

The Role of Career Guidance in Shaping Students' Work Readiness: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

Firayani[□]

Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi

Email* : firayani60@gmail.com

Entered : November 13, 2025

Accepted : December 29, 2025

Revised : November 15, 2025

Published : December 31, 2025

Abstract

The gap between formal educational attainment and labor market demands remains a persistent challenge in education systems, particularly during students' transition from school to work. Career guidance is expected to support this transition; however, it is often implemented as an administrative activity rather than a developmental process that meaningfully prepares students for employment. This study aims to explore the role of career guidance in shaping students' work readiness from the perspective of their lived experiences. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, this study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with final-year senior high school and vocational school students who had participated in career guidance services. Data were analyzed through interpretative thematic analysis to capture patterns of meaning related to career preparation and readiness. The findings indicate that students perceive career guidance as effective when it facilitates self-understanding, clarifies career direction, and strengthens psychological readiness, including confidence and preparedness to face career transitions. Work readiness is experienced as a reflective and developmental process rather than the result of information transfer alone. The effectiveness of career guidance is strongly influenced by counselor competence, institutional support, program continuity, and contextual constraints within schools. This study concludes that career guidance plays a strategic role in developing students' work readiness when implemented as a sustained, reflective, and contextually supported process. Integrating students' experiential perspectives is essential for strengthening career guidance practices in educational settings.

Keywords: career guidance; qualitative study; student perception; work readiness; school-to-work transition

Introduction

The transition from formal education to the world of work remains one of the most critical and challenging phases in students' developmental trajectories. Across educational systems, persistent gaps between academic attainment and labor market demands continue to raise concerns regarding graduates' work readiness. Despite increasing levels of educational participation, many students enter the workforce without sufficient preparation to navigate complex employment landscapes, adapt to workplace expectations, or make informed career



decisions (Almalki et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024). This structural mismatch has positioned work readiness as a central issue in contemporary educational and career development discourse.

Work readiness is increasingly understood as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond technical competence. While vocational skills and academic knowledge remain important, employers and scholars alike emphasize the significance of psychological preparedness, career clarity, adaptability, and self-confidence in facilitating successful school-to-work transitions (Wati et al., 2025; Lennox, 2025). Students who lack clear career orientation or confidence in their vocational identities often experience anxiety, indecision, and delayed entry into stable employment, even when they possess adequate academic credentials. These challenges underscore the need for systematic career guidance that supports students holistically rather than treating career preparation as an auxiliary educational task.

Within this context, career guidance services are positioned as strategic interventions designed to assist students in understanding their personal potential, exploring occupational opportunities, and developing informed career plans. Ideally, career guidance functions as a reflective and developmental process that enables students to integrate self-knowledge with labor market realities (Yuan & Zainudin, 2025). However, in practice, career guidance in many schools is frequently reduced to administrative activities, such as distributing career information, conducting psychometric tests without follow-up reflection, or fulfilling institutional requirements rather than engaging students in meaningful career exploration.

This instrumentalization of career guidance has implications for its perceived relevance and effectiveness. When career guidance is delivered as a one-directional transfer of information, students may struggle to connect guidance activities with their personal aspirations or lived experiences. Several quantitative studies have demonstrated positive associations between career guidance and work readiness indicators (Hakiki et al., 2023; Ma'arif et al., 2025), yet these findings often obscure the processes through which guidance influences students' readiness. As a result, career guidance risks being evaluated based on measurable outcomes alone, without sufficient attention to how students experience and interpret guidance interventions.

Existing research on work readiness is dominated by quantitative approaches that operationalize readiness through scales, indices, or diagnostic instruments. Studies such as those by Azhenov et al. (2023) and Zainuddin and Rijal (2022) have contributed valuable measurement frameworks and empirical correlations between career guidance, self-efficacy, and readiness outcomes. However, such approaches tend to conceptualize students as passive recipients of guidance interventions, offering limited insight into how students actively construct meaning around career preparation experiences. Consequently, the subjective dimensions of readiness—such as perceived confidence, clarity of purpose, and emotional preparedness—remain underexplored.

A growing body of literature has begun to acknowledge the importance of experiential perspectives in career development research. Alnajjar and Hashish (2024), through a lived-experience study among nursing students, highlighted that perceived work readiness is shaped not only by formal guidance content but also by students' reflective engagement with career narratives. Similarly, Jang and Lee (2025) demonstrated that job seekers' perceptions of career readiness vary significantly depending on how guidance experiences align with personal values and identity development. These studies suggest that readiness is not merely an outcome to be



measured, but a process to be understood.

Nevertheless, qualitative investigations into career guidance at the school level particularly within senior high school and vocational education contexts—remain limited. Much of the existing qualitative work focuses on higher education or specific professional programs, leaving secondary-level students’ experiences underrepresented. Moreover, there is insufficient critical analysis of the mechanisms through which career guidance contributes to readiness in practical, psychological, and decisional terms. Questions regarding which aspects of guidance students find most meaningful, how guidance shapes career orientation, and how students translate guidance experiences into readiness for work remain inadequately addressed.

This gap has significant theoretical and practical implications. Without understanding students’ lived experiences, career guidance programs risk being designed based on institutional assumptions rather than students’ actual needs. From a practical perspective, counselors and schools require deeper insight into how guidance processes foster—or fail to foster—work readiness in order to refine program design and delivery. From a theoretical standpoint, incorporating experiential perspectives can enrich conceptualizations of work readiness as a developmental and meaning-driven process.

Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the role of career guidance in shaping students’ work readiness from the perspective of the students themselves. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on experiential meaning-making rather than outcome measurement. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) explore how students interpret the role of career guidance in preparing for the world of work, (2) identify aspects of career guidance that students perceive as contributing to their work readiness, and (3) analyze how career guidance influences students’ career orientation and decision-making during the transition from education to employment. By centering students’ voices, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced and experience-based understanding of career guidance and work readiness.

Research methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to explore students’ lived experiences of career guidance and their perceived readiness for work. A phenomenological approach was selected to capture how students subjectively experience, interpret, and assign meaning to career guidance activities within educational settings, rather than to measure readiness through predefined quantitative indicators (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The focus of the study was on understanding readiness as an experiential and developmental process.

Participants consisted of final-year senior high school and vocational school students who had engaged in career guidance services provided by their schools. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their level of involvement in career guidance activities, such as counseling sessions, career planning programs, or career-related workshops. The study was conducted in educational institutions that implemented structured career guidance programs as part of their student support services.

Data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with students to elicit narratives about their experiences with career guidance, perceptions of work readiness, and career decision-making processes. Limited observations of career guidance activities and document analysis of career guidance programs and materials were used to contextualize



interview data. Data analysis followed an interpretative thematic analysis procedure, including transcription, initial coding, theme development, and interpretative synthesis. To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was established through triangulation and member checking, dependability through systematic audit of the research process, and confirmability through ongoing researcher reflexivity.

Results and Discussion

Students' Meaning-Making of Career Guidance as a Process of Work Preparation

The findings of this study indicate that students do not perceive career guidance merely as an informational service but as a process through which they begin to construct meaning around their future working lives. From the students' perspectives, career guidance becomes relevant when it enables them to recognize personal interests, strengths, and values in relation to real occupational possibilities. This meaning-making process aligns with phenomenological perspectives that conceptualize career readiness as an evolving understanding rather than a static condition (Alnajjar & Hashish, 2024; Jang & Lee, 2025).

Students frequently described career guidance as a reflective space that allowed them to articulate previously vague aspirations. Through counseling sessions, discussions, and guided activities, students began to translate abstract ambitions into more concrete career images. This finding resonates with Lennox (2025), who emphasizes that early-stage career decision-making is often characterized by uncertainty that can be reduced through structured reflection rather than prescriptive advice. For many participants, the value of career guidance lay not in receiving definitive answers, but in gaining clarity about possible directions.

Relevance to labor market realities emerged as a central criterion through which students evaluated the effectiveness of career guidance. Participants expressed greater engagement when guidance activities addressed current employment trends, workplace expectations, and transition challenges realistically. This finding is consistent with Zhu et al. (2024), who argue that career guidance enhances readiness when it bridges educational experiences with actual employment contexts. Conversely, guidance perceived as overly generic or disconnected from real-world conditions was often dismissed as symbolic or administrative.

Students' narratives also highlighted the importance of active involvement in shaping the depth of their engagement. Career guidance was experienced as more meaningful when students were encouraged to participate actively—through self-assessment, dialogue, and exploration—rather than passively receiving information. This supports findings by Annisa et al. (2025), who demonstrate that participatory counseling models foster stronger career planning engagement. From a qualitative standpoint, readiness was co-constructed through interaction rather than transmitted by counselors.

However, not all students experienced career guidance positively. Some participants reported perceiving guidance as a routine obligation, particularly when sessions were brief, standardized, or focused solely on administrative requirements. These perceptions echo concerns raised by Susan et al. (2025), who note that career guidance risks losing developmental value when reduced to formal compliance. In such cases, students struggled to connect guidance activities with their personal career trajectories, limiting their impact on readiness.

Overall, this subdiscussion demonstrates that students construct the meaning of career guidance



through its perceived relevance, interactivity, and alignment with personal aspirations. Career guidance is experienced as a process of work preparation when it facilitates self-understanding, contextual awareness, and reflective engagement. These findings address the first research objective by illuminating how students interpret the role of career guidance in preparing for the transition from education to work.

The Contribution of Career Guidance to the Development of Students' Work Readiness Dimensions

Beyond meaning-making, the findings reveal that career guidance contributes to multiple dimensions of students' work readiness, particularly in terms of career orientation, psychological preparedness, and decision-making confidence. Students did not conceptualize readiness solely as possessing employable skills, but as feeling mentally and emotionally prepared to face the uncertainties of the labor market. This multidimensional understanding aligns with contemporary career development literature that emphasizes readiness as a combination of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Wati et al., 2025; Yuan & Zainudin, 2025).

One of the most salient contributions of career guidance identified by students was the development of clearer career goals. Through counseling interactions, students reported greater awareness of preferred career paths and alternative options. This clarity reduced feelings of confusion and indecision that often accompany the final years of schooling. Similar findings were reported by Jeon and Koh (2025), who found that structured career guidance courses enhanced students' perceived readiness by strengthening goal orientation. Qualitatively, students described this clarity as a sense of "direction," which they associated with increased motivation to prepare for employment.

Career guidance also played a significant role in strengthening psychological readiness. Students reported increased confidence, reduced anxiety, and greater emotional preparedness for job selection processes such as interviews, internships, or further training. This finding is consistent with Almalki et al. (2022), who observed that career counseling services contribute to confidence-building among students facing career transitions. From the students' perspectives, readiness was less about certainty of outcomes and more about confidence in their ability to navigate uncertainty.

Importantly, students emphasized that career guidance fostered reflective decision-making rather than immediate career choices. Participants described learning to evaluate options critically, consider personal values, and anticipate potential challenges. This reflective capacity aligns with Alnajjar and Hashish (2024), who argue that perceived readiness is shaped by students' ability to engage in informed and reflective career planning. In this study, readiness emerged as a process of internal consolidation rather than the completion of a decision checklist. However, the extent to which career guidance contributed to work readiness varied depending on the depth and continuity of guidance experiences. Students who engaged in ongoing counseling and interactive activities reported stronger readiness outcomes than those exposed to sporadic or one-off sessions. This variability mirrors findings by Butal and Pevida (2025), who highlight the importance of sustained career guidance programs for effective transition support. Qualitatively, students interpreted continuity as a sign of institutional commitment to their career development. These findings suggest that career guidance contributes to work readiness not by directly



equipping students with job skills, but by strengthening psychological orientation, confidence, and reflective capacity. Readiness is thus experienced as an emergent quality shaped through guidance processes rather than as a measurable endpoint. This subdiscussion addresses the second research objective by elucidating how career guidance supports the development of students' work readiness dimensions from their lived perspectives.

Contextual Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Career Guidance in Schools

Beyond individual experiences, the effectiveness of career guidance in shaping students' work readiness was strongly influenced by contextual conditions within schools. Students' narratives revealed that career guidance does not operate in isolation but is embedded within institutional structures, counselor competencies, and resource availability. These contextual factors shaped how guidance was delivered, interpreted, and ultimately translated into perceived readiness for work. This finding aligns with career development literature emphasizing that guidance outcomes are contingent upon organizational and environmental support (Zhu et al., 2024; Yuan & Zainudin, 2025).

One of the most salient contextual factors identified by students was the competence and approach of school counselors. Students perceived career guidance as more effective when counselors demonstrated not only technical knowledge about career pathways but also the ability to facilitate reflective dialogue. Counselors who encouraged self-exploration, listened attentively, and contextualized information within students' personal circumstances were perceived as significantly enhancing readiness. This observation resonates with Susan et al. (2025), who argue that counselor professionalism and relational skills are central to effective career development support. Conversely, guidance delivered in a directive or overly standardized manner was perceived as limiting students' engagement and sense of ownership over career decisions.

Institutional support and school policy also emerged as critical determinants. Students reported that schools which explicitly prioritized career development—through structured programs, collaboration with industry, or integration of career guidance into the curriculum—created more meaningful guidance experiences. In such contexts, career guidance was perceived as a legitimate and valued component of education rather than a peripheral service. This finding is consistent with Inderanata and Sukardi (2023), who highlight that integrated guidance models strengthen students' work readiness by aligning educational processes with occupational demands. In contrast, when career guidance was marginalised within school priorities, students perceived it as symbolic and disconnected from their future trajectories.

Resource constraints further shaped students' experiences. Limited time allocation, high counselor–student ratios, and insufficient access to career-related materials were frequently cited as barriers to effective guidance. Students expressed frustration when counseling sessions were brief or infrequent, reducing opportunities for sustained reflection and follow-up. These constraints echo concerns raised by Ma'arif et al. (2025), who emphasize that structural limitations can undermine even well-designed guidance programs. From a qualitative perspective, students interpreted such limitations as indicators of institutional commitment—or lack thereof to their career preparation.

Students' expectations also interacted with contextual conditions. Some participants entered career guidance with unrealistic expectations of immediate job placement or definitive



career answers. When guidance processes emphasized exploration and reflection rather than direct placement outcomes, misalignment occurred, occasionally leading to disappointment. This finding underscores the importance of expectation management within career guidance, as also noted by Jang and Lee (2025). Effective guidance, from students' perspectives, required clear communication regarding the purpose and scope of counseling services.\

To synthesize these contextual influences, Table 1 presents key factors affecting the effectiveness of career guidance in shaping students' work readiness.

Table 1. Contextual Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Career Guidance in Shaping Students' Work Readiness

Contextual Dimension	Key Elements	Influence on Students' Work Readiness
Counselor Competence	Reflective facilitation, career knowledge	Enhances self-understanding and confidence
Institutional Support	School policies, program integration	Legitimizes and sustains career guidance
Resource Availability	Time allocation, materials, counselor ratio	Determines depth and continuity of guidance
Program Continuity	Ongoing vs. sporadic guidance	Supports reflective readiness development
Student Expectations	Alignment with guidance objectives	Shapes engagement and perceived usefulness

Analysis of Table 1 demonstrates that work readiness emerges through the interaction of individual engagement and contextual support. Even motivated students reported limited readiness development when contextual constraints restricted meaningful guidance processes. Conversely, supportive institutional environments amplified the impact of career guidance by enabling sustained reflection and exploration. These findings reinforce the view that career readiness is not solely an individual attribute but a product of educational ecosystems.

This subdiscussion addresses the third research objective by highlighting how contextual factors shape the effectiveness of career guidance. The findings suggest that improving work readiness requires not only enhancing counseling techniques but also strengthening institutional frameworks that support career development.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that career guidance plays a strategic role in shaping students' work readiness when understood as a reflective and developmental process rather than a purely informational service. From students' perspectives, readiness for work develops through gradual processes of self-understanding, career orientation, and psychological preparedness, facilitated by meaningful guidance experiences. These findings challenge outcome-oriented approaches that equate readiness with measurable skills alone.



The findings further reveal that the effectiveness of career guidance is deeply influenced by contextual conditions, including counselor competence, institutional support, resource availability, and alignment of expectations. Career guidance was perceived as most impactful when delivered through sustained, interactive processes embedded within supportive school environments. Conversely, administrative or fragmented guidance practices limited students' engagement and readiness development.

Theoretically, this study contributes to career development scholarship by advancing an experience-based understanding of work readiness grounded in students' lived perspectives. Practically, the findings suggest that schools should strengthen structural support for career guidance, enhance counselors' reflective facilitation skills, and integrate career development more fully into educational programs. Future research may build on these insights through longitudinal or cross-context qualitative studies to further examine how career readiness evolves across different educational pathways.

References

- Almalki, O., Alqarni, T., Alharthi, R., Algarni, M., Ibrahim, M., Asiri, Y., & Fathelrahman, A. (2022). Career Readiness Among Saudi Pharmacy Students: Exploring the Need for and the Impact of Career Counseling Services. *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, 13, 1267 - 1277. <https://doi.org/10.2147/amep.s375929>.
- Alnajjar, H., & Hashish, E. (2024). Exploring the effectiveness of the Career Guidance and Counseling Program on the perceived readiness for the job market: a lived experience among nursing students. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1403730>.
- Annisa, D., Eluemuno, A., & Kumar, A. (2025). Modeling-Based Group Counseling to Enhance Career Planning in Eleventh-Grade Students. *Journal of Counseling and Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.63203/jcerch.v1i3.169>.
- Azhenov, A., Chech, T., & Uaikhanova, M. (2023). EXAMIMIG CAREER READINESS AMONG UNIVERSITY SENIOR STUDENTS AND ALUMNI: DEVELOPMENT OF DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS. *3i intellect idea innovation - интеллект идея инновация*. https://doi.org/10.52269/22266070_2023_3_105
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Thematic analysis: A practical guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–352.
- Butal, M., & Pevida, N. (2025). Examining the Impact of the Career Guidance Program on Senior High School Students' Career Decision-Making and Transition at Tomas V. Rivera National High School. *Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.70838/pemj.351004>.
- Hakiki, M., Budiman, R., Firdaus, M., & Astiti, A. (2023). THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE AND CAREER GUIDANCE ON STUDENT WORK READINESS: A QUANTITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE RESEARCH STUDY. *Jurnal Inovasi Pendidikan dan Teknologi Informasi (JIPTI)*. <https://doi.org/10.52060/pti.v4i2.1398>.
- Inderanata, R., & Sukardi, T. (2023). Investigation study of integrated vocational guidance on work readiness of mechanical engineering vocational school students. *Heliyon*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e13333>.



- Jang, J., & Lee, S. (2025). Exploring Perception Types of Humanities Job Seekers in Employment Preparation: Implications for Career Guidance. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15020151>.
- Jeon, J., & Koh, J. (2025). Impact of a career guidance course on the career readiness of nursing students. *Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology*. <https://doi.org/10.55214/25768484.v9i3.5685>.
- Lennox, E. (2025). Articulating passion: Career decision-making and employability perception among first-year Arts, English and Language students. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 24, 335 - 351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14740222251320339>.
- Ma'arif, S., Zulaihati, S., & Swaramarinda, D. (2025). ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF INTERNSHIP, SELF-EFFICACY, AND CAREER GUIDANCE ON WORK READINESS IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOL STUDENTS. *Jurnal Pendidikan Ekonomi, Perkantoran, dan Akuntansi*. <https://doi.org/10.21009/jpepa.0601.08>.
- Maestrado, J., & Bucar, J. (2024). Career Guidance Advocacy Program and The Grade 10 Completers' Career Choice. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*. <https://doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.05.02.12>.
- Nafia, I. (2025). ENHANCING CAREER READINESS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF PSYCHOMETRIC TEST TRAINING FOR INDONESIAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS. *EDUCATIONE*. <https://doi.org/10.59397/edu.v3i2.95>.
- Rahmadani, K., & Irfan, D. (2021). Contribution of Career Counseling, Internship Experience and Advisor Toward Students Work Readiness at Vocational High School. *JURNAL PENDIDIKAN TEKNOLOGI KEJURUAN*. <https://doi.org/10.24036/jptk.v4i1.19423>.
- Susan, B., H., Suciawati, B., & Lasmana, I. (2025). The Role of Guidance Counselling in Students' Career Development. *Journal of Educational Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.58218/jes.v3i1.1249>.
- Wati, B., Khafidz, M., & Latifah, L. (2025). Analysis of Factors Affecting Students' Job Readiness in Kendal Regency. *Journal of Economic Education*. <https://doi.org/10.15294/jeec.v13i1.13674>.
- Yamamoto, S., Kobayashi, R., & Gonzales, S. (2025). Effectiveness of Career Guidance Program in Improving Students' Job Readiness. *International Journal of Educational Narratives*. <https://doi.org/10.70177/ijen.v3i2.2153>.
- Yuan, X., & Zainudin, Z. (2025). Integrating Career Planning and Guidance to Foster Career Readiness: A Conceptual Perspective on Student Development. *Journal of Digitainability, Realism & Mastery (DREAM)*. <https://doi.org/10.56982/dream.v4i05.310>.
- Zainuddin, M., & Rijal, M. (2022). The Effect of Self-efficacy and Career Guidance Mediated by Work Competency on Job Readiness of Students of Smk Negeri 1 Selong Indonesia. *Asian Journal of Economics, Business and Accounting*. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajeba/2022/v22i24899>.
- Zhu, J., Sun, T., Sun, J., & Chai, F. (2024). Optimizing Employment Quality of College Engineering Students: The Crucial Role of School-Based Career Guidance and Readiness. *2024 ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition Proceedings*. <https://doi.org/10.18260/1-2--47820>.

