Research Article:

Social Support for Pursuing and Perseverance in Career Related Higher Education: The Lived Experiences of First-Generation Maldivian Youth

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ABSTRACT

The current education and employment policies of Maldives highlight the importance of increasing the number of youths with higher education for the sustainable development of the country. Given the importance of social support, this article focuses on young people's experiences of social support in deciding to pursue a career relevant to higher education and their commitment to the programme and future career. The study used a qualitative research methodology of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Participant selection focused on capturing recent experiences of making career-relevant higher education decisions. Hence, 14 first-generation higher education students studying in an undergraduate degree programme (in Maldives) were purposively selected as participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore their experiences of choosing a career-related higher education programme. Findings show that family networks were the most dominant source of social support and few participants also received social support from institutional members (school and college/university personnel), peers, and work colleagues. The article describes the degrees of social support mobilised by the students from different social networks and highlights the importance of strengthening institutional social networks for youth.

Keywords: Social support, first-generation students, career decision-making, higher education, Maldives

INTRODUCTION

Widening participation in higher education (HE) has gained increased political attention worldwide (Marginson, 2016; Mishra, 2020). Participation in higher education is increasing at an unprecedented rate and the phenomenon is observed in most middle-income countries and some low-income countries (Marginson, 2016). It argued that even though higher education is regulated by states and governments, what drives the expansion of higher education is neither public regulation nor employer demands (Marginson, 2016). Using Trow's (1973) three-staged theory of transition from elite education, to mass education to universal education, Marginson (2016) suggested that the prime driver of higher education expansion is parents and their children's desires for social betterment through professional work. Regardless of the driver (policies, families, or both) what is evident is that previously underrepresented groups such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds are entering the higher education system (Mishra, 2020).

Secondary education completion is universal in Central Europe, Central Asia, North America, approximately 90% in East Asia, 70% in South Asia, and just 43% in Southern and Eastern Africa (World Bank, 2023). The gross enrolment rate (GER) in secondary education within South Asia varies considerably with enrolment in Sri Lanka at 91% and just 50% in Pakistan, while Maldives sits at 70%. The Sustainable Development Goals for Education (SDG4) recognised that the path to higher education was through secondary education and encouraged countries to aim for universal secondary education and pursue a plan of lifelong learning (Smith & Antoniavoigt, 2020). GER in higher education exceeds 80% in North America, 78% in Europe and central Asia; is approximately 56% in East Asia Pacific and Latin America & Caribbean; 26% in Asia, and below 10% in African countries (World Bank, 2023). In 2019 GER in higher education enrolment was 30% in India, 20% in Sri Lanka and 12% in Pakistan (World Bank, 2023). While post-secondary education started in 2003 in Maldives it has seen an increase from just 13% in 2013 to 36% by 2020 (World Bank, 2023). The current Master Plan for Higher Education (MPHE) 2017-2022 proposes to increase GER in Higher Education to 60% (Ministry of Higher Education, 2019; 2020).

Given the status of higher education in the country, Maldives offers an interesting context to explore first-generation students' experiences of social support for career decision-making, transition to higher education, and perseverance in higher education. Firstly, evidence shows that with the successful universalisation of secondary education, the social demand for higher education has increased and Maldives is on a path towards massification of higher education (Shareef & Shougee, 2020). Secondly, Maldives offers an interesting context to explore the young people's experiences of social support as there are no formal career education programmes and relatively few organised careers-related social support initiatives exist in the school and higher education institutes. Since the Maldives does not have a formal career guidance programme, the government has plans to set up career hubs for education-industry linkages through a platform known as a job portal. These

career hubs are to provide a physical space for youth to access face-to-face and/or online information on jobs and careers (Ministry of Higher Education, 2020).

This research is a qualitative exploration of both formal and informal experiences of social support focusing on the career decision-making process and transition to career-related higher education programmes. The participants of the study are students who have successfully navigated through the process and are studying in the 2nd or 3rd year of a college/university undergraduate programme. Detailed examination of social support experiences of first-generation Maldivian students who had successfully navigated through high school and the first year of higher education, can help us understand the sources and types of social support that facilitated their journey. The findings of the research will help facilitate the process of enhancing the social support for first-generation college/university students (and generally all students) as the country moves towards massification in higher education. The next section of the article provides a brief overview of education and higher education in Maldives before proceeding with the rest of the article.

The Education Context of Maldives

The Maldives is an island state with 338,434 residential Maldivians. The Maldives comprises over 1,190 islands, of which only 188 are inhabited. About 25% of the population lives in the capital city, Male' and the rest is scattered over its inhabited islands. The population distribution of Maldives is a challenge for the provision of educational services (Ministry of Higher Education, 2019). The Maldives maintains universal enrollment up to lower secondary level, but enrollments in higher secondary education are relatively low. While there are eight higher secondary schools in the capital, there are only 1–3 higher secondary schools on average in the atolls (Asian Development Bank, 2015).

The evolution of higher education in Maldives closely aligns with Trow's (2007) three-staged model (Shareef & Shougee, 2020). In the first stage of higher education in Maldives (early 1900s) few students from elite families were sent abroad (Shareef & Shougee, 2020) which was later followed by merit-based scholarship to study abroad through various multilateral and bilateral aid. The first college in Maldives (Maldives College of Higher Education or MCHE) was established in 1998 and The Maldives National University (MNU), emerged from MCHE in 2011 (Aturupane et al., 2011).

The widening of locally based higher education can be conceptualised as mass education while the current GER rates indicate that Maldives has reached the universal higher education stage (i.e., GER higher than 15%). While the actual percentage of first-generation higher education students is not available from any published documents, based on the tacit knowledge of the researcher, many children of parents who graduated

from abroad commonly choose to study abroad, and hence, currently, the bulk of the young adults studying in local college/universities could be first-generation students.

A recent publication by the Ministry of Higher Education (2019) shows that 37% of 15–19 years old and 25% of 15–24 years old in the Maldives are NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training). This represents the population that has completed compulsory schooling (up to grade 10) and is not employed or studying. There is no research conducted in the Maldives on these NEETs or the young people who have successfully transitioned from compulsory schooling to career-relevant higher education programmes. An abundance of research shows that the various components and sources of support, such as social connections with family, peers and school, are essential contributions to the career development process of young people (Kenny et al., 2019; 2023), indicating that social support can aide young people in pursuing career-relevant higher education. However, studies show that contextual factors influence career development (e.g., Fouad & Kantamneni, 2021; Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Gibbons et al., 2020) and hence, findings from one context are not necessarily transferable due to differences in geography, ethnicity and cultural dynamics (e.g., Carrico et al., 2019).

Given the interplay of personal and sociocultural factors in the career decision-making process, it is important to explore the role of social support within various cultural contexts. Therefore, exploring the lived experiences of Maldivian youth who have successfully navigated the process from compulsory schooling to career-relevant higher education and are persevering in these programmes can contribute valuable information about the social support received and/or needs of this population. The findings and discussions presented in the current paper are focused on the following research objective (RO) and research questions (RQs). RO: (1) To explore lived experiences of social support in the pursuit and perseverance of career-related HE of first-generation young adults of the Maldives. RQs: (1) What are the various forms of social support that were available/received/used by the young people in pursuing and persevering in career-relevant in higher education programmes?; (2) What are the main sources of social support. Drawing from the review of theoretical and empirical research and the researcher's familiarity with the school and higher education context of Maldives, participants were probed about the social support used at various stages of making career-relevant educational decisions.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Social Support

Social support has been conceptualised and defined varyingly and hence it's important to define it and disassociate it with other similar terms that are often used interchangeably. The terms social support, social integration, and social networks are often used interchangeably to refer to distinct aspects such as social relationships: the existence

or quantity (social integration), their formal structure (social support), or their functional content (House, 1987). It is argued that functional content which focuses on the flows of various resources is the most precise use for the term social support (House, 1987). Career-related social support resources can come in different forms such as instrumental support or practical (e.g., information, advice, financial help) or emotional support (e.g., affection, sympathy, and companionship) (Garcia et al., 2015) and can be provided by family, friends, and significant other (e,g, Ataç et al., 2018; Ghosh & Fouad, 2017). Tardy (1985) identified five possible dimensions of social support including: (a) direction (given or received), (b) disposition (available/provided or enacted), (c) description/assessment (social support description and/or satisfaction with) (d) content (e.g., informational, emotional), and (e) networks/source (family, friends, teachers, etc).

Social support is an essential element to many theories and recent career development models, where it is regarded as a critical career resource (Hirschi, 2018; Marciniak et al., 2021) and predictor of adolescents' career preparedness (Marciniak et al., 2022). The current research uses a multidimensional perspective of social support including informational, emotional and practical support, and focusses on participants' experience of social support for pursuing and perseverance in higher education. The exploration of different types of social support, the different sources of support within the given context, and the receivers' satisfaction with the support would lead to a better understanding of support experiences. Such conceptualisation of social support highlights its multidimensional nature, and that people may rely on all types of social support in navigating career transitions across the career lifespan (Greer & Kirk, 2022).

A review of literature linking social support to HE shows mixed results. For example, a systematic review of literature (predominantly from the United States) showsthat family is a critical source of support to all HE student groups (Mishra, 2020). Likewise, research on university students in Indonesia found that family support was the most critical factor for their career choices (Koto et al., 2019). However, findings show that peer group influence on career choices was higher than family influence for Pakistani HE students (Arif et al., 2019), while peer groups and family did not influence the career choices of Sri Lankan HE students (Saranapala & Devadas, 2020). Research also shows that social support has a positive effect on reducing career choice anxiety of Korean HE students (Park et al., 2018) and Kosovar high school students who report higher levels of social support reported lower levels of career indecision (Jemini-Gashi et al., 2019). However, Maduwanthi and Priyashantha's (2018) research on HE students in Sri Lanka found that family support had a significant positive impact on career indecision. This mixed result can be due to cultural differences towards social support needs and provision. It is believed that the benefits of social support depend on the cultural context of support provision/receipt (Kim et al., 2008; Nurullah, 2012) and the appropriateness and match between support needs and provided/received support in that ethnocultural context (Nurullah, 2012). Overall, while studies demonstrate a

clear link between social support and HE, the exact relationship and extent is highly dependent on cultural contexts. Therefore, it is important to explore and determine how social support affects HE in a Maldivian context.

Social support for career decision-making and higher education of first-generation students

There is much literature pertaining to the challenges faced by first-generation students (i.e., students whose parents had not obtained a first degree) primarily based on research conducted in the United States (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). First-generation student's experiences of transition to higher education are marked by challenges including lack of social capital, academic preparation, family support, financial resources (Evans et al., 2020), and high levels of stress and uncertainty (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018). As previously underrepresented groups such as first-generation students are becoming a part of higher education, they are more at risk of dropping out without completing a degree (e.g., Covarrubias et al., 2019; Mishra, 2020). For many students starting higher education involves leaving their current home, family, and friends and settling in a new environment hence, both instrumental/information and emotional support are significant in higher education success (Mishra, 2020). Research findings also show that first-generation students report lower levels of career decision-making self-efficacy (Harlow & Bowman, 2016) and report less social support from family than non-first-generation participants (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Despite these challenges, research findings also show that first-generation students transition to HE and persevere (Mishra, 2020; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). Recent qualitative research with first-generation students who had successfully transitioned into HE highlighted the importance of the role of social support. For example, a recent qualitative study conducted with first-generation universities in the United States showed that the participants engaged in multiple forms of social support (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018). Likewise, recent qualitative research with first-year first-generation students in Africa found that family, community and peers played an important role in supporting and encouraging them to pursue and persevere in university (Motsabi et al., 2020). While qualitative research can provide rich and nuanced accounts of lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022) of social support that facilitated career transitions, there is a dearth of research in the area from the South Asian context in general, particularly qualitative research and research on underprivileged groups. This could be due to the fact that career development resources are less developed in these countries. For example, a framework for determining students' HE choices does not exist within Sri Lanka's current education system (Lakshmi et al., 2023) and only a few career-related studies on underprivileged students have been conducted in India (Joshi & Bakshi, 2016). Similarly, currently there are no formal career guidance systems or career-related research from Maldives. Therefore, as this article focuses on a sample of first-generation students it is important to determine the quality of their social support and how it informs their transition into HE.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Model

Career development theories derived from cognitive psychology focus on how people develop career-relevant interests and career decision-making theories from vocational psychology focus on the decision-making process (i.e., decisional heuristic) (Lent & Brown, 2020). The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT: Lent et al., 1994, 2000; Lent & Brown, 2013) postulates that career goals are determined by the interplay of personal factors (e.g., culture) with external influences (e.g., supports and barriers). Alternatively, career decision-making theories focus on several sequential sub-stages of the decision-making process (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021). As highlighted by Gati and Landman-Tal (2019) prominent six-staged models of career decision-making (e.g. Krumboltz & Hamel, 1977; Peterson et al., 1996) can be summarised by three core stages: Prescreening, In-depth exploration, and Choice (PIC). Likewise, Harren's (1979) and Germeijs and Verschueren's (2007) models on students' transition from school-to-HE can also be summarised by the three core stages. Hence, this research used a conceptual model derived by integrating the interest-choice model of the SCCT (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2013) and the three generic stages of career decision-making derived from career decision-making theories (Gati & Landman-Tal, 2019; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007; Harren, 1979). Figure 1 shows the conceptual model used in this study.
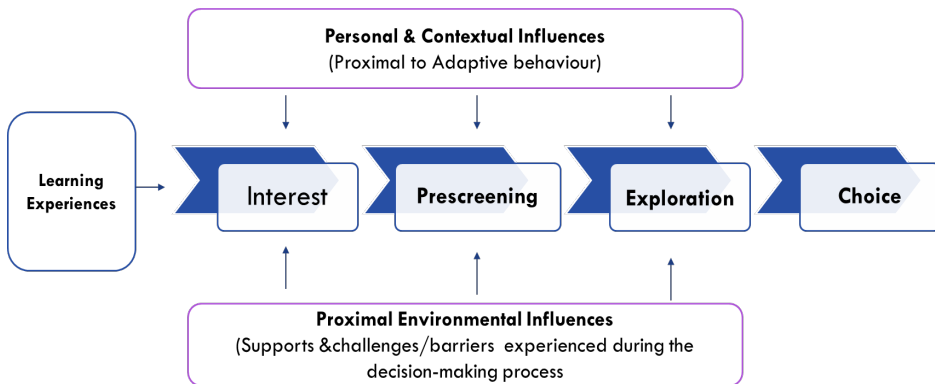

Figure 1. Conceptual model

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to explore and understand the phenomena in this context. IPA focuses on the diversity of lived experiences, contextual influences and the life narratives of the participants (Miller et al., 2018). IPA's propensity for capturing context-specific situations and understanding of issues and needs of individuals in the context (Charlick et al., 2016) is aligned with the aim of making suggestions for creating support and facilitating the career decision-making process of young adults in Maldives.

IPA is grounded in the principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Noon, 2018). Drawing fromthe ideas from phenomenology and hermeneutics IPA has two main aims exploring how people make sense of their lived experiences and understanding the experiences through detailed interpretation of the experience (Smith et al., 2009; Tuffour, 2017). The ideographic focus makes each individual case central to researchers who using IPA and researchers try to understand as much as possible about each case before moving on to the next case (Noon, 2018). Hence, IPA suggests a small number of participants and focuses on an in-depth understanding of the phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

According to the creators of IPA when researchers choose IPA, they commit themselves to certain methods of data collection and analysis (Smith et al., 2009). As IPA is an experiential qualitative approach that aims to "explore the human experience from the point of view of those who are having the experience", the focus is primarily on participant accounts (Smith & Nizza (2022, p. 6). Therefore, the main method of data collection in IPA studies is semi-structured interviews (Smith et al., 2009) and much published IPA work relies solely on interviews (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Howard et al., 2019; VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). For example, career researchers using IPA have used semi-structured interviews as the sole data collection method (with 7–8 participants) to explore the phenomena of career anxiety in undergraduate students (Pisarik et al., 2017), social support on elite athletes' life adjustment after retirement (Brown et al., 2018) and participants' experiences of good career related-decisions (Pop & van Nieuwerburgh, 2019). Therefore, in this study, we used semi-structured interviews as data collection tool.

Population, Participant Recruitment and Sample of The Study

The population of the study were students who were studying towards their first degree in Maldives. Participants were recruited from a public university and a private college

located in Male'. Purposive sampling procedures were used to recruit participants who met the recruitment criteria of the study, which were:

1. A college/university student studying in a degree programme at a local college/ university.

2. The student is between the ages of 18–26 years.

3. First-generation students.

Furthermore, to ensure the inclusion of participants from a variety of career domains, the researcher identified four areas of career-related education programmes for participant recruitment. Educational programmes were selected based on higher education statistics and overall enrollment in various degree programmes (Ministry of Higher Education, 2020). The four areas include: (a) Bachelor of Business [4 participants]; (b) Bachelor of Information Technology/Computer Science [4 participants]; (c) Bachelor of Primary Teaching [3 participants], and (d) Bachelor of Psychology [3 participants].

Participants were recruited from two HE institutes in consultation with the respective course coordinators. Participant information sheets and invitations for voluntary participation were shared through the course coordinators. Seventeen prospective students' volunteers were screened by the researcher through Viber communications to ensure meeting study criteria and 14 participants (nine females and five males) were recruited for the study. The average age of participants was 22 years old. All 14 participants are first-generation college/university.

Data Collection Technique and Interview Protocol

Given the idiographic focus IPA recommends a small amount of participants and IPA studies has been published with 1–4 participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). However, in this research, the 3–4 participants from four different career fields (a total of 14 – see sampling) were recruited to triangulate the purpose. Furthermore, a conceptual model derived from multiple career-relevant theories was used throughout the research.

The primary data collection technique was individual semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interview questions provided the researcher with the advantage of adjusting questioning accordingly during the interview (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The interview protocol was developed by the researcher and was guided by the research objectives and the review of theoretical and empirical literature. The interview questions were arranged in the sequence of four stages of career decision-making and the major influences during each stage. The interview protocol was validated by four education experts from Maldives. The interview protocol included preliminary questions related to participants' demographic and socioeconomic background the core analytical question,

sub-questions, and probes relevant to each major question. The core analytical question related to this paper was about the lived experiences of the major types and sources of social support which assisted in them in pursuing and persevering in career-related higher education programmes.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using the six-step guidelines suggested by the founders of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). The transcribed interviews were shared with the participants for member checking. The six steps include: (a) reading and re-reading, (b) initial coding, (c) developing emergent themes, (d) searching for connections across emergent themes, (e) moving to the next case, and (f) looking for patterns across cases. The researcher first identified the emergent themes for each participant. The analysis for connections and patterns held off until the initial steps were conducted on all interview scripts. The researcher was interested in finding the critical emergent themes for all participants. At the end of the sixth stage of data analysis, the researcher then took the analysis to a deeper level by importing the theoretical lens of multidimensional social support to view the analysis. All three authors were involved in data analysis and contributed at various stages of the data analysis process.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Ethical issues were considered during all stages of the research. It included gaining approvals from the University Ethics Committee, local college/university and informed consent from participants. All interviews, transcribing and data analysis was undertaken by the researcher. At the start of each interview, the researcher ascertained that the participants understood that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw their participation at any point. In the write-up of research findings pseudonyms and aggregates of participants' demographics are used to protect the identity of participants.

FINDINGS

Theme One: Participants Needs and Experiences of Social Support from The Family Context

Parental approval for career and higher education choices

The interviews of many participants show they sought the approval of their parents prior to going ahead with their career interests and that their parent's opinions were critical

to them. Findings showed that all 14 participants discussed or shared their career intentions with their families. Five participants noted that families encouraged them to choose a career of their liking. For example, Mana said that her parent believed that "children should go forward in an area that they are interested in." Similarly, Aiman also noted that her "parents were supportive of whatever career" she wanted but her "mum and dad's opinion matter most," so she always "discuss these matters with them first." Likewise, Sujau also said:

> My family members were very supportive of my studies. They all want to me go forward in my studies as much as possible. My family's opinion was important to me…and family was ok with what I chose, this was my choice, and everyone was happy with it. So, it was very easy for me. (Sujau, 22/04/2021, 01:00 p.m.)

The parents of Sara, Dhana, and Zaid wanted different careers for their children, but they too eventually let them follow their own career interests. For example, Zaid wanted to join the police force or MNDF (Maldives National Defence Force) but initially his mother did not agree to it. Yet he was able to get his mother's approval for joining the police force. According to Zaid: "She only agreed due to my interest and because of how much I wanted to join it". Unlike other parents, Mala said her "mum did not want to send" to Male' for higher education, and she believed that she "should get married" instead. According to Mala her mum only agreed after she "begged" her parents to send her back to Male' to study.

The findings showed that the participants wanted their parents, especially mothers to approve their career choices. For example, Dhanish highlighted that "most of my decision-making was with my mother" because "her decision did count" for him. Three other participants (Haleem, Haneefa and Neena) specifically highlighted their mother's role. Haleem said: "My family and mum were very supportive. Mum would always say choose an area that you are interested in". Neena's interview also showed the prominence of her mother in her career decision-making journey. According to Neena, only her mum supported her decision to join a private institute. She added: "It's only my mum's opinion that I care." Similarly when Haneefa wanted to follow her career interest (instead of her parents), she turned to her mother for support. According to Haneefa, when she told her mum that she really "wanted to become a teacher," her mother supported her decision. Sudha also said:

> The opinion of my family regarding my career choice is very important to me. Because of that, I have given up on many careers. …My mother always had a dream of at least one of her children becoming a teacher. So, she was very happy when I decided to become a teacher. (Sudha, 29/04/2021, 09:00 p.m.)

Likewise, Zeenath also gave up on some of her career interests because of her parents. Zeenath's interview highlighted that she considered family support as a crucial factor in her career choice decisions at different decision-making stages. In junior secondary, Zeenath had wanted to choose the business stream but did not do it because her mother objected to it. Even after completing school, Zeenath initially enrolled in a degree in business administration. Nevertheless, she did not get family support to persevere in this degree programme. While talking about her current career/study area, she said:

> When I chose psychology, I did not get any negative comments from the family. I think family support was very important to me because in this situation I think it would be very difficult to go forward with it without their support, especially for a girl it would be difficult. For example, in future if I get a kid and I was in a field that mum and them do not approve, then I might not get the support that I need. (Zeenath, 28/04/2021, 03:00 p.m.)

Emotional support from parents and other female family members: Believing in them, providing encouragement and being there for them

Participants interviews show that they received and/or sought emotional support during their study period, and it was predominantly provided by family members. Most participants described emotional support as being there for them to talk during stressful times and encouraging them to continue with their studies. Twelve participants noted that it was parents or family members that provided them with emotional support. Participant's descriptions of emotional support included aspects such as providing them with encouragement (e.g., Sudha and Haleem), checking up on them (e.g., Zaid and Haleem), or being there for them (Zeenath and Mala). For example, Zaid said:

> Emotionally, all my family members gave me emotional support. They would always call me and tell me to be strong, and that I can do this, and they would remind me that I am the only person from the family who has come this far [educationally]. That I could do it. (Zaid, 19/06/2021, 10:00 a.m.)

Alternatively, Sudha and Haleem regarded the support and encouragement for them to follow their career interest as emotional support. In the case of both participants, the providers of this support were female members of the family. For example, Haleem noted that his mother was the source of emotion for him. According to Haleem his mother "encouraged" him to "go forward in area" that he liked and "would always tell" him that if he liked something he "will be able to do it". Likewise, Sudha said:

I got emotional support from my family, especially from the two sisters who were residing with me and also from one of my cousins who was already a teacher. She told me that it's a good thing that I thought of this, and I can really do this. (Sudha, 29/04/2021, 09:00 p.m.)

Six other participants (Dhanish, Haleem, Aiman, Sujau, and Neena) specifically mentioned the role of female members (mother, grandmother and aunt) in providing emotional support for perceiving in college/university. For example, Sujau highlighted that his "main support system" is his mother, and "even now" his "mum would call and ask about studies and encourage" him to "study harder". Aiman also noted the emotional support enacted from her mother when she was feeling stressed about her study deadlines. Aiman said: "Sometimes the stress and workload are too high and when I can't concentrate, I do these things with my mum, and she gives me good advice. And that helps me to focus on my studies". Similarly, Neena said:

Emotionally it is my family. By family, I mean my aunt and my mother, and my grandmother. Without them, I don't think I would be here. Now I am starting a new semester. My grandmother will call me and ask whether I am studying. Will tell me I can study well and so do study. (Neena, 18/03/2021, 07:00 p.m.)

Information and practical support from family members

Family members were also a main source of informational support. They provided career-relevant information support by suggesting career possibilities and provided them with encouragement when they were unsure. For example, Sujau's brother suggested that he study information technology, and Dhana's uncle encouraged her to follow through with her career interest in computer science and reassured her that "it was actually a very good career area." In addition, when Zaid could not study criminology, his brothers provided him with informational support that about an alternative career. According to Zaid:

My brothers who are working in the resort have told me that in the resorts most of those who work in HR [Human Resource] area are foreigners. So, they suggested that I study in HR area for the future. In the future, according to the new laws the resorts would need to hire locals for HR posts too. (Zaid, 19/06/2021, 10:00 a.m.)

Findings also showed that half of the participants received or sought the college/ university application process. For example, Haleem got a suggestion from family about which college was best for his area. Many participants were in their islands when they applied to the colleges/universities and sought the help of extended family members

such as cousins who were already studying in the capital island where the tertiary institutes were located. Five participants received information support and practical support during the application process. For example, according to Aiman:

> When I first applied, it was my dad who lodged it. My dad got me the available courses. We went through them and decided on this course. I would say my dad was very helpful in filling out the forms when I was going to apply. Ever since I moved to Male, I have been doing these things on my own, which is not very challenging for me. (Aiman, 26/04/2021, 08:30 p.m.)

Similarly, Dhana, Dhawood, Sudha, and Sara highlighted how their extended family members supported and facilitated the college/university application process. For example, Dhana completed the process with her sister. Her sister helped her to fill out the forms. She went with her and "explained the process." Likewise, Sudha's family aided with different tasks of the application process. For example, her cousin gave her "the link to the available course in the institution and how to apply for the course," and she filled out hard copy forms herself. Then her "sister went to the institution to submit the forms to the institution," and she also assistance from her "sister to get registered." Sara's cousins also helped her with "the form filling," and a cousin "who was living in Male'" submitted all the forms.

Theme Two: Participants Needs and Experiences of Social Support from The Educational Context

Emotional support from teachers: Believing in them, encouraging words and provision of information as a form of caring

The findings of the research show that there were no formal avenues for participants to receive career-relevant information or discuss career interests with their teachers. The few participants who had received career-relevant information, career suggestions, or took the initiative to discuss their career interests with teachers fondly talked about these incidents in the interviews. For example, Haneefa and Sara shared their interest in teaching and received encouragement from their teachers. When Haneefa told her business teacher about her interest in teaching, he encouraged her and provided her with information about higher education. Likewise, when Sarah was asked about her sources of support she said:

> As for support, I would say that most of my teachers were supportive. They were encouraging when I told them I want to be a teacher. They would tell me it is very hard, but they are also very encouraging. (Sara, 18/05/2021, 09:00 a.m.)

Alternatively, Mana and Mala had received career suggestions from their teachers. According to Mana seeing that other students were comfortable discussing their problems with Mala, some of her schoolteachers suggested that she should become a psychologist. Likewise, Mala said that her economics teacher suggested that she become an economics teacher. According to Mala (who doing a degree in business) even now she occasionally thinks she "should consider becoming an economics teacher".

The interviews with participants indicated that any form of teacher support was appreciated. Participants regarded positive attitudes and beliefs about them as emotional support. For example, Dhawood noted that he had plenty of emotional support from parents and teachers who believed that he "could do anything" if he "really focussed on it". When asked about emotional support, Mala talked about the love and support she had received from some teachers in her island school when she went back after studying in the capital for a brief time. Mala said:

> The mathematics and economics teachers were very loving to me. I think it was because of them that I was able to keep up my studies after I had to go back to the island after coming to Male'.

The interviews of Dhana and Haleem showed that participants wanted to discuss their career interests with teachers and remember positive and negative experiences with their teachers. For example, Dhana wanted to pursue a career in information technology and discussed the issue with her computer teacher. When her computer teacher discouraged her from following her interest, she regarded it as "negative emotional support". Alternatively, Dhana took the initiative to discuss her career interest with another teacher and fondly remembered her in an interview. Dhana said: "She was not my teacher. She came to our class once and she was very nice so my friend and I used to go to her and talk about careers and how we can choose a career". Haleem also described a lack of encouragement as negative emotional support. Describing his experiences of informational support from teachers Haleem said:

> From my experience of the education school system, informational support, it has been at times given because it is something that has to be given, that is the only reason why they give it. Some teachers give emotional support while other teachers at times give the opposite of emotional support. For example, for a student in our class when he/she was good at a particular subject it has been said to the student that you are only good at one subject, and you cannot go forward in that subject if you are not good at other subjects too. (Haleem, 19/05/2021, 01:30 a.m.)

Emotional support, information and practical support from friends for higher education

The findings of the study show that most of the participants (10 participants) received or sought support from their friends and peers for higher education transition and perseverance in higher education. Participants mentioned social support from friends/ peers only in relation to making career-relevant choices in secondary school and transition to higher education. Furthermore, participants noted that peers were a main source of emotional support in persevering in higher education.

Participants' description of their journey highlights that perceived emotional support from friends was also an important aspect of educational and higher education decision-making. Participants who had no firm career choices made secondary education and higher education decisions based on the decisions of their friends. For example, Dhawood (who did not think about a career in secondary school) chose business studies as an elective subject and Zaid chose the "business stream" because most of their friends chose it. Sara's interview highlighted the importance of a familiar person and companionship, especially as they move into higher education. According to Sara when she first went to the college/ university she was "very nervous" because there were no familiar faces but fortunately for her, she met "a friend who was doing the same course, so it was ok after that".

Dhawood, Neena and Mala's higher education programmes were also influenced by their friends. Both Dhawood and Neena first completed a certificate course in business administration and Dawood decided to continue with a first degree in business management with "his batch mates" and Neena decided to pursue a degree in marketing with her close friends. Likewise, Mala also said:

> I wanted to do an accounting degree then but what happened was none of my friends were joining the accounting degree so I was thinking that studying accounting at bachelors will be very difficult without a foundation. But because most of my friends decided to study here and I wanted to be with them too [in a business administration degree]. (Mala, 3/07/2021, 02:00 p.m.)

Participants often received emotional support in the form of encouragement at stressful times during college/university education. Sujau, Aiman, Sara and Haleem noted that their friends/peers were an important source of emotional support. For example, Haleem noted that his "friends also gave emotional support to some extent in terms of encouragement" and Sujau also said that the friends he made in college were "very helpful" and he got "emotional support from them too". Aiman also said: "My friends who study with me are a good source of emotional support because they motivate me to do my best". Sudha felt that her friends were the best source of emotional support for her.

Friends and peers were often a source of both information/advice support, companionship, motivation (emotional support) and practical support during the process of exploration of higher education options/courses. For example, Dhanish and Zaid received information and advice from friends about higher education colleges/ courses, Sara discussed her application plans with her friends, Dawood did his application with a friend and "helped each other", and Haneefa's friend submitted the college application forms as she was still living in her island at the time of application (practical support).

Others like Haleem, Dhawood and Neena got multiple forms of support from their friends during the college application process. For example, Haleems friends gave him advice on how to explore college/course while another friend "recommended" the college and helped him "in getting documents, looked into the process and what needs to be done, and explained the process". Neena's interview also highlights the important role of her friend in pushing her to enroll in higher education. According to Neena:

> And there was a friend of mine who pushed me to [X] college. He came to my house with the forms and made me fill the forms and submitted the forms. After one month I got admittance to the course. (Neena, 18/03/2021, 07:00 p.m.)

DISCUSSION

The study aim of this study was to explore lived experiences of social support for first-generation young adults from Maldives, in their decision-making process, transition to, and perseverance in career-related higher education programmes. The findings of the research were presented under two main themes: (1) social support from the family context and (2) social support from the education context. As shown by the sub-themes, participants received or enacted all three types (information, emotional, and practical support) from both contexts, in varying degrees. The sub-themes also highlight the multiple sources of social support from the family context (parents, grandparents, aunts, siblings, and cousins) and the few sources of support from the school context (teachers and peers/friends).

Participants had received/enacted all three forms of support (i.e., informational, emotional, and practical) from various family members. In this respect, these findings are similar to past qualitative research conducted with first-generation students that found parents and family members as the most salient source of motivation for HE (Albien & Naidoo, 2016; Evans et al., 2020; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). Mitchall and Jaeger (2018) noted that parents often helped during choice moments just by being supportive but in a 'hands-off' fashion. While many participants of this study

also affirmed that their parents motivated them to follow their own interests, most participants of this research wanted their parents to be active participants in their career-relevant educational choices. This study found that participants often turned to parents for advice and all participants sought parental validation of their career choices. Most participants discussed their interests and educational plans with their parents, especially their mothers, and valued their input. When participant'sparents career interests did not match, they appealed to the parents and gained their approval prior to going ahead with their career choices, and the two participants (Sara and Zeenath) who could not get their parents' approval for their interest eventually changed their career directions.

The findings show that participants talked about receiving or seeking specific forms of social support at specific stages of the journey, indicating that the social support needs varied according to the stage of career-relevant choices. While all participants desired at least a bachelor's degree, most had not decided on a future career by the time they completed school and needed information about occupations. The college/university application process was also alien to most participants, and their parents lacked the knowledge to assist them. However, other family members like cousins and friends/peers provided practical support and companionship during the college/university exploration and application process. The findings of the study indicated that the parents compensated for their lack of information through their encouragement, motivation and overall emotional support throughout their journey.

The findings of the study also specifically highlighted the importance of female family members in provision of emotional support. Many participants noted that their main source or the sole source of emotional social support for their higher education studies were their mothers, grandmothers, or aunts. In this respect, the findings of this study differ from past studies (e.g., Kantamneni et al., 2018) that noted that fathers' social support was more important for higher education decisions. This research showed that mothers and other female family members were instrumental in developing positive attitudes towards higher education. These findings can be related to role of women in education sector of Maldives. In ancient times Maldives was known as the 'land of women' in Sri Lanka (Bandi, 2017) and was ruled by powerful queens and had a matrilineal tradition (Bandi, 2017; UNESCO, 1989). All Maldivian children regardless of their sex were exposed to the traditional education systems where the instructors were mainly females and the levels of literacy were higher for women than men (UNESCO, 1989). Furthermore, recent employment statistic shows that women dominate the professional category partly due to the high percentages of trained teachers (Abdullah et al., 2018). Therefore, it is not surprising that the primary source of emotional/encouragement support was the females of the family.

Participants also recalled social support from the teachers, although it was less prominent when compared to the support received by parents and family members.

Two participants recalled career suggestions from teachers and a few participants discussed their educational and career intentions with teachers who encouraged them to pursue their interests. Participants appreciated the encouragement received from the teacher. The findings highlighted that forms of social support from a teacher including information support, or practical support from teachers were regarded as caring/emotional support.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our research findings enhance the understanding of the importance of social support in the career decision-making process, transition to, and perseverance in higher education and contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the role of social support in this career transition. The findings provide new insights, that the social support needs shifted with career decision-making and transition into higher education. The findings showed that young people needed informational support (e.g., various occupations, the relationship between school subjects and occupations) while they are in school, especially high school; followed by information and practical support for college/exploration and application process towards the end of formal schooling; and information and emotional support for acclimatising and persevering HE environment. Given that social support needs and expectations vary by culture and context and this research, the first on career choices (also social support) in Maldives, it contributes new knowledge from an ethno-cultural perspective. The findings showed that first-generation students of Maldives needed their families to validate their academic and career choices; family support was a multifaced concept based on positive attitudes, motivation and general support for all educational and career areas. This need was generally met, especially through the female members of the family. The young people also desired encouragement/emotional support from school/university personnel (e.g., teachers, school/university counselors) for choosing a career and pursuing and persevering in higher education. However, this remains a generally unmet need, which has specific implications for school policy.

The findings suggest the need for programmes, and activities that provided informational and practical support during career-relevant choice points and transition to higher education and social support persons (e.g., school counselors, and higher education counselors) to guide the career decision-making process of young adults and provide the emotional support in general and especially for first-generation students. The findings of the research also suggest the need for specialised higher education orientation programmes for prospective first-generation students and their parents. Based on the findings, offering such programmes earlier on, while the prospective students are still in secondary school may increase its benefits and decrease first-generation students' uncertainty. The findings also indicate that high school students' contact with higher education student bodies could facilitate the transition process for first-generation

students by reducing their anxiety about entering the new environment. Nevertheless, given the crucial role that family members play in supporting young people's career and education dreams, it is important that career guidance activities conducted in school do not alienate parents from the process.

The current study explored the experiences of first-generation young adults who had already gone through the process of choosing a career-relevant higher education and were preserved in these programmes at local colleges and universities. Further research with diverse groups of young adults in Maldives can provide a holistic picture as their experience of social support enactment/needs could be different from first-generation students studying in local colleges. For example, there is a common practice of the overwhelming majority of children of graduate parents predominantly going abroad for their higher education. Likewise, exploring the lived experience of social support enactment/needs from a gender lens can highlight differences between both genders.

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