework.

Eight Chinese international students from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) participated in this study. The participants varied in terms of gender, age, level of study, duration of stay in Malaysia, and experience with career counseling. This diversity provided a comprehensive perspective on the different challenges and expectations faced by Chinese students in Malaysia.

The data analysis identified several key themes related to the participants' perceptions, experiences, and expectations of career counseling. These themes are organized according to the research questions which look into ; i) the perceptions of Chinese international students in Malaysia regarding career counseling, ii) the potential misconceptions and barriers about career counseling services of Chinese international students in Malaysia and iii) improving Chinese international students' experiences with career services on Malaysian campuses.

Meaning and Scope of Career Counseling

Participants had varying understandings of what career counseling should entail. Most viewed it as a service that should provide practical guidance on job searching, skill development, and career planning. However, there was also an expectation that career counseling should go beyond these practical aspects to include emotional support and personal development.

Focus on Building Autonomy

Participants, such as AJ and YX, emphasized the importance of career counseling in fostering self-sufficiency. AJ noted, "*I don't think a career counselor should tell you exactly what to do, step by step. Instead, they should help you build the skills to find a job on your own. It's about making you independent in your career choices.*" This sentiment was echoed by YX, who mentioned, "*Counselors should guide you on how to think and decide for yourself, rather than making decisions for you.*" These views align with the principles of SCCT, which emphasizes self-efficacy as a critical component of career development (Lent & Brown, 2019).

Personalized and Holistic Career Matching

Many participants expressed a desire for career counseling that is tailored to their individual needs and aspirations. Lee, a PhD student, stated, "*I would like the counseling to be more personalized. It's not just about finding any job but finding a job that fits my background, my skills, and what I want in the future.*" This need for a personalized approach is supported by recent studies, which highlight the importance of culturally sensitive counseling practices (Plewa, 2021).

Perceived Importance and Benefits of Career Counseling

Participants recognized several benefits of career counseling, including access to valuable career information, skill development, and enhanced self-understanding.

Access to Career Information and Opportunities

Participants valued career counseling as a source of information about job opportunities, internships, and career paths. However, they also noted that the information provided was often too general and not sufficiently tailored to international students' specific needs. As YZ commented, "*The information they provide is useful, but sometimes it's too broad. I feel like they don't fully understand the challenges we face as international students.*" This finding is

consistent with previous research, which suggests that international students often feel underserved by general career services (Li et al., 2021).

Skill Development and Professional Growth

Several participants highlighted the role of career counseling in developing essential skills, such as resume writing, interview techniques, and networking. SY shared, *"I found the workshops on resume writing and interviews really helpful. They gave me the confidence to apply for jobs both here and back in China."* These services were seen as crucial for improving their employability in both Malaysian and international job markets.

Enhanced Self-Understanding and Clarity

Participants also noted that career counseling helped them gain better self-awareness, particularly in understanding their strengths, weaknesses, and career interests. Mark mentioned, *"Talking to a counselor made me realize that I was more suited for a career in education than in business. It helped me focus on what I'm really passionate about."* This aligns with the SCCT's focus on self-efficacy and outcome expectations as key drivers of career-related behavior (Lent & Brown, 2020).

Barriers to Career Counseling

Several participants reported misconceptions about career counseling, often shaped by their cultural background. These misconceptions acted as barriers to seeking out and engaging with career counseling services.

Stigma Associated with Seeking Counseling

A significant barrier identified by participants was the stigma attached to seeking counseling services. Lee, for instance, stated, *"In China, going to a counselor is often seen as something you do only if you have problems. So, many of us don't consider it for career advice."* This stigma prevented some students from accessing career counseling, as they feared being perceived as needing help. This is consistent with findings from Liu et al. (2020), which highlight the cultural stigma associated with counseling in Asian cultures.

Language and Communication Barriers

Language barriers were another significant challenge. Although most Malaysian universities provide services in English, many Chinese students, particularly those who are not fluent in English, found it difficult to fully express themselves or understand the advice given. YBB mentioned, *"Even though I understand English, sometimes it's hard to express what I really mean in another language. I feel like things get lost in translation."* This led to a preference for Mandarin-speaking counselors, which are often in short supply (Lashari et al., 2022).

Lack of Awareness and Visibility of Services

Participants also pointed out several institutional barriers that limited their access to career counseling services. Many participants were unaware of the availability of career counseling services or did not know how to access them. Mark shared, *"I didn't even know our university offered career counseling until a friend mentioned it. They should do more to let us know about these services."* This lack of visibility was a significant barrier, as participants often relied on word-of-mouth or informal networks to learn about these services.

Inadequate Resources and Support

Some participants noted that even when they were aware of career counseling services, these services were often under-resourced. SY commented, *"When I finally went for counseling, I had to wait weeks for an appointment. And even then, the counselor was so busy that there wasn't much follow-up."* This lack of resources discouraged students from seeking help, as they felt their needs were not adequately addressed.

Suggestions for Improvement

Participants provided several suggestions for improving career counseling services, focusing on making these services more accessible and culturally sensitive.

Enhancing Accessibility and Cultural Sensitivity by Increasing the Availability of Mandarin-Speaking Counselors

Given the language barriers many Chinese students face, participants suggested that universities should increase the availability of Mandarin-speaking counselors. Lin noted, *"It would be much easier if we had more counselors who speak Mandarin. That way, we can express ourselves better and get the help we need."* This would make it easier for students to communicate their concerns and feel understood.

Tailored Outreach and Marketing Strategies

To address the lack of awareness, participants recommended more targeted outreach efforts, including marketing materials in Mandarin and informational sessions specifically for Chinese students. YZ suggested, *"They should have more sessions in Mandarin and maybe hold events where we can learn about career counseling in a more relaxed setting."* These strategies could help demystify career counseling and encourage more students to take advantage of these services.

Developing Culturally

Participants also suggested that career counseling services develop resources that are specifically tailored to the needs of Chinese students. YX mentioned, *"It would be helpful to have guides that explain the job market in China and Malaysia. Something that addresses the specific challenges we face."* This could include job search guides that consider the unique challenges faced by Chinese students in both Malaysian and international job markets.

Discussions

The findings of this study highlight several key issues related to the career counseling experiences of Chinese international students in Malaysia. The underutilization of these services can be attributed to a combination of cultural, linguistic, and institutional barriers. These findings are consistent with previous research, which has identified similar challenges faced by international students in other contexts (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2009; Lee et al., 2019). The application of the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) in this study provides a useful framework for understanding these challenges. SCCT emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual supports and barriers in shaping career behaviors. The findings suggest that Chinese international students often struggle with low self-efficacy due to language barriers and cultural differences, which in turn affects their engagement with career counseling services.

To address these issues, it is essential that Malaysian universities adopt a more culturally sensitive approach to career counseling. This includes increasing the availability of Mandarin-speaking counselors, developing resources tailored to the specific needs of Chinese students, and implementing outreach strategies that effectively communicate the benefits of career counseling to this demographic. Additionally, there is a need for further research to explore the long-term impact of career counseling on the career outcomes of Chinese international students. Such research could help to identify best practices and inform the development of more effective support services.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the expectations, perceptions, and barriers experienced by Chinese international students in Malaysia regarding career counseling services. Through in-depth interviews with eight Chinese students at Universiti Putra Malaysia, several key themes emerged. These themes highlighted both the potential benefits of career counseling and the significant challenges that prevent students from fully utilizing these services.

The findings revealed that while students recognize the value of career counseling, particularly in terms of skill development and self-awareness, there are substantial barriers to accessing these services. Cultural stigma, language barriers, and institutional shortcomings were identified as primary obstacles. Moreover, the lack of culturally sensitive and personalized counseling services further exacerbates these challenges, leaving many students feeling unsupported in their career development.

To better support Chinese international students, institutions must adopt a more culturally sensitive approach that addresses the unique needs of this demographic. Specific recommendations include:

Increasing the Availability of Mandarin-Speaking Counselors: Given the significant language barriers, providing more counselors who are fluent in Mandarin could greatly enhance students' ability to communicate their needs and concerns, leading to more effective counseling outcomes.

Developing Tailored Resources: Career counseling services should develop resources specifically designed for Chinese students, including job search guides that address the unique challenges they face in both Malaysian and international job markets.

Targeted Outreach and Awareness Campaigns: Universities should implement targeted outreach strategies to raise awareness about the availability and benefits of career counseling services. This could include marketing materials in Mandarin and informational sessions that specifically address the concerns of Chinese students.

This study also contributes to the broader understanding of the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) by applying it to the context of Chinese international students in Malaysia. The findings underscore the importance of self-efficacy and contextual factors, such as cultural and linguistic barriers, in shaping career-related behaviors. By integrating these insights, future research can further refine SCCT to better address the needs of diverse student populations.

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the critical role that culturally sensitive career counseling can play in supporting the career development of Chinese international students in Malaysia. By addressing the barriers identified in this study, universities can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that empowers Chinese students to achieve their academic and professional goals. The recommendations provided here offer practical steps that can be taken to enhance the effectiveness of career counseling services, ensuring that they meet the diverse needs of all students.

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