

Building career trajectories: an integrative review of career interventions in higher education

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Abstract— This study analyzed career interventions for university students, focusing on career adaptability and employability through an integrative review of empirical literature published between 2015 and 2025. A total of 11 studies from Brazil and other countries were included, most of which were conducted in the field of Psychology and employed quasi-experimental designs. The interventions were predominantly delivered in group formats, either face-to-face or online, with durations ranging from two to fifteen sessions. Across studies, intervention content was organized around three core axes: self-awareness, career exploration and decision-making, and planning for labor market entry. Common strategies included reflective and autobiographical exercises, occupational exploration, simulations, and development of employability competencies. Overall, findings indicate that career interventions are associated with improvements in adaptability, self-efficacy, decision-making, and career engagement competencies. Despite these positive outcomes, methodological limitations were found, including reliance on self-report measures, lack of longitudinal follow-up, and restricted access to participants' subjective processes. The review highlights the relevance of career interventions in supporting the university-to-work transition and underscores the need for methodologically robust studies, as well as integrative approaches that connect career development with mental health.

Keywords— adaptability, career, employability, integrative review.

I. INTRODUCTION

The increasing complexity of the labor market, driven by contemporary transformations, poses new challenges to the professional integration of graduates into the workforce [1]. Factors such as advances in new technologies and changes in work organization have intensified this reality, requiring individuals to continuously adapt and develop competencies to manage transitions. This has led to growing concerns about employability [2]. Consequently, individuals must be prepared to anticipate change and develop a sense of control and responsibility over their career choices [3].

Given these transformations, young people are among those most affected by new demands related to worker profiles, experiencing barriers linked to labor market entry, outsourcing, job precariousness, limited professional experience, and increasing requirements for specialization and professional development [4], [5], [6]. In higher education, recent graduates need to

develop competencies to cope with the university-to-work transition, which often generates insecurity about their new profession. By the end of their undergraduate studies, students are expected to make decisions about their professional future, work within their field of training, achieve their individual goals, and adapt to work environments [7], [8], [9].

One of the main challenges in the university-to-work transition that directly impacts students' career trajectories is achieving a deeper understanding of the factors involved in their professional journey from the classroom to the labor market [10]. The authors emphasize the importance of the interface between theory and practice, the effectiveness of educational policies, and the professional support provided by institutions as fundamental considerations that require further exploration. Additionally, they argue that in order to improve educational practices and support students' trajectories toward their first job or professional position, higher education institutions must better understand how these factors directly affect

students' lives.

Students' academic preparation plays a direct role in shaping these expectations. As such, it is essential to understand and influence this cultural capital. Institutions should not only ensure that curricula are aligned with labor market expectations, but also support students in constructing a professional identity consistent with the theoretical, practical, and cultural standards of the labor market [11].

In this context, studies indicate that competencies associated with employability and adaptability facilitate university students' entry into the labor market [12], [13], [14], [15]. Career adaptability is understood as a psychosocial construct that reflects an individual's readiness and resources for coping with current and anticipated career development tasks [16], [17]. This construct comprises four dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Concern refers to the capacity to think about and prepare for career-related challenges. Control reflects the ability to regulate efforts directed toward preparing for the professional future, as well as levels of responsibility, effort, self-discipline, and persistence. Curiosity concerns the exploration of oneself and possible future career scenarios, and confidence relates to the belief in one's career choices and ability to implement professional plans [17].

Employability, in turn, involves the ability to enter and re-enter the labor market in line with one's knowledge, skills, and attitudes that were intentionally developed through education and training and are aligned with labor market demands [18]. It includes personal characteristics, beliefs, and attitudes that may strongly influence the effectiveness of job-search outcomes [19]. Furthermore, employability is understood as a personal resource that individuals build throughout their career trajectories and that can enhance opportunities for career success [20].

Employability is considered a multidimensional construct. According to [21], it encompasses four dimensions associated with job-search success: (a) job-search efficacy, defined as the self-perceived competency in performing effective job-search actions and related to general self-efficacy; (b) coping with difficulties, referring to the capacity to manage obstacles and frustrations during entry or re-entry into

the labor market; (c) optimism, characterized by a positive and confident outlook regarding one's professional future, including sociability, self-confidence, and communication skills; and (d) responsibility and decision-making, which involve autonomy, commitment, and responsibility for one's career trajectory, as well as consistency between career choices and personal values. Regarding studies on employability and career adaptability among university students, one notable intervention found higher scores in measures of concern for the future, as well as a greater willingness to deal with new challenges and career transitions [12]. Complementary research [13] examined how career adaptability and self-perceived employability influence the relationship between career competencies and self-efficacy during the job-search process. The results indicated that university students with higher levels of career competencies, such as career adaptability and self-perceived employability, were more likely to adapt effectively to their careers, perceive themselves as more employable, and demonstrate higher levels of job-search self-efficacy. Literature asserts that programs aimed at developing adaptability competencies, such as uncertainty management and flexibility in the face of change, have a direct impact on successful labor market entry [14]. Similarly, studies highlight that courses and workshops structured around career development significantly enhance competencies associated with employability, such as students' ability to identify job opportunities aligned with their professional goals [15].

Considering these findings, this study aims to analyze interventions for career adaptability and employability among university students in Brazilian and international research published between 2015 and 2025. This study may facilitate the development of a career intervention proposal that addresses the needs of graduating students, who will have the opportunity to develop competencies that aid labor market entry or re-entry within their field of knowledge. Specifically, this study seeks to identify the content addressed in career interventions, describe the strategies and procedures used, and identify the suggestions proposed by authors for career interventions.

II. METHOD

A. Page Layout

This is a qualitative, descriptive-exploratory study with a theoretical framework based on an integrative literature review. This is considered the broadest and most methodologically comprehensive type of literature review, allowing the inclusion of both experimental and quasi-experimental studies to achieve a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under investigation [22]. The research question was developed using the PICO framework [23], in which P = population (university students); I = intervention (career interventions); C = concept (employability and career adaptability); and O = outcome (themes, strategies, and procedures). Thus, the research question was: what stages comprise career interventions with university students in Brazilian and international publications between 2015 and 2025? The integrative review followed the steps proposed by [22]: (a) identification of the theme and research question; (b) literature search; (c) data extraction/categorization; (d) critical appraisal of included studies; (e) interpretation of results; and (f) presentation of findings.

B. Study selection

The following descriptors were used in the search strategy: career, universities, career guidance, employability, career adaptability, career counseling, and professional guidance. Different combinations of

these descriptors were applied in title and abstract/subject filters in the databases Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Literatura Latino-Americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde (LILACS), Scopus, and the Journals Portal from the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES). A total of 11 publications met the inclusion criteria: (a) scientific articles published in English, Portuguese, or Spanish; (b) studies involving career interventions with university students; (c) articles published in scientific journals between 2015 and 2025; and (d) empirical studies. Exclusion criteria included studies that did not describe the stages, strategies, and procedures applied in the career intervention. Table 1 presents the studies analyzed, five of which were published in Brazil and three in the United States. Most studies (n = 9) were published in Psychology journals, in subfields such as vocational guidance and career development. Quasi-experimental pretest-posttest designs predominated, with most of them including control groups and some including follow-ups. In general, the interventions were conducted in groups, with durations ranging from two sessions to semester-long courses lasting fifteen weeks, combining psychoeducational, reflective, and experiential-practical activities. Some programs incorporated reflective writing assignments, group projects, seminars with guest speakers, and systematic facilitator supervision.

Table I. Characteristics of the studies

Author/year	Title	Journal	Field of knowledge	Country
(Vieira et al., 2020)	Happenstance Learning Theory: Avaliação de uma intervenção de carreira com universitários finalistas	Revista Brasileira de Orientação Profissional	Psychology	Brazil
(Azhenov et al., 2023)	Career decision-making readiness among students in the system of higher education: career course intervention	Frontiers in Education	Educational Psychology	Switzerland
(Cheung & Jin, 2015)	Impact of a Career Exploration Course on Career Decision Making, Adaptability, and Relational Support in Hong Kong	Journal of Career Assessment	Educational Psychology	United States

(Chukwuedo et al., 2022)	Practitioner' vocational guidance with direct learning model: influencing career commitment and employability in electrical/electronic technology education	International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance	Education / Vocational Guidance	Netherlands
(Torrecilla-Sánchez et al., 2025)	My Career Project: University Career Guidance Pilot Programme	Revista Lusófona de Educação	Education / Vocational Guidance	Portugal
(Kılıç, 2024)	The Effect of Career Course on Career Decision Making Self-efficacy of Senior University Students	Ankara University Journal of Faculty of Educational Sciences	Educational Psychology	Turkey
(Alves & Teixeira, 2020)	Construção e Avaliação de uma Intervenção de Planejamento de Carreira para Estudantes Universitários	Psico-USF	Psychology	Brazil
(Barbosa et al., 2018)	Delineamento e Avaliação de um Programa de Adaptação Acadêmica no Ensino Superior	Revista Brasileira de Orientação Profissional	Psychology / Vocational Guidance	Brazil
(Carvalho et al., 2023)	Career counseling for university students: Assessment of an online and group intervention	Journal of Vocational Behavior	Vocational Psychology / Career Development	United States
(Wetstone & Rice, 2023)	Enhancing Career Adaptability Among University Students: An Intervention Study	Journal of Career Development	Psychology	United States
(Choate et al. 2019)	A professional development program with an assessed ePortfolio: A practical solution for engaging undergraduates with their career development in large student cohorts	Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability	Humanities / Education	Australia

C. Data collection instruments

Data collection from the selected studies involved the creation of an Excel spreadsheet with the following columns: place of publication, publication reference, description of the target population, objectives of the interventions, content, strategies, procedures adopted, and suggestions made by the authors.

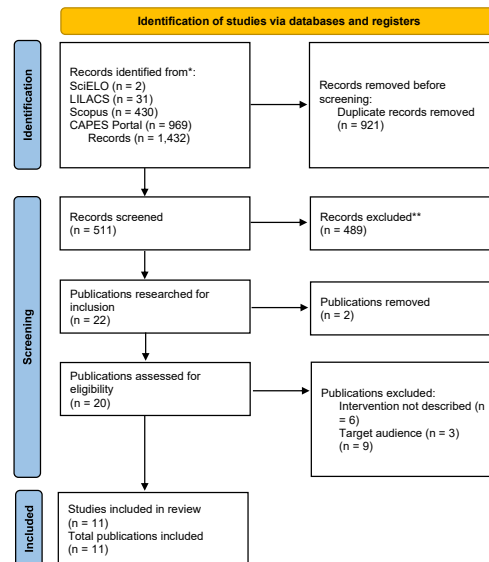
D. Data collection procedures

Initially, database and portal searches were conducted using the selected descriptors. The articles were then

imported into the Rayyan platform (<https://www.rayyan.ai/>) and screened according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. For this purpose, both authors independently reviewed titles and abstracts.

Subsequently, potentially eligible studies were read in full, and additional exclusions were made if articles were incongruent with the scope of the present review. The selection process was documented using a PRISMA flow diagram [24], indicating the reasons for exclusion at each stage, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – PRISMA flow diagram (adapted from [24]).



Note: Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/registers).

If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools.

The data were interpreted and summarized according to the stages [22]. The information was organized into thematic axes, as shown in Table 2.

E. Data analysis procedures

Table II - Operational Description of the Sub-Axes

Axes	Sub-axes	Operational Description
Intervention characteristics	Modality	Target population, type of intervention (group, individual, online, face-to-face), workload.
	Intervention objective	Central purpose of the intervention, specifying the intended outcome or change in the target population.
	Content	Themes, topics, module titles
Procedures	Strategies used	Activities, exercises applied during the intervention, pilot testing
	Activities outside sessions	Activities and exercises conducted outside the intervention sessions (assignments)
	Assessment	Methods used to assess outcomes and/or process, considering techniques employed and control groups.
Suggestions	Intervention	Suggestions aimed at improving the intervention.
	Research	Suggestions for strengthening empirical evidence.

III. RESULTS

A. Intervention characteristics axis

The interventions analyzed predominantly involved higher education students from different academic programs, with a greater concentration of mid- to late-

stage undergraduate students. In the international context, samples included third- and fourth-year students, senior students, undergraduates from technical and health-related fields, and volunteer university students enrolled in career exploration courses at institutions in Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania,

and North America [25], [26], [27], [28], [29], [30], [31]. In the Brazilian context, substantial institutional, regional, and educational heterogeneity was observed, with participants from multiple academic programs, public and private institutions, and different regions of the country, with a prevalence of students in the second to eighth semesters of undergraduate education [32], [33], [34], [12].

The intervention content was progressively organized into three stages: (a) self-awareness and professional identity; (b) career exploration and decision-making; and (c) planning and employability. The interventions addressed themes such as autobiographical narratives, professional interests, flexibility, and adaptability.

B. Procedures Axis

The interventions analyzed integrated different methodological strategies, combining reflective, experiential, and instructional activities. Overall, they included written exercises, active occupational exploration, goal setting, and practical employability simulations.

Some studies prioritized autobiographical and reflective exercises, such as lifeline, value identification, trajectory analysis, and goal setting, often organized into portfolios and accompanied by pre- and post-intervention assessments [34], [12], [32]. These strategies facilitated integration between past, present, and future, contributing to greater clarity in career decision-making and more flexible planning.

Other studies emphasized practical and experiential strategies, including interviews with professionals, group projects, mentoring, networking, CV writing, mock interviews, analysis of real job vacancies, and the use of digital [29], [28], [33], [27], [25], [26], [30], [31].

In addition to in-session activities, some interventions incorporated extracurricular assignments focused on self-reflection, active career exploration, and progressive career planning. These activities included interviews with professionals, mapping of post-graduation possibilities, goal analysis, and action-plan development [34], [12], [32], as well as practical employability-related activities such as CV writing, job searching, and interview [25], [33], [26].

Notably, some interventions included pilot studies and process assessments [33], which supported

methodological and curricular adjustments such as adapting workload, reorganizing content sequencing, strengthening individualized feedback, expanding written activities, and including emerging topics such as time management, strategic use of social media, and networking, thereby contributing to greater adherence, effectiveness, and applicability of the programs.

Quantitative pre- and post-intervention designs were the predominant assessment procedure, with the use of instruments to measure adaptability, self-efficacy, career exploration, decision-making, and employability. Among the instruments used, the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS), the Planned Happenstance Career Inventory (PHCI), the Hope-Action Inventory (HAI), the Career Exploration Survey (CES), and self-efficacy and career decision-making scales stood out. Mental health and well-being measures were also employed, such as the DASS-21, SRQ-20, and LOT-R, assessing aspects such as anxiety, stress, depression, and optimism.

Qualitative approaches included interviews, open-ended questions, session records, reflective reports, and satisfaction assessments, allowing access to participants' subjective experiences. Some studies adopted mixed-methods designs, and a few included follow-ups, enabling analysis of the stability of effects over time [28], [34].

C. Suggestions axis

Suggestions were identified in six studies and concentrated on two main aspects: improving interventions and strengthening methodology. Recommendations for interventions included adjusting the program schedule to reduce dropout rates, increasing flexibility between individual and group formats, diversifying assessment strategies, and promoting greater integration between practical activities, digital resources, and specialized support [30], [25], [33], [34], [26], [28].

Recommendations for methodological improvement included expanding sample sizes, employing more rigorous designs, including control groups, diversifying assessment instruments, and incorporating objective measures of performance and employability. Further suggestions highlighted the importance of replicating studies in different contexts and conducting

longitudinal research [32], [27], [29], [30], [25], [26]. Although the results are consistent and promising, these recommendations indicate a need for greater methodological robustness and further empirical evidence.

IV. DISCUSSION

The interventions analyzed focused primarily on higher education students, particularly those in the intermediate and final stages of undergraduate programs. This finding suggests that these interventions target a critical phase in students' academic trajectories, when concerns related to career definition and labor market entry become more salient. This is in alignment with the literature, which identifies the university-to-work transition as a period characterized by uncertainty and a strong need for structured support [7], [8].

The heterogeneity of the samples suggests that these interventions may be applicable across diverse institutional and educational contexts. However, it also points to challenges in terms of standardization and comparability across studies, which may limit the consolidation of more robust evidence in the field.

Regarding modality, the findings indicate a relatively balanced distribution between face-to-face and online interventions, with a recent trend favoring virtual formats. This shift reflects adaptations to contextual changes, particularly during the pandemic, and highlights the adoption of more flexible and scalable approaches. Nevertheless, regardless of modality, there is a clear predominance of group formats, a central feature both for optimizing institutional resources and for fostering social learning and relational support, which are key components of career development [29], [10].

Overall, the objectives of the interventions converged on the development of competencies essential to career construction, with particular emphasis on adaptability, self-efficacy, decision-making, and professional exploration. This convergence indicates that, despite theoretical diversity, there is a shared understanding of the competencies required to address the complexity of the contemporary labor market [7], [8]. In this sense, the interventions not only respond to current demands but are also structured to foster psychosocial resources

that support more flexible and sustainable career trajectories.

The results indicate a predominance of Career Construction Theory (CCT) and the Life Design paradigm [35] as the primary frameworks guiding the analyzed interventions, as documented across several reviewed studies [25], [32], [33], [29], [30]. These approaches conceptualize career development as a dynamic, narrative, and contextualized process grounded in adaptability and the active construction of career trajectories.

Additionally, complementary frameworks were also identified, including Hope-Action Theory [12], Happenstance Learning Theory [34], and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), applied either independently or in combination with other models. This is exemplified by interventions that incorporate the Holland Codes (RIASEC) framework [26], [27]. Additionally, some approaches adopt more applied and context-sensitive perspectives, such as curriculum-integrated models and competency-based frameworks [31], [28].

This overview indicates that, although a core theoretical foundation is present, the field of career interventions is characterized by a plural and integrative configuration, in which different frameworks are combined in complementary ways. This diversity can be understood as a response to the complexity of contemporary career development, which requires the integration of cognitive, emotional, contextual, and behavioral dimensions.

At the same time, this theoretical multiplicity suggests a field still in development, where no single dominant model prevails, but rather different approaches converge toward similar goals, particularly the development of adaptability, self-efficacy, and decision-making capacity [36], [37], [3]. Thus, rather than fragmentation, the findings point to a trend toward theoretical integration, with models being flexibly applied according to intervention contexts.

This theoretical diversity is also reflected in how interventions are operationalized. In terms of procedures, the results show that interventions combine reflective, experiential, and instructional strategies, organized in a progression that moves from self-

awareness toward employability. This structure suggests an intervention model designed to integrate reflection and action, thereby narrowing the gap between subjective career construction and labor market entry.

Widely used autobiographical and narrative activities support the reinterpretation of experiences and the construction of meaning about one's trajectory, a central element in approaches such as Life Design [35]. In contrast, practical strategies such as interview simulations, job vacancy analysis, and networking bring students closer to the concrete demands of the labor market, contributing to the development of applied competencies [25], [33], [31], [27], [26], [28], [34].

Together, these strategies indicate a shift away from traditional information-based models toward approaches that position students as active agents in their own career development. This configuration fosters self-efficacy and engagement, which are essential for decision-making and adaptation in dynamic professional contexts. The inclusion of extracurricular activities further strengthens this process by extending the temporal and spatial boundaries of interventions, supporting learning transfer and ongoing career planning. This suggests that more effective interventions are not confined to formal sessions but actively promote participant autonomy.

Regarding assessment, the findings show a predominance of quantitative pre- and post-intervention designs using instruments that assess adaptive and decision-making competencies. Although results indicate consistent gains, particularly in adaptability, self-efficacy, and decision-making, the limited use of qualitative approaches restricts a deeper understanding of the subjective processes underlying these changes [32], [33], [38], [34].

Additionally, although psychological tests may initially suggest categorization processes, the analyzed studies indicate that they are mainly used to support individualized feedback, which is considered central to intervention effectiveness [39], [30]. In this context, results function as reflective tools that enhance self-efficacy, confidence, and clarity regarding competencies and readiness levels. This reinforces the idea that the effectiveness of these instruments depends

less on isolated application and more on the quality of their integration into the intervention process.

Despite the progress observed, important limitations remain that affect the consolidation of the field. The predominance of self-report measures, small sample sizes, and the lack of more robust experimental designs in part of the studies may compromise the validity of findings.

Another noteworthy aspect is the generally brief duration of interventions. Although effective in promoting initial reflection and engagement in career planning, such interventions have limited capacity for longitudinal follow-up, which restricts the assessment of long-term effects.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that psychological screening, particularly using instruments such as the DASS-21 and SRQ-20 [12], [34], is widely used to ensure participants present minimum emotional conditions to benefit from interventions, while also preserving methodological rigor by minimizing the influence of severe clinical symptoms. In this context, relatively strict exclusion criteria are applied, with referral of more severe cases to clinical care.

However, this practice reveals an important paradox: individuals experiencing higher levels of psychological distress also tend to face greater difficulties in career decision-making, which may ultimately limit the social reach of such interventions [31]. Consequently, although methodologically justified, this approach exposes a gap in the analyzed proposals, suggesting that mental health and career development continue to be treated as largely separate domains. This underscores the need for more integrative models that connect career interventions with mental health support, thereby expanding both their effectiveness and their reach within university settings.

Thus, a tension can be observed between the need for program structuring, which is essential to ensure methodological rigor and replicability, and the demand for flexibility, which is necessary to address participants' individual particularities. Strategies such as hybrid models, process evaluations, and active methodologies emerge as promising alternatives for balancing these dimensions.

Overall, career interventions for university students are

consistent in their objectives, diverse in their strategies, and promising in their outcomes. Nevertheless, advancing the field will require stronger methodological rigor, greater investment in qualitative and longitudinal research, and the development of more integrated models capable of addressing the complexity of contemporary career trajectories.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The present study analyzed interventions in career adaptability and employability aimed at university students, showing that these practices represent relevant strategies for supporting the university-to-work transition in contexts characterized by uncertainty and continuous adaptation demands. Overall, the findings indicate that these interventions do not directly target employability as a final outcome, but rather prioritize the development of psychosocial resources such as adaptability, self-efficacy, and decision-making capacity, understood as foundations for building more autonomous and sustainable career trajectories.

The analysis also shows that the field has made important progress, particularly in diversifying intervention strategies and incorporating more active and reflective approaches. Nevertheless, challenges remain regarding methodological robustness, the predominance of short-term assessments, and the need for greater integration between career development and mental health. In this sense, this study contributes by systematizing recent evidence and emphasizing the importance of more integrative and continuous intervention models that are sensitive to students' individual characteristics, thereby expanding the reach and effectiveness of interventions in higher education.

VI. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings support the development of more effective career interventions, indicating that programs combining methodological structure and flexibility tend to enhance engagement and impact. The relevance of active methodologies, individualized feedback, and strategies that promote student agency is particularly emphasized.

Furthermore, the review highlights the importance of integrating career guidance interventions with mental health considerations, especially to broaden access for students in situations of greater vulnerability. These

elements may guide the development of more comprehensive interventions aligned with contemporary higher education demands.

VII. LIMITATIONS

This study has limitations related to its exclusive reliance on previously published research, which may introduce publication bias, as studies reporting positive outcomes are more likely to be published than those with negative or inconclusive results. The heterogeneity of the studies analyzed in terms of design, instruments, and sample characteristics also limits direct comparisons and generalizability.

In addition, the predominance of short-term assessments and variations in methodological rigor restrict understanding of the long-term sustainability of intervention effects. Finally, the absence of direct empirical assessment of a specific intervention limits practical validation of the propositions discussed.

VIII. FUTURE STUDIES

Future studies should adopt more robust designs and longitudinal follow-up to assess the persistence of intervention effects over time and their relationship with concrete outcomes, such as labor market entry and career satisfaction. There is also a need to incorporate objective indicators, expand the use of mixed methods, and develop more integrative intervention models that connect career development and mental health. Moreover, exploring different formats, such as hybrid interventions, may help expand access and increase student engagement.

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