

Career Guidance in High School to Reduce University Dropout in Madagascar

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of career guidance in high school in reducing university dropout in Madagascar, with a focus on the Itasy region where students often face difficulties in making informed academic and career decisions. The study aims to analyze how different forms of career guidance, including academic counseling, career orientation sessions, mentoring, self-assessment activities, and family-supported guidance, influence students' readiness for higher education and their persistence in university. A qualitative approach was used involving 30 informants consisting of high school students, teachers, school counselors, and university students. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, and analyzed using thematic analysis with triangulation to ensure credibility. The findings reveal that career guidance practices remain limited, irregular, and insufficiently integrated into school systems. The absence of continuous and structured guidance contributes to unclear career choices, low academic motivation, weak self-awareness, and difficulties in adapting to university studies, all of which increase the risk of dropout. The study also found that late-stage orientation conducted only in the final year of high school is less effective than continuous career guidance implemented throughout students' educational journeys. In contrast, students who received mentoring, informal counseling, or exposure to career exploration activities demonstrated clearer academic goals and stronger commitment to higher education. Social influences, particularly family expectations, also significantly shape students' decisions and may either support or hinder educational persistence. The study concludes that strengthening structured, early, and context-relevant career guidance through collaboration among schools, families, and communities can improve students' transition to higher education and contribute to reducing university dropout in Madagascar.

Keywords: Career, Orientation, Dropout, High School, Madagascar.

Article history

Received: 23-4- 2026

Revised: 18-5- 2026

Accepted: 8-7- 2026

Published: 1-8- 2026

INTRODUCTION

The transition from secondary education to higher education represents a critical stage in students' academic and professional trajectories, particularly in developing countries where structural, social, and economic challenges shape educational outcomes (De Vos et al., 2021). In Madagascar, access to higher education has expanded over recent decades; however, student persistence and completion remain pressing concerns (Bien Aimé et al., 2025). University dropout has emerged as a significant issue, reflecting not only institutional limitations but also gaps in students' preparedness for academic and career decision making (Balfanz et al., 2007). Early orientation toward future careers during high school is increasingly recognized as a key factor in addressing these challenges, as it helps students align their interests, abilities, and expectations with realistic educational and professional pathways.

Career guidance during adolescence plays a fundamental role in fostering students' self-awareness and motivation, which are essential for informed decision making. Research has shown that students who actively engage in career exploration develop stronger adaptability and clearer professional identities

(Alaydrus & Hamid, 2019). Structured counseling services in schools further contribute to enhancing students' motivation in selecting career paths, thereby reducing uncertainty and indecision (Azhari, 2020). In addition, psycho pedagogical counseling has been identified as a crucial stage in guiding students toward appropriate career orientations, particularly when integrated into the educational process (Barna & Mircea, 2015). These findings highlight the importance of early and continuous support systems that prepare students not only academically but also psychologically for future transitions.

The consequences of inadequate career preparation are often reflected in disengagement and eventual dropout. Studies on student retention emphasize that early disengagement during high school significantly increases the likelihood of dropping out later in the educational journey (Emynorane, 2019). Similarly, multiple theoretical perspectives have identified factors such as lack of academic motivation, unclear goals, and weak social support as predictors of early school dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Without a clear sense of direction, students may enter higher education with unrealistic expectations or insufficient commitment, leading to difficulties in adapting to academic demands. This situation is particularly critical in contexts where guidance systems are limited or unevenly distributed across schools.

Recent developments in career theory further stress the dynamic nature of career development in a rapidly changing world. The concept of protean career orientation, which emphasizes adaptability, self-direction, and personal values, has gained prominence in understanding how individuals navigate complex career paths (Bazine et al., 2025). At the same time, career adaptability among youth is influenced by contextual factors such as educational environments and access to resources (Chen et al., 2020). These perspectives suggest that career guidance should not be limited to providing information but should also cultivate competencies that enable students to manage transitions effectively. The ability to make informed and flexible career decisions becomes especially relevant in developing countries, where labor markets are often unstable and opportunities unevenly distributed.

Social influences also play a decisive role in shaping students' career aspirations and educational persistence. Family support, peer interactions, and community involvement contribute significantly to the development of career goals and self-efficacy (Lee & Hung, 2024). Parental attachment, for instance, has been linked to stronger career aspirations among students, indicating the importance of supportive relationships in career development (Bhatia et al., 2023). Furthermore, career social support has been shown to enhance students' career management competencies through increased confidence in decision making processes (Wang & Jiao, 2023). In Madagascar, where community structures and traditional values remain influential, these social dimensions are particularly important in shaping educational experiences and outcomes.

The Malagasy educational context presents unique characteristics that further complicate the transition from high school to university. Cultural practices, community governance systems, and local perceptions of education all interact to influence students' academic trajectories. For example, traditional and modern educational perspectives coexist, sometimes creating tensions in how students perceive their future roles (Bien Aimé et al., 2025). Community involvement has been identified as a positive factor in supporting school success, yet its integration into formal career guidance remains limited (Emynorane et al., 2026). Additionally, mechanisms such as local governance structures can strengthen educational engagement, but their potential for supporting career orientation is not fully utilized (Sulla et al., 2025). These contextual elements suggest that career guidance strategies in Madagascar must be culturally responsive and locally grounded.

Existing studies on career development and student retention highlights important insights into how students navigate educational pathways, yet several important gaps remain in understanding the relationship between high school career guidance and university dropout in Madagascar. First, an empirical gap exists because most previous studies focus on career development, motivation, or student retention in general educational contexts, while limited study specifically examines how career guidance at the high school level influences university persistence among Malagasy students (Emynorane et al., 2024). Existing international studies provide useful theoretical perspectives, but they do not sufficiently capture the socio-cultural and educational realities of Madagascar, where family influence, unequal access to educational resources, and community structures strongly shape students' academic decisions (Bien Aimé et al., 2025). Second, a methodological gap can be identified because many earlier studies rely predominantly on quantitative approaches that measure career outcomes statistically, with limited qualitative exploration of students' lived experiences, perceptions, and transition difficulties between secondary school and university (Chen et al., 2020; Wang & Jiao, 2023). As a result, the complexity of students' decision-making processes and adaptation challenges remains insufficiently understood. Third, a contextual gap appears in the limited attention given to rural and semi-urban educational environments such as the Itasy region, where access to structured counseling services and career information is often constrained. Most previous studies are conducted in urban or more institutionally developed contexts, making their findings difficult to apply directly to Madagascar's educational realities. Fourth, a practical gap exists because previous study rarely examines the specific forms of career guidance such as mentoring, academic counseling, self-assessment activities, and family-supported orientation that may contribute to reducing university dropout. Consequently, there is still limited understanding of which guidance practices are most effective in supporting students' transition to higher education. In addition, many existing studies examine secondary education and higher education separately, leaving the transition process insufficiently explored as a continuous and interconnected educational pathway.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining the role of career guidance in high school as a strategic intervention to reduce university dropout in Madagascar. It seeks to analyze how career orientation programs influence students' motivation, decision making, and preparation for higher education. By focusing on the link between secondary education experiences and university outcomes, the research intends to provide a more comprehensive understanding of student trajectories. The objective is not only to identify existing challenges but also to highlight effective practices that can be adapted or scaled within the Malagasy educational system.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform educational policies and practices that promote student success and retention. Strengthening career guidance at the high school level can contribute to better alignment between students' aspirations and academic choices, thereby reducing the risk of dropout. It also supports the development of essential skills such as self-efficacy, adaptability, and long-term planning, which are crucial for navigating both education and employment. Furthermore, by integrating community and cultural dimensions into career guidance frameworks, the study can offer contextually relevant recommendations that resonate with local realities. Ultimately, enhancing career guidance in Madagascar represents a proactive approach to improving educational outcomes and supporting sustainable human development.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research approach to explore the role of career guidance in high school in reducing university dropout in Madagascar. The study was conducted in the Itasy region, Madagascar, an area characterized by both rural and semi-urban educational conditions, making it relevant for understanding diverse student experiences and educational transitions. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because it allows an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, experiences, and social realities related to career guidance and higher education preparation.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and documentation analysis to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The study involved 30 informants consisting of high school students, teachers, school counselors, and a small number of university students who had experienced transition challenges in higher education. Participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in career guidance processes or their experiences with educational transitions, enabling the researcher to gather rich and relevant insights. High school students were included to capture perceptions and experiences regarding guidance services, teachers and counselors were selected because of their roles in implementing orientation activities, while university students were involved to reflect on the adequacy of career preparation received during high school.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis through several stages, including data reduction, coding, categorization, and interpretation to identify recurring patterns and key themes. The analysis process was iterative, allowing themes and meanings to emerge progressively from the collected data. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Member checking was also conducted by verifying key findings with selected informants to ensure the accuracy of interpretations. In addition, prolonged engagement in the field enabled the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the context and strengthen the reliability of the study findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings highlight that career guidance practices in high schools in the Itasy region remain limited, fragmented, and highly dependent on individual initiatives rather than institutionalized systems. Interviews with students revealed that most of them had never participated in structured career orientation programs. Instead, information about future studies and professions was often obtained informally through discussions with teachers or peers. Several students expressed uncertainty about their academic choices, explaining that they selected university programs without a clear understanding of the academic requirements or career prospects associated with their chosen fields. These interview findings were reinforced through school observations, which showed that career-related activities were rarely integrated into regular learning processes and were generally absent from daily school practices. During observations, no structured counseling sessions or dedicated career orientation schedules were identified in most schools. Documentation collected from schools also supported these findings, as school reports and administrative documents contained very limited evidence of formal career guidance programs, policies, or long-term orientation planning. This triangulation between interviews, observations, and documentation demonstrates that career guidance remains weakly institutionalized within the educational structure of the schools studied. This lack of preparation was also reflected in the experiences of university student informants,

many of whom reported difficulties in adapting to their chosen fields, leading to discouragement and, in some cases, consideration of dropping out.

Teachers and school counselors further confirmed through interviews that career guidance was not systematically integrated into school activities. Most informants explained that guidance sessions were occasional and typically organized only at the end of the final year. These sessions were generally limited to providing basic information about available university programs without deeper exploration of students' interests, abilities, or labor market realities. Observation data strengthened these statements, showing that schools lacked dedicated counseling spaces, career guidance materials, and specialized personnel responsible for orientation services. Researchers also observed that teachers frequently acted as informal advisors despite having limited professional training in career counseling. Documentation analysis similarly revealed the absence of formal institutional plans, guidance frameworks, or budget allocations related to career orientation activities. The consistency between interview responses, field observations, and school documents indicates that career guidance services are not yet prioritized as an essential component of educational support in the studied context.

Family and community influence emerged as another important factor shaping students' educational decisions. Interviews with students revealed that parents often played a decisive role in determining future study choices, particularly by encouraging fields considered prestigious, financially secure, or socially respected. Several students admitted that these expectations sometimes resulted in a mismatch between their personal interests and their academic pathways. Observations conducted during school interactions and parent-related activities further indicated that educational decisions were strongly influenced by family authority and social expectations within the local community. Documentation from schools also showed limited collaboration mechanisms between schools, families, and external community actors in supporting career orientation activities. At the same time, some informants explained that when families were supportive of students' preferences and maintained communication with schools, students appeared more confident and balanced in making educational decisions. However, community members, including local professionals and external institutions, were rarely involved in school orientation activities, limiting students' exposure to real-world career experiences and professional perspectives.

Table 1 below presents a synthesis of the main findings derived from interviews, observations, and documentation in the Itasy region.

Table 1. Field Based Findings on Career Guidance Practices in Itasy High Schools

Key Aspect	Field Evidence	Implication for University Transition
Limited structured guidance	Students reported absence of regular orientation sessions	Weak understanding of academic and career pathways
Late intervention	Guidance mainly provided in final year only	Insufficient time for reflection and informed decision making
Lack of trained personnel	Teachers act as advisors without specific training	Inadequate support in career planning
Absence of resources	No counseling materials or dedicated spaces observed	Reduced effectiveness of guidance activities
Strong family influence	Parents often decide on students' study choices	Risk of mismatch and low academic engagement
Minimal community involvement	Few interactions with professionals or external actors	Limited exposure to real career opportunities

Source: Source: Authors' field data analysis (2026)

Further findings indicate that students who had even minimal exposure to guidance activities, such as informal mentoring or discussions with teachers, demonstrated relatively better clarity regarding their academic goals. Interview data showed that these students possessed stronger motivation and a greater sense of direction when entering university. This finding was also reflected in observations, where students

who actively interacted with teachers or participated in informal orientation discussions appeared more engaged and confident in discussing their future plans. Supporting documentation, including school activity notes and student participation records, suggested that even limited mentoring initiatives contributed positively to students' educational preparation. In contrast, students without any guidance support frequently described feelings of confusion and anxiety about their future, which negatively affected their engagement in higher education. The triangulation of interviews, observations, and documentation therefore suggests that even small-scale career guidance interventions can positively influence students' educational transitions, although a more structured and consistent approach is still needed to ensure equal access to guidance services for all students.

Discussion

Evidence from the Itasy region reveals that limited and fragmented career guidance practices in high schools significantly influence students' difficulties in transitioning to higher education. Many students make academic choices without sufficient preparation, which reinforces existing research emphasizing the importance of early and structured career development processes. Career guidance extends beyond the provision of information; it contributes to the development of self-awareness, motivation, and adaptability, all of which are essential for sustained academic engagement. When these elements are absent, students are more likely to experience uncertainty and weak commitment to their chosen academic paths.

One prominent issue concerns the absence of structured and continuous career guidance programs. Students reported that guidance activities were minimal and often concentrated at the end of the final year of high school, leaving little time for reflection and informed decision making. This situation aligns with research showing that active engagement in career exploration strengthens adaptability and helps students develop clearer professional identities (Alaydrus & Hamid, 2019). Psycho pedagogical counseling is also recognized as a crucial stage in guiding students toward appropriate career orientations when implemented as an ongoing process rather than a one-time intervention (Barna & Mircea, 2015). The conditions observed in Itasy indicate that career guidance remains marginal within school systems, limiting its capacity to influence students' long term educational trajectories.

Timing plays a decisive role in shaping the effectiveness of career guidance. Interventions that occur too late reduce opportunities for students to explore their interests, understand their strengths, and evaluate available options. Students require gradual exposure to career related information and experiences to make thoughtful decisions. Research on student engagement demonstrates that early disengagement during high school increases the likelihood of academic difficulties and eventual dropout (Balfanz et al., 2007). In environments where socio economic challenges already affect educational participation, delayed guidance further intensifies these risks. Continuous support throughout the high school years would allow students to progressively build the competencies needed for successful transitions (Ratna et al., 2026).

Limited availability of trained personnel and resources further constrains the effectiveness of career guidance. Teachers frequently assume advisory roles without formal preparation or adequate tools, which affects the quality of support provided to students. Structured counseling services have been shown to enhance students' motivation and clarity in career selection (Azhari, 2020). Access to career information services and appropriate learning media can also improve students' understanding of potential career paths (Basuki & Kurniawan, 2022). The absence of such resources in the schools studied reflects a systemic gap that reduces the impact of guidance initiatives and leaves students insufficiently prepared for higher education (Wang & Chang, 2025).

Social influences, particularly from families, play a central role in shaping students' educational decisions. Many students rely heavily on parental expectations, sometimes choosing academic paths that do not align with their personal interests or abilities. Research indicates that parental attachment and support significantly influence career aspirations, often shaping the direction of students' choices (Bhatia et al., 2023). Social support more broadly contributes to the development of career management competencies by

strengthening confidence in decision making (Wang & Jiao, 2023). Family involvement can therefore be a valuable resource when aligned with students' goals, but it may also limit autonomy when expectations dominate the decision-making process.

Community involvement remains limited, reducing students' exposure to real world career experiences. Interaction with professionals and local actors can provide practical insights and help students connect academic learning with future opportunities. In Madagascar, community engagement has been identified as an important factor in supporting educational success (Emynorane et al., 2026). Local governance mechanisms and traditional structures can also contribute to strengthening educational practices, including career orientation (Sulla et al., 2025). The lack of collaboration between schools and communities in the Itasy region suggests that career guidance is not yet fully integrated into the broader social environment, which reduces its relevance for students.

Career development theories provide additional insight into these challenges. The concept of protean career orientation emphasizes adaptability, self-direction, and alignment with personal values in navigating modern career paths (Bazine et al., 2025). Students in the studied context have limited opportunities to develop these competencies due to the absence of structured guidance systems. Career adaptability, which includes skills such as planning and problem solving, is shaped by contextual factors including access to support and resources (Chen et al., 2020). Without these supports, students may struggle to adjust to the demands of higher education and the evolving labor market.

Experiences shared by university students illustrate the long-term consequences of insufficient career preparation. Many reported difficulties adapting to their academic programs due to a lack of prior understanding of course expectations and career outcomes. Research on career transitions emphasizes the importance of aligning educational choices with individual competencies and labor market demands (De Vos et al., 2021). Misalignment between students' interests and their chosen fields can lead to dissatisfaction, reduced engagement, and eventual withdrawal from university studies (Lai et al., 2024).

Motivation emerges as another key factor influencing persistence in higher education. Students who lack clarity about their career goals often show lower levels of engagement and commitment. Career choice motivation and self-concept are closely linked to students' enthusiasm and persistence, particularly in the early stages of higher education (Deiglmayr et al., 2025). Clear goals provide a sense of purpose that helps students overcome academic challenges, whereas uncertainty can lead to disengagement and loss of direction.

Broader structural and social inequalities may also shape access to effective career guidance. In many contexts, barriers such as limited resources and unequal access to information constrain students' opportunities to make informed career choices. Research has shown that such constraints can affect career development and progression, particularly among marginalized groups (Windapo et al., 2025). Similar patterns may exist in Madagascar, especially in rural areas where educational resources are scarce. Addressing these disparities requires inclusive strategies that ensure all students have access to meaningful guidance.

Even limited exposure to career guidance appears to have a positive effect on students' orientation and motivation. Informal mentoring and discussions with teachers helped some students develop clearer goals and stronger commitment to their studies. Research indicates that self-efficacy plays a mediating role in career decision making, suggesting that even small interventions can strengthen students' confidence and ability to plan their futures (Kholifah et al., 2025). Expanding such initiatives into more structured programs could enhance their impact and reach a larger number of students.

Cultural and contextual factors also shape how career guidance is perceived and implemented. Educational practices in Madagascar are influenced by both traditional values and modern expectations, which can create tensions in how students and families approach career decisions (Bien Aimé et al., 2025). Recognizing these dynamics is essential for designing guidance programs that are culturally relevant and responsive to local needs. Incorporating community perspectives and respecting cultural norms can improve the acceptance and effectiveness of career guidance initiatives.

Strengthening career guidance systems requires coordinated efforts at multiple levels, including integrating guidance into the school curriculum, providing adequate training for teachers, and developing relevant resources to improve the quality of support available to students. Collaboration between schools, families, and communities can further create a supportive environment that enhances students' career development, especially when social support is aligned with individual aspirations (Wang & Jiao, 2023). In addition, creating opportunities for students to engage with professionals and explore diverse career paths can enrich their understanding and strengthen their motivation. Such efforts are essential in addressing underlying factors contributing to university dropout, as better prepared students are more likely to make informed decisions and adapt successfully to higher education (De Vos et al., 2021). Supporting the development of self-awareness, adaptability, and decision-making skills also aligns with the need for stronger career competencies in a changing world (Bazine et al., 2025). Improved career guidance systems can therefore enhance not only educational outcomes but also contribute to broader social and economic development in Madagascar.

CONCLUSION

Career guidance in high school emerges as a decisive lever for shaping more coherent educational trajectories and reducing the risk of university dropout in Madagascar. The results confirm that when students are not supported in understanding their interests, capacities, and opportunities, their transition to higher education becomes fragile and often misaligned. This reinforces the initial assumption that early orientation is not a complementary service but a foundational component of educational success. The patterns observed in Itasy illustrate how gaps in guidance translate into uncertainty, weak motivation, and difficulty adapting to university demands, highlighting the need to rethink how schools prepare students for future pathways. These insights suggest that improving career guidance is not solely a technical matter but also a systemic and cultural one. Strengthening collaboration among schools, families, and communities can create more meaningful and context sensitive guidance practices. Embedding career orientation within everyday learning processes would allow students to progressively construct their aspirations rather than making rushed decisions at the end of high school. Such an approach aligns educational experiences with long term personal and societal development goals. Future research could deepen these findings by examining differences across regions, school types, or socio-economic groups to better understand inequalities in access to guidance. Longitudinal studies following students from high school into university would also provide valuable evidence on how early interventions influence persistence over time. Expanding the scope to include policy analysis and institutional practices could further support the development of more effective and sustainable career guidance systems in Madagascar.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to sincerely thank all participants, especially the students, teachers, school counselors, and university students, whose valuable time, openness, and experiences made this study possible. Their willingness to share honest insights greatly contributed to the depth and relevance of this research. Appreciation is also extended to the school authorities and all individuals who facilitated the data collection process.

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