

CAREER ADAPTABILITY IN GENERATION Z: DIFFERENCES BY GENDER, SECONDARY-SCHOOL BACKGROUND AND WORK EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Career adaptability is increasingly important as university students navigate uncertain labor markets and complex school-to-work transitions. This study mapped career adaptability among Generation Z university students and examined differences by gender, secondary-school educational background, and employment status. A quantitative cross-sectional comparative design involved 156 students in emerging adulthood. Career adaptability was measured using the Indonesian version of the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS), and data were analyzed with descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests. The results showed that 56% of participants were in the moderate category, 34% in the low category, and 10% in the high category. Significant differences were found for gender, $t(154) = -4.650$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .123$; secondary-school educational background, $t(154) = -3.686$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .081$; and employment status, $t(154) = 6.359$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .208$. Female students reported higher career adaptability than male students, students from vocational high schools scored higher than those from general high schools, and part-time employed students scored higher than students who were not working. The findings indicate meaningful variation in career adaptability across personal and contextual characteristics, although the cross-sectional design does not establish causality. Evidence-informed career mentoring, career exploration, experiential learning, and work-integrated learning may support students' adaptive career resources.

Keywords: Career Adaptability, Emerging Adulthood, Generation Z, Vocational Education, Work Experience

INTRODUCTION

Career adaptability has become a central construct in contemporary career-development research because students increasingly face non-linear transitions, changing occupational requirements, technological disruption, uncertainty in entry-level labor markets, and persistent mismatches between emerging workforce competencies and industry needs (Framesthi et al., 2025). Career Construction Theory conceptualizes career adaptability as a set of psychosocial resources that help individuals respond to current and anticipated vocational tasks, transitions, and work-related challenges (Savickas, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). A broad mapping review showed sustained international growth in career-adaptability research and its links with employability, career decision-making, and adjustment outcomes (Chen et al., 2020), while a systematic review emphasized the construct's value for understanding how individuals prepare for and manage changing career demands (Johnston, 2018). More recent studies likewise connect career adaptability with job-search behavior, well-being, and adjustment during the university-to-work transition (Ouyang et al., 2025; Fu et al., 2023).

Building on the foundational conceptualization of career adaptability as an integrative career-development construct (Savickas, 1997), Career Construction Theory organizes adaptability into four interrelated resources: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Concern reflects orientation toward and preparation for the future; control concerns responsibility and self-regulation in career development; curiosity involves exploration of possible selves and occupational environments; and confidence refers to perceived capacity to solve problems and pursue career goals (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Empirical developments in career construction research have continued to distinguish adaptive readiness, adaptability resources, adapting responses, and adaptation results, thereby positioning career adaptability as a resource rather than

a fixed trait (Rudolph et al., 2019). Longitudinal evidence from students also indicates that adaptability can develop across transition periods and is associated with future work selves and broader adaptive outcomes (Fu et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2022).

For Generation Z students, these issues are especially salient because career entry occurs amid rapidly evolving skill requirements and strong pressure to translate higher education into employability. Indonesian research has linked career adaptability with work readiness and career engagement (Anggriana et al., 2022; Putri et al., 2024) and has shown that optimism is positively related to adaptability among Generation Z students (Putri & Yuniasanti, 2023). International evidence similarly shows that students' adaptive resources are embedded in social and educational contexts. For example, social support is associated with career-adaptability dimensions among vocational upper-secondary students (Hlad'o et al., 2020), and agentic resources and coping with barriers predict career adaptability in diverse community-college populations (Gregor et al., 2021). Higher education also shapes how students develop career interests and translate academic experience into career planning and employability (Quinlan & Renninger, 2022).

Educational and work-related experiences may be particularly relevant because they provide opportunities to explore occupational roles, test self-efficacy, and practice responsibility. A five-wave study found that internship participation was associated with developmental change in career adaptability over time (Ocampo et al., 2020). Career-adaptation interventions have also demonstrated that adaptability can be strengthened through structured activities: career-adaptability training has supported school-to-work transition preparation (Koen et al., 2012), compact transition interventions produced sustained gains and improved employment-related outcomes through enhanced career adaptability (van der Horst et al., 2021), motivational interviewing among peers improved selected adaptability resources among at-risk college students (Gai et al., 2022), and community-service learning increased career adaptability in an experimental university setting (Pong & Leung, 2023). These findings make educational background and work exposure theoretically meaningful characteristics for comparative analysis, while also cautioning against treating observed group differences as causal effects.

Recent measurement research also strengthens the case for treating career adaptability as a multidimensional but hierarchically organized construct. Validation studies with university students, graduates, and workers have supported the four-resource structure and good reliability of CAAS-based measures across different national settings (Soares et al., 2023; Song et al., 2023). These findings are relevant for comparative research because observed differences between demographic or educational groups should ideally reflect substantive variation rather than measurement artifacts. At the same time, cross-cultural validation elsewhere cannot substitute for reporting reliability and measurement properties in the present Indonesian sample. This distinction is important when group comparisons are interpreted, particularly because the current article analyzes total scores and does not test measurement invariance or dimension-level differences. Contemporary research continues to use Career Construction Theory to explain university students' career development, including recent evidence linking career-construction styles with adaptability (Yilmaz, 2026).

Despite the expanding literature, much of the recent evidence focuses on predictors, longitudinal development, measurement validation, or intervention effects in specific student populations. Fewer studies compare gender, secondary-school background, and current employment status simultaneously within one Indonesian Generation Z student sample. This comparison is relevant because gender-related patterns can vary by sociocultural context, vocational schooling may provide earlier practice-oriented exposure, and part-time employment can offer career-relevant experience while also creating competing demands for students (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022). The present study therefore contributes a contextual comparative account rather than a causal model. Career Construction Theory is used as an interpretive framework for

understanding observed differences in total career-adaptability scores, not as evidence that the grouping variables directly cause specific adaptability dimensions. The study also responds to the practical need for higher-education institutions to distinguish between broad population trends and the individualized resources students require when approaching career transitions.

Accordingly, this study aimed to map the level of career adaptability among Generation Z university students and examine differences based on gender, secondary-school educational background, and employment status. The study is expected to provide empirically grounded information for higher-education career services and to identify groups for whom more individualized assessment and career-development support may be useful. Rather than assuming that one demographic characteristic determines adaptability, the analysis is intended to identify patterns that can inform subsequent assessment, longitudinal research, and carefully targeted career-development programming.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional comparative design to describe the level of career adaptability and examine differences across gender, secondary-school educational background, and employment status at a single point in time. The design is appropriate for identifying between-group variation in a psychosocial construct but does not establish temporal ordering or causal effects. Career Construction Theory served as the conceptual framework for interpreting total career-adaptability scores and the observed group differences (Rudolph et al., 2019; Savickas, 2013).

Participants

The participants were 156 Generation Z university students in the emerging-adulthood phase. They came from various university study programs and differed in secondary-school educational background, specifically general high school (SMA) and vocational high school (SMK), and in employment status, specifically part-time employed and not working. The available study report does not specify the institutional location, recruitment procedure, participants' age distribution, inclusion and exclusion criteria, or subgroup sample sizes. These details should be inserted from the original study records before final submission because they are necessary for assessing representativeness and reproducing the sampling procedure.

Instrument

Career adaptability was measured with the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS) developed by Savickas and Porfeli (2012). The CAAS operationalizes concern, control, curiosity, and confidence and has demonstrated cross-national measurement equivalence. The study used the Indonesian form adapted by Sulistiani et al. (2019), for which the source report states a validity coefficient of .98. Continued international validation work supports the reliability and hierarchical structure of CAAS-based measures across student and worker populations (Soares et al., 2023; Song et al., 2023). However, the available study report does not specify the number of items, response anchors, scoring procedure, possible score range, type of the reported validity coefficient, or internal-consistency estimate for the present sample. These psychometric details should be verified against the original instrument documentation and dataset before publication.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants completed the Indonesian CAAS and the resulting career-adaptability scores were prepared for descriptive and comparative analysis. The available report does not indicate whether administration occurred online or in person, the setting and timing of administration, the order of

participant briefing and consent, or procedures for handling incomplete responses. Because the manuscript template requires a transparent data-collection procedure, these operational details should be added from the original research documentation rather than inferred. Figure 1 summarizes only the procedural stages that are explicitly supported by the study report.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using JASP statistical software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the distribution of career-adaptability levels, and independent-samples t-tests compared mean career-adaptability scores by gender, secondary-school educational background, and employment status. Normality and homogeneity-of-variance prerequisite tests were reported as having been conducted before the comparative analyses, with an inferential significance level of $p < .05$. To complement p values, eta-squared (η^2) was calculated from the reported t statistic and degrees of freedom using $\eta^2 = t^2/(t^2 + df)$. The available report does not provide subgroup sample sizes, group means, standard deviations, confidence intervals, or numerical assumption-test results; therefore, these values are not reconstructed in this revision.

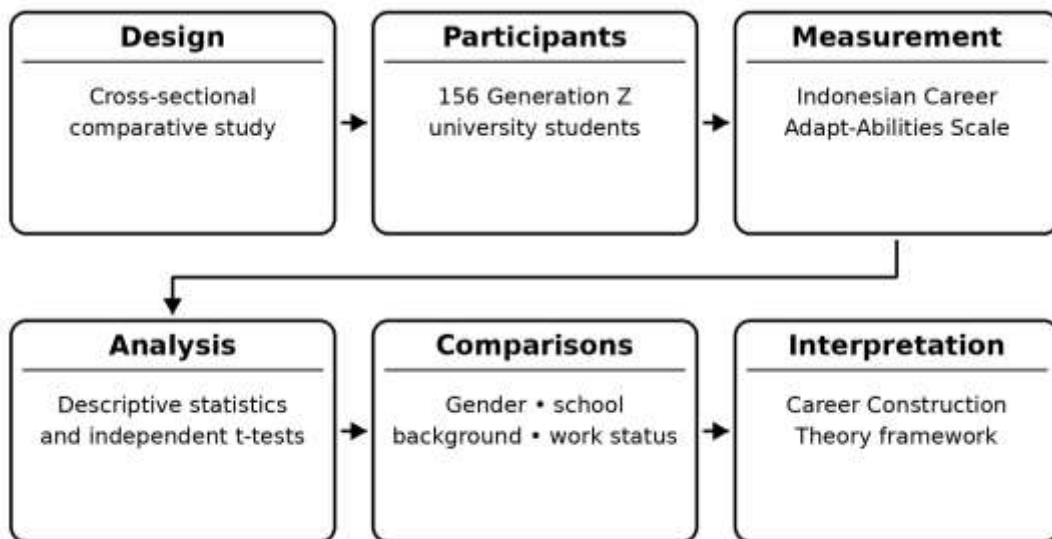


Figure 1. Research Procedure

Ethical Considerations and Data Transparency

The manuscript supplied for revision does not report an ethical-review approval or waiver, informed-consent procedures, confidentiality or anonymization practices, data-storage arrangements, or a data-availability statement. These items should be completed by the authors from the original study documentation before submission. No ethical approval number, consent procedure, or data-governance detail has been invented in this revision.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis first mapped the overall distribution of career adaptability and then examined whether total career-adaptability scores differed by gender, secondary-school educational background, and employment status. Because the available dataset summary does not include dimension-level CAAS scores, all interpretations below refer to overall career adaptability rather than demonstrated differences in concern, control, curiosity, or confidence.

As shown in Table 1, 15 students (10%) were classified in the high category, 88 (56%) in the moderate category, and 53 (34%) in the low category. Thus, the largest group displayed moderate career adaptability, while more than one third of participants fell in the low category. The category

thresholds are retained from the source analysis, but the basis used to derive the cut-offs was not reported. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the category labels, and future reporting should identify whether thresholds are norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, or derived from the sample distribution.

Table 1. Overview of Student Career Adaptability Levels

Category	Interval	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	$X > 95$	15	10%
Moderate	$73 \leq X \leq 95$	88	56%
Low	$X < 73$	53	34%

The distribution is consistent with the broader view that career adaptability varies in level across students and can change during educational and school-to-work transitions rather than functioning as a fixed personality characteristic (Fu et al., 2023; Rudolph et al., 2019). Research with college populations also demonstrates that adaptability is associated with coping with barriers, career decision-making, and job-search outcomes (Chen et al., 2022; Gregor et al., 2021; Ouyang et al., 2025), while meta-analytic evidence links career adaptability with a broad set of adapting responses and adaptation results (Rudolph et al., 2017). The 34% classified in the low category is therefore practically important as an indicator that a sizeable subgroup may perceive fewer resources for managing career tasks. However, the category should not be interpreted as a diagnosis or as evidence that these students will necessarily experience unsuccessful transitions. Career adaptability is responsive to contextual support and developmental experience, and intervention studies demonstrate that adaptive resources can be strengthened under structured conditions (Gai et al., 2022; van der Horst et al., 2021). Consequently, the descriptive distribution is best used as a basis for further assessment rather than as a fixed classification of students' future employability. Nevertheless, employability, career decision difficulty, well-being, and job-search behavior were not directly measured in the present study; these outcomes therefore provide theoretical context rather than empirical results of this sample.

Differences in Career Adaptability Based on Gender

Table 2. Independent-Samples T-Test Based on Gender

Variable	t	df	p	η^2
Career Adaptability	-4.650	154	< .001	.123

The independent-samples t-test showed a statistically significant gender difference in total career adaptability, $t(154) = -4.650$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .123$ (Table 2). The distribution in Figure 2 indicates that female students tended to have higher scores than male students. The direction is interpreted from the plotted group distributions rather than from the negative sign of the t statistic alone. The effect-size estimate indicates that the observed difference was not trivial, although complete interpretation would be strengthened by reporting group means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals from the original statistical output.

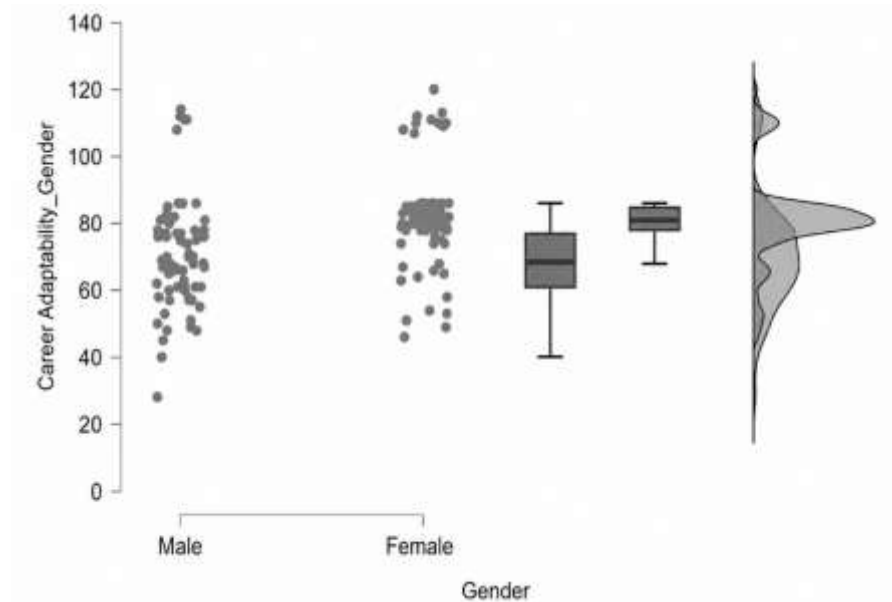


Figure 2. Distribution of Career Adaptability Scores by Gender

The pattern is broadly consistent with studies that have reported gender differences in career adaptability, including evidence from student and early-career samples (Coetzee & Harry, 2015; Han & Rojewski, 2015; Pratiwi et al., 2024). At the same time, gender findings are not universally uniform across contexts, and measurement research emphasizes the importance of establishing comparable measurement across groups before attributing differences to substantive mechanisms (Soares et al., 2023). Gender should therefore be treated as a grouping variable that may capture multiple socialization, opportunity, support, and educational processes rather than as a direct psychological cause. Differences in career expectations, access to role models, willingness to seek career information, and perceived barriers could all shape the way students engage with career-development tasks, but none of these mechanisms was measured here. The present study also does not analyze CAAS dimensions separately and therefore cannot conclude that female students differ specifically in curiosity, control, concern, or confidence. Sociocultural expectations, educational experiences, support, and other unmeasured factors remain plausible explanations that require multivariate or longitudinal testing. Future research should additionally test whether the gender difference remains after controlling for study program, year of study, socioeconomic background, work experience, and other career-relevant characteristics.

Differences in Career Adaptability Based on Secondary-School Educational Background

Table 3. Independent-Samples T-Test Based on Secondary-School Educational Background

Variable	t	df	p	η^2
Career Adaptability	-3.686	154	< .001	.081

Students from vocational high school (SMK) backgrounds had significantly higher total career-adaptability scores than students from general high school (SMA) backgrounds, $t(154) = -3.686$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .081$ (Table 3). Figure 3 shows a higher median and generally higher score distribution for the vocational-background group. The finding establishes a group difference in the present sample but does not demonstrate that vocational education itself caused the difference.

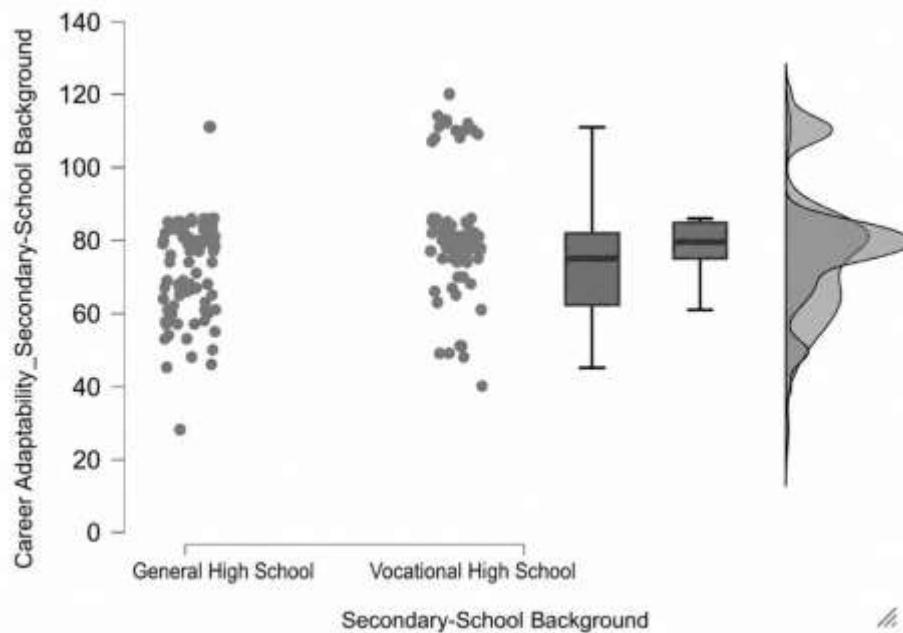


Figure 3. Distribution of Career Adaptability Scores by Secondary-School Background

The result is theoretically plausible because vocational education typically provides earlier opportunities for occupational exploration and practice-oriented learning, experiences that may support adaptive career resources. Evidence from vocational students shows that career adaptability is embedded in educational and social-support contexts (Hlad'o et al., 2020), while longitudinal and model-testing studies indicate that adaptability develops through educational transitions and is connected with life-skills and career-planning processes (Fu et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2022). Internship research likewise shows that structured work-related exposure can accompany growth in adaptability over time (Ocampo et al., 2020). A vocational-school background may therefore coincide with earlier occupational information, practical tasks, contact with workplace norms, or clearer perceptions of possible career pathways. Yet self-selection is equally plausible: students who already prefer applied learning or possess stronger career direction may be more likely to enter vocational education in the first place. In addition, SMA and SMK students may differ in socioeconomic background, field of study, prior guidance, or access to work-based learning. Because none of these factors was measured, the current comparison cannot isolate the mechanism underlying the difference. The study also did not measure the duration or quality of prior vocational experiences, internship exposure, curriculum characteristics, or dimension-level CAAS scores. The explanation should therefore remain an interpretation rather than a causal claim.

Differences in Career Adaptability Based on Employment Status

Table 4. Independent-Samples T-Test Based on Employment Status

Variable	t	df	p	η^2
Career Adaptability	6.359	154	< .001	.208

Career adaptability also differed significantly by employment status, $t(154) = 6.359$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .208$ (Table 4). Figure 4 indicates that students employed part-time tended to have higher total career-adaptability scores than students who were not working. The corrected positive t statistic is consistent with the group ordering used in the source analysis. Because the study is cross-sectional,

the result identifies an association between employment status and adaptability; it cannot determine whether employment increased adaptability, whether more adaptable students were more likely to obtain part-time work, or whether both patterns reflect other characteristics.



Figure 4. Distribution of Career Adaptability Scores by Employment Status

Work exposure can create opportunities to practice decision-making, role management, exploration, and confidence in real settings, which is consistent with evidence that internships and career-transition interventions can strengthen adaptability (Ocampo et al., 2020; van der Horst et al., 2021). Experiential university programs, including community-service learning, have also produced gains in career adaptability under experimental conditions (Pong & Leung, 2023). At the same time, the employment-status variable in this study is relatively broad. It does not indicate weekly working hours, job tenure, occupational field, job quality, relevance of the job to the student's degree, or whether employment was undertaken for financial necessity, professional development, or another reason. These characteristics could substantially change the developmental meaning of part-time work. Reverse selection is also possible: students with stronger concern, control, curiosity, or confidence may be more willing and able to seek employment while studying. Moreover, paid work during university is not uniformly beneficial; working students can experience time pressure, stress, and incompatibility between work and study roles (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022). The present finding should therefore be interpreted as a contextual difference rather than as a recommendation that all students should work while studying. Future studies should distinguish the intensity and quality of employment and examine whether career adaptability changes after students enter or leave paid work.

Implications

The findings reinforce the usefulness of Career Construction Theory for interpreting variation in students' adaptive career resources. Practically, universities may use career-adaptability assessment as one input for targeted career-development support rather than assuming that demographic or educational categories alone identify students' needs. Evidence from international intervention research supports structured approaches such as compact career-adaptation programs, motivational interviewing, experiential learning, career exploration, and work-integrated learning (Gai et al., 2022; Pong & Leung, 2023; van der Horst et al., 2021). These strategies should be

presented as evidence-informed options, not as interventions proven effective by the present study. The 34% of participants in the low category suggests a potentially important group for additional assessment, mentoring, and career-planning support, while individualized services should remain attentive to students' distinct goals, barriers, and contextual resources. Career services could combine brief screening with individual or group counseling, opportunities for occupational information seeking, alumni or employer mentoring, and structured reflection after internships or part-time work. Such support can be organized as a developmental sequence rather than a single end-of-study activity: early-semester exploration may help students clarify interests and possible selves, middle-stage activities can connect academic learning with occupational information, and later-stage mentoring or work-integrated learning can support the translation of adaptive resources into transition behavior. Research on students' career interests and employability suggests that career planning is strengthened when learners can connect meaningful academic interests with possible future work (Quinlan & Renninger, 2022), while longitudinal evidence indicates that adaptability continues to develop during the school-to-work transition (Fu et al., 2023). Universities should therefore evaluate not only participation rates in career programs but also changes in adaptability, career decision-making, job-search preparation, and transition outcomes over time. Program evaluation should preferably include pre-post measurement and, where feasible, comparison or longitudinal designs so that institutional claims about effectiveness are supported by evidence rather than inferred from cross-sectional group differences. Importantly, the observed group differences should not be used to stereotype male students, general-high-school graduates, or students who are not employed. The more defensible application is to ensure that students with fewer opportunities for occupational exploration receive equivalent access to career-learning experiences, while recognizing that part-time employment can also create work-study conflict and stress for some students (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022). Career support should therefore focus on access, reflection, and developmental quality rather than simply encouraging paid work. In policy terms, higher-education institutions can treat career adaptability as one component of student-development and employability strategies, integrate career learning across the curriculum, and establish monitoring systems that evaluate whether such programs actually improve adaptive resources and transition outcomes.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify the findings. First, the cross-sectional design captures group differences at one time point and cannot establish causal direction. The observed association between part-time employment and higher career adaptability, for example, may reflect developmental exposure to work, self-selection of more adaptable students into employment, or unmeasured third variables. The same caution applies to gender and secondary-school background. Second, career adaptability was measured by self-report, making responses potentially sensitive to common-method variance, social desirability, and individual response tendencies. Third, the available sample description lacks institutional location, recruitment strategy, age distribution, subgroup sizes, academic year, field-of-study composition, and socioeconomic characteristics needed to evaluate representativeness and transferability. Fourth, the analyses use total CAAS scores and do not test dimension-specific patterns, measurement invariance across groups, interactions among grouping variables, or multivariate controls. Although international validation studies support CAAS-based measurement across diverse populations (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Soares et al., 2023; Song et al., 2023), psychometric evidence from the present sample is still required for the strongest interpretation of between-group comparisons. Fifth, the available report does not provide group means, standard deviations, confidence intervals, numerical assumption-test statistics, or the original subgroup sample sizes. The effect sizes reported here were calculated from the available *t* statistics and degrees of freedom and therefore do not replace fuller descriptive

reporting. Sixth, the categorical cut-offs used to classify high, moderate, and low adaptability were retained from the source analysis because their derivation was unavailable; they should not be treated as universal clinical or normative thresholds. Finally, three separate group comparisons increase the need for careful interpretation of statistical significance, particularly because the study was not designed as a comprehensive multivariate test of demographic predictors. Future studies should use longitudinal or repeated-measures designs, report complete sampling and psychometric information, test the four adaptability dimensions and measurement equivalence, incorporate relevant covariates, and examine whether educational and work experiences prospectively predict change in adaptability. Such designs would provide a stronger basis for determining which contextual experiences are genuinely developmental and which observed differences reflect selection or other background characteristics.

CONCLUSION

This study mapped career adaptability among 156 Generation Z university students and found that 56% were in the moderate category, 34% in the low category, and 10% in the high category. Significant differences were observed by gender, secondary-school educational background, and employment status: female students tended to report higher total career adaptability than male students, students from vocational high schools tended to score higher than those from general high schools, and part-time employed students tended to score higher than students who were not working. These results support the relevance of personal and contextual variation in career adaptability while remaining consistent with the limits of a cross-sectional comparative design. Career Construction Theory provides a useful conceptual lens for interpreting the patterns, but causal and dimension-specific mechanisms require further testing. Higher-education institutions may consider evidence-informed career mentoring, career exploration, experiential learning, and work-integrated learning, particularly for students who report lower adaptive resources, while evaluating such initiatives systematically and avoiding deterministic assumptions based on group membership.

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