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BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: HOW CAREER GOALS, SELF-BELIEF, AND ENTREPRENEURIAL DRIVE SHAPE CAREER PLANNING AMONG MALAYSIAN FINAL-YEAR STUDENTS

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Abstract:

This study investigates the factors shaping career planning among final-year students in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The primary objective was to examine the influence of career goals, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial intent on career planning. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed. Data were collected from 407 final-year students using a structured online questionnaire via Google Forms. The data were analysed using SPSS, incorporating descriptive statistics, reliability analysis (Cronbach's Alpha), Pearson correlation, and regression analysis. The findings revealed strong, positive, and statistically significant relationships between all three independent variables and career planning. Career goals explained 72.4% of the variance in career planning, while self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intent each explained 73.7% of the variance. The study concludes that students who set clear goals, possess high self-confidence, and harbour entrepreneurial ambitions are significantly more likely to engage in structured career planning. The implications suggest that universities should integrate goal-setting frameworks, self-efficacy-building interventions, and entrepreneurial mindset cultivation into their curricula. Limitations include the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data.

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Introduction

The transition from higher education to the professional workforce represents a period of significant uncertainty and critical decision-making for final-year students. The ability to effectively plan one's career is no longer a luxury but a necessity in a rapidly evolving and increasingly competitive global job market. Career planning is a dynamic, ongoing process through which an individual identifies, organizes, and sets goals for their future career, involving strategic decision-making and continuous self-assessment (Binrong Dai et al., 2023). For graduating students, robust career planning is directly linked to improved job satisfaction, higher employment rates, and better long-term career advancement opportunities (Lent et al., 2020).

Despite the recognised importance of career planning, a significant problem persists. Many final-year students struggle to align their career aspirations with practical plans due to low self-efficacy, vague career goals, and a lack of proactive strategies (Macario Neri et al., 2023; Jessyca Lages et al., 2023). This deficiency leads to indecision, reduced persistence in job searches, and a higher likelihood of underemployment or unemployment. Furthermore, while entrepreneurial intent is increasingly viewed as a viable career path, its specific influence on structured career planning remains underexplored, particularly within the Malaysian context.
The Klang Valley, Malaysia's economic and industrial heartland, hosts a high concentration of university students and presents a unique yet demanding labour market. Understanding the specific factors that drive effective career planning among this demographic is crucial for reducing graduate unemployment and ensuring a skilled workforce. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by examining the direct relationships between career goals, self-efficacy, entrepreneurial intent, and career planning. The specific research objectives are: (1) To examine the relationship between career goals and career planning; (2) To assess the role of self-efficacy in shaping career planning outcomes; and (3) To analyse the influence of entrepreneurial intention on career planning. In addressing these objectives, this study contributes to United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by identifying the psychological and motivational factors that support graduates' successful transition into productive employment.

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Literature Review

This section reviews the theoretical and empirical literature underpinning the key variables. The dependent variable, career planning, is conceptualised as a systematic process of setting goals and developing action plans (Savickas, 2019). The independent variables—self-efficacy, career goals, and entrepreneurial intent—are examined as critical antecedents.

Definition and Importance of Career Planning

Career planning refers to a deliberate process of setting career goals, identifying necessary steps for achievement, and evaluating progress over time (Greenhaus & Callanan, 2006). It involves self-assessment, exploration of opportunities, and strategy development. Effective career planning is associated with higher motivation, greater proactive job-search behaviour, and a clearer sense of professional direction (Lent et al., 2020). Students who engage in systematic career planning are more likely to secure relevant internships and job placements, thereby enhancing their overall employability.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, a core concept from Bandura's (2020) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), is an individual's belief in their capability to execute tasks and achieve specific goals. In career contexts, high self-efficacy fosters greater confidence in navigating career challenges, setting ambitious goals, and persisting through setbacks. Students with high self-efficacy are more likely to engage in proactive career planning activities, such as networking and skill development (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). Conversely, individuals with low self-efficacy may struggle with career decision-making and lack the motivation to pursue opportunities. Bandura's SCT posits that self-efficacy is developed through four primary sources: mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and emotional states. In the career planning context, students who have successfully completed internships or academic projects (mastery experiences) are likely to develop stronger confidence in their career-related capabilities, thereby enhancing their planning behaviours. This aligns with evidence from a Malaysian university sample showing that career adaptability and social support significantly strengthen students' job search self-efficacy and career outlook (Al-Jubari et al., 2021).

Career Goals

Based on Locke & Latham's (2019) Goal-Setting Theory, specific and challenging goals lead to higher performance. Career goals act as benchmarks that provide direction and purpose. Students with well-articulated career goals are more likely to align their academic and extracurricular efforts with their professional aspirations, thereby engaging in more focused and effective career planning. Career goals can range from short-term objectives, such as securing an internship, to long-term aspirations, such as achieving a leadership position in a specific industry. The Goal-Setting Theory further suggests that goal specificity, difficulty, and commitment are crucial determinants of goal-directed behaviour. In career planning, students with specific and challenging career goals are more likely to develop detailed action plans and persistently pursue their objectives.

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Entrepreneurial Intent

Entrepreneurial intent refers to a conscious state of mind that directs attention toward entrepreneurial activities, such as starting a new venture (Krueger et al., 2000). According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), entrepreneurial intention is shaped by attitudes toward entrepreneurship, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. An entrepreneurial mindset encourages proactiveness, innovation, and opportunity recognition—skills highly valuable even in traditional employment (González & DeSantis, 2021). This intent is hypothesised to positively influence career planning as students explore non-traditional and diverse career pathways. Students with strong entrepreneurial intentions are more likely to seek relevant experiences, such as internships and networking events, which build essential skills and confidence. Among Malaysian undergraduates, entrepreneurial intention has been shown to be jointly shaped by attitudes toward entrepreneurship, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, together with underlying psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Al-Jubari et al., 2019). Family business exposure has similarly been found to strengthen students' entrepreneurial knowledge, skills, and confidence (Kumar et al., 2022). Nevertheless, translating entrepreneurial intent into actual entrepreneurial behaviour is not always straightforward, as structural barriers such as limited access to capital, networks, and skills-building opportunities can constrain this process, particularly among under-represented groups (Zainuddin et al., 2019).

Theoretical Integration: The Synergistic Effect of Career Self-Management

While each theoretical framework—Social Cognitive Theory, Goal-Setting Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior—offers distinct perspectives, an integrated theoretical lens provides a more comprehensive understanding of career planning. This study proposes a synergistic Career Self-Management Model, which posits that career goals, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial intent collectively shape career planning through both direct and interactive mechanisms.

Drawing from Lent et al.'s (2020) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), career planning is viewed as a dynamic process influenced by cognitive-person variables (self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals) and contextual factors. Self-efficacy serves as the foundational psychological mechanism that enables students to translate their career aspirations into concrete plans. Simultaneously, career goals provide the directional focus necessary for sustained planning efforts. Entrepreneurial intent adds a third dimension by fostering proactive career exploration and adaptability. When these three factors converge, students develop a career self-management orientation that goes beyond reactive job-seeking to proactive career development.

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

Based on the integrated theoretical foundation (Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, Locke & Latham's Goal-Setting Theory, and Krueger et al.'s Entrepreneurial Intent Framework), a conceptual framework was developed positing direct positive relationships between the three independent variables and career planning.

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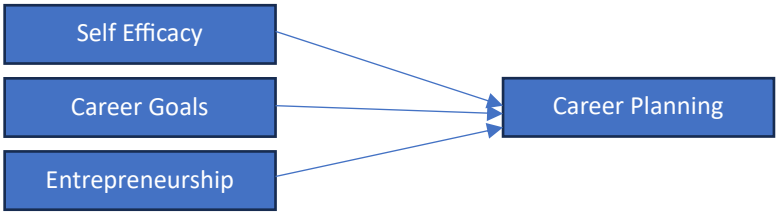


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The following hypotheses were formulated based on the framework:

H1: Career goals have a significant positive influence on career planning among final-year students.

H2: Self-efficacy has a significant positive influence on career planning among final-year students.

H3: Entrepreneurial intent has a significant positive influence on career planning among final-year students.

Methodology

Research Approach

A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed to test the hypotheses. This approach was suitable for capturing a snapshot of the relationships between variables at a single point in time. The quantitative method allowed for the statistical testing of hypotheses and the generalisation of findings to the broader population of final-year students.

Population, Sample, and Sampling

The target population comprised final-year undergraduate students enrolled in public and private universities within the Klang Valley, Malaysia. Using Krejcie & Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table for a large population, a minimum sample of 377 respondents was required. A total of 407 valid responses were collected, exceeding the minimum requirement. A convenience sampling technique was used to distribute the questionnaire due to time and resource constraints, ensuring adequate representation from various institutions

Instrument and Data Collection

A self-administered online questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire was disseminated through university student portals and social media platforms (Instagram, WhatsApp, X) over one academic semester. The survey consisted of four sections: demographics, and 7-item scales for each variable (Career Planning, Career Goals, Self-Efficacy, and Entrepreneurial Intent). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). Established scales were adapted from Greenhaus & Callanan (2006), Bandura (1997), Locke & Latham (1990), and Krueger et al. (2000).

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS version 26. The analysis involved: (1) descriptive statistics to profile the sample, (2) Cronbach's Alpha to assess scale reliability, (3) Pearson correlation to examine the direction and strength of bivariate relationships, and (4) simple linear regression

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to test each hypothesis and determine the variance explained (R^2) by each independent variable on career planning.

Results

Sample Description

The sample (N=407) consisted of 54.2% male and 45.8% female students. The majority were aged 24-26 years (36.4%), followed by 21-23 years (30.8%). The sample was ethnically diverse (29.6% Indian, 29.6% Chinese, 20.3% Malay) and predominantly Malaysian (51.3%). Most respondents held a bachelor's degree (31.3%) or Diploma (23.5%).

Table 1a:Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
Career Planning	406	12.00	34.00	27.04	5.615
Career Goals	406	11.00	34.00	26.98	5.655
Self-Efficacy	406	13.00	34.00	27.13	5.646
Entrepreneurial Intent	406	11.00	33.00	27.24	5.589

Source: SPSS Output (2026)

Table 1b: Skewness, Kurtosis, and Reliability

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's α
Career Planning	-.768	-.891	.833
Career Goals	-.715	-1.007	.832
Self-Efficacy	-.665	-1.135	.825
Entrepreneurial Intent	-.771	-.834	.826

Source: SPSS Output (2026)

All variables demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (ranging from .825 to .833). Skewness and kurtosis values were within the acceptable range of -2 to +2, indicating a normal data distribution suitable for parametric testing.

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Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Career Planning	1			
2. Career Goals	.859**	1		
3. Self-Efficacy	.851**	.885**	1	
4. Entrepreneurial Intent	.858**	.868**	.867**	1

*Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*
Source: SPSS Output (2026)

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed strong, positive, and statistically significant relationships between all variables. Career planning was strongly correlated with career goals ($r = .859$, $p < .001$), self-efficacy ($r = .851$, $p < .001$), and entrepreneurial intent ($r = .858$, $p < .001$).

***Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing**

Table 3: Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	**Relationship**	**R-squared (R^2)**	**Decision**
H1	Career Goals → Career Planning	.737	Accepted
H2	Self-Efficacy → Career Planning	.724	Accepted
H3	Entrepreneurial Intent → Career Planning	.737	Accepted

Note: All relationships are positive and significant at $p < .001$.
Source: SPSS Output (2026)

Simple linear regression was conducted to test each hypothesis. The results, summarised in Table 3, fully supported all three hypotheses. Career goals explained 73.7% of the variance in career planning ($R^2 = .737$). Self-efficacy explained 72.4% ($R^2 = .724$), and entrepreneurial intent explained 73.7% ($R^2 = .737$). All relationships were positive and statistically significant, with standardized beta coefficients ranging from .851 to .859. The high adjusted R^2 values (.723 - .736) confirm that these models are robust and generalizable.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the key factors affecting career planning among final-year students in Malaysia's Klang Valley. The results strongly confirm that career goals, self-efficacy, and

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entrepreneurial intent are significant, positive predictors of effective career planning. All three hypotheses were supported, with each independent variable explaining over 70% of the variance in career planning.

The Effect of Career Goals on Career Planning

The robust relationship between career goals and career planning ($R^2 = .737$, $\beta = .859$, $p < .001$) aligns perfectly with Locke & Latham's (2019) Goal-Setting Theory. This finding demonstrates that students who possess specific, measurable, and time-bound career objectives are far more motivated to engage in structured planning activities, such as seeking internships, acquiring relevant skills, and building professional networks. Without clear goals, career planning lacks direction and purpose.

This result is consistent with prior research by Lent et al. (2020), who found that goal clarity is a fundamental driver of proactive career behaviours. Furthermore, the strength of this relationship (explaining 73.7% of variance) suggests that career goals may be the most direct cognitive driver of career planning, providing students with a clear roadmap for their professional development. The high beta coefficient ($\beta = .859$) indicates that for every unit increase in career goal clarity, career planning increases by nearly 0.86 units, demonstrating a near-linear relationship.

The Goal-Setting Theory's emphasis on specificity and challenge is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where graduates often face intense competition. Students who set specific goals such as "securing a position in a multinational corporation within six months of graduation" are likely to engage in more focused job searches, skill development, and networking activities compared to those with vague aspirations like "finding a good job."

The Effect of Self-Efficacy on Career Planning

Similarly, the strong influence of self-efficacy ($R^2 = .724$, $\beta = .851$, $p < .001$) supports Bandura's (2020) Social Cognitive Theory. Students who believe in their own capabilities are more resilient and proactive. They view career challenges as surmountable and are more likely to persist in their job search and development efforts. This finding suggests that technical skills alone are insufficient; students must also develop the psychological confidence to navigate their career paths.

This aligns with findings from Schunk (2019), who demonstrated that self-efficacy enhancement leads to greater academic and career persistence. The slightly lower R^2 for self-efficacy (72.4%) compared to career goals and entrepreneurial intent may indicate that while self-efficacy is crucial, its effect on career planning may be partially mediated through other variables such as career goals. Students with high self-efficacy are more likely to set ambitious goals, which in turn drive planning behaviours. This mediating pathway is consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 2020), which posits that self-efficacy influences career outcomes through goal-setting mechanisms.

The β coefficient of .851 suggests a strong direct effect, but the slightly lower variance explained indicates that self-efficacy works synergistically with other factors. Students who believe in their abilities are more likely to persevere through setbacks, such as job application rejections, and maintain their career planning momentum.

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The Effect of Entrepreneurial Intent on Career Planning

Perhaps the most contemporary finding is the powerful effect of entrepreneurial intent (R^2 = .737, β = .858, $p < .001$). This indicates that an entrepreneurial mindset—characterised by proactiveness, innovation, and opportunity recognition—significantly enhances career planning, even for students who may not start a business. This mindset encourages individuals to take ownership of their career trajectory, view themselves as a "venture" to be managed, and explore diverse, non-linear pathways to success.

This supports González & DeSantis (2021) and reflects the realities of a gig economy. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) provides a useful lens for understanding this relationship. Students with strong entrepreneurial intent possess positive attitudes toward entrepreneurship, perceive social support for entrepreneurial activities, and believe they have the capability to engage in entrepreneurial behaviours. These same cognitive factors enhance their career planning by making them more proactive and opportunity oriented.

The high R^2 (73.7%) suggests that entrepreneurial intent is not merely an alternative career path but a cognitive orientation that enhances career planning across all career trajectories. Students with entrepreneurial intent are more likely to engage in continuous learning, network building, and skill diversification—activities that are beneficial regardless of their ultimate career choice.

Theoretical Integration and Synergistic Effects

While each independent variable independently explains a substantial portion of variance in career planning, the theoretical integration proposed in this study suggests that their combined effect may be even more powerful. The high correlations among the independent variables (ranging from .867 to .885) indicate significant overlap and potential synergistic effects. Career goals, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial intent likely reinforce each other in a positive feedback loop.

For example, students with high self-efficacy are more likely to set ambitious career goals (goal-setting theory), and these goals, in turn, may foster entrepreneurial thinking by encouraging students to explore innovative career pathways. Similarly, entrepreneurial intent may enhance self-efficacy through the development of problem-solving and opportunity recognition skills. This triangular reinforcement suggests that career planning interventions should address all three factors simultaneously rather than in isolation.

The Career Self-Management Model proposed in this study integrates these three theoretical perspectives into a unified framework. This integration acknowledges that career planning is not simply a cognitive process (goals) or a psychological process (self-efficacy) or a motivational process (entrepreneurial intent), but a complex interplay of all three. Universities seeking to enhance student career planning should therefore implement comprehensive interventions that simultaneously develop goal-setting skills, build self-confidence, and foster entrepreneurial mindsets.

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Practical Implications for Malaysian Higher Education

The findings of this study have significant implications for Malaysian universities and policymakers. Given that career goals, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial intent collectively explain such a large proportion of career planning variance (with R^2 values above 72%), universities should prioritise the development of these factors through structured interventions. First, career guidance programs should move beyond traditional career counselling to incorporate explicit goal-setting frameworks. Students should be trained in SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goal-setting techniques and provided with structured tools for career planning. This could include mandatory career planning modules, career portfolios, and regular goal-review sessions.

Second, self-efficacy building should be integrated throughout the curriculum. Universities can provide mastery experiences through internships, industry projects, and practical assignments. Vicarious learning can be facilitated through alumni mentorship programs and guest lectures from successful professionals. Social persuasion can be provided through constructive feedback and encouragement from faculty and peers.

Third, entrepreneurial mindset development should be accessible to all students, regardless of their major. Innovation challenges, startup incubators, and entrepreneurship courses should be open to non-business students. Even students pursuing traditional career paths benefit from entrepreneurial skills such as opportunity recognition, problem-solving, and proactive networking.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 2020) by demonstrating the importance of entrepreneurial intent as a cognitive-person variable influencing career planning. While SCCT traditionally focuses on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals, this study suggests that entrepreneurial intent should be incorporated as an additional predictor.

Second, the study integrates three major theoretical frameworks—Goal-Setting Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior—into a unified Career Self-Management Model. This integration provides a more comprehensive understanding of career planning than any single theory alone.

Third, the study empirically validates the Career Self-Management Model in the Malaysian context, contributing to the cross-cultural generalisability of these theories. While these theories have been extensively tested in Western contexts, their applicability in Asian settings, particularly Malaysia, has been less examined.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-reported data, which may introduce response biases, as participants may provide socially desirable answers or overestimate their self-efficacy. However, the high internal consistency of the scales (Cronbach's $\alpha > .825$) mitigates this concern to some extent.

Second, the sample was limited to final-year students from universities in the Klang Valley, which may not fully represent the broader population of university students in Malaysia. Future research should include students from other Malaysian states and from different types of educational institutions.

Third, the cross-sectional design captures relationships at a single point in time and cannot establish causality. While the theoretical framework posits that career goals, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial intent influence career planning, reverse causality or bidirectional relationships are possible. Longitudinal studies are needed to establish causal directions.

Fourth, the study did not account for other potential influences such as family support, socioeconomic background, specific industry trends, or institutional factors that may also play a role in career decision-making. Future research should incorporate these contextual variables. Finally, while the R^2 values are high (above 72%), there remains unexplained variance in career planning. Other factors such as career adaptability, emotional intelligence, and perceived organizational support may contribute to career planning and should be explored in future research.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations for future research are proposed. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to track how these factors influence actual career outcomes post-graduation, such as employment status, job satisfaction, and career advancement.

Additionally, investigating mediating variables such as university support, family background, or social networks would provide a more nuanced model. For example, university career services may moderate the relationship between entrepreneurial intent and career planning, with stronger effects observed in institutions with robust entrepreneurship support programs.
Expanding the sample to other Malaysian states and including students from diverse academic disciplines would enhance the generalisability of these findings. Cross-cultural comparisons with other Southeast Asian countries would also be valuable.

Qualitative research could provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of students as they navigate career planning decisions. In-depth interviews could reveal the processes through which students develop career goals, build self-efficacy, and cultivate entrepreneurial intent.
Finally, intervention studies should be conducted to test the effectiveness of career planning programs that integrate goal setting, self-efficacy building, and entrepreneurial mindset development. Such studies would provide practical guidance for universities seeking to enhance student career outcomes.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, this study empirically demonstrates that career planning among final-year students is not a standalone activity but a function of clear goals, strong self-belief, and an entrepreneurial outlook. The findings provide a clear, actionable framework for universities and policymakers in Malaysia. All three hypotheses were supported, confirming that career goals, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial intent play significant roles in shaping students' career planning behaviours.

The theoretical integration proposed in this study—the Career Self-Management Model—offers a comprehensive framework for understanding career planning. This model highlights the synergistic effects of cognitive factors (goals), psychological factors (self-efficacy), and motivational factors (entrepreneurial intent) in driving career planning behaviours.

Recommendations for universities include: (1) Mandatory career planning courses that explicitly teach goal-setting frameworks (e.g., SMART goals); (2) Mentorship programs designed to build self-efficacy through positive role models and guided achievements; (3) Extracurricular activities like innovation challenges and startup incubators open to all faculties to foster an entrepreneurial mindset; (4) Integration of career planning modules into the core curriculum beginning in the first year of study; and (5) Regular monitoring and evaluation of career planning interventions to ensure effectiveness.

For students, the findings suggest that actively setting career goals, believing in their own abilities, and exploring entrepreneurship as a viable career option can contribute significantly to their career success. Even students who do not plan to start their own businesses can benefit from entrepreneurial thinking, which fosters adaptability, proactiveness, and opportunity recognition in the rapidly changing job market.

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