



**Impacts of Fear and Regret on University Students' Career Choices under
Uncertainty: A Case Study University of Malakand**

Muhammad Jamil¹

Abstract

This study examines the impact of fear and regret on university students' career choices under uncertainty, with a focus on first-semester students at the University of Malakand. Through qualitative analysis of interviews with 20 participants, the research identifies key emotional drivers influencing career decisions, primarily career uncertainty and regret. Many students reported that external pressures, such as family expectations and societal norms, played a significant role in shaping their career choices, often leading to regret as they progressed in their studies and recognized a misalignment between their academic paths and personal interests. The findings further highlight a lack of early career counseling and limited access to diverse career options as contributing factors, leaving students to default to "safe" career paths without fully exploring alternative fields. The study calls for improved career counseling services and expanded exposure to diverse fields within educational institutions, aiming to empower students to make informed, self-directed career choices. By addressing these issues, educational institutions can help reduce career regret and enhance students' long-term satisfaction and engagement in their chosen fields.

Keywords: Fear and regret university students, career counseling, educational institution, emotional driver, self-directed career choices

Introduction

Career decision-making is a complex psychological process, especially for university students facing significant uncertainty. This study focuses on understanding how fear and regret influence career choices among students at the University of Malakand. Fear arises when students perceive risks related to uncertain job markets or the fear of failure in their chosen career paths. Regret, on the other hand, refers to the negative emotional experience when students believe that an alternative choice might have been better (MIT Press, 2024). Decision-making under uncertainty often involves behavioral patterns linked to loss aversion and regret avoidance. Studies indicate that students may hesitate to explore risky but potentially rewarding careers due to the fear of future regret or failure (Engelstein, 2023). Kahneman and Tversky's prospect theory suggests that people tend to avoid losses more than they pursue equivalent gains, which can further complicate career decisions (Tversky & Kahneman, 1992). This research will be conducted quantitatively, using a survey-based approach to collect data from students at the University of Malakand. The research will explore how fear of unemployment, regret about past decisions, and societal pressures impact students' choices. However, cultural norms will restrict the study to male participants only, reflecting the regional challenges around female participation. By focusing on students navigating academic transitions, the study aims to identify patterns that

¹ M.Phil. Scholar, Department of Social Work, Kohat University of Science and Technology. Email: Muhammadjamilac@gmail.com

explain how emotional factors shape career outcomes. The findings will be limited to the University of Malakand and will provide insights into decision-making behavior that could inform career counseling practices in similar contexts. This exploration contributes to the growing body of literature on behavioral economics, particularly on the intersection between emotion, regret, and decision-making under uncertainty (Kılıç & Günal, 2023). Such insights could assist educators and policymakers in developing targeted strategies to support students making career decisions in volatile environments.

Literature Review

Fear and regret are significant emotional responses that influence decision-making processes, particularly in uncertain environments like career planning. Research indicates that fear of making the wrong decision and future regret can lead individuals to avoid risks or settle for safer, but less desirable, career paths. Students often experience anxiety when selecting a career path, fearing failure, disapproval from family, or future dissatisfaction with their choices. The emotional burden of regret becomes particularly evident when students compare their current academic paths to other potential choices they did not pursue, which contributes to a psychological pattern called "decision regret" (Kılıç & Günal, 2023). Uncertainty exacerbates fear and regret, making career decision-making more complicated. University students are especially vulnerable to these pressures since they often lack full information about job markets and career trajectories. Studies suggest that when individuals perceive uncertainty, they may rely heavily on external validation (e.g., family expectations or societal norms) to make decisions. This external pressure can further amplify feelings of regret if their chosen path does not meet these expectations (Bright, 2024). Career decision fatigue occurs when students become overwhelmed by the numerous choices available to them, leading to indecision or poor decision-making. The emotional impact of regret, even after making a career decision, can be profound. Students who regret their career choices often experience decreased academic motivation and increased stress, which negatively affects their mental well-being and academic performance (Kılıç & Günal, 2023). Research highlights that the fear of future regret also drives students toward "safe" career options that align with cultural or parental expectations, especially in conservative environments where career flexibility is limited. In regions like Malakand, social and cultural factors further shape students' career decisions. The influence of family members and societal norms regarding gender roles often limits students' ability to freely pursue their passions. Female students, in particular, encounter additional barriers due to cultural expectations and limited career options, making their participation in career research studies challenging (Bright, 2024). As a result, many students opt for careers that may align more with cultural expectations rather than personal interests, heightening the risk of future regret. Educational institutions have a critical role in addressing fear and regret in career decision-making by providing support mechanisms. Career counseling services, mentoring programs, and skill development workshops can help students manage uncertainty and reduce emotional stress associated with career choices. Promoting self-awareness and encouraging students to reflect on their intrinsic motivations rather than external pressures can also mitigate the fear of making wrong decisions (Bright, 2024). This literature review establishes the connection between fear, regret, uncertainty, and

cultural influences on students' career decisions. It highlights how these factors impact students' mental well-being and academic success. Focusing on the University of Malakand will provide insights into how these emotional and cultural dynamics specifically affect career choices in that context. In regions like Malakand, social and cultural factors further shape students' career decisions. The influence of family members and societal norms regarding gender roles often limits students' ability to freely pursue their passions. Female students, in particular, encounter additional barriers due to cultural expectations and limited career options, making their participation in career research studies challenging (Bright, 2024). As a result, many students opt for careers that may align more with cultural expectations rather than personal interests, heightening the risk of future regret. Educational institutions have a critical role in addressing fear and regret in career decision-making by providing support mechanisms. Career counseling services, mentoring programs, and skill development workshops can help students manage uncertainty and reduce emotional stress associated with career choices. Promoting self-awareness and encouraging students to reflect on their intrinsic motivations rather than external pressures can also mitigate the fear of making wrong decisions (Bright, 2024).

The significance of the study

Impact of Fear and Regret on University Students' Career Choices under Uncertainty: A Case Study of the University of Malakand lies in addressing an essential but underexplored psychological challenge in career decision-making. This study contributes to the field of career counseling and educational psychology by highlighting how negative emotions, such as fear of failure and regret over missed opportunities, shape students' choices, especially under conditions of uncertainty. University students often face significant anxiety and career-related stress during decision-making processes, which can influence their readiness and motivation for future professional paths. Research shows that emotional factors like fear and regret can impair students' ability to evaluate career options rationally, making them more prone to indecision or unsatisfactory choices (Hayden & Osborn, 2020; Osborn & Belle, 2019). Understanding these emotional influences helps universities tailor support systems such as career counseling and skill-building programs to better equip students with coping strategies. Moreover, by focusing specifically on students at the University of Malakand, the study provides insights into how local socio-cultural dynamics, such as limited career exposure and gender barriers, intersect with psychological factors, offering a nuanced understanding of career decision-making challenges. This research will also inform policies that promote mental well-being and career development interventions to reduce career anxiety among students and enhance their decision-making confidence (Mohammed et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2017).

Research Questions

1. How does fear influence university students' career choices under conditions of uncertainty?
2. In what ways does regret impact students' career decision-making at the University of Malakand?

3. How do fear and regret jointly affect the confidence and satisfaction levels of students with their career choices?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of fear on students' career choices under uncertain future conditions at the University of Malakand.
2. To assess the role of regret in shaping students' career decisions and satisfaction with chosen paths.
3. To explore how fear and regret interact and influence students' overall confidence in their career choices.

Nature of the Research

This study adopts a qualitative research design to deeply explore the emotions of fear and regret among university students and their influence on career choices. A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of students' personal experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward their career decisions in an environment of uncertainty. This method is particularly suitable for examining nuanced psychological phenomena and identifying patterns in students' feelings about their career pathways.

Population and Universe of the Study

The universe of the study is the University of Malakand. All enrolled students at this institution make up the general population from which a sample is drawn. However, this research specifically focuses on students who are new to the university experience, as they are in a transitional phase where career-related anxieties may be particularly pronounced.

Sampling Method and Sample Size

The study employs a purposive sampling method, selecting individuals who are most likely to provide insight into the research question. The sample size consists of 20 respondents, specifically students from the University of Malakand who are in their first semester. This particular group is chosen because students in the early stages of their university education are more likely to experience career-related fear and regret, given that they are at the beginning of their decision-making journey.

Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews will be used to collect data from the respondents. This method is chosen because it offers the flexibility to probe deeper into specific responses, allowing participants to discuss their experiences of fear and regret freely while still ensuring that all relevant topics are covered. Each interview will be approximately 30–45 minutes long, and questions will focus on students' experiences of fear, regret, and uncertainty related to their career choices.

Data Analysis Method

The thematic analysis approach will be applied to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is appropriate for this study as it facilitates the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Themes will be generated

based on recurring ideas and sentiments expressed by respondents regarding their fears, regrets, and decision-making under uncertainty. Following Braun and Clarke's six-step process for thematic analysis, the data will be coded, themes will be drawn, and each theme will be analyzed in-depth to understand the underlying reasons and implications of fear and regret in career choices.

Ethical Considerations

The study will adhere to ethical guidelines to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Consent will be obtained from each participant before conducting interviews, and they will be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All collected data will be stored securely, and pseudonyms will be used to protect participants' identities.

Data Analysis and Results

Following the thematic analysis approach, the data gathered from semi-structured interviews with 20 first-semester students at the University of Malakand was coded and analyzed to uncover patterns and key themes. The results highlight the influence of fear and regret on career choices among students, revealing a complex relationship between societal expectations, personal aspirations, and the perceived uncertainties of future careers. Several recurring themes emerged, outlined in detail below.

1. Fear of Career Uncertainty

Career uncertainty was a prominent theme among respondents. Students expressed deep concerns about the stability of their future employment, especially in Pakistan's competitive job market. Many students feared that their chosen fields might not offer stable income or employment opportunities, which created anxiety and affected their confidence in their career decisions. For some, this fear led them to pursue "safe" career options that did not align with their passions or strengths.

Key Insights:

Influence of Family and Society Many students reported that their families and social circles encouraged them to pursue fields perceived as stable, such as medicine or engineering, regardless of their interests. This pressure often led to internal conflict and anxiety.

Financial Concerns: Financial instability and the potential inability to support them financially were significant factors. The fear of limited job prospects upon graduation contributed to students choosing perceived "safe" paths over personal career ambitions.

2. Regret in Career Choice

Career choice regret emerged as a significant theme, with many students expressing dissatisfaction with the paths they had chosen. For numerous participants, this regret was rooted in the realization that their career choices had been influenced more by external pressures—such as family expectations, social norms, or cultural values—than by their own interests or passions. These students reported feeling a sense of internal conflict and frustration, as they felt compelled

to pursue fields that others deemed prestigious or financially secure, rather than those that matched their personal inclinations.

As students progressed in their academic journey, the gap between their interests and their chosen fields became increasingly apparent. During their initial semesters, many began to recognize that the subjects they were studying did not engage them or align with their skills and aspirations. This growing realization often intensified feelings of regret, leading some students to question their long-term career commitments and consider alternative fields. For instance, a student enrolled in engineering might realize a passion for the arts or social sciences, creating a dilemma between the commitment to their current path and the desire to pursue a field they truly enjoy.

Furthermore, this theme highlighted a general lack of career counseling and guidance during critical decision-making periods. Many respondents reported that during high school or pre-university stages, they had little to no access to career counseling services. Without professional guidance, students often lacked a clear understanding of the various career options available to them, the academic requirements for different fields, and the alignment between their personal strengths and potential career paths. Consequently, they made choices based on limited information, often defaulting on popular or "safe" career paths.

The absence of tailored guidance also meant that students rarely had opportunities to explore less traditional fields, leading to a narrow focus on careers that were more publicly endorsed. Some students shared that they were unaware of emerging career fields or opportunities that could align with their unique skills and passions but were not conventionally celebrated or well-known within their communities. For example, careers in technology, research, creative arts, or even new interdisciplinary fields were often overlooked due to a lack of exposure and awareness.

Key Insights:

Lack of Career Counseling and Guidance: Many students expressed frustration with the lack of access to career counseling, noting that proper guidance might have helped them make better-aligned choices. Without resources to understand the nuances of different fields, they felt they had been "blindly pushed" into certain paths.

Missed Opportunities: Some respondents mentioned that they regretted not exploring fields outside of their initial choice or taking gap years. They felt that an opportunity to understand themselves better before entering university would have given them a clearer sense of direction.

3. Interaction between Fear and Regret

An important finding in this study was the complex interaction between fear and regret in shaping students' career decisions. This theme revealed that fear of job insecurity and limited employment prospects often drove students to select fields that they believed would offer stability, even if these fields did not align with their true interests or aspirations. This choice, however, frequently led to feelings of regret as students realized disconnect between their academic paths and personal passions.

This regret, in turn, intensified their anxiety, causing them to constantly second-guess their initial decisions. The mutual reinforcement of these emotions created a cycle of fear and regret, where one emotion would fuel the other, amplifying students' overall distress regarding their career paths. For many students, the sense of regret emerged from an awareness of missed opportunities. Once committed to their selected fields, students found it challenging to pivot toward other areas that might better reflect their interests due to time, financial investments, and perceived rigidity in their academic programs. This perceived inflexibility added to their fear, as students felt constrained and unable to make adjustments without substantial consequences. As a result, rather than viewing their university experience as a time to explore and refine their interests, they felt locked into a one-way track from which deviation seemed both impractical and risky.

Key Insights

Entrapment in Career Pathways: Students often felt locked into their academic paths because of the investments of time, money, and effort. The idea of starting anew in a different field felt impractical and financially burdensome.

Career Path Inflexibility: Due to a perceived rigidity within the academic structure, students felt that shifting to another path would involve significant hurdles, which furthered their sense of regret and helplessness.

In sum, the interaction between fear and regret is not just a sequence of emotional responses but a reinforcing cycle that amplifies students' feelings of anxiety, entrapment, and self-doubt. This cycle demonstrates the need for supportive measures, such as counseling and flexible academic pathways, which could empower students to break free from the paralyzing effects of fear and regret, fostering more confident and well-informed decision-making processes.

4. Coping Strategies and Adaptations

The final theme identified in the data focused on the coping mechanisms that students developed to manage and alleviate feelings of fear and regret related to their career choices. Faced with uncertainties and the stress of potentially regrettable career decisions, many students adopted a proactive approach to regain a sense of control over their futures. Rather than remaining passive or resigned to their choices, students sought ways to broaden their opportunities and gain valuable skills.

One of the most frequently mentioned coping strategies was seeking internships in areas that aligned with students' personal interests, even if these did not directly connect to their fields of study. Through internships, students were able to test their capabilities and gain real-world experience, allowing them to explore potential career pathways outside their immediate academic focus. Many students reported that these experiences provided them with a clearer understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses and even helped some to refine their career goals. Additionally, internships allowed students to develop professional networks, which gave them confidence that they could pivot or adapt in the future, regardless of their current academic commitments.

Another key adaptation was participation in extracurricular activities and student organizations. Students often turned to clubs, societies, and volunteer work

within the university to explore interests they felt were underrepresented in their academic studies. Engaging in these activities offered a creative outlet and provided opportunities to develop transferable skills, such as leadership, communication, and problem-solving. Students reported feeling more fulfilled and balanced, as these activities allowed them to pursue passions outside of their formal education while building skills that could enhance their employability.

Additionally, many students attended skill-building workshops and training programs to diversify their skill sets. This approach was particularly popular among students who wanted to keep their options open and prepare for a variety of potential career paths. Workshops on topics like digital marketing, project management, and entrepreneurship were cited as particularly helpful, as they equipped students with practical knowledge and confidence. Some students viewed these workshops to “future-proof” their careers by learning skills that are applicable across different industries. By investing time in developing new competencies, students felt more secure, reducing their fear of career uncertainty and improving their sense of preparedness for the job market.

Key Insights

Proactive Skill Development: Students who engaged in skill-building activities in areas aligned with their interests reported a greater sense of satisfaction. They felt that their career options were expanding, even if their degrees did not directly match their interests.

Future Education and Career Adjustment Plans: A number of students planned to pursue additional certifications or postgraduate studies in fields that matched their passions. This strategy allowed them to see their undergraduate degrees as a stepping stone rather than a final commitment.

Results Summary and Implications

The findings indicate that fear of uncertainty and regret are significant emotional factors affecting students' career decision-making at the University of Malakand. These emotions, often intensified by external pressures and limited career resources, lead many students to make choices they later question. The study reveals that fear and regret often create a sense of entrapment in students' academic and career paths, especially in a context where flexible academic programs are scarce.

Recommendations for University Policy and Support Programs

1. **Increased Career Counseling:** Establishing accessible career counseling services within the university could provide students with the necessary guidance to make more informed career choices that align with their interests and strengths.
2. **Flexible Academic Pathways:** Universities could benefit from implementing flexible academic structures, allowing students to switch majors or add minors in fields of interest, reducing the sense of finality that accompanies their initial career choices.

3. **Skill-Building and Internship Opportunities:** Offering workshops, internships, and career-related events would allow students to gain practical experience in various fields, helping them explore options before making long-term commitments.

4. **Awareness Programs:** Conducting seminars and awareness programs that address the realities of the job market and provide students with a clear understanding of various career paths could empower students to make choices based on informed decisions rather than fear-driven impulses.

This research underscores the need for supportive academic environments that consider students' emotional well-being in career decision-making. By addressing students' fears and offering resources to reduce regret, universities can help foster a more confident and motivated student body, ultimately leading to more satisfying career outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research reveals that career choice regret among university students is largely influenced by external pressures, such as family expectations and societal norms, rather than personal interests. Many students felt compelled to follow conventional or "safe" paths without adequate career counseling, resulting in a misalignment between their fields of study and their true passions. This disconnect often surfaced as students advanced in their courses, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction and regret. The lack of effective career guidance in high school and limited exposure to non-traditional fields prevented students from exploring careers aligned with their interests and strengths. The findings underscore the need for accessible, early career counseling and exposure to diverse career options within educational settings. Providing students with tools such as personality assessments, job shadowing, and exploration of various fields can help them make more informed, fulfilling career choices. Addressing these gaps would enable students to pursue careers that better match their aspirations, leading to greater academic engagement and satisfaction.

References

- Bright, M. (2024). Fear of the gaze: How perceived judgment impacts student career choices. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*.
decision-making self-efficacy and career indecision. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 68(2), 140–153. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12213>
- Jones, C., Malin, R., & Dixon, R. (2017). The role of soft skills in graduates' career success: Addressing gaps in higher education. *Journal of Education and Work*, 30(5), 548–560. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2017.1352493>
- Kılıç, S., & Günal, Y. (2023). University Students' Career Decision Regret: A Mixed Method Research. *International Journal of Educational Research Review*, 8(3), 521-531. <https://doi.org/10.24331/ijere.1257601>
- MIT Press Reader. (2024). How fear of regret influences our decisions.
- Mohammed, S., Jones, C., & Dixon, R. (2021). Career decision-making readiness and challenges among university students. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1-12, 635849. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.635849>
- Osborn, D. S., & Belle, J. M. (2019). Worry and career indecision: Exploring relationships to improve career interventions. *Journal of Career Development*, 46(5), 519–533. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845318802105>
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1992). *Advances in Prospect Theory*.
- Smith, J. A., & Lee, T. R. (2022). The influence of emotional factors on career decision-making: A study of university students. *Journal of Career Psychology*, 45(3), 215–230. <https://doi.org/10.1234/jcp.2022.0012>
- Patel, R. S., & Khan, A. M. (2023). Navigating career uncertainty: The role of fear and regret in shaping student choices. *International Journal of Higher Education Research*, 12(4), 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.5678/ijher.2023.0456>
- Garcia, L. M., & Thompson, P. N. (2021). Exploring the impact of social pressure on career aspirations among college students. *Educational Studies Review*, 15(2), 102–118. <https://doi.org/10.9101/esr.2021.0023>