



From Classroom to Career: Understanding the Career Decision-Making Process of Psychology Alumni

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Abstract

There is little research in the career decision making experience of psychology students in Thailand, especially with international programs like Joint International Psychology Program (JIPP). The purpose of this study is to explore the themes of JIPP alumni's career decision making experiences. The first part of the research is a quantitative survey of what career choices 15 alumni made in the year following their graduation. The second part is a qualitative interview with 10 alumni with questions replicated from Strappe (2021). The result from the first study is that most alumni chose 'Work' after they graduated even if they also chose 'Intern' or 'Continue study.' The themes observed from the interviews can be divided into 5 main parts, including uncertainty, change of plans, differences between alumni who joined the workforce and those who continue their studies, information for the JIPP faculty, and lastly, recommendations to the current students. Future research should further explore the career decision making experience of international psychology alumni in Thailand. Specific research topics could be explored further, such as the effect of bicultural experiences (Akosah-Twumasi et al. 2018), factors that affect the decision making process the most, and how alumni overcome the difficulties in the process. However, because of the lack of literature in Thailand, the first step should be collecting the fundamental statistical data on psychology undergraduate alumni's careers in Thai universities, such as their employment rate and career choice following their graduation. This research clarifies the challenges of psychology students in Including more alumni in future studies may help uncover a new or different aspect.

Keywords: Career Decision Making, International Program, Psychology Undergraduate

Introduction

Psychology remains a budding field in Thailand. The first inclusion of psychology was only in primary education schools in 1930. The next was in 1962 when psychology was taught as one of the majors of the Master of Education at Chulalongkorn University. With the support of university members at Chulalongkorn University, the faculty of psychology was founded initially with a master's degree in 1996, then a doctoral degree in 2001, and finally a bachelor's degree in 2002. The Joint International Psychology Program (JIPP) was started in 2010 as a dual-degree program in partnership with the University of Queensland. This is still the only international psychology undergraduate program in Thailand as of May 2022. From 2013 to 2020, there were 518 students at Chulalongkorn University studying psychology at a bachelor's level in both Thai and International Programs (Faculty of Psychology Chulalongkorn University 2020a: 18). The number of Chulalongkorn psychology students is rapidly increasing, especially in the international program (from 38 students in 2017 to 68 in 2020).

However, there is very limited information on the career life of psychology bachelor students in Thailand after they graduate. The Bachelor of Science Program in Psychology at Naresuan



University found a 79% employment rate of the 74 psychology major alumni from 2014, excluding 4 students who sought further education (Faculty of Social Sciences Naresuan University 2017). The paper included survey results from 10 employees of the social sciences alumni and found that 60% worked in private sector and 80% worked in something related to the field they were studying. However, the paper did not survey the alumni directly or specify what occupations they were working in. Unfortunately, there are no similar statistics available for Chulalongkorn University at all, except once in the JIPP Handbook 2020 (Faculty of Psychology Chulalongkorn 2020b: 8), in which the University of Queensland claims its graduate job rate for bachelor's degree graduates is 78.2%, which is higher than Australia's national average at 72.9%. However, this information is not available for Chulalongkorn University's own psychology program students, let alone JIPP students.

There are reasons to believe that psychology undergraduate students have difficulties making career decisions. The high generalizability of psychology major graduates may result in difficulty planning for a specific job for both undergraduates and supervisors and higher competition for non-specialized jobs (Landrum 2018). The author also mentioned that psychology students may not have accurate expectations of how much their career would be related to their education. Research shows that almost one-third of psychology major alumni rate their jobs as not being related to their majors (Rajecki 2007, as cited in Landrum 2018). Additionally, while psychology majors are able to identify the transferable skills such as critical thinking, communication, and self-management that employers look for, they may not be able to provide the accurate definition or utilizations of those skills, creating another barrier to successful employment (Martini et al. 2015).

Despite these difficulties, psychology students make decisions on what to do next after graduation based on multiple factors. A systematic review found culture to be one main factor in youth's career choices (Akosah-Twumasi et al. 2018). The values from their specific cultures determine what students would prioritize in their decisions. Collectivistic cultures are more likely to be influenced by interpersonal factors such as family expectations, while intrinsic motivation, such as personal interest, is given more weight in individualistic cultures. Bicultural young adults lean more toward the factors that match the culture they feel acculturated to the most. Even though most JIPP students are Thai, they may be affected by individualistic values from their time in Australia.

Another study specifically examined the themes of how psychology alumni decided whether to go to graduate school or join the workforce (Strappe 2021). Using semi-structured interviews, the researchers found diverse themes such as uncertainty, gaining experience, self-knowledge, and relationships in alumni's reflections on their final period as undergraduates. Those who entered the workforce mentioned work-related experiences such as internship, receiving information from relationships, uncertainty, and exploring options, while those who were entering graduate school reflected on their goals and their clear certainty on what they wanted.

Lastly, there is one research study directly related to JIPP students' career decision making (Pisitsungkagarn 2018). It examines student's self-reported evaluation of the 5 learning components (Career Self-assessment, Career Interview, Career Site Visit, Career Counseling, and Integrative Report) of the "Career in Psychology" course for 4th-year JIPP students. The author found that students rated relatively high benefits and relevance for all 5 components. Career counseling was found to be most relevant and beneficial to students' career exploration while



Career Site Visit was the least likely because of the lack of hands-on experience and limited sites. Despite the positive evaluation, the mean of perceived progress was 3.94/5, while the effort and perceived urgency were higher at 4.10 and 4.16. Perhaps this could mean that JIPP students did not feel as prepared as they would like to.

Even though there is already some research on youth career decision making experience, it is important to study international psychology students who have unique difficulties making career decisions. The sample group used in this study is JIPP alumni whose career information is currently lacking. Thus, the first part of the study is to determine the career decisions JIPP alumni make after graduating. Next, international psychology students like JIPP students may be affected by more factors unique to a psychology degree and the cultures of Thailand and Australia. This research aims to explore this by interviewing JIPP alumni about their career decision making experience, specifically by following the same semi-interview method of a previous study (Strappe 2020).

This exploratory study aims to provide a better understanding of what career decisions international psychology students in Thailand are making and how. It would add to the knowledge of how psychology students make career decisions, as well as examine how their experience may be different in the context of students in international programs and in Thailand. The results could potentially provide some guidance for current JIPP students. Additionally, it may be able to clarify what additional support the JIPP program could provide for its current students.

Research objectives

The objectives of this study is to explore the themes of JIPP

Methodology

Part 1 Quantitative survey

This study is conducted between January and February of 2022. The first part aimed to determine the career decisions JIPP alumni made after graduating by conducting a quantitative survey through a short Google form which was sent to the Line group of JIPP 1-11. Thus, the 15 respondents were JIPP alumni who had graduated within 8 years prior to this research. Respondents were asked their cohort year and what they did in the one year following their graduation with the choices “Work,” “Intern,” “Travel,” “Continue study,” or “Nothing significant,” and an option to write their own answer. They could also specify what they did in the next question. Finally, they were asked whether they would be willing to continue with the second part of the study (see Appendix A for the full questionnaire.)

Part 2 Interview

Participants who agreed to be interviewed in the first part of the study were contacted via the contact details they provided in the survey and then agreed on an interview time. Interviews were conducted verbally online through a platform of the participants’ choosing (Zoom, Line, Instagram, etc). Each interview lasted approximately 10 minutes.

This part was a semi structured interview with one main question, replicated from Strappe (2020)’s original study. However, participants were first asked what language they preferred their interview session to be in. The Thai version of the question was translated beforehand. The question is: “Tell me about your experience ending your time as an undergraduate and figuring out

your next steps when you were graduating.” The same probes in the study include anticipated work, plans, preparation for a first job, difficulties, and challenges. Additionally, interviewees were asked about what further support they wished the faculty had given them, and what recommendation they would give current JIPP students regarding their career decision after graduation. The interviewees were encouraged to share any relevant information in addition to what was asked. The interviews were transcribed during the interviews and analyzed following the method of thematic analysis both deductively and inductively (Braun & Clarke 2013).

Results

Part 1 Quantitative survey

The study was conducted between January and February of 2022. There were 15 respondents who completed the survey from the cohorts of JIPP 1 to JIPP 8. Seven were from JIPP 8 cohort (graduate in 2021), and five were from JIPP 7 cohort (graduated in 2020). The rest of the participants were part of other cohort from one to six. Responses to the question on what alumni did in the year after their graduation in illustrated in Figure 1. All participants but one responded that they “Work” after graduation. The second most chosen options were “Intern” and “Continue study.” All of those who chose “Intern” also selected “Work” as another thing they did that year. Out of those who selected “Continue study,” two out of three also chose “Work.”

Those who “Work” specified diverse fields, including “Recruitment consulting,” “International NGO,” “Management,” “Marketing,” and “Tutoring.” Three respondents were involved in “Project management trainee” or “Project manager.” Those who chose “Continue study” specified as “Study Honors,” “Masters in Applied Clinical Psychology,” and “Project Management Graduate Certificate.” Other specifications included “Missed window for applying so I was doing random things” and “Volunteering.”

What did you do in the year right after JIPP graduation in terms of career?

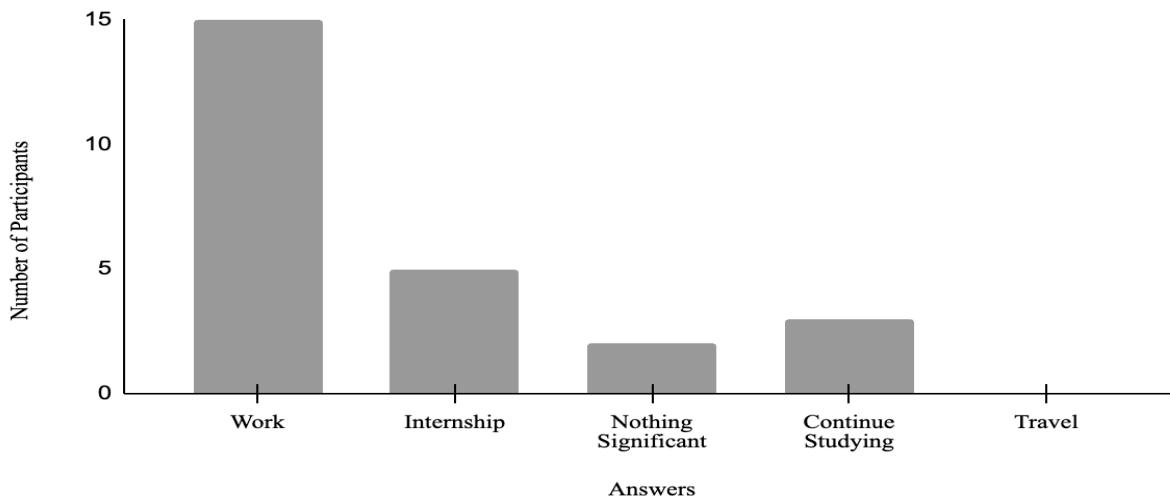


Figure 1 Survey responses to the multiple choice question of what alumni did in the year following their graduation.

Note. The multiple choice responses allow for multiple selections and new option answers.



Part 2 Interview

Out of the 15 people who completed the survey, 10 agreed to an interview, which was conducted online via a platform of the interviewee's choosing. Specifically, six were interviewed via Line calls, three on Zoom, one with Instagram call, and one by phone. Four out of 10 participants chose to be interviewed in Thai. The author transcribed the conversations during the interviews and followed the method of thematic analysis, which involves seven steps: transcription, reading and familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finalizing the analysis (Braun & Clarke 2013). The data is analyzed both deductively and inductively. The themes are arranged into the following 5 main topics.

Uncertainty

Feeling lost.

Like previous research (Strapp 2021), uncertainty was found to be a common theme among all the alumni. Most alumni were unlikely to say they were absolutely certain about what they wanted or needed to do at the time following their graduation. Even those who seemed sure they wanted to continue their education were not sure what they should do before then. Many reported feeling lost and having self-doubt during the process of career decision making. One alumnus said, "I felt empty. Like I don't know what to do next. I don't know where to start. The world is a really big place." Another said, "I was feeling really lost throughout the whole process. I still do sometimes."

Lack of a definite passion.

There could be many causes of the feeling of uncertainty in the alumni experience. One reason that was often mentioned was the lack of passion for any specific career path. There is an idea that there is a single passionate topic a person is supposed to work toward. However, most alumni said they were not able to find theirs. This was both mentioned as something alumni had experienced as soon as they graduated and even after they gained some work experience. Some said they were interested in many fields; others said they had no idea what they were interested in at all. Some said they had wanted to work in a certain field after they graduated, but after spending some time working in that field, they realized it did not really fit their interest anymore. This will be further discussed in the following sections. It was really rare to find any alumni who was adamant that their current or prospective career choice was their true passion. However, some alumni are able to happily make peace with the reality that most people will not have their exact ideal career. One alumnus said that their current job "is not exactly my passion, but I enjoy working in any field, so it is good for me." Others reported trying to change their circumstances by exploring other careers or going back to study.

Lack of direction.

In addition to having difficulty finding a career they are truly passionate about, JIPP alumni also struggle with finding a clear-cut career path, which may be attributed to the high generalizability of psychology majors (Landrum 2018). This was also mentioned by some alumni as a part of the reason for their struggle to find a specific career to work toward. One alumnus said, "JIPP forged a generalist. There are many things to consider. It is a bit frustrating." Even if JIPP students can make peace with not finding something they are really passionate about, it is still difficult to find any clear path to work toward at all.

Change of plans



COVID-19.

Another common difficulty was the sudden, unexpected change. One problem most recent graduates struggled with was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. “There are not a lot of positions available during COVID,” said one alumnus about her career opportunities. However, it seemed to affect those who had already made commitments to continuing their education the most. They had to wait until the situation got better to continue their education as planned, especially if they wanted to study abroad. Their education plans may need to be altered to accommodate the changing policies. One alumnus said, “With COVID-19, there are limited choice of countries I can go to study.” Sometimes, it changes their whole plans altogether. Another alumnus, who had plans to continue a master’s in psychology but ended up in business, said, “During COVID, I realized a career in psychology might not be as needed as other jobs.”

Change of interest.

Another significant change alumni face is the situation when their previous work experience, whether from their study, internship, or paid work, does not match their current interest anymore. This could be because of a specific upsetting event that made them realize they do not fit the work or a gradual boredom after some time. One alumnus wisely said, “People change all the time. Like every month. Back then, I was so sure about my decision. Now I am not, and it has only been a few months.”

Chance.

Chance played a big role in what alumni ended up doing. Alumni who worked may have serendipitously found certain jobs available at the time they were looking or been recommended by a friend. Even alumni who continued their studies depended on what programs were open at the time of this application and whether they received a scholarship or not to make the final decision. There were many things that were outside their control; however, there may still be some differences in their experience and dispositions that lead them to certain paths.

Differences in the experience of alumni who entered the workforce and those who continued their study

Alumni entering the workforce. Many alumni who were interviewed worked in diverse fields, similar to what was found in the first part of the study. Those who had worked in more than one job also talked about their experiences in other jobs as well.

Experience. Similar to previous research (Strapp 2021), the results showed that alumni who chose to work after their graduation usually had some internship experience during their studies or after their graduation, which sometimes then led them to full time jobs in that same company or field. They also seemed to have slightly more uncertainty than those who chose to study because of the variability in their career choice, application process, and other career-related decisions they needed to make. A few alumni talked about exploring options as well. They recounted trying different things in the year following their graduation, including volunteering, interning, working part-time, and trying different jobs.

Networking. Networking through friends seems to be quite important to those who chose to work, particularly as a way of finding career opportunities. Four alumni said they found their internship or work after being “invited by” a friend or “just saw their post.” In addition to friends, some mentioned getting help from professors to get internships, but this was a minority.

Online networking platform. Additionally, those who worked after graduation mentioned online networking platforms, including LinkedIn, Facebook, and Thaingo. Most used this to find



work, though some had mentioned that these platforms have limitations, including the lack of certain jobs. “I think those jobs are not posted there. Maybe I just couldn’t find it because I am not in the right group or have the right connection,” said one alumnus.

Other factors. Usually, alumni chose jobs based mostly on what was most available to them, but also the search depended on their previous interests or experience. However, there were other factors some alumni considered in their career decisions, including money and family. One alumni was given two job offers, and she explained that she chose the one with the higher salary because of the money and work-life balance. Another alumnus mentioned that he chose to work in business instead of psychology because of his family. However, few alumni mentioned their family as a reason for their career decision. It is possible that JIPP alumni give more priority to intrinsic motivation for career decision making than interpersonal motivation. This may be a cultural influence of the individualistic culture of international students or from staying in Australia for a year and a half (Akosah-Twumasi et al. 2018).

Alumni who chose to continue their studies. On the other hand, almost half of the alumni interviewed had or intend to continue their education. It seems the number of alumni who chose “continue study” in the first part of the study was smaller than what appeared in the interview because alumni usually wait a while before they start applying for further education instead of immediately in the first year after graduation. In fact, almost half of the alumni had some plan to or had continued their studies.

Studying abroad. Almost all the alumni who said they were going to continue their studies or had continued their studies said they chose to study abroad. It seems they were concerned about the quality of Thai education. One alumnus explicitly said they did not trust the quality of the Thai graduate program. Another alumnus said he did not consider Thai universities to be his top choice.

Experience. Like previous research (Strapp 2021), the result showed that those who chose to study were slightly more certain in their goals, seemed to be more confident in their self-knowledge, and reported having done more self-reflection. One alumnus said, “I am sure I want to keep studying to reach a Ph.D. level because I know I can. I also know I like to do research.” They usually had a specific explanation of why they were pursuing their education. One alumnus reasoned that he “needed at least a master’s to operate as a licensed practitioner.” Another said, “There are more job opportunities available with a master’s, and I am sure I don’t want to do HR and marketing.”

Information for the JIPP faculty

Comments about the University of Queensland. Many alumni talked about their good impression of their time at the University of Queensland. Firstly, it offered alumni the opportunity to explore and learn about themselves. One alumni said, “I did a lot of self-discovery by trying new types of work. Many friends also get to try internships and travel during this time.” Additionally, a lot of alumni also appreciate the different education experiences there. One said, “They have a different learning process. I was exposed to different types of research.” Alumni also specifically appreciate the subjects taught there. One alumnus described a certain course there as “more practical. It combines research methods and statistics together.” Another said, “I found more diverse subjects to study in Australia. For example, with volunteer work, I met people who studied social work and became interested in that.” Being at the University of Queensland seems to help alumni explore their interests, but perhaps more could be done to directly assist them in their career decision making process.



Guidance wanted.

Career in psychology. In the JIPP curriculum, there is a course called “Career in Psychology,” which is a mandatory class in the last semester of the 4th year. Alumni mentioned course activities such as “talking to a career counselor,” “interviewing a developmental psychologist” and other professionals. Like the result from Pisitsungkagarn (2018), alumni who brought up this course during the interview thought it was helpful in setting them on a more specific career path. One alumnus said, “It helped me organize my thoughts more even though I did not get an absolutely clear path.” Despite the positive evaluation of the course, there seem to still be some limitations. Like Pisitsungkagarn (2018), some alumni wished there were more variety in certain activities such as career site visits. Additionally, another alumnus also said that the course “should have come sooner so people would have a chance to find an internship.”

Additional support. Most alumni said they wish the faculty had done more to help them make the career choice. They expressed that more activities could be provided, such as “seminars for career related talks and internships,” “networking events,” and “mentoring.” Additionally, some pointed out that seniors and alumni could be given more roles in this process. One mentioned the senior and alumni network that is not “utilized” at all, even though they could be a good source of guidance and connection. One specific activity the faculty may help with is promoting more internship opportunities. One alumnus who struggled during the initial job search said she “did not know what jobs were available.” Having more guidance on this topic can be helpful to students.

Many alumni expressed concern regarding the need to intern and gain experience. Some suggested that it best be done between the semesters or specifically in the months before students leave for the University of Queensland. The faculty can “help announce where students can intern at exactly” and enlist the help of “seniors and alumni to advise the students.” Some alumni also mentioned that this has already been held annually with the JIPP counterpart in the Thai program. It seems unfair that JIPP students lack this assistance. Another alumnus suggested that diversity in these internship opportunities is also important. She said, “It would be good if the faculty promoted other careers that psychology can expand to, like researchers.” Others also mentioned other areas that JIPP students may be able to work in that are not clinical, counseling, and developmental psychology, and encouraged that these be promoted as well.

Variety in the curriculum. Some alumni also talked about the need for variety and choice in the main courses or Gen-ed courses in JIPP. Alumni mentioned these subjects as possible areas of interest: “IO psychology,” “Business,” “Introduction to Clinical Psychology,” “R language,” “Programming,” and “other subjects that may be more applicable specifically in the 21st century”. These courses could increase the understanding of more specific fields that are of students’ interest and widen the career opportunities for them.

Advice for current students

It is okay not to know what to do. One alumnus nicely summarized this advice as “Do not stress. People my age still don’t know what to do.” Many alumni have experienced the pressure of having to figure out what to do after graduation firsthand, and know it is difficult not to be stressed. “There is so much pressure to do something useful right after graduation, especially in Thailand,” said one alumnus. However, alumni also emphasized that it is normal not to know and to take the time to explore your interests. “It is okay not to know what to do right away,” said one alumnus. “In other countries, traveling and doing nothing after graduation is completely normal.”



Try everything. Many alumni suggested current students “explore what is out there” and try as many things as possible in order to explore their interests and find new opportunities. They also made some suggestions to perfectionists that the activities one tries do not have to match one's interests exactly since they are just for the sake of experience. “Even try things out of your field of interest,” said one alumnus. “The least that will do is you'll know whether you like it or not.” Another similarly said, “It doesn't have to be your passion. Just try to find what fits your current life circumstances.”

Communicate. Lastly, some alumni suggested that current students talk about their plans and ask for advice from seniors, alumni, and professors. One said, “You have support from your seniors. It is not easy to specifically ask them for things like internship information, but try anyway.” Another said that the process of interviewing, not unlike what we did for this research, could be really beneficial for students. Communicating with others can help current students gain a better understanding of their field of interest and what their choices are.

Discussion

The first part of this study found that most alumni worked in the year following their graduation. The specifications of these works were diverse, from tutoring to project managing. Few others chose to continue their study. According to the second part of the study, it is speculated that it could be because most alumni who planned to study did not do so right away because of COVID-19 or they were exploring their options.

This second part of this study explored the themes that emerged from interviews with alumni about their career decision making experience. The results suggested that most alumni struggled with uncertainty due to the high generalizability of the degree and change of plans during this process. The findings provide recognition of the unique difficulties psychology alumni face in the career decision making process which builds on the current understanding of this struggle, similarly highlighting the non-specific direction of graduates' careers after the completion of their degree (Landrum 2018; Martini et al. 2015). Additionally, it is observed that there are some differences in the experiences and perspectives of alumni who joined the workforce and those who continued their education. Those who joined the workforce had more internship experience while those who continue their education are certain in their self-knowledge and goals, which is in line with previous research (Strappe 2021). Additionally, most of those who were continuing their study or planned to choose to study abroad instead of in Thailand because of concern about the education quality.

During the interview, alumni also recommended some changes JIPP can make to accommodate the career decision making process. This is mainly requesting more guidance via support of seniors and alumni and additional seminars and courses. Comments were also made about the adjustment of the ‘Career in Psychology’ course, similar to results of another evaluative study of the same course (Pisitsungkagarn 2018). Alumni also provided some advice to current students who are unsure what career decision they should make, including accepting the uncertainty, exploring their interests, and asking seniors, alumni, and professors for advice. Additionally, we found that alumni primarily consider money and personal factors for their career path. On the other hand, a few but not many alumni listed family as their motivation. This may be because of the cultural impact of being an international student as culture is also another main factor influencing career decisions (Akosah-Twumasi et al. 2018).



This research clarifies the challenges of psychology students in making a career decision, and uncovers novel themes in their career decision making experiences; however, there are limitations to this study. Firstly, because this is an exploratory study, the scope of the study was so large that specific theories may not be analyzed and addressed adequately. Secondly, the sample size is too small, especially for the first part of the study. Including more alumni in future studies may help uncover a new or different aspect of this career decision making experience. Additionally, since the samples are all JIPP alumni, it may be less generalizable to other international psychology programs. Lastly, the validity of the second part of the study may be compromised due to the informal method of transcription which was done during the interview itself, and the researcher's limited understanding of the analysis method of thematic analysis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the career decision-making process for psychology students is characterized by a high degree of uncertainty, influenced by both the versatile nature of their degree and external disruptions. While many find their path in the workforce or onto higher education, the journey remains challenging. Our findings emphasize the need for better preparatory support from educational institutions. This study contributes to our understanding of these challenges and points towards ways in which such support can be strategically enhanced to better prepare future psychology graduates.

Suggestions

The process of career decision making is complex and unique to each individual; however, there are similar kinds of assistance alumni wish they had received. Universities and psychology programs could further support their students by providing more resources to prepare them for the future such as additional courses and mentorship. Additionally, current students could try to make peace with the uncertainty in their career path by being open-minded and seeking new experiences during and after their studies.

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Appendix A

1. Part 1 Survey Questions
2. Cohort
 - a. JIPP 8 (Graduate in 2021)
 - b. JIPP 7 (Graduate in 2020)
 - c. JIPP 6 (Graduate in 2019)
 - d. JIPP 5 (Graduate in 2018)
 - e. JIPP 4 (Graduate in 2017)
 - f. JIPP 3 (Graduate in 2016)
 - g. JIPP 2 (Graduate in 2015)
 - h. JIPP 1 (Graduated in 2014)
3. What did you do in the year right after JIPP graduation in terms of career? (Multiselect)
 - a. Work
 - b. Intern
 - c. Travel
 - d. Continue study
 - e. Nothing significant
4. Specify from the previous question (Optional)
5. Would you be willing to do an interview on this topic later? (Yes/No)
6. Contact information (If Yes to the previous question)