



## Challenges Facing Career Counselling and Guidance Service Delivery in India

**Sudha Bhogle**

Professor of Psychology and Head, Educafe Student Solutions Pvt. Ltd.

### Abstract

With massive numbers of students requiring career counseling and guidance services, both for higher education and job opportunities, it is essential that we recognize the challenges that face career guidance service delivery in India. Such an understanding would help develop strategies to overcome these challenges so that India enjoys its demographic dividend. This paper tries to delineate some of the challenges in providing career guidance services in India and suggests some of the strategies that would be needed to be taken to mitigate these challenges.

**Key words:** career counselling, career guidance, challenges, career choices, India

### Career choices – the Indian scenario

'Career counselling' is a process of introspection and self-understanding as well as understanding of the world of work in order to make informed career decisions and develop professional goals in life i.e., to explore oneself objectively, recognize one's personal strengths and based on these and other relevant factors, select potential career areas. The focus is entirely on the individual undergoing career counselling. The terms 'career counselling' and 'career guidance' have often been used interchangeably in India. Career guidance is the formal process for people to receive advice on their career. It is a type of counselling undertaken by professionals to help identify and explore the most suitable careers and occupations. These terms have several nuances and notations that we need to understand if we want to know the challenges being faced in its delivery.

In India, career choices and decisions are often made based on peer or parental pressures. Students opt for educational programs based on what they

*think* they should do rather than what they are *best suited* to do. Students and their parents are often unaware or ignorant of all the possible educational and career choices available and make their decisions on ill-informed and limited data points.

This has led to extreme stress, academic failures, lack of confidence in one's abilities, inability to cope and even suicidal risks. The loss to the national exchequer in terms of human resources is immense. This vicious cycle needs to be broken. *It is important that we provide our students with guidance on various career alternatives available and the career path that is best suited for them*

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\*Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Sudha Bhogle Professor of Psychology and Head, Educafe Student Solutions Pvt. Ltd. e-mail: [sudhabhogle@eduquity.com](mailto:sudhabhogle@eduquity.com)

In a research study conducted by Educafe in 2007 (Research Report, Educafe), on more than 5000 students studying in 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, across three Educational Boards in India – CBSE, ICSE and State, the analysis revealed

- 41% of the sample had selected just 5 careers and another 30 occupations accounted for not even 5% of the responses. Most students were not even aware of the different career opportunities available to them
- Among the top 10 careers chosen, 6 were linked to the field of Science viz., engineering, computers and IT, architecture, medicine, physical and life sciences, accounting for 48.9% of the sample; and not one of them was from the Humanities (Liberal Arts) faculty. Sports, Performing Arts (acting, choreography, dance, modeling, music etc.), Commerce and Financial operations and Transportation (commercial pilots, merchant navy etc.) were the next four career clusters which were ranked high in the career aspirations of this sample.
- A hierarchy existed in the Indian educational scenario, with Science careers being more highly valued.
- Changes had occurred in the career aspirations of this generation. For years, the most highly regarded careers were in the civil services, engineering, and medicine. While engineering and medicine continued to maintain their hold, high-paying jobs like software and commercial pilots, high profile careers as in sports, the financial sector and defence were careers that members of this sample aspired to.

In a study conducted by Mindler in 2020, on the awareness of career options among Indian students in the age group of 14-21, only 7 career options were considered by over 70% of the students – Engineering (24%); Accounts and Finance

(12%); Computer Applications and IT (10%); Medicine (8%); Management (7%); Designing (6%) and Law (4%).

These results seem to imply that over the 15 years since the 2007 report, the career scenario has not changed. These results underline the dire need for appropriate and timely career counseling and guidance, so that our youth could actualize their potential.

With such a high requirement for career counselling, why is it that our youth do not avail the services of career counsellors and get into the right career at the right time? This could be because not only do we need the right person for the right job but also the right job for the right person. What are the challenges facing career guidance delivery, in the Indian context?

## Challenges

### 1. The large numbers who would need Career Services

As of now, in the Indian educational context and till the NEP 2020 is firmly in place, high school (grades 9-10) and higher secondary (grades 11-12) are the most important stages, impacting a student's career choice. The Unified District Information System Plus (UDISE+) 2021-22 given by the Government of India, Ministry of Education indicates that there are 3.85 crore students in grades 9-10 and 2.86 crore students in grades 11-12. The India Brand Equity Foundation (2022) in their analysis of Education and Training found that 1.96 crore male and 1.89 crore females are enrolled in Higher Education (Graduation). Meeting the career needs of this massive number of students who are the target audience for career counseling, guidance and information is a major challenge. Not only are the numbers huge, but the target is extremely heterogeneous in terms of social strata, economic conditions, geographical locations, languages and competencies. The 'one - shoe - fits - all' approach will not work.

## 2. The difference between a job and career

The concept of career counselling in India is still an elite concept. The idea that you can 'choose' a career you are best fit for, is an idea that really applies to the middle and higher middle socio-economic strata. Career guidance services are generally linked to higher and professional education in India or abroad. For students from lower income backgrounds, in the urban or rural context, an immediate income is a necessity for living and many school students drop out of education after high school/higher secondary school and join the world of work. Arulmani (2014), differentiated between Career Guidance and Livelihood planning and linked livelihood to work that is rooted in the community and has a cultural connotation. This was more in the rural context and livelihood planning was thus an application of the principles of career guidance at the broader level of facilitating individuals' traditional engagement with work such that it gains contemporary relevance.

For the urban poor, where there may not be traditional work roles that they can follow, job fitment rather than career counseling for higher education, becomes imperative. As per the Unified District Information System Plus, UDISE +, (2022), 1.7 crore children are studying in grades 9-10 in Government schools and around 1.17 crore are studying in grades 11-12<sup>1</sup> grade in Government schools. Higher education and postponement of securing a steady income is a dream too far. These students are untrained for any employment and because, generally, the infrastructure in Government schools in terms of human, physical and financial resources is inadequate, these students pass out, with not too much of an 'education'. They have the certificate that they have 'passed' the exam, though, in reality, many are still, quite illiterate and unemployable.

## 3. The term 'Counselling'.

There are two issues to be addressed here.

- a. The term counselling is still a much-maligned word, in the Indian context. Though the scene is changing, the word is often associated with mental or emotional problems and parents (and students) don't want to meet counsellors. In most schools, the school counsellor doubles up both for emotional/academic problems as well as for career counselling. Thus, students are wary of meeting them, because of the stigma associated with consulting a counsellor.
- b. Counselling is also one of the most misused terms. While technically the word counselling refers to the provision of professional assistance and guidance in resolving issues and dilemmas, it is frequently applied to recommending a course of action, not necessarily based on the individual but on supply and demand. Thus, we have CET or JEE counselling where based on the individual's marks in the entrance exam, they are allotted to a particular course or college, irrespective of whether that is the best 'fit' for them. The students with higher marks get their choices, and as you come down the ladder, you just accept which ever course/college is available.

## 4. Lack of awareness

The awareness amongst parents and students about the availability and importance of career counselling is low stereotyping and biases regarding career choices, affect career decisions. To further exacerbate the situation, students and their parents are often 'fixated' on a few careers and are inflexible and rigid to even consider meeting a professional with regard to exploring other or newer career options. Career and course choices must be made when the student is in grade 10-12, and since children are not yet cognitively mature enough to make their own career choices, these are often made by others. More often than not, the career choice is made on the basis of parental preferences and their background and experiences, and

not always on the child's personal preferences. Parental and peer pressure often impel students to choose careers which are 'financially secure'. Developing fields and emerging technologies are less trusted and are perceived to be risky.

**5.** This brings us to the next challenge. Most career counsellors and people in general, look at the **marks obtained** as a criterion to choose a career. If a student has scored high in Mathematics/Science, then Engineering/Medicine is the go-to career, even if they are not interested in that career. Aptitude or ability however is just one facet to be considered during the journey of career exploration. Despite the emergence of so many new careers that require a completely different skill set for success, schools or career counsellors still focus exclusively on **academic areas**, especially on Mathematics and Sciences. While marks and grades are important, they are not the only indicators of success in later life. While the Marks Card acts as a visa to get into the college/course of one's choice, success in that career/course/college depends on several other factors. For example, the 5C model provides a list of other factors: Communication skills, Critical thinking skills, Creativity, Collaboration and Confidence [self-insight]. These are generally not addressed by career counsellors, whose aim is to get the student into a particular course /college, based on their scores, SOP, common application etc. The student's all-round development usually does not receive adequate resources or attention.

**6.** There is also the concept of '**conflict of interest**' and **malpractice** among career counsellors. Most often, career counselling in schools (especially in International Schools) is delivered with the idea of helping the student get college admissions and not really an introspective understanding of self to make an informed career decision. Sometimes, career counsellors are linked to colleges (especially in the Study Abroad programs) and they then market the courses and colleges that they are associated with,

rather than guiding the student without any bias. This had made the career counselling scene murky. Because of this, many students and their parents are wary of availing career counselling services. It is a loss-loss situation for all.

### **7. Lack of adequate professional career counsellors**

In several countries such as the USA, the UK, Australia, Singapore, career counselling is regarded as one of the basic elements of education and professional services. In the USA, every school has a full-time career counsellor who guides the student in terms of their career growth. In the UK, several colleges and Universities provide career services free of cost to help students navigate their career paths. However as per the International Career and College Counseling Institute (IC3) report of 2020, there is an acute lack of trained professionals in the field. The IC3 estimates that India has only 100,000 trained career counselors. The report states that 1.5 million counselors would be needed to provide an adequate student-to-counselor ratio for India's 315 million students ([www.schoolcounselor.org](http://www.schoolcounselor.org)).

**8. Lack of assessment tools** that are psychometrically reliable and valid, and relevant to the Indian culture is another challenge. Many career counsellors use assessment tools that have been developed for the Western culture and are not culture free or fair. These are generally available only in English, limiting their usability and the norms for interpretations may not be really applicable to the Indian scenario.

### **9. Lack of a school ecosystem that encourages career guidance**

In India, career guidance is not given much importance in schools. While all stake holders agree that it is important, for schools, the marks that the children obtain in their Board exams becomes the most important metric to determine how 'good' the school is. Moreover, the success of the student in their 'chosen' career is revealed,

many years after the student has 'passed out' of the school. Therefore, availability of career guidance and counseling in the school is often only a 'feel-good' metric. Thus, insufficient funds and resources are provided for career guidance services. Due to an overall lack of resources, many Indian schools are unable to dedicate personnel, space, and technology infrastructure toward college and career counseling.

### How Can these Challenges be Met? Some Strategies.

#### 1. Addressing non-cognitive aspects

Research has revealed that while domain specific knowledge and aptitude are important to do well in a career, there are other *non-cognitive* aspects that are equally important and indicate whether the candidate will continue in that stream and whether they would be successful. To choose a right career path, evaluation and proper understanding of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills are essential. Knowing precisely what are an individual interests, what their abilities are and what traits define their personality are the 3 key aspects that define a wise career/subject decision.

Apart from Aptitude or Talent which is anyway reflected in the marks card/entrance test scores, one's interests (or passions) or what excites and fascinates students motivating them to do their best, the person's personality (or qualities that form the student's distinctive character) as applied to the world of occupations (Holland, 1959, 1981); their emotional intelligence indicating how students recognize and manage their emotions and their work values and role models need to be assessed.

#### 2. Some Government initiatives

The Government of India is trying to address this issue in several ways:

(a) The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) now mandates some vocational training as part of the school system for

every child. This would equip every child with some vocational or skill training at the end of the schooling.

(b) The Government, as part of the National Skills Development Corporation [<https://nsdcindia.org/>] has started several initiatives, one of which is the *Rozgar Melas* or the Job fairs. A Rozgar Mela is an event where a number of employers and job seekers come together for the purpose of applying and interviewing for jobs. Defined more precisely, a Rozgar Mela is an employment strategy to fast-track the meeting of job seekers and employers.

However, these have not been too successful, because the rally is often restricted to working hours only, and there is a paucity of time for employers to do a detailed assessment for selection of the right candidates for job offers. Candidates also get very little time to display their knowledge and capabilities to the prospective employers. Thus, candidates apply for any job without seeing if they are suitable or will be happy doing that job. Some candidates especially those coming from the very low-income group and with almost no knowledge about employment opportunities, apply for any job that is available. All these and other factors put together make the Rozgar Melas not as successful as they can be. Career or job role fitment and counselling is something that is denied to these people, and this is a challenge that needs and can be addressed.

(c) The Government of India has also set up the National Career Service [<https://www.ncs.gov.in/>] under the Ministry of Labour and Employment as a portal for employment. This portal also has counsellors to help students make informed choices. This was a Five-Year Mission Mode Project launched by the Hon'ble Prime Minister on 20th July, 2015 as a one-stop solution to provide a wide array of employment and career related services to the citizens of India. The aim was to bridge the gap between jobseekers and employers, candidates seeking

training and career guidance and agencies providing training and career counselling. The digital centralized portal provides a wide range of career related services including job search, job matching, rich career content, career counselling, and information on job fairs.

(d) The National Testing Agency (NTA) was set up as a premier, specialist, autonomous and self-sustained testing organization by the Government. NTA's vision of '*The right candidates joining best institutions will give India her demographic dividend*' is best realized when students make the correct career/subject choices. In this direction and as a part of providing career guidance services to school children, NTA administered the National Aptitude Test in 2021, which was a free, online Test of 2 hours' duration, measuring 8 domains.

However, all these Government initiatives in terms of career guidance and job fitments, have not yet borne fruit. For the Nation, the consequences of a mismatch between what career they have chosen and what they are fit for in terms of actual potential and market demands, are detrimental, and leads to large scale unemployment because they are just not 'fit' for the job. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), 2022 has given an unemployment percentage rate of around 10.5% for the grades 10-12 and around 17% for graduates and above.

(e) In an attempt to improve the school ecosystem, many commissions recommended the importance and necessity of guidance and counselling services for secondary school students. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005) stated that guidance and counselling should become an integral part of curriculum and the functions of guidance and counselling should be carried out throughout the curriculum. The guidelines of CBSE directed an appointment of counsellor in each school. However, Batra and Pyari (2019), in their study of the status of guidance and counselling services in the secondary schools of Delhi reported that

while a separate counselling room had been provided in most of the schools of Delhi, there were schools which lack adequate resources needed for effective counselling service delivery. Group counselling was preferred over individual counselling in most of the schools. Thus, introspection and the individual were not the focus of the counselling.

We need trained professionals who can carry out these services, as well as psychometric assessment tools that are relevant to the target audience and are suitable for the Indian culture across socio economic strata. We need to develop tools and techniques, in the vernacular, wherever possible, which can be administered by trained professionals. The norms should reflect the Indian conditions. As of now, there is no certifying agency and therefore anyone and everyone calls themselves a career counsellor. Trained professionals who are unbiased, objective, with strong grounding in psychological theory, and well-versed in the administration and interpretation of psychological tests are the need of the hour. This lacuna in trained professionals needs to be dealt with on a war footing.

Since the numbers requiring career guidance are massive, we would need to use information technology to reach as many as possible. Assessments and guidance and counselling can be made online, as far as possible. The COVID pandemic gave an impetus to online education and people are now a little more comfortable using technology. This change in attitude can be utilized to provide access to these services to many more people

In sum, there is a dire need for career guidance services in India, at all levels and across all geographical locations. While providing adequate information and resources, such as online resource libraries and a dedicated counselling space, in schools and colleges, is one part of the solution, adequate training of counselors is as critical. The numbers of students requiring counselling services to help choose careers /colleges/courses that

will help them actualize their potential will only increase over time as the concept of career guidance becomes more popular. As a nation, we need to prepare for this eventuality. The use of technology to make the process scalable, use of all forms of media to popularize the concept and make people aware of Government initiatives, development of adequate training

programs to help career counsellors keep up to date with the changing employment scenario are some initiatives that need to be taken. All stake holders, the Government, educational institutions, counseling fraternity, parents and students will need to participate in this venture if India is to actualize its demographic dividend.

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#### About the author

**Dr. Sudha Bhogle** is a Ph. D in Psychology and was Professor and Chairperson of the Post Graduate Department of Psychology, Bangalore University. She has more than 43 years in the field of education, academics and research. At present she heads Educafé Student Solutions. Helping a student find where his/her potential lies and realize it, is the work of Educafé. This is done through career counselling to help students make correct and informed choices regarding the career to choose, as well as training programs for students, teachers and working people for self and professional development. She along with her team of psychologists have impacted the lives of more than 150,000 students across India and abroad through their Assessment, Counselling and Training initiatives.

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