**Assessing the Role of Career Guidance Programs in Secondary Schools: A Path to Job Creation and Sustainability**

**Abstract**
*The study explored the significance of career guidance programs in secondary schools as a strategic tool for enhancing students' career readiness, promoting job creation, and supporting sustainable development. Career guidance programs have increasingly been recognized as essential components of secondary education, helping students understand their strengths, interests, and potential career paths. In Zambia, where youth unemployment is high, such programs are meant to connect students with the labour market. The study employed a qualitative secondary research design, focusing on the review and analysis of existing literature, government reports, education policies, and academic studies related to career guidance and youth employment in Zambia. Although no primary data was collected, the study synthesized findings from over 25 documents and reports, including policy papers from the Ministry of Education, labour market assessments, and research articles from local and international journals. The study results showed that career guidance programs significantly enhance students’ awareness and preparedness for diverse career opportunities, leading to better alignment between their academic pursuits and future employment or entrepreneurial goals. Additionally, schools that effectively implement career guidance initiatives report lower rates of student indecision and higher levels of post-secondary engagement in vocational training, higher education, or job placement, contributing positively to youth employment and sustainable livelihoods. The study therefore recommended to enhance career guidance, national training and certification programs that should be developed in collaboration with educational institutions to professionalize practitioners; clear implementation plans with timelines and performance metrics must be established to ensure effective policy monitoring; gender-sensitive programs should be introduced to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusive career exploration; and mobile counseling units along with online resources should be deployed to bridge the urban-rural divide and ensure equal access for all students.*

***Keywords: Career Guidance, Education System, Gender Disparities, Job Creation and Sustainability***.

### Introduction

Career guidance programs have increasingly become a fundamental component of secondary education, particularly in preparing students for the transition from school to the world of work. These programs provide structured support to help learners identify their interests, aptitudes, and career aspirations through various activities such as career talks, mentorship, psychometric assessments, and exposure to different occupational fields (Chanda, 2024). In doing so, they bridge the gap between academic learning and the demands of the labor market by equipping students with both technical and soft skills (UNESCO, 2021). In many developing countries like Zambia, where the youth population is growing rapidly and employment opportunities remain limited, career guidance serves as a vital tool in reducing uncertainty and misalignment between educational outcomes and job market needs (ILO, 2020). By helping students make informed choices about subject selection, post-secondary education options, and career planning, these programs lay a strong foundation for lifelong learning and career success (Kasonde & Banda, 2022).

Furthermore, the role of career guidance extends beyond individual career planning to contributing to broader socio-economic goals such as job creation and sustainable development. When students are guided effectively, they are more likely to pursue fields that align with national development priorities or develop entrepreneurial ventures that respond to community needs (Chilala & Mulenga, 2023). This fosters a spirit of innovation, creativity, and self-employment among the youth, reducing reliance on formal job markets which are often saturated (World Bank, 2021). Moreover, career guidance programs can help mitigate skill mismatches, a common problem in many economies, by ensuring that learners are not only aware of emerging industries and opportunities but also trained to meet their specific requirements (MoE, 2022).

Zambia gained independence from Britain in 1964 but retained many colonial structures, including the education system (World Bank, 2018). This system, largely unchanged since independence, continues to focus on preparing learners for the job market, with minimal emphasis on career development (UNESCO, 2021). It lacks a structured framework to help students identify suitable career paths. Consequently, many learners progress through school without a clear understanding of their aspirations, often influenced by peer pressure or media-driven program advertisements (ILO, 2020). This misalignment results in students pursuing careers that do not align with their interests or skills, weakening prospects for sustainable job creation. Despite these challenges, career guidance professionals in secondary schools are well-placed to support students in making informed decisions. When equipped with the right tools, they can help learners explore opportunities aligned with their strengths, making career guidance a vital strategy for addressing youth unemployment and fostering long-term employment solutions (AfDB, 2022).

Career guidance is a structured, developmental process that helps individuals make informed educational and occupational choices. Rooted in the historical concept of “guidance” from the 1530s, meaning the act of directing conduct, that has evolved into a comprehensive approach to career planning. It aims to empower students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to make informed decisions that enhance their personal and professional well-being. Scholars such as Super et al. (1976) describe career development as a lifelong journey influenced by various factors, including family, peers, and educators. Bandura et al. (2001) emphasize the role of personal context, aptitudes, and academic achievements in shaping career choices. Even young children can form career aspirations at an early age (Seligman et al., 1988), although gender stereotypes often persist and girls tend to prefer traditional roles like teaching or nursing, while boys explore more varied careers such as engineering (Looft, 1971). Effective career guidance can help challenge these norms and expand opportunities for all learners.

**1.2 Statement of the Problem**

In Zambia, the education system, which inherited colonial structures, continues to focus on preparing students solely for the job market without a robust framework to guide them in making informed career choices (Chilala, 2017). As a result, many students lack the necessary career guidance to align their educational paths with their skills, interests, and the evolving demands of the job market (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). The absence of a systematic career guidance program in secondary schools has contributed to an increasing number of young people graduating without clear career goals or readiness for sustainable employment opportunities (ILO, 2020). Despite the importance of career guidance programs in fostering informed career choices and sustainable job creation, current programs in secondary schools are often underfunded, inadequately implemented, and lack coordination between education policymakers and the labour market (World Bank, 2021). Moreover, students, teachers, and even policymakers may not fully recognize the potential role of career guidance in addressing key issues such as youth unemployment and underemployment. Given the rising youth unemployment in Zambia and the need to align education with the demands of the labour market, it is critical to assess how career guidance can be better utilized by the government in secondary schools to promote the creation of sustainable jobs (Chanda et al., 2024). This study aimed to assess the role of career guidance frameworks in strengthening career guidance programs, identifying the challenges these programs face, and exploring strategies that could improve their effectiveness in shaping students’ career choices and enhancing their preparedness for the job market.

**1.3 Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of career guidance programs in Zambian secondary schools and its potential to reduce youth unemployment and promote sustainable job creation. The study aimed to explore how effectively career guidance services are delivered, the challenges they face and the extent to which they align students’ educational experiences with labour market needs.

### 1.4 Research Objectives

* To assess the effectiveness of career guidance programs in Zambian secondary schools.
* To examine the influence of career guidance on students' career choices and their preparedness for the job market.

**1.5 Conceptual framework**

Career Guidance Program Challenges

 Current Career Guidance Programs

Career Guidance Influence

Sustainable Job Creation

Independent variables

Dependent variables

***Figure 1: Conceptual Model***

**1.6 Significance of the study**

This study was significant for several reasons, as it provided valuable insights into the role of career guidance in secondary schools and its potential in fostering sustainable job creation in Zambia. By examining how career guidance could influence students' career choices and preparedness for the job market, the research contributed to understanding how to bridge the gap between education and employment. The findings helped policymakers and educators to design more effective strategies to equip young people with the necessary skills and knowledge to pursue viable career paths, ultimately contributing to the reduction of youth unemployment resulting in creation of sustainable jobs in Zambia.

**2. Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative secondary research design utilizing a documentary analysis approach. The research was grounded in a qualitative paradigm, which is well-suited for exploring social phenomena and interpreting non-numerical data through a contextual and thematic lens (Creswell, 2014). The choice of a qualitative design was based on the need to explore the depth and complexity of career guidance services in Zambia and their potential impact on youth employment, without engaging in primary data collection.

The study relied entirely on secondary sources, including policy documents, government reports, academic journal articles, and official education and labour market frameworks. This approach allowed the researcher to gather a wide spectrum of insights from previously published materials, enhancing the comprehensiveness of the analysis. In total, more than 25 documents were reviewed, comprising national education policies, labour market assessments, strategic government plans, and empirical studies from both local and international academic sources. These documents included policy papers from the Ministry of Education, the Seventh National Development Plan, the Education and Skills Sector Plan, and research articles published in reputable journals such as the *International Journal of Educational Development* and the *Zambian Journal of Education*.

The documents were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance, credibility, and alignment with the research objectives. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes related to the implementation, accessibility, and outcomes of career guidance services, as well as their relationship to youth employment trends in Zambia. Documentary analysis, as a research method, facilitates the examination of written materials to derive meaning, context, and patterns that are critical in social science research (Bowen, 2009).

This methodological approach was particularly appropriate given the availability of rich policy and institutional data in the Zambian context. Moreover, it enabled the study to draw on historical and current perspectives while circumventing challenges associated with field-based research such as time, cost, and access to respondents. The findings derived from the synthesis of secondary sources provided critical insights into the effectiveness of career guidance interventions and their potential role in addressing youth unemployment in Zambia.

**2.1 Data analysis**

The data in this study was analysed through a comprehensive literature review, which involved systematically examining existing academic publications, policy documents, reports and relevant secondary sources on career guidance and counselling in Zambia. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes, patterns, and gaps related to the availability, accessibility and effectiveness of career guidance services in schools. The literature was critically reviewed to extract evidence on the current state of career counselling, challenges faced by educators and learners and policy implementation issues. By synthesizing insights from various credible sources, the study was able to draw meaningful conclusions and proposed informed recommendations to address the shortcomings in career guidance provision across different regions in Zambia.

**2.2 Ethical issues**

This study adhered to established ethical standards for conducting research using secondary data. All information was obtained from credible, publicly accessible academic sources, ensuring that no primary data collection involving human participants was undertaken. As such, issues of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were not applicable. However, ethical integrity was maintained by properly acknowledging all authors and sources through accurate citations and references to avoid plagiarism. The study also ensured impartiality by presenting findings objectively and critically evaluating the reliability and limitations of the sources used. Additionally, efforts were made to uphold academic honesty and transparency throughout the research process.

**3. Results and discussion**

**3.1 Implementation of Career Guidance Programs in Secondary Schools**

**Limited Availability of Qualified Practitioners**

The implementation of career guidance programs in secondary schools across Zambia has often been hindered by the limited availability of qualified practitioners. Many schools, particularly in rural areas, either lacked dedicated career counselors or had staff members without the necessary training. This gap in expertise has been particularly evident in rural and peri-urban regions, where teachers with academic backgrounds, rather than career counseling qualifications, have been assigned guidance responsibilities (Chanda et al., 2025). The absence of specialized training in career development, labor market trends, or psychological counseling means that guidance and counseling services often remain underdeveloped and overly generalized.

A study by Nyirenda (2018) revealed that only 30% of Zambian secondary schools have counselors with formal training in career development. Furthermore, Mwewa and Chanda (2020) noted that in many rural schools, career counseling was often a secondary task performed by teachers who had no formal counseling qualifications. The lack of specialized training is consistent with findings from global studies. For example, a report by the International Labour Organization (2015) found that many African countries face similar challenges in providing adequately trained career counselors, which hinders the effectiveness of career guidance services.

**Inconsistent Policy Implementation**

Although Zambia’s education policies, such as the Education Act No. 23 of 2011 and the Revised Curriculum Framework of 2013, have emphasized the importance of career guidance, their implementation across secondary schools has been inconsistent. The policies encourage the inclusion of career education within the national curriculum, yet their actual integration has been sporadic and often sidelined due to lack of resources and insufficient monitoring mechanisms (Kangwa & Chanda, 2025).

A study by Chirwa (2020) highlighted that although the policy documents provided strong recommendations for career guidance, the actual execution was often left to individual schools, resulting in varying levels of implementation. In some schools, career guidance was delivered only as an occasional event, such as career days or workshops, while others offered no career-related activities at all. Globally, this is not unique to Zambia; according to the European Commission (2016), many countries struggle with translating policy intentions into concrete practices, particularly in areas with resource constraints. However, countries like Singapore have succeeded in integrating career guidance into their educational system through dedicated programs and government support, setting an example for effective policy implementation.

**Urban-Rural Divide in Service Provision**

A significant divide exists between urban and rural areas in terms of access to career guidance services. Schools in cities like Lusaka and Kitwe tend to have greater access to resources such as career fairs, university visits, and partnerships with NGOs that offer career-related workshops and counseling. These urban schools also benefit from a wider range of subject offerings and better infrastructure, which contribute to more informed career decision-making. However, rural schools, particularly in provinces such as Northern and Eastern, face significant challenges in accessing these services. A study by Simukonda (2021) found that rural schools were twice as likely to lack career counseling services compared to urban schools, and students in rural areas were less likely to have any exposure to professional career advice. In contrast, a study in Kenya by Gitau (2017) showed that urban-rural disparities in career counseling led to better employment outcomes for students in urban areas, emphasizing the need for equitable distribution of resources. Internationally, studies have shown that rural students are more likely to experience career guidance gaps due to geographic isolation, as seen in countries like South Africa (Le Roux, 2019).

**Lack of Modern Tools and Methods**

Career guidance in Zambia’s secondary schools has also been constrained by the lack of modern tools and methodologies. In many schools, career guidance is still largely based on traditional, one-size-fits-all approaches, such as group counseling sessions or career talks. These methods tend to be generic and do not cater to the individual needs or aspirations of students. Additionally, psychometric tools, career assessments, and digital platforms that could aid in tailoring guidance to individual student profiles are rarely used. Research by Mbewe and Phiri (2018) indicated that less than 10% of Zambian secondary schools have employed formal career assessments, such as personality tests or skills inventories, that could better inform career choices. The absence of such tools has been shown to limit the effectiveness of career guidance. For instance, a study by Du Plessis and Meyer (2019) in South Africa emphasized that the use of psychometric tests and career assessments improves career guidance outcomes by helping students understand their strengths and preferences, thus enabling them to make informed decisions.

International best practices underscore the importance of digital tools in career guidance. Countries like Finland and South Korea use digital platforms to connect students with career resources, provide personalized advice, and match students’ skills with job market demands. The absence of such technologies in Zambia, as highlighted by Mbewe and Chanda (2020), leaves students with limited career direction.

**Late Introduction of Career Guidance**

In Zambia, career guidance is typically introduced in Grade 9, after students have already made critical subject choices that will shape their academic and professional futures. This delay often results in students pursuing subjects that may not align with their natural abilities, interests, or career aspirations. Research by Chipili (2020) revealed that only 18% of students received career counseling before selecting their subject streams in Grade 9. Many students reported that they made their subject choices based on what was deemed "useful" by teachers or parents, rather than on what was most suited to their abilities and future goals. This situation mirrors findings from a study by Mumbuna (2017), which showed that early career guidance significantly improved subject selection and student satisfaction with their academic paths in Zimbabwe. Countries like Finland and New Zealand have adopted a more proactive approach, introducing career education at an earlier stage—often in primary school. In these countries, career guidance is seen as an integral part of personal development and is integrated into the curriculum from a young age (O’Reilly, 2018).

**Absence of a Lifelong Guidance Framework**

In Zambia, the provision of career guidance typically ends once students graduate from secondary school. There are limited services for tertiary students or young adults who are transitioning into the workforce. This gap in lifelong career guidance creates a barrier for many young Zambians as they face challenges in securing employment or navigating the labor market. In contrast, countries like Norway and Australia have adopted lifelong career guidance systems, where individuals receive continuous support throughout their careers. These systems assist people in transitioning between jobs, pursuing further education, or re-entering the workforce after a break. According to a report by the OECD (2018), lifelong career guidance has been proven to enhance employability and reduce unemployment rates by providing individuals with the necessary tools to manage career transitions effectively.

In Zambia, the absence of a robust lifelong guidance system leaves many young adults without direction after they leave school. A study by Mutale (2021) found that 70% of young graduates reported feeling unprepared for the workforce, with many citing a lack of career advice as a major contributing factor. This gap results in high levels of underemployment and unemployment among youth. Developing a national framework for lifelong career guidance could help address these issues by providing ongoing support throughout individuals' career journeys.

***Table1- Summary of key findings***

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| **Key Findings** | **Description** | **Supporting Statistics** |
| **Limited Availability of Qualified Practitioners** | Many teachers assigned to provide career guidance lacked formal training, leading to outdated information and generalized advice. This reduced the effectiveness of career guidance services. | In Chilanga District, over 70% of teachers assigned to guidance roles had no formal training in counseling or career development (Simwanza, 2020). |
| **Inconsistent Policy Implementation** | Although career guidance is mandated by policy (Education Act 2011, Revised Curriculum Framework 2013), its implementation was inconsistent due to insufficient training, resource constraints, and poor monitoring. | 30% of school administrators and teachers in Chongwe District had never been oriented to the revised curriculum (Kasonde, 2019). |
| **Urban-Rural Divide** | Urban schools had better access to career guidance services (e.g., career talks, mentorship, and partnerships with tertiary institutions), while rural schools faced limitations in resources and opportunities for career development. | 76% of urban school students in Lusaka had access to at least one career talk annually, compared to only 21% in rural Samfya District (Mundia, 2021). |
| **Lack of Modern Tools and Methods** | Very few schools used standardized tools like psychometric tests, career interest inventories, or labor market information systems, which limited the ability to personalize career guidance for students. | Less than 10% of surveyed schools had used standardized career assessment tools (Mbewe & Phiri, 2018). |
| **Late Introduction of Career Guidance** | Career guidance was typically introduced too late (Grade 9), after students had already made key academic choices. Early career education could help shape students' aspirations and academic decisions. | Only 18% of surveyed students in Lusaka received career guidance before making subject selections in Grade 9 (Chipili, 2020). |
| **Resource Constraints** | Many schools lacked essential resources such as dedicated counseling spaces, up-to-date labor market information, and career assessment tools, further limiting the delivery of effective career guidance services. | Many schools lacked dedicated counseling spaces and up-to-date labor market information, with career guidance being treated as an add-on service (Chilala & Kalimaposo, 2020). |

**3.2 Influences on Student Career Choices and Job Market Preparedness**

**Gender-Based Disparities in Access and Impact**

Gender disparities significantly influence students' access to and the benefits they derive from career guidance, disproportionately disadvantaging female learners in rural settings. This is rooted in deep-seated socio-cultural norms that perpetuate gender roles and influence educational aspirations and outcomes. In many rural Zambian communities, girls face systemic barriers such as early marriage, childbearing responsibilities and domestic labor which divert their focus from academic pursuits and diminish their access to future-oriented planning like career guidance (UNICEF, 2020). These socio-cultural expectations often lead to lower parental and community expectations for girls’ academic and professional success. They further restrict their exposure to a diverse range of career paths, especially in male-dominated industries such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Chirwa (2020) highlights that in Eastern Province, rural female students are commonly steered away from professional or technical careers. The discouragement stems from persistent beliefs that prioritize girls' reproductive and domestic roles over personal career ambitions (Chanda et al., 2023). As a result, girls rarely receive encouragement to explore careers in sectors like ICT, medicine, or engineering, which are not only high-growth but also pivotal to national development. The situation is compounded by the lack of visible female role models in these fields, leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of gender-based occupational segregation.

UNESCO (2019) found that targeted career guidance towards STEM fields is notably lacking for Zambian girls, particularly in rural districts. Only 18% of rural female students reported receiving career talks or information related to technology or engineering, compared to 41% of male students in the same regions. This gap reflects a broader issue of gender bias in the design and delivery of career guidance programs. Most interventions are not tailored to consider the unique challenges that girls face, thereby failing to level the playing field.

Internationally, countries like Germany have taken significant steps to counteract such disparities. Through initiatives like the National Pact for Women in STEM Careers, Germany has implemented mentorship programs, industry-academic partnerships and inclusive career fairs aimed specifically at guiding young girls into STEM careers (European Commission, 2020). Zambia could draw lessons from such programs by adapting mentorship models to local contexts, incorporating successful female professionals from various sectors to inspire and guide young girls.

Beyond socio-cultural barriers, structural inequalities within school environments also undermine girls' ability to participate in long-term career planning. According to Mwansa & Phiri (2021), issues such as inadequate sanitation facilities for menstruating girls, gender-insensitive teaching materials and the absence of policies addressing sexual harassment in schools create unsafe and unsupportive environments. These factors collectively reduce girls’ attendance and engagement in school, weakening the foundation upon which effective career guidance is built (Chanda, 2023).

**Low Student Satisfaction with Career Guidance Services**

Student satisfaction with career guidance services in Zambian secondary schools is generally low, largely due to poor delivery mechanisms and lack of individualized support. High counselor-to-student ratios, insufficient time allocation and irrelevant or outdated advice contribute to students’ lack of preparedness for tertiary education or the labor market. In a study by Mukupa (2019) involving 15 public secondary schools in Lusaka and Copperbelt Provinces, 62% of students expressed dissatisfaction with the career guidance services they had received. Key complaints included infrequent sessions, limited private consultations, and career talks that lacked alignment with real job market opportunities.

Additionally, a survey conducted by the Zambia National Education Coalition (ZANEC, 2022) found that most students had little understanding of vocational and technical career paths due to guidance being primarily focused on university-related options. This university bias excludes practical alternatives such as entrepreneurship, artisanal trades and green jobs, which are increasingly vital in Zambia’s evolving economy. Compounding the issue is the lack of integration between schools and industry (Chanda, 2024b). Few schools have formalized partnerships with private sector actors or use labor market information (LMI) to guide students. In contrast, countries like Singapore and Sweden use data-driven, employer-informed models to help students align their skills and interests with national employment trends (ILO, 2019). Furthermore, the average counselor-to-student ratio in Zambian secondary schools is approximately 1:1,500, far above the UNESCO-recommended maximum of 1:250 (UNESCO, 2017). This overload limits the ability of counselors to provide meaningful, personalized advice and reducing the efficacy of the entire guidance framework.

**4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study reveals significant gaps in Zambia's career guidance system, including a shortage of qualified practitioners, inconsistent policy implementation, gender-based disparities and an urban-rural divide in service provision. These issues are further compounded by the late introduction of career guidance, limited access to modern tools, and low student satisfaction with the existing services. The absence of a lifelong career guidance framework further hinders the ability of individuals to make informed career decisions and adapt to the evolving labor market. Addressing these challenges through better training, improved policy enforcement, and the integration of modern career development tools could greatly enhance career guidance services and contribute to more equitable and informed career decisions for all Zambian.

**5. Recommendations**

**i. Training and Certification of Career Guidance Practitioners**

Developing national training and certification programs should be undertaken in collaboration with educational institutions to ensure that career guidance practitioners are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge. The Ministry of Education should take the lead in policy development and funding, while the Teaching Council of Zambia should be responsible for regulating and enforcing professional standards. Recognized universities such as the University of Zambia should deliver specialized training and the Zambia Qualifications Authority should ensure that training programs meet national curriculum standards. The Ministry of Education should take up the task of coordinating all stakeholders involved.

**ii. Improved Implementation and Monitoring of Career Guidance Policies**

To enhance implementation, a clear plan should be created with timelines and measurable outcomes and a monitoring system must be established to ensure policies are consistently applied across schools. The Directorate of Standards and Curriculum under the Ministry of Education should spearhead this effort, with District Education Boards (DEBS) tracking school-level execution and the EMIS Unit collecting and reporting data for ongoing improvement. The Directorate of Standards and Curriculum should take up the task of leading this implementation and monitoring framework.

**iii Gender-Sensitive Career Guidance Programs**

Gender-sensitive programs should be introduced to challenge cultural stereotypes and promote equal access to diverse career paths for all students. The Ministry of Gender and Child Development, working with NGOs like FAWEZA and CAMFED should lead sensitization campaigns and mentorship initiatives, while schools should integrate gender-inclusive content into their guidance curricula. Local professionals should be involved as mentors and role models. The Ministry of Gender and Child Development should take up the task of leading these gender-responsive initiatives.

**iv. Bridging the Urban-Rural Divide**

To ensure that rural students have the same access to career guidance services as their urban counterparts, mobile counseling units and digital platforms should be established. The Ministry of Education should coordinate this initiative, with ICT support from ZICTA. Telecom companies like MTN and Airtel should provide subsidized internet services and rural councils should support outreach activities in collaboration with local schools. The Ministry of Education should take up the task of overseeing and implementing rural outreach strategies.

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