

Career counselling at Indian universities from a gender viewpoint: Cases from different regions



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Abstract

Career studies indicate that individuals are increasingly responsible for their own careers, which seem to be more diverse than before. This raises the question for universities as to how they can develop their career counselling services so that students receive the help and guidance they need to manage such careers. Previous studies show that women have more difficulties advancing in a career than men. To increase women's career opportunities and empower them to participate in working life, and ultimately increase gender equality in society and working life organizations, it is argued here that women's career counselling at universities needs special attention.

Career counselling at Indian universities in different regions is analyzed using a case study approach. The paper starts by describing the main obstacles to women's career development in India, followed by the presentation of the case study results. In the case study, the following three questions are answered: What kind of career counselling services do Indian universities offer? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the universities' career counselling services? How is gender taken into consideration in the services? The study contributes to the literature on women's career development, specifically from the viewpoint of university career services, by highlighting the often under-stressed contextual nature of the topic. Seen from the practical management viewpoint, this study offers insights into how to advance women's employability, social mobility, wellbeing and inclusion in working life in the Indian context. Such advances could improve labor market effectiveness as well as social and economic development in India.

Open-ended interviews and documentary data were used to produce the data, and content analysis was applied to analyze it. In India, it is significantly more difficult for women to advance

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in a career than for men. Many women university alumni work for only a limited time after graduation and then focus on family. It is a strength of Indian universities that they have career counselling services available and close connections with working life institutions. A weakness is that typically, little attention is paid to the gender perspective in counselling.

Keywords: career counselling, case study, gender, India, university

Introduction

The most of career theories are based on the ideas of stability and continuity, and in the theories, people's personal characteristics are often assumed to stay unchanging. Yet, recent career studies indicate that individuals are increasingly responsible for their careers which seem to be more diverse, changing and unsecure than earlier. (Savickas et al., 2009.) To be able to act in this changing career context, people need career competencies that can support them to be proactive and adaptable in identifying career opportunities (Akkermans et al., 2012). Seen from the viewpoint universities, which is our focus in this paper, this raises the question for the universities as to how they can develop their career counselling services so that students receive the help and guidance they need to manage such careers.

Due to secondary socialization process (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) the student's professional identity is created to a great extent during the years at university. Therefore, the years when the student studies at university can be considered a significant, even transformative phase in her life that affects competency and motivation to make career decisions and prepare to a new career path and life situation in general after graduation. Effective career guidance and counselling is an important mechanism to help students to prepare to future working life.

Previous studies show that women have more difficulties to advance in a career than men, and family responsibilities affect more to women's careers than men's (Budhwar et al., 2005; Heikkinen et al., 2014, 2017; The Global Gender Gap Report, 2018). Young women particularly, compared to young men, have more difficulties after graduation to start their career, for example, due to expected future family responsibilities (Vuorinen-Lampila, 2016). Yet, prior research show that various forms of gender-sensitive developmental activities such as mentoring and training can support women's careers and their participation in working life (e.g. Bova, 2000; Lämsä & Hiillos, 2008; Petrovic, 2015; Lämsä & Savela, 2019). So, it can be argued that to increase young women's

career opportunities and empower them to participate in working life, and ultimately increase gender equality in society and working life organizations, career guidance and counselling targeted specifically to women students at universities needs special attention.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to produce knowledge of career counselling and guidance services at universities. To reach the aim we analyze the services at Indian universities in different regions using a case study approach. The paper starts by describing the main obstacles to women's career development in India, followed by the presentation of the case study results. In the case study, the following three questions are answered:

- What kind of career counselling services do Indian universities offer?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the universities' career counselling services?
- How is gender taken into consideration in the services?

According to Akkermans & Kubasch (2017), the main emphasis in the field of career and gender research has been on what women need to do themselves to be successful in a career. In line with their argument, we think that a crucial next step is to investigate also the role of other actors concerning the topic. Therefore, in this study, we contribute to the literature by exploring universities as crucial actors in supporting women's career development and make a situational analysis of the universities' counselling and guidance services.

This case study offers insights and ideas to university management how universities can advance young women's career competencies, employability, wellbeing and inclusion to succeed in future working life in India. University career guidance and counselling services are important not only in meeting students' personal needs but also to encourage sustainable development and equality in working life and society (Van Esbroeck, 2002).

Quick changes in working life and career paths as well as competitive labour market have caused challenges to graduate employability (Bates et al., 2019), not to speak of economic and equality pressures to increase women's labour market participation in different parts of the world (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2018). Currently, career theory and models apply most closely to the live-pattern of white men. Pointing out the necessity to adapt the existing models to better include the live-realities of women, Pringle and McCulloch (2009) have requested to pay attention to the viewpoint of women in career studies. Also, the influence of sexism and racism (Pringle & Mallon, 2003) on women's career issues still tends to be underestimated and should be taken into account, providing women-empowerment activities, mentoring and/or networking as a counter weight. In this paper, we make visible a gender perspective to the topic in the university career counselling and guidance context. We also contribute to the literature by highlighting the often under-stressed contextual nature of career issues in previous studies (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017) and investigate the topic in the Indian context.

Literature review

Career counselling

A well-known definition of Kidd (2006) has conceptualized career counselling and guidance broadly and defined it as a one-to-one, usually ongoing, interaction between counsellor (practitioner) and counsellee (client) involving the application of psychological theory and a recognised set of communication skills. Traditional career counselling theory relies on the idea of matching (Kidd et al., 1993). This means that counselling is seen as a process of decision making in which counsellees are evaluated by the counsellor and then matched to the best offered solution by the counsellor. The counsellor's view is hardly ever questioned, and in this type of matching theory the role of the counsellee is understood as being a passive object of the counsellor's exercise of power (Lämsä & Hiillos, 2008). The primary focus is on helping the counsellee, such as a female

university student in this paper, make career-related decisions and deal with career-related issues under the guidance and impact of the counsellor. Despite its popularity the matching theory has been claimed to be very counsellor-dominated, and criticized for not listening prominently the counsellee's voice (McMahon et al., 2002).

In recent years, there has been a call for the contextual mind-set in career research in which the understanding on career development and factors related to the development are based on the idea that career development does not happen in a vacuum (Savickas et al., 2009; Heikkinen & Lämsä, 2017), but individuals in career issues are seen as interacting with and within their social, institutional and cultural contexts (Patton & McMahon, 2017; Litano & Major, 2016). This viewpoint takes into consideration that career counselling and guidance is not only an intra-individual developmental process, but the person is seen as an open system, constantly interacting with various factors in the environment while seeking solutions in career and gaining necessary skills to prepare to career.

Following Savickas et al. (2009) we accentuate that human behavior in career context is not only a function of the person but also of the environment. For example, no matter how stable the young Indian women's characteristics might be not only counselling services but also the women's living environment and its circumstances affect their career skills and decisions. From this viewpoint, career development is seen more as a part of the process of human development in a specific context, not only on a singular outcome (Litano & Major, 2017).

In this paper, we see both career and career counselling and guidance as active meaning-making processes and evolving over the life course embedded in context (Savickas, 1995; Savickas et al., 2009). This idea stresses three main tasks to be crucial to career counsellors: 1) to enter into sensible and trustworthy communication with the other, 2) to develop a mutual understanding of the particular difficulty which the other faces, and 3) to plan and construct activity projects together

with counsellee which are designed to increase self-responsibility and personal control, increase the other's meaningful participation in social life and move toward preferred future (Peavy, 1998, p. 50).

In sum, career counselling and guidance in general is facing a paradigm change. In the 20th century focus was mostly on helping people to find paid employment, which if done correctly could lead to a life-long work relationship. Fitting to this perception the counseling approach adopted "trait-factor" theories based on the assumption that work-related characteristics are stable over a lifetime (Savickas et al., 2009). According to Arthur et al. (1999), two essential elements have been missing in this process: first, the subjective meaning of life and work and second a sense of the dynamic interplay between life episodes and context of the career itself.

Obstacles to women's career development in India

According to the The Global Gender Gap Report (2018), India ranks 108 out of 149 countries worldwide in gender equality; in gender equality concerning economic participation and opportunity the country ranks 142, and in educational attainment 114. In India, the work participation rate of women is approximately 30 per cent compared to men's 80 per cent (India Labour Market Update, 2017). In rural areas, women are mainly involved as cultivators and agricultural laborers, and in urban areas women work typically in the unorganized sectors such as household industries, petty trades and services, and construction. Although the Indian government currently puts attention on women's empowerment and equal opportunity in the society, women's career development is more problematic compared to men, and women have significant difficulties to attain decision-making positions in working life. Advancing women's economic participation and career is not only a matter of social justice and equality, but women are an important human resource of the society and working life, and their talents needs to be utilized to advance economic growth and development of the country and institutions (Kumbhar, 2013).

Various factors affect women's possibilities to start and advance in a career in the Indian context. According to Agarwala (2008), who investigated MBA students in India, good competency and "father" are important factors affecting the career choices of Indian students. In the study of Agarwala (2008) women said that they experience career barriers which men do not face; for example, women are evaluated under stricter criteria compared to men. Budhwar et al. (2005) and Kumbhar (2013) argued that especially the traditional mind set of and gender-based stereotypes in the Indian society that favor men over women, are crucial obstacles to women's economic participation and career development.

Kumbhar (2013) also brought forth that women in the Indian context face problems to be able to set an agenda to their life. The lack of role models, limited possibilities to education, scarcity of social networks related to work are significant barriers which means that many women in India are not aware of their potential, suffer of low self-confidence and low ability to bear risk (Kumbhar, 2013). Traditional gender roles and family relationships affect significantly the career choices of Indian women and cause difficulties to them to integrate work and family successfully. Educated women can decide to leave their career to take care of children, family members and household (cf. Ronzio, 2012).

Additionally, women experience often sexual harassment and teasing at the workplace in India that is a violation of their right to dignity and equality. The harassment is argued that have its basis in the dominance of patriarchy in the society which sees men superior to women. As a result, violence against women is easily understood as acceptable and 'natural'. (Handbook on Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace, 2015, p.1). A risk to face sexual harassment causes various physical and mental problems to women and can prevent them to participate in working life.

Methods

In this study, an explorative case study approach was applied because our purpose was to seek new insights into and discover general information of the topic (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, p. 110) to be able to assess contemporary situation of career counselling and guidance services at the studied Indian universities and produce knowledge how to develop the services. Two universities represent our cases. The universities were selected to this study for the reason that during the research process they were participants of an international R&D project with an aim to support young women's career development in the university system and examine women's career barriers in India. So, these universities showed motivation and willingness to promote the aim and, thus, to our understanding, can be considered at least to some extent fore-runners in their context. Yet, no comprehensive information about applying a gender perspective to career counselling and guidance in Indian universities is available.

The case universities locate in different parts of the country. They have operated several decades and are regarded as highly ranked institutions in their fields. The institutions have active contacts with various stakeholders, for example, alumni, industry and civil society. Moreover, they are active in social responsibility initiatives. Later, in this paper, the acronyms A and B are used of the cases.

We used data triangulation to increase the trustworthiness of this case study, so, the data were gathered from multiple data sources (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, p. 116-117). Five open-ended individual interviews, two focus-group interviews including 13 participants altogether, roundtable discussion including 14 people, and documentary data (website information, project plan, organizations' internal communication material) were used to produce the data, and content analysis, which is a method concentrating on analyzing texts, not numbers (Saunders & Lewis, 2012) was applied to analyze it.

Results

Since its establishment the case A has been engaged in students' career management activities. The career services have been offered approximately during the last two decades. The career management organization includes managers and faculty from the university as well as external members like industry experts, company representatives and medical and psychological experts. The university has developed a center which is responsible for career boosting activities such as active company relations to offer the opportunities of internship and final employment to the students. The scope of the center has been extended, with passage of time, to various other activities such as corporate projects of short term, recruitment trainings and special sessions for females for social engagement. The scope covers the professional and personal counselling and capacity building programs.

The center is an important strategic function of the university and its activities are regularly evaluated and developed. In general, the center aims to building up the all-round competence of the students from the industry's point of view and adds value to the students through its diverse interventions. The center has offered counselling and support services to alumni as well. Yet, because it is focusing more on services to the students, the alumni career services have been for some years ago delegated to the independent alumni association.

Career counselling and guidance starts from the beginning of the studies when the students arrive in the campus. The program continues throughout the studies and offers various types of activities to the students. For example, senior alumni and leaders from industry make presentations; students are offered personal testing to improve their self-awareness and self-reflection capacity, and to support their understanding of their potential during the studies and for future career. Also as an example can be mentioned a summer internship workshop which is organized with the aim to make the students prepared to future working life and its requirements.

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Regular counselling sessions and discussions with small groups of students conducted by faculty member are used. Health care professionals are available round the clock to handle any query of students pertaining to their physical and mental well-being. Women's special needs are paid attention to some extent in the health care services. A committee is in existence which handles issues related to sexual harassment. To ensure the safety and security of female students, during off campus selection process/visits, the university provides the logistics support, through its reliable and regular vendors.

All in all, a strength of career counselling services of the case A is that the institution has a professional management approach to counselling and guidance including permanent and well-settled organizing body representing various relevant actors to support the students in their career planning and aspirations. Additionally, multiple forms of career supportive activities are made available to the students. An important strength is also that the center responsible for career counselling and guidance activities is acting in close cooperation with external stakeholders especially industry and alumni.

Seen from a gender viewpoint the institution has recognized the importance of the perspective and already pays attention to it in many of its activities. Yet, with the increasing number of female students in the institution, a challenge is to make the career counselling and guidance processes still more supportive to female students, considering their specific career requirements. A challenge is to advance the services which can take into consideration that the majority of the students have no work experience. Additionally, female students' empowerment to participate in different campus activities could be stronger. The development of the students' stress management skills merit further attention. Finally, as the students come from the different parts of the country as well as from different linguistic groups, cultural sensitivity and tolerance would be an issue.

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The case B has a systematic counselling policy, organization and procedure which provide a platform to the students for sharing their problems, aspirations and interests related to academic and non-academic matters. Moreover, the system involves monitoring the academic progress of the students and identifying different learners to offer them suitable assistance and environment to grow and prosper. Finally, the aim is to cultivate higher degree of professional responsibilities and imbibe values amongst the students.

A key activity of career counselling and guidance is mentoring whose aims and process are defined explicitly. A mentoring process which follows the student's phase of studies is designed to the whole university yet different units of the university have a possibility to modify the process according to needs and requirements of the concerned unit. The approach to mentoring is processual by nature containing several steps from the training and cultivation of the faculty members to become mentors and meet the students' needs, aspirations and challenges to the evaluation and continuous development phase of the process. The mentoring policy is generally reviewed after a period of one year following the institution's quality assurance system.

Typically, a group of mentees consist of 20–25 students, and an individual faculty member acts as mentor of the group. It is targeted that the same faculty member remains as the mentor for the same group during the group's entire tenure at the institution. This university also provides the services of a professional counsellor who visits different institutes regularly, however, the students tend to prefer to go their mentor or other faculty member whom they know better and feel comfortable with to discuss their problems. The faculty members counsel the students on various issues, such as to help them with their career issues, selection of specialization, choices concerning practical placements as well as support regarding personal problems.

Seen from the viewpoint of gender the university also has a unit called the Women Development Cell, with the aim to provide sessions on gender sensitization, self-defense and self-

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exploration to the students as well as the staff of the university. Additionally, the prevention of sexual harassment cell is operating at the university. It prevents discrimination and sexual harassment based on gender. It lays down procedures for the prohibition, resolution, settlement and prosecution of acts of discrimination and sexual harassment against women, by the students and the employees. Special committees in the university deal with cases of discrimination and sexual harassment reported by teaching and nonteaching member or student.

A strength of this institution is that it has a systematic processual and well-developed approach to career counselling and guidance services, especially in the field of mentoring. The approach is based on quality management system. Furthermore, the organizing of the counselling and guidance services is clear and responsibilities of different actors are explicated well. The specific cells have been set up in order to build a safe and non-discriminatory environment to the students and staff that is a strength. A gender perspective is paid attention to particularly through the activities of the cells but no systematic attention to gender is taken into consideration in the mentoring procedure.

Concluding remarks and recommendations

The experience of the university life is commonly identified as a transitional phase in a student's life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). For many women (as well men) students, it may be the first instance to stay away from family restrictions and living independent life. It is also a transitional period in terms of economic status wherein, the students are financially dependent on the family, but they learn to manage their expenses by staying away from home. Also, during this period, they are introduced to wide range of professional courses under the programs offered to them. At times, this adds to the stress and anxiety factors amongst the students. When all these issues of the students' life are counselled effectively in a gender sensitive way, the students may be chiseled out as the sound professionals as per the demand of the society and working life.

We assumed in this case study that career counselling and guidance is a context-situated phenomenon and many factors outside the counselling process affect it (Savickas et al., 2009). So, to the management of the universities we suggest that to build an useful career counselling and guidance system a holistic model is needed instead of the traditional idea to see counselling as only a one-to-one relationship between counsellor and counsellee based on psychological theory (Kidd, 2006). We recommend that career competencies (Arthur et al., 1995; Akkermans et al., 2012) such as female students' reflective, communicative and networking as well as behavioral competencies can offer an interesting and multidisciplinary perspective to develop the model. Additionally, special trainings such as entrepreneurship and job search trainings can be part of the model. Finally, we recommend that the model's theoretical background is explicated to build a credible foundation to it. In the Indian context especially the role of family to female student's career choices as well as the problems of sexual harassment need special attention.

This case study implies that an important strength of the studied Indian universities is that they have career counselling and guidance services available. A weakness is that typically, little attention is paid to a gender perspective in counselling and guidance. Although gender is taken into consideration to some extent, a systematic research-based view to how and why to deal with gender is not so evident. Yet, the offered services are multiple, and they are well organized as well as continuously evaluated and developed. The services are also conducted in a close connection with working life institutions and other stakeholders. To conclude, we think that the case institutions have a positive attitude and many existing effective career counselling activities which form an excellent basis to develop their career counselling and guidance services also from a gender perspective.

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