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Açık Erişim

Exploring Career Information Needs in the Transition to Higher Education

Yükseköğretime Geçişte Kariyer Bilgisi İhtiyaçlarının Keşfi

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ÖZET

Yükseköğretime geçiş, bireylerin hayatlarında kritik bir dönemi temsil eder ve bu süreç, onların gelecekteki kariyerleriyle ilgili bilinçli kararlar almalarını gerektirir. Kariyer bilgisi, üniversite adaylarının, kendi istekleri ve iş gücü piyasası koşullarıyla uyumlu bir bölüm ve üniversite seçimi yaparken rehberliğe ihtiyaç duydukları önemli bir kaynaktır. Bu çalışma, öğrencilerin üniversite ve bölüm seçimindeki tercihlerini etkileyen faktörleri belirlemeyi ve psikolojik danışmanlar, üniversite personeli ve kariyer rehberliği ve tanıtım faaliyetlerine katılan diğer paydaşlar için uygulanabilir farkındalık sağlamayı amaçlamaktadır. 18-28 yaş arasındaki katılımcılardan veri toplamak amacıyla bir anket uygulanmıştır. İlk bulgular, adayların karar verirken müfredat detayları, kariyerlerin ekonomik sonuçları ve burs fırsatlarını öncelikli olarak değerlendirdiklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışma, bu bulguların kariyer danışmanlığı uygulamaları ve üniversite tanıtım stratejileri üzerindeki etkilerini keşfederek, aday öğrencilere yönelik desteklerin güçlendirilmesi için önerilerde bulunmaktadır..

ABSTRACT

Transition to higher education represents a critical phase in individuals' lives, requiring them to make informed decisions about their prospective careers. Career information is a vital resource for university candidates who need guidance on selecting a major and institution that aligns with their aspirations and labor market conditions. This study aims to identify factors influencing students' preferences in university and major selection and to provide actionable insights for psychological counselors, university staff, and other stakeholders involved in career guidance and demonstration activities. A survey was conducted to collect data from participants aged 18-28 years. Preliminary findings reveal that candidates prioritize curriculum details, economic outcomes of careers, and grant opportunities when making decisions. This study explores the implications of these findings for career counseling practices and university outreach strategies by providing recommendations to enhance support for prospective students.

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INTRODUCTION

The transition to higher education signifies a crucial developmental phase in an individual's scholarly and career route (Kırdök & Harman, 2018; Söner & Yılmaz, 2024). During this period, students are confronted with the challenging task of deciding on a university and major that will influence their academic experiences and career opportunities (Korkut-Owen et al., 2012). The process of decision-making is complex and encompasses various dimensions, including individual interests and aspirations, in addition to external factors such as economic conditions, familial expectations, and the realities of the labor market (Savickas, 2011; Söner & Yılmaz, 2024).

In the context of Türkiye, the transition to higher education is predominantly shaped by the national university entrance exam (Yükseköğretim Kurumları Sınavı – YKS), which serves as the main gatekeeper for students' university and major selection. The high-stakes nature of this exam often creates intense pressure among students, resulting in psychological distress, uncertainty, and decision paralysis. Research has shown that students in Türkiye frequently make educational decisions without sufficient guidance or access to detailed information about university programs and career paths (Mutlu et al., 2019). These constraints are particularly acute for students from under-resourced schools or socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Şahin, 2024).

The gravity of career decisions underscores the need for structured guidance to help students align their choices with long-term goals and values. Career guidance emerges as an indispensable resource in this context (Korkut-Owen et al., 2012). By providing prospective students with accurate, relevant, and comprehensive information, career guidance empowers them to navigate the intricacies of their choices. Universities, recognizing the importance of facilitating informed decision-making, frequently organize demonstration days. These events aim to familiarize prospective students with academic programs, campus facilities, and institutional culture, while also offering opportunities for direct interaction with faculty, staff, and current students (Tinto, 1993).

Despite the widespread use of university demonstration days, there remains a notable gap in the empirical evidence regarding their effectiveness and the specific factors that should be emphasized to maximize their impact. Research exploring decision-making in higher education frequently highlights broader considerations such as career prospects, financial stability, and academic reputation (Aydın, 2015; Günbey et al., 2024), yet the particular information needs of students during these events have not been adequately addressed. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the factors influencing students' selection of universities and majors, providing actionable insights for career counselors, university administrators, and other stakeholders involved in guiding prospective students.

Psychological counselors play a crucial role during this transitional phase by assist students in navigating complex decisions related to job prospects, financial factors, skill development, and long-term career security. While existing literature emphasizes the importance of career counseling, it often lacks specificity regarding the information students prioritize when making decisions about higher education (Lent et al., 1994). By addressing this deficiency, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of student preferences and priorities in university and major selection.

The decision-making process in higher education is multifaceted and influenced by individual, contextual, and societal factors. Theoretical frameworks such as Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (1990) and Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making (1996) offer valuable insights into this

process. Super's theory emphasizes the dynamic nature of career development, suggesting that individuals' career choices evolve throughout their lives in response to shifts in self-concept, life roles, and external opportunities. This perspective underscores the importance of providing students with adaptable guidance that reflects their changing needs and circumstances (Super, 1990).

Krumboltz's Social Learning Theory, in contrast, highlights the critical role of experiences and information in shaping career preferences. According to Krumboltz, exposure to diverse experiences—such as academic programs, internships, and mentorship opportunities—equips individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions (Krumboltz, 1996). University demonstration days align closely with this framework by offering prospective students firsthand exposure to institutional offerings and professional pathways. Furthermore, the questionnaire items used in this study were conceptually grounded in these theories—particularly in their emphasis on experiential learning, career self-concept, and environmental interactions. Items addressing occupational outcomes and environmental fit, for instance, reflect Krumboltz's notion of learning from labor market exposure, while questions tied to self-development and long-term adaptability align with Super's life-span career adaptability model.

Empirical studies have consistently identified key factors that influence students' choices in higher education. These factors include the perceived quality of academic programs, career opportunities, expected income, and financial support availability. Research by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) emphasizes the need for career counseling to integrate both personal aspirations and market realities, enabling students to align their educational goals with future job prospects. Besides, practical considerations such as employability and financial aid significantly impact students' decision-making (Aydın, 2015).

Student attrition emphasizes the importance of providing clear and comprehensive information about the academic environment and support services (Tinto, 1993). Additionally, studies by Choy (2001) and Gati and Asher (2001) highlight the critical role of financial support in facilitating access to higher education, particularly for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These findings suggest that students place significant value on practical and economic factors, yet there remains limited evidence regarding the specific priorities of students during university outreach events. This gap in the literature necessitates a closer examination of the factors that prospective students prioritize when evaluating universities and majors. Understanding these preferences can inform the design of more effective demonstration days and career counseling practices, ultimately enhancing students' ability to make informed decisions.

METHOD

Research Design

The current study utilized a cross-sectional design to investigate the factors influencing university and major selection among prospective students. Drawing from key themes in the literature on career decision-making (Gati & Asher, 2001; Hooley, 2014), a 18-item questionnaire – presented in appendix 1- was developed to capture students' preferences. The questionnaire was divided into three categories: information about academic programs, career opportunities, and university-specific aspects.

Participants

A total of 256 participants between the ages of 18 and 28 participated in the study. 53% (n = 136) of the participants were female, and 47% (n = 120) were male. The data were analyzed with descriptive statistics by evaluating the participant responses separately in the context of the determined themes.

Ethical Disclosure

Data was collected after consultation with XX University, Human Research Ethics Committee (No: 61491896-050.06.04).

Data Instruments

Career Information Needs in Transition to Higher Education Questionnaire. Drawing from key themes in the literature on career decision-making (Gati & Asher, 2001; Hooley, 2014), a 18-item questionnaire – presented in appendix 1- was developed to capture students' preferences and priorities. The questionnaire was divided into three categories: information about academic programs, career opportunities, and university-specific aspects. The first category focused on curriculum details, including course content, academic structure, and the quality of faculty. The second category examined career-related factors such as job prospects, potential salary, and skill transferability. The third category addressed university-specific aspects, including campus facilities, extracurricular activities, and financial aid options. Content validity was ensured by seeking expert review from three professionals in the fields of educational psychology, career counseling, and higher education. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made to item wording to enhance clarity and relevance. Construct validity was assessed through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and factor loadings supported the multidimensionality of the scale. Participants were asked to rate the importance of each item on a three-point Likert scale, ranging from "not important" to "very important."

Data Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was applied to the data obtained from the trial form, and an 18-item application form of the scale was obtained. The total internal consistency reliability for all dimensions, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha, was .86, suggesting good reliability for the overall scale. A principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was conducted to determine the underlying structure of the career information needs scale.

RESULTS

Preliminary results indicate that students prioritize practical and economic considerations when selecting universities and majors. Information about curriculum details, such as course content and academic structure, emerged as the most important factor ($\bar{x} = 2.71$). This finding suggests that students place significant value on understanding the educational experience offered by universities.

Economic factors were also highly prioritized. The expected income associated with future jobs received the highest mean score ($\bar{x} = 2.79$) among career-related factors, reflecting students' concerns about financial stability and career advancement. Similarly, financial support opportunities, including grants and scholarships, were rated as the most important university-specific consideration ($\bar{x} = 2.53$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for career information needs dimensions

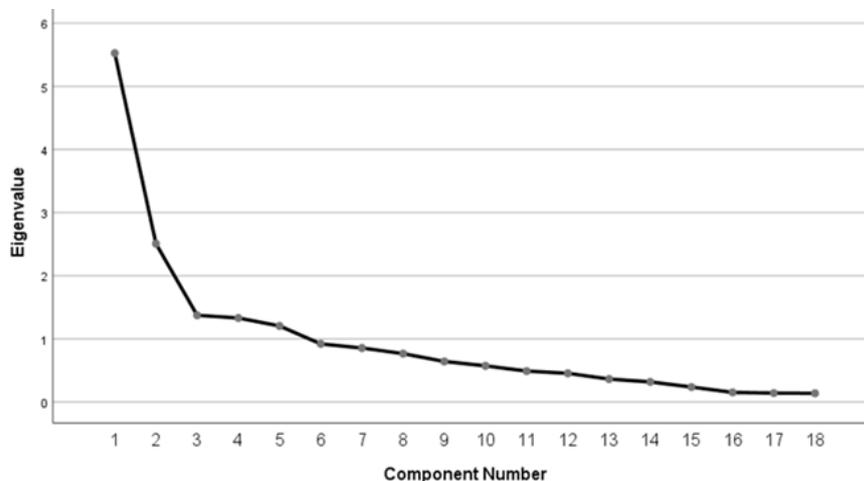
Dimension	Item number	Mean	Variance	Cronbach's Alpha
Contemplatory Career Information Needs	21, 22, 23, 15, 16	2.56	30.70	.76
Employment Oppourtunities	7, 8, 9	2.84	13.93	.80
Social Oppourtunities	17, 18, 19	2.49	7.63	.76
Occupational and Environmental Oppourtunities	4, 10, 14	2.57	7.39	.76
Program and Its Outcomes	1, 2, 5, 12	2.51	6.69	.69
Total			66.35	.86

Descriptive statistics for the dimensions of career information needs are presented in Table 1. The highest mean score was observed for the *Employment Oppourtunities* dimension ($M = 2.84$, $\alpha = .80$, variance = 13.93), indicating that participants prioritized information about employment prospects. The Complementary Career Information Needs dimension had a mean score of 2.56 ($\alpha = .76$, variance = 30.70), followed closely by Occupational and Environmental Oppourtunities ($M = 2.57$, $\alpha = .76$, variance = 7.39) and Program and Its Outcomes ($M = 2.51$, $\alpha = .69$, variance = 6.69). The total internal consistency reliability for all dimensions, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha, was .86, suggesting good reliability for the overall scale. These findings highlight the multidimensional nature of career information needs among the participants.

The scree plot (see Figure 1) displays the eigenvalues associated with each component in descending order, which is used to identify the appropriate number of components to retain in the principal component analysis (PCA). According to Cattell's (1966) scree test, the ideal number of components is indicated at the point where the plot shows an elbow, marking a distinct change in the slope.

As shown in the plot, the eigenvalues for the first five components are greater than 1 suggesting that five components are optimal for explaining the majority of the variance in the data, while subsequent components contribute less significantly. The five-factor solution is consistent with the results of the rotated component matrix, confirming the multidimensional structure of career information needs. The sharp decline between the first and second components indicates that the first component accounts for the largest proportion of the total variance.

Figure 1. Scree plot showing eigenvalues for each component in the principal component analysis



A principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was conducted to determine the underlying structure of the career information needs scale. The analysis revealed five components with eigenvalues greater than 1, accounting for the majority of the total variance. The rotated component matrix (see Table 2) illustrates the factor loadings for each item across the five dimensions. Each dimension was labeled based on the common theme of the items with high loadings.

Table 2. Rotated component matrix for career information needs dimension

Item	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5
Q22	.72				
Q23	.68				
Q16	.63				
Q15	.59				
Q21	.57				
Q8		.87			
Q9		.84			
Q7		.76			
Q18			.81		
Q17			.78		
Q19			.63		
Q4				.80	
Q10				.75	
Q14				.68	
Q5					.72
Q2					.69
Q1					.66
Q12					.51

Dimension 1 (D1): Complementary Career Information Needs. This dimension consisted of items Q22, Q23, Q16, Q15, and Q21, with factor loadings ranging from .57 to .72. These items reflect participants' need for additional information to support their career decision-making processes, such as supplementary details about career paths, job roles, and professional development opportunities. The high factor loadings indicate that these items are strongly associated with this dimension, suggesting a cohesive construct.

Dimension 2 (D2): Employment Opportunities. Items Q8, Q9, and Q7 loaded onto this dimension, with loadings ranging from .76 to .87. These items capture participants' interest in exploring employment prospects, including job availability, hiring trends, and career growth potential. The strong loadings highlight the importance of employment-related information in participants' career planning processes.

Dimension 3 (D3): Social Opportunities. This dimension included items Q18, Q17, and Q19, with factor loadings between .63 and .81. These items reflect the social aspects of career decision-making, such as networking opportunities, professional communities, and collaboration prospects. The moderate to high loadings suggest that social factors play a distinct and meaningful role in shaping career information needs.

Dimension 4 (D4): Occupational and Environmental Opportunities. Items Q4, Q10, and Q14 loaded onto this dimension, with loadings ranging from .68 to .80. These items emphasize participants' interest in the broader occupational and environmental context of career choices, including

workplace conditions, industry trends, and job market dynamics. The strong loadings indicate that these items are highly representative of this dimension.

Dimension 5 (D5): Program and Its Outcomes. The final dimension consisted of items Q5, Q2, Q1, and Q12, with loadings ranging from .51 to .72. This dimension represents participants' need for information about the outcomes and benefits of specific programs, such as graduation rates, employability statistics, and long-term career impact. The loadings suggest a consistent relationship between these items and the overarching theme of program outcomes.

The overall pattern of loadings indicates that the scale captures five distinct and interpretable dimensions of career information needs, supporting its multidimensional structure. These findings provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how different types of career-related information contribute to individuals' career decision-making processes.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

Discussion

The present study set out to disentangle the informational priorities that shape the university and major selection process of Turkish prospective students. Five inter related factors emerged—Employment Opportunities, Complementary Career Information Needs, Occupational and Environmental Opportunities, Programme and Its Outcomes, and Social Opportunities—each reflecting a distinctive, theoretically grounded strand of decision making. In what follows, we interpret these findings against the backdrop of current scholarship, recent labour market statistics, and the psychosocial realities of Türkiye's high stakes admission regime.

That 'employment opportunities' garnered the highest mean score corroborates a substantial body of evidence indicating that Generation Z view higher education chiefly as a hedge against labour market volatility (Lent et al., 1994; Soares et al., 2022). The salience of employability is hardly surprising in a context where fewer than four in ten young Turks participate in the labour force and graduate unemployment hovers near 25 percent. These macro economic headwinds amplify what Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) describes as outcome expectations: Beliefs that a chosen pathway will produce tangible returns (Lent et al., 1994). When demonstration days and prospectuses fail to supply credible salary medians, placement rates, or industry linkages, students interpret that vacuum as a negative signal.

Recent work on Gen Z career readiness underscores exactly this tension. Jones Vlasceanu (2025) reports that two thirds of first year business students feel ill equipped to articulate a career direction and therefore demand early, data rich professional development. The results extend that insight beyond business schools, showing a similarly urgent appetite for labour market intelligence across disciplines. Besides, these findings suggest that universities able to foreground concrete employability metrics will have a competitive advantage in student recruitment.

The second and fifth factors—Complementary Career Information Needs and Programme and Its Outcomes—point to students' desire for longitudinal proof that a degree yields transferable skills and sustainable careers. From the vantage point of Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2011), such evidence serves as a "boundary object", translating self concept into vocational identity. Yet many institutions still present curriculum descriptions divorced from graduate destinations, leaving students to triangulate fragmented data. A recent multi institutional review of campus visit practices concluded that

personalized dashboards combining programme content with graduate outcome statistics significantly boost enrolment yield for undecided applicants. Embedding alumni labour market trajectories into outreach activities therefore offers a concrete way to satisfy the complementary information demand while enhancing institutional transparency.

Although ‘social opportunities and occupational & environmental opportunities’ received lower mean scores, they remain critical predictors of long term career capital. Meta analytic evidence shows that weak tie networks and campus engagement exert powerful effects on early career mobility (Methot & Seibert, 2021). One plausible interpretation of the current results is *temporal myopia*: applicants undervalue social resources until they confront them directly in university life. Admissions teams can counteract this bias by illustrating how mentoring schemes, professional societies, and internship brokers convert relational capital into job offers. In this regard, hybrid demonstration day models that weave structured networking with employer led micro workshops show promise. Brown and Smith (2025) documented a 12 % point rise in first year retention when institutions integrated such boundary crossing elements into orientation activities.

Layered on top of these information needs is the distinctive psychosocial environment created by the YKS. Qualitative reports from Turkish counsellors depict acute exam related distress not only among students but also their parents. Empirical work confirms elevated test anxiety levels among high school seniors (Küçükdoğan & Yıldız, 2024). High anxiety erodes working memory capacity and, by extension, career decision self efficacy (Cassady & Johnson, 2002). Super’s life span theory posits that supportive contexts can buffer such strain by supplying coherent role cues (Super, 1990). The findings showed that transparent, multidimensional information—particularly around economic and curricular outcomes—may serve as a psychosocial buffer by reducing uncertainty. Accordingly, demonstration days that combine evidence based career information with stress management workshops could simultaneously meet informational and emotional needs, thereby fostering more adaptive decision making.

The transition into higher education is a critical stage in a student’s career development, with significant implications for their academic and vocational trajectories. This study highlights the essential role of career information in supporting students as they navigate this transition. The findings reveal that students face considerable gaps in accessing relevant career information, which can contribute to decision-making difficulties and career-related anxiety. These gaps are especially pronounced among first-generation and underrepresented students, aligning with prior research on the barriers that hinder access to effective career guidance. By examining students’ evolving information needs and the challenges they face in obtaining career-related knowledge, this study reaffirms the importance of early and continuous career guidance throughout the higher education experience. The results underscore the need for universities to proactively integrate career information into the academic curriculum, particularly during the early stages of a student's university journey.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching, with recommendations for both higher education practice and policy. Universities are encouraged to provide more personalized, accessible, and timely career resources, such as tailored career workshops, mentoring programs, and improved digital platforms. Moreover, university staff, career counselors, and academic advisors must collaborate more effectively to address the diverse needs of students across different stages of their educational journey. In conclusion, by taking proactive steps to bridge the career information gap, higher education institutions can better

support students in making informed decisions, ultimately contributing to their academic success and career readiness. Future research should further explore the impact of targeted career interventions and examine how career guidance can evolve to meet the changing demands of an increasingly complex job market.

The five-factor solution derived from the current data places employment opportunities at the top of students' information hierarchy. This emphasis on concrete labour-market outcomes can be read as an anticipatory strategy aimed at avoiding the status of *NEET*—“*Not in Education, Employment, or Training*”—which now affects roughly one in four young Turks (Tatar & Öztürk, 2024). Within Social-Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994), such a stance reflects strong outcome expectations; applicants actively seek programmes that maximise the probability of rapid, stable employment because they are acutely aware—often through family experience—of the economic and psychosocial costs of *NEET* status. Our data show that students also ranked Programme and Its Outcomes and Complementary Career Information Needs highly, signalling a desire for longitudinal indicators (e.g., graduate placement rates, transferable skills) that bolster career decision self-efficacy. By providing persuasive evidence that a degree will keep them out of the *NEET* category, institutions can strengthen the mastery and vicarious-learning sources that SCCT identifies as critical for adaptive choice behaviour. In sum, such preferences emerge as attempts to safeguard self-efficacy, expand learning experiences, and fortify adaptability during a critical life transition.

Strengths and Limitations

The present study benefits from several methodological strengths that enhance confidence in the findings. First, the questionnaire was developed through a rigorous, theory-driven procedure that integrated foundational constructs from Social-Cognitive Career Theory, Krumboltz's learning framework, Super's life-span model, and Career Construction Theory. This conceptual triangulation ensured that the 18 items reflected a wide spectrum of information needs rather than a narrow set of institutional marketing cues.

Despite, several limitations temper the generalisability and explanatory power of the results. Because the research design is cross-sectional, associations among information-need dimensions can be described but cannot ascertain how those needs drive actual application behaviour or later retention outcomes—an especially a gap given the dynamic nature of career decision-making. Structural validity also remains provisional: we relied on exploratory methods without conducting a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on a separate sample, leaving open the possibility of alternative factorial solutions. In addition, all measures were self-reported, raising the likelihood of common-method variance and social-desirability effects—particularly in items concerning perceived financial risk, which may be under- or over-played for impression-management reasons. Finally, the sampling frame focused exclusively on candidates preparing for the YKS exam, excluding students who intend to enter Turkish higher education via international, distance-learning, or vocational tracks. These groups may have distinct information priorities (e.g., accreditation portability, work-study options) that our instrument did not capture.

Directions for Future Research

Several avenues can extend and refine the present work. Longitudinal panel studies that begin in the final year of secondary school and continue through university graduation would reveal how information needs evolve and whether early emphasis on employment cues moderates later academic engagement or

career adaptability. Such designs could incorporate objective outcomes (e.g., programme completion, internship participation, NEET avoidance) to test causal pathways implied by Social-Cognitive Career Theory. Experimental research is also warranted: randomised field trials could embed live graduate-outcome dashboards or alumni mentoring modules into demonstration-day schedules and then track subsequent differences in application patterns, offer acceptance rates, and first-year persistence. A third priority concerns measurement invariance. Multi-group CFA across gender, socio-economic status, and urban–rural backgrounds would indicate whether our five-factor structure functions equivalently across demographic strata or whether culturally specific items should be adapted. Mixed-methods approaches—pairing click-stream analytics from university websites with narrative interviews—could deepen our understanding of the emotional texture of information seeking, capturing moments of surprise, relief, or anxiety that quantitative metrics alone cannot detect. Finally, future studies might compare Turkish data with samples from countries using less exam-centric admission processes, thereby isolating the role of high-stakes testing in shaping informational hierarchies.

Conclusion

Against a backdrop of fierce entrance-exam competition and labour-market volatility, Turkish prospective students emerge from this study as discerning and strategically minded information consumers. They assign the greatest weight to concrete employment metrics—expected salaries, job-placement likelihood, and market demand—yet they simultaneously seek confirmation of programme quality, institutional support structures, and opportunities for social capital formation. The empirically validated five-factor model illuminates how these varied considerations cohere into a multidimensional decision framework, enriching existing career-development theories with context-specific nuance. By showcasing reliable psychometric properties and detailing the specific content areas students rank most highly, the study provides actionable intelligence for university administrators designing outreach events, policymakers allocating career-guidance resources, and counsellors tailoring one-to-one interventions. Institutions that respond with transparent, data-rich, and contextually sensitive information—integrating dashboards on graduate outcomes, interactive employer-engagement formats, and psychosocial supports to buffer exam stress—are poised not only to attract and retain students but also to foster graduates who possess the confidence, adaptability, and relational resources needed to thrive in an uncertain labour market.

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Birinci yazar tarafından araştırmanın tasarlanması, giriş, metod, veri toplama, veri analizi, bulguların raporlanması, sonuç ve tartışma bölümlerine katkı sağlamıştır. İkinci yazar tarafından araştırmanın tasarlanması, giriş, veri analizi, sonuç ve tartışma bölümlerine katkı sağlamıştır.

The first author contributed to the study design, introduction, method, data collection, data analysis, reporting of the findings, and the conclusion and discussion sections. The second author contributed to the study design, introduction, data analysis, and the conclusion and discussion sections.

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This research was completed in line with the Helsinki Declaration. In line with this, the study was investigated and permitted by TED University Scientific Research and Ethical Review Board. Additionally, data tools in the study were only distributed to volunteer participants. All participants provided informed consent. Additionally, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time during data collection.

Etik Kurul Adı / Name of the Ethics Committee: TED University Scientific Research and Ethical Review Board.

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