Comprehensive Career Counseling Strategy for Pakistani Schools and Colleges

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Introduction

Pakistan is a nation with a tremendous "youth bulge", as over 60% of its population is composed of young people (1). This demographic presents a great opportunity for economic and social development – but only if the country's youth are guided into productive careers that match their aptitudes and the market's needs. Career counseling (also termed Career Guidance and Counseling, or CGC) refers to professional guidance that helps students understand their interests and abilities, explore education and career options, and make informed decisions about their futures. Unfortunately, career counseling is strikingly scarce in Pakistan's education system, especially at the school and college level (grades 10–12). Research indicates that 99% of Pakistani students lack access to career counselling services during their schooling and even university years (2). In practical terms, this means that nearly all Pakistani students navigate the critical transition from school to higher education or work without any formal guidance from trained counselors. They are left to make life-shaping career choices based on limited information, ad-hoc advice, and societal pressures. This report examines the current state of career counseling (or lack thereof) in Pakistani schools and colleges, the prevailing career trends among youth, and the impact of insufficient guidance. We also include quantitative comparisons with other countries to contextualize Pakistan's situation, and we discuss emerging initiatives and recommendations for strengthening career counseling in the country. The focus is on secondary schools and higher-secondary colleges (approximately ages 15–18, equivalent to grades 10–12 in a U.S. high school context), as decisions made at this stage – such as choice of academic track or pre-professional program – critically influence students' career trajectories.

Shortfalls in career guidance have far-reaching consequences for Pakistan's youth. Many students end up choosing fields based on family expectations or prestige rather than personal fit, leading to dissatisfaction and underperformance later on. Others simply drop out of the education pipeline due to lack of direction. Only about 26% of Pakistani students make it to any form of higher education, while 74% discontinue their studies after school, and experts identify the lack of timely guidance as a major contributing factor to this high dropout rate (3). Even among those who do pursue college or university, a large number make suboptimal or "wrong" academic choices, often realizing too late that their selected field does not align with their strengths or job market realities (3). In sum, there is an urgent need for structured

career counseling in Pakistan's education system. The subsequent sections delve into the evidence for these issues in detail – from the career aspirations and decision-making patterns of students, to the near-absence of counseling infrastructure in schools, to the repercussions visible in employment outcomes. We also compare Pakistan's scenario with other countries and highlight what can be learned from global best practices.

1 Education and Career Trends in Pakistani Youth

To understand the impact of missing career counseling, it is important first to review what educational and career paths Pakistani youth are taking. The overall educational attainment in Pakistan is low by global standards – as noted, only roughly one-quarter of students continue to any form of higher education (3). According to UNESCO data, the gross enrollment ratio at the secondary level in Pakistan is about 45%, and at the tertiary (college/university) level only about 12% (4). In other words, out of all college-age youth, barely one in eight is enrolled in higher education, which is one of the lowest rates in the world. This steep attrition reflects many factors (economic constraints, limited college capacity, etc.), but lack of guidance amplifies the problem: many students do not have a clear sense of why continuing education would benefit them or how to navigate pathways to college and careers (3). As a result, potential talent is lost. By comparison, the global tertiary enrollment rate averages around 38%, highlighting how far behind Pakistan lags in channeling students into advanced education (4)

Among the students who do make it through high school, certain career ambitions dominate. Surveys of Pakistani high-schoolers show a heavy skew toward a few traditional professions. For example, in one study of higher-secondary students in Karachi, nearly one-third (32.6%) said they aimed to become engineers, and another 29.8% aspired to become doctors (5). In other words, almost two-thirds of students were clustered in just two career goals (medicine or engineering) – fields long viewed in Pakistani society as prestigious and financially rewarding. Only the remaining 38% of students expressed interest in other careers, which likely included professions like business, IT, the armed forces, law, academia, etc. (each of those presumably comprising much smaller fractions). This indicates a narrow breadth of career awareness. It aligns with cultural observations that "typical" high-status occupations – doctors, engineers, and lawyers – attract many youth due to their prestige and perceived high income, even though there are over 200 other distinct career paths in the modern economy (1, 6). Minor and McLean (2002) found that most Pakistani undergraduates preferred law, medicine, or engineering as careers because these were seen as offering status and recognition (1). High academic achievers often feel pressure to choose one of these tracks, reinforcing a societal bias that equates a few professions with success.

However, the reality is that the capacity in these coveted fields is limited – and the competition is intense. Each year, tens of thousands of students who have been funneled (often by parental or societal expectation) into the pre-medical or pre-engineering streams in 11th–12th grade sit for entrance exams to professional colleges, only to be turned away. According to the British Council, about 41,000 students take the medical college entry test annually in Pakistan, while only around 5,000 (roughly 12%) succeed in gaining admission to medical colleges (3). Similarly, over 70,000 students sit for engineering university entrance

exams, with only about 7,200 (10%) admitted (3). These numbers imply that each year over 36,000 aspiring doctors and 63,000 aspiring engineers are unsuccessful in entering the professions they had set their hearts on. Many of these youth have dedicated their high school years exclusively to these tracks (often neglecting other subjects or career exploration) and find themselves at a painful crossroads when admission eludes them. The British Council commentary notes that due to lack of guidance, "250,000+ students are suffering annually" – including the tens of thousands mentioned above and an estimated 150,000 or more students from other groups who remain confused about choosing a discipline after high school (3). In other words, hundreds of thousands of Pakistani students graduate from school each year with uncertainty or disappointment regarding their next steps, largely because they had aimed narrowly and were not counseled about alternate pathways or realistic outcomes.

It is worth noting that most Pakistani students opt for the science stream in higher secondary school (Intermediate/A-Levels) if they have any academic aptitude, as it is often seen as the default route to prestigious careers (5). In the Karachi study, the majority had taken Science as a major in high school (5). Far fewer choose humanities or vocational tracks, partly due to the stigma or lower status associated with those in the local context. This imbalance can lead to an oversupply of science students vying for limited professional seats and a neglect of other fields. The end result is a mismatch between student aspirations and actual opportunities. For instance, while 40,000–70,000 students compete for a few thousand med/eng seats, sectors like technical trades, entrepreneurship, agriculture, teaching, or emerging digital careers see relatively few entrants despite there being demand in those areas. Awareness of many modern career options is very low among Pakistani youth. A survey in neighboring India (which has a comparable South Asian context) found that 93% of students aged 14–21 were aware of "just seven" career options, even though more than 250 different job types are available in the Indian economy (6). We can reasonably infer that Pakistani students' career awareness is similarly constrained – most can name doctor, engineer, lawyer, perhaps business manager or pilot, but exposure to newer or non-traditional careers (e.g. in technology, creative industries, vocational skilled trades, etc.) is minimal without guidance. The lack of career counseling in schools perpetuates this tunnel vision towards only a few "safe" choices.

Another notable trend is the role of gender and family in career trends, though detailed statistics are not always formally recorded. Culturally, medicine is often seen as a desirable career for girls (partly due to social acceptability and perceived flexibility), leading to very high numbers of female pre-medical students – yet many do not end up practicing (a phenomenon of "doctor brides" often cited anecdotally). Engineering and technical fields traditionally attract more boys. In both cases, parental influence is paramount (discussed more below). When students were asked who helped them the most in choosing their career path, the majority cited their parents as the most helpful influence (5). Even students who claimed to be following their "personal interest" in aiming for a career acknowledged that family expectations set the context for what options were even considered. Overall, career trends in Pakistan's youth are characterized by a high concentration in a few fields, a high rate of unrealized ambitions (due to capacity constraints), and a lack of diversification into newer fields. These patterns underscore the importance of proper counseling – with better guidance, students might distribute more efficiently across various disciplines, have backup plans, and align their goals with their abilities and the job market.

2 Absence of Career Counseling in Schools and Colleges

Despite the clear need, formal career counseling is almost non-existent at the secondary school and college level in Pakistan. The vast majority of students go through their entire school education without ever meeting a career counselor or attending a dedicated career guidance session. Schools focus on academic curricula and exam preparation, with little provision for helping students plan their futures. A 2017 study concluded starkly that "very few schools [in Pakistan] provide career counselling sessions and there is no concept of the presence of career counsellors in any school of Pakistan." (5). Unlike many developed countries where high schools have guidance/career counselors on staff, Pakistani schools (especially public/government schools) simply do not have such a role budgeted or mandated. Teachers are not trained in career guidance either, and while some well-meaning teachers or principals may give ad-hoc advice, it is not a systematic counseling program.

To quantify this gap: According to a recent analysis, only about 5% of public schools in Pakistan offer any form of career counseling services to students (7). In other words, 95% of public schools have no counselor or structured career guidance program. This statistic from the Institute of Social and Policy Sciences (I-SAPS) was highlighted in a 2025 commentary on Pakistan's education system, underscoring how rare counseling is in the public sector (7). The situation in private schools is somewhat better in a few elite institutions, but overall still poor. For comparison, neighboring India faces a similar shortage: over 93% of Indian schools do not have a professional career counselor on board (6), meaning only 7% do. In the United States, in contrast, school counseling is an established part of education – about 83% of U.S. high schools have at least one school counselor on staff (8) (though often focusing on both academic and career guidance). Table 1 summarizes these differences.

Country	**Percentage of Schools with Dedicated Career Counseling Services**
Pakistan	$\sim$ 5% of public schools; "no concept" of counseling in most institutions
India	$\sim$ 7% of schools have professional career counselors
United States	$\sim$ 83% of high schools have at least one counselor
Australia	95% of secondary schools employ career advisors
Canada (Ontario)	99% of secondary schools have a guidance counselor
United Kingdom	53% of pupils attend schools with in-house career advisors

Table 1: Prevalence of Career Counseling Services in High Schools

Not only are counselors absent in Pakistan's schools, but also there is no national policy or framework for career guidance. The education system has historically prioritized content knowledge and exam results, with guidance seen as an "extra." As of 2020, Pakistan had "no formal or institutional structure proving the education authority's negligence" in this area (9, 10). No government body systematically evaluates or regulates career counseling, and until recently there was little recognition of it in education plans. (It is telling that even in the National Education Policy documents, career guidance gets scarcely a mention, if at all.) The Punjab province's education authorities have only in the past few years started

to encourage schools and colleges to hold career events. For instance, the Punjab Higher Education Commission (PHEC) in 2015 began offering incentives to colleges for arranging job fairs, career workshops, and seminars as a stopgap measure (10). This is a positive step, but it is not the same as embedding full-time counselors in schools – it usually means a one-off career day or inviting guest speakers occasionally.

Where career counseling does exist in Pakistan, it is mostly at the university level or via private initiatives. Many university students encounter career services for the first time only when they reach their campus career office (if their university has one). Research by Zahid et al. (2020) notes that career services and counselors are not part of most schools and colleges, hence many students get their first-ever exposure to career guidance at the university level (10). By that point, however, students have already chosen an academic field and are nearing graduation – guidance at that late stage may help with job placement, but it cannot undo an ill-fitting choice of major made back when the student was 16 or 17. Ideally, intervention is needed earlier, during secondary education, when students are deciding whether to pursue pre-medical, pre-engineering, commerce, humanities, or other tracks (typically in Grade 9 or Grade 11). Pakistan's education system currently leaves this decision entirely to students and their families, without professional support.

To illustrate how extreme the counseling shortfall is: The American School Counselor Association recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1 for effective support, and the U.S. national average is around 376:1 (as of 2023) (11). In Pakistan, the ratio is essentially off the charts – one study pointed out that there are only on the order of a few hundred trained career counselors for the millions of students nationwide, meaning the ratio of students per counselor would number in the tens of thousands (if not more) when considering the whole country. In India, estimates suggest 315 million students for only 100,000 counselors, averaging about 3000+ students per counselor (12, 13). Pakistan likely has even fewer counselors per student than India. Indeed, an academic survey of Pakistani career service providers (CSPs) revealed a shortage of qualified personnel: among those filling counseling roles, many are not specifically trained. For example, in one sample of university career advisors, only 3 out of 7 had relevant qualifications (such as a Master's or diploma in career counseling) (10). The others were assigned to career guidance duties but lacked formal training in the field. This lack of capacity and expertise trickles down to schools as well – even if a school wanted to hire a counselor, there are very few qualified professionals available in the job market, and no licensing pipeline exists domestically (most counselors have foreign training or psychology degrees).

The geographical and sectoral disparities in counseling availability are also notable. A handful of elite private schools (especially those offering O/A-Levels or with international links) have in recent years hired career advisors or established counseling "cells." For instance, a 2023 study of some private secondary schools in Lahore found that those schools did have separate career counseling cells with knowledgeable counselors, and students reported being able to openly discuss their issues with these counselors (14). In those fortunate few institutions, students found the counseling useful – many reported that after receiving guidance sessions, they felt satisfied with the field they chose and confident about their career direction. But such cases are the exception. The vast majority of schools, especially public (government) schools and those in rural or underprivileged areas, offer no counseling at all. Rural students in particular are deprived of exposure; an overwhelming number of them have

never met a career advisor and rely solely on family or local community suggestions, which may be limited to traditional occupations.

In summary, Pakistan's schools and colleges largely lack the infrastructure for career counseling – neither in terms of human resources (counselors) nor programmatically (no curriculum time dedicated to career education). The system currently produces students who are well-drilled for board examinations but ill-prepared to make informed decisions about higher studies or careers. This gap between schooling and the "real world" is widely acknowledged now as a critical weakness in Pakistan's education system. As Ahmed Ismail observed in a 2025 report, "Students often choose careers based on societal pressures rather than personal interests or market needs. With only 5% of public schools offering career counseling, most students are left navigating critical life decisions without proper guidance." (7). The next sections will discuss how, in the absence of school-based guidance, Pakistani students' career choices are shaped by other influences, and what consequences emerge from this scenario.

3 Decision-Making Without Guidance: Influences on Students' Careers

When formal counseling is absent, who or what fills the void for Pakistani students trying to decide on a career path? The answer: mostly family, friends, and societal norms. Young people rely on a mix of parental direction, peer advice, and their own limited awareness. These influences are often unstructured and biased, which can lead to suboptimal decisions. Several studies have quantified the dominance of non-professional influences in Pakistani students' career planning:

- **Parental Pressure:** Family expectations play an outsized role. In Pakistan's patriarchal culture, parents – especially fathers – commonly steer children toward certain careers. Many youths feel obliged to pursue the professions that their parents deem prestigious or acceptable. In one analysis, researchers noted that "the sub-continent culture is dominated by a patriarchal pattern, where the father is the central and final decision figure" in a student's career choice (1). A study by Iqbal (2017) found that over 50% of students are essentially forced by their parents to select a particular field of study, even if it contradicts the student's own interests or personality (1). This statistic is telling – more than half of students end up in a discipline chosen "for them" by parents. Often, these parental choices align with societal prestige (e.g., "my son must become an engineer" or "my daughter should be a doctor"), without regard to the child's aptitude or the realistic chances of success. Conditional family support also factors in – some parents only agree to support higher education if the child chooses a field the family approves of (like medicine, not, say, fine arts).

- **Peer and Sibling Influence:** In the absence of knowledgeable guidance, students often turn to older siblings, cousins, or friends for advice. Peers share information (sometimes rumors or half-truths) about which fields are "in demand" or what choices they are making, leading to herd behavior. Research indicates that more than 70% of students are influenced

by their peer groups or elder siblings in deciding their study path (1). This influence can be misleading if the peers themselves are not well-informed. For example, if a cluster of friends decides that "software engineering is the hot field" (based on hearing success stories of a few techies), many in the group might opt for it en masse – even those who neither have interest nor aptitude in programming – potentially leading to struggle later. Likewise, if an older brother went into a certain field and is earning well, the younger one might follow blindly. While peer advice can sometimes provide moral support, it is no substitute for professional counseling; peers typically do not have comprehensive information on the spectrum of opportunities or the individual's fit for a career.

- **Teachers and School Environment:** Ideally, teachers could be a source of career mentorship, but in Pakistan this is rarely the case. High school teachers are usually subject specialists who focus on completing the syllabus. There is no formal expectation for them to advise students on careers (and many teachers themselves have limited exposure beyond their academic domain). Some private schools do arrange career talks or have teachers double up as counselors, but this depends on individual initiative. In general, students do not view teachers as career guides – instead, they might approach a favorite teacher informally, but the guidance remains anecdotal. A lack of training and time prevents most teachers from filling the counseling gap. One exception is at the college (intermediate) level where occasionally a professor might advise students about which university programs to apply to; however, these suggestions often reflect the professor's personal bias or alma mater loyalty rather than a systematic assessment of each student's goals.

- **Societal Norms and "Trending" Fields:** In Pakistan, societal narrative heavily influences youth choices. High-paying jobs and fields perceived as "marketable" gain sudden popularity – for instance, in the 2000s many students flocked to computer science/IT when it was touted as a growth sector; in other years, chartered accountancy or civil services exam might be the craze. Yet students often have superficial knowledge of these fields. A study highlighted that many Pakistani students choose their field based on "market trending scope" or popular perception, without truly understanding the nature of the work (1). For example, if "telecom engineering" is rumored to have good salaries, many students opt for it, only to find later that the industry's boom was short-lived or that the work doesn't suit them. Lack of reliable career information exacerbates this. There are few accessible resources in schools about labor market trends or the diversity of careers. Consequently, myths and fads drive decisions. The Mindler survey from India (noted earlier) showed 93% of students knew only 7 careers – similarly in Pakistan, awareness is extremely narrow, meaning students might not even consider careers outside those few, because society rarely talks about them. Lack of information was explicitly identified as a key missing piece in Pakistani students' career decision process (10). They often do not know what a newer profession (say, data science, physiotherapy, digital marketing, etc.) really entails or that it even exists as a viable path.

- **Cultural Attitudes and Risk Aversion:** The broader culture in Pakistan tends to encourage "stable" and conventional paths over unconventional or risky pursuits. Entrepreneurship, creative arts, and vocational trades are often discouraged in favor of

white-collar professions. A cultural fear of failure means many students stick to tried-and-true options rather than explore something unique. As one commentator observed, "From a young age, our culture discourages risk-taking. Students are taught to prioritize stability over creativity, which stifles entrepreneurship and innovation." (). So even a student passionate about, say, starting a business or becoming a writer, might be steered into a safer option like an MBA or government job, due to family pressure not to "take risks." Without career counselors to validate diverse talents, these social pressures funnel everyone down similar paths.

The combined effect of these influences is that career decision-making in Pakistan is often based on subjective or external factors rather than a student's own informed choice. One research article summarized that Pakistani university students "usually base their career-related matters on multiple personal factors instead of professional career help" (10). Those factors include family expectations, financial considerations (choosing a field believed to lead to wealth), and social status. For instance, financial motivations are significant: studies have found that expected financial gains are one of the strongest factors in students' subject selection (1). It is understandable in a developing country context that many youth (and parents) prioritize careers that promise upward mobility, but without guidance they might chase fields with an overestimated payoff or ignore the personal suitability aspect. Additionally, many students don't match their own strengths to their chosen field because no one helped them assess those strengths. Aptitude testing or personality-career matching is virtually absent in schools. As a result, a student weak in math may still force themselves into engineering because all their friends did so, or a highly creative student might end up in a rote profession due to lack of encouragement.

It's important to acknowledge that not all informal influence is negative – for example, a supportive parent who discusses many options with their child can be beneficial, or an older sibling in a field can provide firsthand insights. The issue is that these sources are hit-or-miss and frequently biased or limited in scope. A parent's advice might be based on outdated notions of job markets, and a peer's suggestion might be based on their own interests, not yours. Without expert guidance to supplement, students have to "navigate blind." In the words of one Pakistani student, it is like "groping in the dark to figure out what to do with our lives." This often leads to indecisiveness and anxiety among students. Indeed, a 2023 study in Peshawar found that most students reported difficulties in making career decisions and only a small percentage were confident or satisfied with their chosen disciplines (2). The majority said they needed help with career decision-making – help they did not receive in school.

Quantitatively, the absence of counseling correlates with low career decision self-efficacy. In an evaluation of youths who did receive some counseling vs those who didn't, those with counseling scored higher in decision-making confidence (this was noted in a study of 1,445 Pakistani students who experienced counseling) (15). But since 99% did not get counseling, we have a generation of students largely making tentative or externally-driven choices. One direct outcome is the phenomenon of "mismatched graduates" – students who realize partway through or after completing a degree that it's not what they truly wanted or not what they are good at. Many then either switch fields, remain underemployed, or pursue a career unrelated to their degree (essentially wasting years of specialized education). We explore

these outcomes in the next section.

4 Consequences of Inadequate Career Guidance

The lack of career counseling during formative years manifests in serious adverse outcomes for both individuals and society. Some of the measurable consequences of Pakistan's guidance gap include high dropout rates, misalignment between education and employment (skills mismatch), underemployment and unemployment among youth (especially educated youth), and even personal mental health issues. We detail these below, supported by data:

1. **High Dropout and Wasted Potential:** As mentioned, about 74% of Pakistani students do not progress to higher education (3). Many drop out after matric (Grade 10) or intermediate college (Grade 12). While poverty and lack of access are major reasons, education experts identify lack of guidance as a "major reason" for these dropouts (3). Without counseling, students often fail to see a clear "goal" or pathway that education will lead them to, causing disengagement. Some choose subject combinations that they later struggle with and then quit studies. Others simply follow a herd into a track and then lose motivation when it doesn't resonate with them – potentially dropping out rather than changing course (since they don't know how to switch). The British Council explicitly links "lack of timely guidance" to this huge attrition, suggesting that timely career guidance in secondary school could help more students find a suitable path and stay in school (3). Every student who drops out represents lost human capital. Pakistan already has 22.8 million children out of school (44% of the age group) (7), one of the highest numbers globally. Effective counseling in secondary classes could at least reduce dropouts at the transition to college by motivating students and helping them choose attainable goals.

2. **Entrance Exam Failures and Career Detours:** We saw that tens of thousands of aspiring doctors and engineers are left in limbo each year after failing to get admission into medical or engineering institutions (3). What happens to these students? Often, they have no Plan B. Many will spend additional years attempting again (taking gap years to retake entrance exams or improve grades), which delays their entry into alternate careers. Others end up switching to entirely different fields at the last minute (for example, a student who doesn't get into medical college might reluctantly enroll in a general B.Sc. or a pharmacy program). Because these decisions happen late and under duress, students often land in fields they are uninterested in, leading to mediocre performance. The wasted effort is enormous: those 36,000 unsuccessful medical aspirants likely spent two years focusing on pre-medical studies that may not fully transfer to another domain. Had there been counseling, some of them might have been advised early on about the intense competition and encouraged to consider allied health sciences or bio-sciences research as alternative pathways, rather than all or nothing for MBBS (medical degree). The same applies to engineering hopefuls, many of whom could thrive in other science and technology fields if guided. Without counseling, we effectively have a "single-track" pipeline where those who fall off that track struggle to find their footing elsewhere. This contributes to delay

in young people establishing careers, and in many cases, a sense of failure or lowered self-esteem.

3. **Mismatch Between Education and Job Market:** Perhaps the most pernicious effect is the large-scale education-job mismatch in Pakistan. A huge number of graduates end up in jobs that do not correspond to their field of study or skill level. According to one analysis, around 45% of employed men in Pakistan are in jobs that are mismatched to their education level (16). About 30% are under-educated for their jobs (meaning they are doing work that typically requires more education than they have, often because they skipped acquiring needed skills) and about 15% are over-educated for their jobs (17) (meaning they have higher qualifications than needed, e.g. a college graduate doing clerical work that a high schooler could do). Similarly, another study found about one-third of university graduates face an education–occupation mismatch (16). This inefficiency arises in part because without guidance, students pursue degrees in fields that either do not have commensurate job demand or for which they are not suited, leading them to either work in a different sector or take lower-level jobs. For instance, Pakistan produces far more business administration or commerce graduates than the economy can absorb in managerial roles – many end up taking unrelated jobs. Conversely, fields like skilled manufacturing or agriculture lack qualified young people because everyone was chasing a few popular degrees. Proper counseling could help calibrate student choices with market realities (steering some towards technical/vocational training where jobs exist, and others towards fields where their advanced education will actually be utilized). The government's own analysis in the 2025 budget documents admits "there is a serious mismatch between the jobs demanded and the supply of skills and trained manpower in the country" (18). It notes that educational outcomes are not aligned with labor market needs, contributing to unemployment (18). This is exactly what career guidance is meant to address – bridging the information gap between education and employment.

4. **Youth Unemployment and Underemployment:** Pakistan faces a significant youth employment challenge. The overall unemployment rate is about 6.3%, but youth (ages 15–24) unemployment is much higher – official figures suggest it could be in the range of 44.9% (if interpreted as percentage of youth labor force) (18). Many young people who do complete degrees cannot find jobs, or at least not in their field. For example, it's not uncommon to hear of engineering graduates driving ride-share vehicles or MBAs working as bank tellers. One reason is the lack of soft and technical skills that employers seek – a gap that stems from an education system not attuned to market needs. The World Bank reports that over 80% of South Asian graduates (including those from Pakistan) are considered unemployable by employers due to lack of soft and technical skills (7). These "employability" skills (communication, teamwork, problem-solving) are rarely taught in our schools, and career counseling programs could help inculcate them or at least make students aware of their importance. Without guidance, students often focus purely on academic content and grades, missing out on skill-building that would make them job-ready. Moreover, many youth choose fields with limited job openings – for instance, Pakistan has experienced periods where thousands of engineers graduate annually with very few engineering jobs available, leading to underemployment. A recent

article asked "What is the cause of engineers' unemployment in Pakistan?" and noted the disparity in job opportunities, implying that poor planning and over-supply in certain disciplines contribute to many graduates remaining jobless or taking unrelated jobs (19). If career counseling were in place, students could be counseled about sectors with growth potential vs saturated fields, thus distributing talent more evenly and reducing painful unemployment among educated youth.

Another outcome of poor guidance is the brain drain: each year, a large number of young Pakistanis opt to go abroad in search of education or employment opportunities that they could not navigate locally. The 2025 budget document highlights that about 0.8 million (800,000) skilled, semi-skilled and highly skilled Pakistanis leave to work abroad annually (18). While labor migration has economic benefits (remittances), a significant portion of this is driven by young professionals feeling they have no viable career at home or being dissatisfied with the options they ended up in. It speaks to a possible frustration: for example, a bright student who didn't get into a top medical college might instead go abroad for medical school; or an IT graduate who didn't get proper career development might seek a job overseas. With better counseling and career development programs domestically, more of these talented youth might find fulfilling opportunities in Pakistan, slowing the brain drain.

5. **Personal Dissatisfaction and Mental Health Issues:** On an individual level, being stuck in the "wrong" career or facing repeated career failures can take a psychological toll. Many Pakistani students and graduates experience anxiety over their future. In fact, a study by the Aga Khan University found 35% of school-going adolescents in Pakistan suffer from depression or anxiety (7), and while that encompasses various causes (academic pressure, social issues), uncertainty about one's future is a major stressor. The mismatch between a young person's passions and the path they are forced into can lead to chronic frustration. Researchers have observed that due to the mismatch of passion and profession, combined with unemployment or poor performance in an ill-suited job, many youths develop "distorted behaviors and mental illness" (‘). For instance, a student who always loved art but was coerced into a finance degree may perform poorly and feel a loss of identity, potentially leading to low self-esteem or depression. Another who wanted to work in a creative industry but ended up unemployed might feel hopeless. These personal struggles are often invisible but widespread. Counselors, had they been present, could help students navigate choices that align better with their interests (improving overall life satisfaction) or at least prepare them to cope with transitions.

   The lack of guidance also contributes to a waste of talent – students with great potential in one domain never realize it because they were never guided to explore it. Pakistan likely has, for example, potential scientists, entrepreneurs, artists, or skilled technicians who never pursued those callings because the system only recognized and pushed a few conventional achievers. This "misallocation" of human resources due to poor counseling means the country is not fully benefiting from the diverse capabilities of its youth. As one Pakistani education reform advocate put it, "the gap between what is taught and what is required in the real world has left our youth unprepared and disillusioned" (7). The cycle then continues: unfulfilled professionals do not inspire the next generation, and

the notion that education doesn't guarantee a good career discourages younger students, possibly feeding back into higher dropouts.

The consequences of not providing career counseling are visible in multiple dimensions – educational wastage (high dropout, exam re-takers), economic inefficiency (mismatched skills, graduate unemployment), and social/personal costs (frustrated youth, mental health issues). These outcomes are quantifiable and dire. For instance, having 45% of workers in mismatched jobs (17) implies a significant productivity loss to the economy. Youth unemployment nearing 10 times the overall rate signals a failure to transition educated youth into the workforce (18). And behind those numbers are personal stories of students feeling "lost" or "stuck." The data and research make a compelling case that improving career guidance is not just a marginal educational enhancement – it is central to improving Pakistan's human development outcomes.

5 International Comparison and Best Practices

To put Pakistan's situation in perspective, it is helpful to compare with other countries – both neighboring developing countries and developed ones that have robust career counseling systems. These comparisons highlight just how far behind Pakistan is, but also offer models for how the scenario could improve.

We have already noted that India faces a counseling deficit too: about 93% of Indian schools lack counselors (6). However, India has in recent years recognized this gap and there is a growing private career counseling industry and some state-level initiatives. For example, estimates suggest that to serve India's 350 million students, at least 1.4 million career counselors are needed (at a standard ratio) (20). Currently only around 100,000 exist, but efforts are underway to train more (some Indian states have begun programs to appoint counselors in higher-secondary schools). India's case shows the scale of need in South Asia – and by proportional population, Pakistan would need on the order of 150,000+ counselors to cover its student population, whereas currently only a tiny fraction of that number are available. Additionally, Indian students appear to have slightly better access to at least some counseling or guidance: one survey found 68% of students in India reported having access to some counseling services, even if not formal, while 32% did not (21). In Pakistan, by contrast, we could infer that the percentage of students who have ever accessed any career counseling is in single digits (virtually limited to those in elite schools or some who seek private advisors). So Pakistan is perhaps even behind its neighbor in awareness; it certainly lacks the large-scale government or corporate-led counseling programs seen emerging in India.

Looking to developed countries, the contrast is stark. In the United Kingdom, for example, career education and guidance are integrated into the school system by law. By Year 9 (around age 14), UK schools are required to provide impartial career guidance to students, and many schools have career advisers or links to external career services. There are national frameworks like the Gatsby Benchmarks for career education, ensuring that students get exposure to a variety of careers, workplace experiences, and personalized advice by the time they finish secondary school. While not perfect, the UK's approach means virtually every student gets some level of professional guidance before making post-secondary choices. Continental European countries also have long traditions of vocational and career guidance, often

starting in middle school. For instance, Germany's system includes assessments of aptitude and counseling that channels students into academic vs vocational tracks with support.

In the United States, as noted, school counselors are commonplace in high schools (about 83% of high schools have at least one counselor) (8). The role of these counselors typically includes academic advising, college admissions guidance, and career counseling. The recommended ratio is 250 students per counselor, though the actual average is 376:1 (and worse in some states) (11). Even so, most American students will have had at least a couple of one-on-one meetings with a counselor by graduation, and will have received information on college/career options. Counselors help students with things like identifying suitable colleges or vocational programs, navigating scholarship opportunities, and even exposing them to career interest inventories. Research in the U.S. has shown that lower student-to-counselor ratios correlate with better student outcomes – including higher test scores, better attendance, higher graduation rates, and increased likelihood of students discussing postsecondary plans (11). These findings provide evidence that counseling makes a difference: when students receive more individualized guidance, they tend to plan better and perform better academically (likely because they have goals to work toward). There is no reason to think Pakistani students would be any different in this regard; if anything, they might benefit even more significantly given the current vacuum of guidance.

One telling comparison is in career awareness breadth. While Pakistani (and Indian) students know of perhaps a half-dozen prestigious careers, students in countries with strong counseling often explore dozens of career options. For example, a Canadian or New Zealander high school student might be aware of career paths ranging from forensic analyst to graphic designer to occupational therapist, thanks to career fairs and guidance classes (5). In Pakistan, such breadth of exposure is rare without external intervention. The Times of India piece noted an Indian survey where 93% of students were aware of only 7 careers (6), implying a similar scenario likely in Pakistan – a huge knowledge gap relative to the universe of possibilities. This underscores how much catch-up is needed in terms of career education content delivered to students.

Another area of contrast is use of technology and assessments in counseling. In many countries, students take career aptitude tests or interest surveys (like Holland's RIASEC tests, etc.) as part of counseling, which help indicate compatible career areas. They may also have portfolios and career plans by graduation. In Pakistan, such tools are not part of the standard school experience. However, some private organizations are introducing them – for instance, Mindler and Eduvision (in India and Pakistan respectively) offer online career assessment tests. There's also anecdotal evidence that lacking human counselors, some students are turning to the internet: a recent report from India claimed over 85% of students had used AI tools (like ChatGPT) for career advice, highlighting the demand for guidance and the lengths students will go when formal help isn't available (22). Pakistani students similarly often resort to the internet, forums, or social media to glean career guidance, which can be hit-or-miss in accuracy.

Global best practices suggest that for effective career counseling, a multipronged approach is needed – one-on-one guidance, career education in curriculum, exposure to the world of work (through internships, career talks, etc.), and involvement of parents in the guidance process. Many countries' systems incorporate these. For example, South Korea and Japan have national career counseling programs starting in middle school, given their emphasis

on aligning education with economic needs. Finland is often cited for its counseling: it has one of the best counselor-to-student ratios and comprehensive guidance that is credited with helping students transition smoothly to either vocational education or university based on their strengths. In developing countries, some have made strides too: Sri Lanka has a nationwide career guidance service under its Ministry of Education; Malaysia and Indonesia have training programs to station career teachers in secondary schools.

Pakistan can also look at successful pilot programs within the country or region. For instance, there have been donor-funded initiatives in certain districts where trained counselors were placed in public schools on a trial basis. These often showed improved student satisfaction and better post-secondary enrollment from those schools. Another angle is leveraging the diaspora or industry experts to mentor students remotely – some NGOs have tried mentorship programs linking students with professionals for guidance.

In comparing "success rates", as the question alludes, one could consider how many students in different systems end up on a suitable career path by adulthood. While exact comparisons are complex, one proxy is the youth NEET rate (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Pakistan's NEET rate is quite high for both males and females, indicating many youths are idle or in transition. Countries with strong counseling like Germany have very low youth unemployment/NEET because students are efficiently guided into either further training or jobs. Another measure is job satisfaction among graduates – if many Pakistani graduates are unsatisfied or end up switching fields, that points to poor initial matching (likely due to lack of counseling), whereas higher satisfaction in other contexts indicates better alignment of career choices.

Pakistan stands at one extreme – with negligible school-based counseling – whereas developed education systems treat career guidance as an integral part of schooling. Even peer countries are starting to address the gap more aggressively than Pakistan has so far. The comparisons underscore that it is not normal for students to be left entirely unguided; most successful systems have mechanisms to help youth navigate decisions. The experiences of other countries suggest that if Pakistan were to invest in career counseling, there could be tangible improvements: better utilization of skills, lower graduate unemployment, and perhaps improved academic outcomes as students have clearer goals. The following section will discuss signs of progress and what can be done in Pakistan's context to move closer to these best practices.

6 Emerging Initiatives and The Way Forward

Current Initiatives

- **University Career Centers:** A number of universities in Pakistan have established Career Services Centers in the past decade. For example, institutions like FAST (National Univ. of Computer & Emerging Sciences), Forman Christian College University, NUST, UET, etc., have dedicated career offices (10). These centers often help students with internships, job placements, and sometimes career counseling or aptitude testing for undecided students. While these primarily serve university students, they signal a recognition that young people need guidance in linking education to careers. Some universities host

annual job fairs and networking events, indirectly exposing students to various industries. The limitation, of course, is that this comes late (at university) and only benefits those who made it to higher education. But it's worth noting that such centers did not widely exist 20 years ago in Pakistan; they are a relatively new feature, indicating progress.

- **Private Career Counseling Services:** In the absence of school counselors, private sector and non-profit organizations have stepped in to some extent. Organizations like Eduvision, Brightspyre, AFAQ, Counseling Pakistan, Edvise Hub, and others have appeared, offering career guidance services either online or through workshops (10). For instance, Eduvision (based in Islamabad) provides aptitude tests and career planning for students, and hosts seminars in schools upon invitation. These organizations are mostly urban-centric – concentrated in major cities like Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, etc. (10). They often use social media to reach students with advice on admission deadlines, entry test prep, and alternative options. There are also freelance or independent career counselors (some who have certifications from abroad) offering paid counseling to students, especially those aiming for foreign university admissions. While the reach of these services is still limited to those who actively seek them (and can afford them, in some cases), the fact that a "career counseling industry" is emerging shows that demand is present and slowly being acknowledged.

- **Government and Donor Programs:** The Punjab government, through PHEC, has been incentivizing colleges to hold career events as noted earlier (10). Additionally, some donor-funded programs have included career counseling components. For example, the U.S. and Pakistan recently launched a $19 million, five-year program to improve Pakistan's higher education system and increase employability of graduates (23) – such programs often include training for career guidance and linking academia to industry. Similarly, some NGOs and charities have taken up career guidance for underprivileged students: Pakistan Youth Foundation offers career counseling sessions, workshops, and fairs for students to explore paths (24). Another example is Muslim Hands Pakistan, which initiated career counseling in certain public schools for underprivileged youth, aiming to equip them with information for better futures (25). These efforts, while localized, are important pilots. They demonstrate that even in public schools, introducing career guidance is feasible and welcomed by students.

- **School-Level Changes (in Elite Schools):** A few prestigious school networks in Pakistan have started to integrate counseling. For instance, the Beaconhouse and City School systems (large private school chains) now often have a "Student Counselor" or "Career Advisor" role in their higher-secondary sections, particularly to assist students with college (including overseas) applications. These counselors primarily focus on guiding students on subject choices in A-levels and processing university applications (sometimes doubling as mental health counselors too). The Aga Khan Education Service and some other not-for-profit school systems also have begun career awareness programs for their students. While these cover a tiny fraction of the student population, they set an example that could be replicated in more schools if prioritized.

- **Use of Technology:** With the proliferation of internet access, Pakistani students now

have more access to information than previous generations. Websites and forums (for example, Facebook groups of students counseling each other on universities, or platforms like MeriTaleem and Ilmkidunya that share admissions info) have become informal counseling resources. Some counselors offer webinars or YouTube videos on career selection in Pakistan. Even AI tools as noted are being experimented with. These cannot replace human guidance but are helping fill some information gaps. A potential initiative could be developing Pakistani-specific career guidance web portals or mobile apps, possibly in Urdu/regional languages, to reach students nationwide with career info and self-assessment quizzes.

Despite these positive developments, Pakistan still lacks a coordinated, nationwide strategy for career counseling. So what is the way forward? Below are some key recommendations and strategies to make career counseling effective and widespread, focusing on the school and college level:

1. **Integrate Career Counseling into School Systems:** The government (federal or provincial education ministries) should formally incorporate career guidance into the secondary school framework. This can be done in stages. Initially, allocate time in the school calendar for career counseling activities – e.g., a weekly or monthly class period for career exploration, or designated career weeks each year where students attend workshops and talks. Eventually, aim to appoint dedicated career counselors at least at the higher-secondary school level. Given resource constraints, one approach could be to assign one counselor per several schools (e.g., at the district level or tehsil level, a counselor who rotates schools on different days). Over time, the goal should be at least one counselor per high school, even if part-time. It's worth noting that many countries treat career guidance as a right for students; Pakistan could set a policy target that by (say) 2030, every student completing high school will have had access to some form of counseling.

2. **Counselor Training and Certification:** Building a counselor workforce is crucial. Universities (especially those with psychology or education departments) should be encouraged to offer postgraduate diplomas or master's programs in Career Counseling. This will create a pipeline of qualified counselors. International partnerships can help here – for example, short-term certification courses could be developed with input from associations like the Asia Pacific Career Development Association (APCDA) (26). Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC) and provincial HECs could fund scholarships for trainees in counseling. Additionally, in the interim, train existing teachers to act as career guides. Select motivated teachers or lecturers and give them intensive training on career guidance tools, so that each school has at least one teacher who can serve as a career advisor alongside their teaching duties. This is not ideal long-term (because it adds to teachers' workload), but as a stopgap it can start the process. Importantly, ensure counselors/teachers are themselves exposed to current job market trends and new career options – perhaps via continuous professional development sessions.

3. **Develop Comprehensive Career Information Resources:** One major task is to compile and disseminate up-to-date information about the range of careers, educational

routes, and labor market trends in Pakistan. The government, possibly in collaboration with bodies like NAVTTC (National Vocational & Technical Training Commission) and the private sector, should create career information guides (both print and online). These should describe various occupations, required education/skills for each, which institutions offer relevant programs, and the employment prospects. Such guides can be made student-friendly and introduced in schools. Additionally, implementing aptitude and interest assessments in schools would greatly aid the counseling process – these could be standardized tests adapted to Pakistani context that students take in grade 9 or 10 to identify their strengths, followed by interpretive sessions with counselors.

4. **Involve Industry and Alumni:** Schools and colleges should forge connections with industry professionals and alumni to provide mentorship and insight. Career talks, mentorship programs, and internships can be facilitated. For example, schools can host monthly "career seminars" where doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs, artists, etc., come and talk about what their work is like and what it takes to get there. Hearing from role models in various fields can broaden students' horizons beyond the few careers they usually hear about. Alumni networks can be tapped – many former students are willing to guide current ones if a platform exists. Some Pakistani schools have started doing this on a small scale; scaling it up would cost little but have significant impact. It also helps break some stereotypes (e.g., seeing a successful professional in a non-traditional field can legitimize that path in the eyes of students and parents).

5. **Parent Engagement and Community Awareness:** Since parental pressure and lack of understanding is a big factor, any counseling program must include a parental counseling or orientation component. Schools can organize sessions for parents to educate them on the importance of aligning career choices with a child's aptitudes, on the diversity of emerging careers, and on the realities of admission competitions. Often, parents simply do not know how slim the chances are for certain routes (like medical college) or what alternatives exist. By making parents allies in the counseling process, we can reduce the conflict between a student's personal interest and family expectations. Community outreach through media is also useful – TV or radio programs on career guidance (in Urdu or local languages) could spread awareness at scale, so that even people in areas without formal counselors get some guidance input. The goal is to shift cultural attitudes to be more accepting of varied careers and of the idea that every child doesn't have to be an engineer or doctor to be successful.

6. **Use of Technology and Online Counseling:** Pakistan can leverage the high mobile phone penetration to deliver counseling remotely, especially to areas where counselors cannot be physically present. Setting up a national career counseling helpline or chat service could allow students from any region to consult advisors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, tele-counseling became common globally; Pakistan can adopt similar models. There are also Pakistani career counseling Facebook groups and forums – these can be strengthened or formalized with input from professionals. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools and localized career recommendation engines could be developed (taking into account local educational institutes and job market data) to guide students interactively. While technology is not a panacea, it can significantly extend the reach of

counseling services.

7. **Monitoring and Integrating with Education Outcomes:** Finally, it's important to monitor the impact of any introduced counseling programs. Metrics such as student satisfaction, percentage of students making informed post-secondary transitions, reduction in mismatches or dropouts can be tracked for schools that implement counseling versus those that don't. This data can convince policymakers of the return on investment. Over time, career guidance should become an embedded part of the education-to-employment ecosystem – linked with technical training opportunities, linked with higher education admissions processes (e.g., counselors helping students apply in a broader range of programs that fit them), and linked with national workforce planning. For instance, if Pakistan identifies a shortage in a sector like nursing or ICT, counselors can be mobilized to encourage interested students towards those fields, balancing supply and demand.

In conclusion, transforming the current landscape will require concerted effort, but the benefits are immense. If done right, career counseling can raise the "success rate" of students achieving fulfilling careers: fewer students will waste years in the wrong programs, more will complete higher education in fields suited to them, and employers will get graduates who meet their needs. Countries that have invested in guidance have seen improvements in workforce readiness and innovation. Pakistan, with such a large youth population, stands to gain enormously from unlocking the potential of its young people through proper guidance. As one recommendation in the education reform report succinctly puts it: "Introduce Career Counseling: Implement comprehensive programs at all levels to guide students toward informed career choices" (7). This must start at the school level. The quantitative comparisons and research presented in this report overwhelmingly support that Pakistan can no longer afford to neglect career counseling if it hopes to harness its demographic dividend and steer its next generation toward prosperous and purpose-driven lives. By learning from global best practices and scaling up current initiatives, Pakistan can bridge the counseling gap – ensuring that no student has to make the journey to their future alone and unguided.

7 Incorporating an Alumni-Led Career Counseling Program

We propose an Alumni-Led Career Counseling Program for students in Grades 11–12 (AS and A2 levels), leveraging the school's own alumni as career mentors. Instead of overburdened teachers or absent professional counselors, former students working in diverse fields will guide current students. This approach harnesses real-world expertise and relatable role models, tailored to Pakistani cultural norms (where community and familial trust are key). The ultimate goals are to expand students' knowledge of education/career pathways, provide up-to-date industry insights, and reduce uncertainty and anxiety about the future (27). By addressing these needs with a concrete plan (detailed below), the program can be implemented with maximum clarity.

International Best Practices in Career Counseling

To design a state-of-the-art program, we draw on proven career counseling methodologies from around the world – including the United States and Japan – and adapt them to our context:

- **Dedicated School Counselors (U.S. Model):** In countries like the United States, high schools typically employ professional guidance counselors who advise students on college and careers. Counselors provide one-on-one advising, career aptitude assessments, and college application assistance. However, high student-to-counselor ratios (national average about 376:1 in 2023 (11)) mean counselors' time is limited. To augment counseling, many U.S. schools organize career days, college fairs, and mentoring programs. For example, some schools partner with alumni networks to offer mentorship, recognizing that mentors help students connect classroom learning to real-world careers (28). Work-based learning programs (like career academies) have shown success – 64% of students in one program said internships and mentor interactions broadened their professional network, and over half gained at least two adult contacts for college/career advice (28). This highlights the value of mentorship and industry exposure alongside formal counseling.

- **Teacher-Guided Career Education (Japan's Approach):** Japan offers a contrasting yet effective model. Rather than separate career counselors, Japanese high schools integrate career guidance into the role of teachers and the curriculum. Homeroom teachers and school staff are "heavily involved in the process of students selecting their career options," through a structured guidance system unique to Japan (29). Schools coordinate closely with employers and colleges ("Shinro/Shushoku guidance"), essentially acting as intermediaries for student placements. As a result, Japanese high schools achieve near-100% job placement rates for students not pursuing college (29) – an enviable outcome of systematic school-driven counseling. This "guidance in ways of living" approach emphasizes discipline, self-awareness, and matching students to appropriate opportunities, illustrating how embedding career education in school life can yield outstanding results.

- **Mandated Career Guidance & Alumni Engagement (Other Countries):** Many countries have elevated career counseling to a policy level. All Nordic countries, for instance, guarantee students the right to career guidance by law, with professional counselors in schools (often working alongside teachers) (30). The UK has defined benchmarks for "good career guidance" (the Gatsby Benchmarks), which require schools to provide a stable counseling program, exposure to labor market information, multiple encounters with employers or alumni, and personal guidance for every student (31). A common thread in such models is engaging the broader community in counseling – including alumni and industry professionals. Schools and governments recognize that students greatly benefit from interacting with people in the real working world. Alumni mentorship, in particular, is gaining traction globally as a way to enhance career counseling. Research finds that alumni mentors can "provide career guidance, encouragement... advice on important course and field work, and opportunities to

make professional contacts" for students (32). The international best practices combine professional guidance, curriculum integration, and mentorship to help youth make informed decisions.

Adapting these lessons, our program in Pakistan will blend the mentorship-centric approach (as seen in U.S./UK initiatives) with a school-coordinated framework (as in Japan), while ensuring we meet the cultural and practical needs of our students and parents.

Alumni-Led Career Counseling Program Plan

The senior secondary years (AS and A2) are critical for subject selection, college entrance exams, and career direction, so timely guidance here will have the greatest impact. The program aims to include all students in these grades, ensuring no one misses out on career awareness opportunities.

Core Objectives

- **Expand Awareness of Options:** Introduce students to a broad spectrum of career and academic paths beyond the conventional choices. Through interactions with alumni in varied professions (science, arts, business, technology, entrepreneurship, vocational trades, etc.), students will learn about emerging fields and multiple routes to success. This addresses the current trend of students gravitating only to a few "popular" careers under social pressure (33). By hearing real stories and diverse experiences, students can discover paths aligned to their true interests and talents.

- **Reduce Career Anxiety:** Alleviate the stress and uncertainty students face regarding their future. Many teens worry about "making the right choice" and feel overwhelmed. Regular counseling and mentorship will provide reassurance, clarify doubts, and build decision-making confidence. Studies show that effective career counseling reduces students' stress and anxiety, while fostering resilience in the face of career decisions (27). An approachable alumni mentor can normalize the process of exploring and even changing paths, making students feel supported rather than alone in their journey.

Program Structure & Methodology

- **Alumni Mentors as Counselors:** The program will recruit volunteer alumni of the school to serve as career mentors and advisors. Priority will be given to alumni who have pursued various professions or academic fields, ensuring we cover a wide range of careers (engineers, doctors, academics, artists, entrepreneurs, etc.). Any enthusiastic alumnus with useful experience is welcome – the diversity is key. By using alumni, we leverage a built-in trust factor: these mentors once sat in the same classrooms and navigated the same environment as current students. They are thus well-positioned to provide realistic, relevant guidance that teachers (who may have spent their careers in academia) or generic career counselors might not offer. Alumni can share up-to-date industry knowledge, university application tips, and personal stories of success, failure,

and learning. This insider perspective will bridge the gap between school and the "real world". In effect, alumni mentors become relatable role models – living proof of various pathways – which can greatly inspire students (34). (Notably, mentorship research indicates that young adults with mentors are significantly more likely to achieve leadership positions and career satisfaction (34), highlighting the long-term value of such guidance.)

- **Frequency of Sessions:** We plan to hold career counseling sessions every quarter (3 months) during the academic year. This translates to four sessions annually, which is frequent enough to build continuity but not so frequent as to disrupt academics. If quarterly sessions prove logistically challenging, we will adjust to bi-annual sessions (two per year, e.g. one mid-year, one towards end). Regularity is important – consistent engagement keeps career development on the students' radar year-round, and each grade level will benefit at different points (for example, Grade 12 in fall for college prep, Grade 10 in spring for subject selection, etc.). By scheduling well in advance (e.g. aligning with mid-term breaks or just after exams), we can minimize conflicts. Each session will be well-structured (details below) to maximize impact in a short time.

- **Hybrid Delivery Model:** To accommodate alumni who may live far or have busy schedules, the program will use a hybrid format – a combination of in-person and virtual interactions. Ideally, we will invite as many local alumni as possible to physically come to the school on the session days for face-to-face mentorship (nothing inspires students like meeting professionals in person). For alumni abroad or in other cities, or those unable to travel, we will set up live video conferencing (e.g. Zoom/Google Meet projected in the school auditorium or AV room). This hybrid approach ensures we tap into the global alumni network of the school. A graduate working at a tech firm in Silicon Valley or a researcher in Japan can still speak to our students remotely, bringing international exposure right into the classroom. All sessions – whether a panel talk or workshop – will thus have both on-site and online mentors interacting seamlessly. The school's existing IT infrastructure will be used (internet connection, projector, sound) – since the administrative setup already supports digital connectivity, this is fully feasible. By going hybrid, we ensure no willing alumnus is left out due to geography, and students get a richer array of mentors.

- **Session Format and Activities:** Each quarterly session will be organized with specific themes and formats:

  - *Career Panels:* A group of 3–5 alumni from different fields will form a panel to introduce their career journeys. They will give short talks about "A Day in the Life" of their jobs, the education path they took, and challenges overcome. This will be followed by a Q&A where students can ask questions openly. Panels can be themed (e.g. Medical & Health Panel, Engineering & Tech Panel, Entrepreneurship & Business Panel, Arts & Humanities Panel), ensuring students hear relevant details about fields they're curious about.
  - *Small Group Workshops:* After a large panel, breakout sessions will be arranged. Students will choose which field interests them most and join a smaller group

discussion with the alumni from that field. Here, mentors can give targeted advice (for instance, an alum in medicine might guide on MBBS admission strategies and coping with that career's demands; an entrepreneur alum might discuss starting a business in Pakistan). Hands-on activities can be included – such as guiding students to draft a simple career plan, or interpret a career aptitude test result.

  - *One-on-One Mentoring:* Over time, we will develop a system to pair willing students with an alumni mentor for individualized mentorship. For example, a Grade 12 student aspiring to be an engineer could be paired with an alumnus engineer for a few online mentoring meetings. This pairing will be done with parental consent and under school supervision (to ensure safety and alignment with goals). While one-on-one mentoring is resource-intensive, it can be piloted with a small batch of students (say top 10 interested students per session) and later expanded. Initially, focus will be on group mentoring, which already provides substantial value.
  - *Career Resources and Tools:* The program will also introduce tools such as career interest inventories or aptitude tests (free online assessments) to help students discover their strengths and preferences. Alumni can help interpret results of these tests during the sessions, giving students personalized feedback. We will also build a library of career brochures, college program information, and scholarship opportunities (both physical copies in the counseling office and digital resources via a portal) that students can explore. These resources ensure that between sessions, students have material to read and parents can also be informed.

- **Alumni Database & Digital Platform:** A concurrent initiative is to create a comprehensive alumni database, essentially an online directory of the school's graduates with details like their contact info, education, current occupation, and willingness to help. The school already has some administrative infrastructure for alumni outreach, which we will expand. A dedicated team (e.g. a teacher and a couple of volunteer senior students or IT staff) will build and maintain this database. This could be as simple as a Google Form sent to alumni to collect data, feeding into a spreadsheet, or a more sophisticated alumni networking platform. The database will facilitate easy matching of student interests with alumni expertise – for instance, if a student expresses interest in law, we can quickly find alumni lawyers to invite. Moreover, a digital alumni network (through a Facebook or WhatsApp group, or an alumni portal) will keep former students engaged with the school community. Regular updates, newsletters, and event invitations will make alumni feel valued and more likely to volunteer. In the long run, this digital connectivity could evolve into a formal Alumni Association, which not only supports counseling but also other school development projects. (Notably, many successful mentorship programs cite having a connected alumni community as a backbone for sustainability (35).)

Cultural and Logistical Considerations:

- **Parental Involvement and Consent:** In Pakistan, parents are key stakeholders in a child's career choices – often deeply invested and sometimes opinionated. We

acknowledge that "Pakistani parents often have a negative outlook on people guiding their kids and not being in control" (as observed anecdotally). To address this, parental consent will be mandatory for student participation in the counseling program. Well before the first session, the school will hold a Parent Orientation meeting to explain the program's purpose and benefits. We will communicate that the mentors are trusted school alumni who have the students' best interests at heart. Emphasizing the alumni connection should reassure parents – these mentors are essentially extended family of the school, not random outsiders. Parents will also be invited to attend or observe certain sessions (especially the introductory ones), so they feel included rather than bypassed. By getting parents on board early, we convert them from potential skeptics to partners. We will obtain written permission from parents for any ongoing one-on-one mentoring arrangements, and keep them informed of their child's participation and progress. This transparency respects family authority while gently expanding the guidance influence beyond just the family. (It's worth noting that research in Pakistan found parents are the most helpful/influential in students' career choices (33)), so our goal is not to exclude parents but to supplement their advice with broader perspectives. Many parents may actually welcome expert guidance, given the complex new career landscape.)

- **Administrative Support:** Implementing this program will require coordination, and the school's administration is prepared to support it fully. A Career Counseling Coordinator (likely a teacher or counselor appointed by the principal) will oversee scheduling, communications, and records. This coordinator's duties include inviting and briefing alumni, preparing session agendas, and ensuring all logistics (room setup, IT for virtual calls, student attendance) are handled. The existing staff can manage these tasks as part of their extracurricular responsibilities – for example, the coordinator could be the teacher already handling student affairs or clubs. We will also involve student volunteers (possibly form a "Career Club" of interested students) to assist in organizing events and ushering guests. This not only shares the workload but gives students a sense of ownership of the program. All necessary facilities (auditorium, multimedia projector, internet, seating) are available at the school, so no extra infrastructure is needed. We will, however, maintain a database or log of sessions and feedback – essentially creating institutional memory so the program improves each year.

- **Frequency and Duration Feasibility:** As noted, quarterly sessions are planned. Each session would ideally be a half-day program (e.g. 3-4 hours on a Saturday morning or a weekday after classes). Conducting it quarterly means at most four half-days in a year, which is manageable within the school calendar. If needed, we can combine sessions with existing events (for instance, tie one into the annual Science Fair or alumni reunion day, to capitalize on alumni presence). By being flexible and efficient with timing, we anticipate minimal disruption to regular academics.

- **Financial Considerations:** Budget constraints are not a major barrier here – the program is designed to run on a modest budget, especially in its pilot phase. Alumni mentors are volunteers, so no speaker honoraria are required initially (3.1: We will start with volunteering; later, if the program grows, we can consider modest compensation

or tokens of appreciation). The school may incur minor costs for hospitality during in-person sessions (tea, snacks for alumni guests), printing of any counseling materials or workbooks, and perhaps an annual career booklet. These can be covered by the school's discretionary funds or via sponsorship. In fact, enthusiastic alumni might sponsor materials or offer venue support if needed. Should the program prove successful and we choose to expand it, we might allocate a dedicated budget for a part-time career counselor or an alumni relations officer to manage the program (this would be a future investment once value is demonstrated). For now, logistics are the primary "cost" – i.e. staff time and effort – which the school is ready to commit. We will document expenses and resources used, to evaluate cost-effectiveness over time. Given that financial outlay is minimal and the community goodwill factor is high, we foresee no serious financial hurdles to implementation.

Anticipating Challenges & Mitigation:

- *Alumni Participation:* What if not enough alumni volunteer? – We will proactively engage the alumni community through multiple channels (social media, personal outreach by teachers and existing alumni) to rally support. The school has years' worth of graduates; even if a small percentage volunteer, we will have dozens of mentors. We can start with a pilot group of highly motivated alumni (perhaps the most recent graduates who are early in their careers and eager to give back). Their successful involvement will attract others. Additionally, we'll schedule sessions at times convenient for working professionals (e.g. weekends or late afternoon) and offer appreciation certificates to recognize their service. Early signs indicate many alumni are interested in guiding juniors; the key is tapping into that altruism and school pride.

- *Quality and Consistency of Advice:* How to ensure mentors provide useful and appropriate guidance? – We will brief all participating alumni on the do's and don'ts of counseling before they engage with students. A short orientation (via email guidelines or a pre-session meeting) will clarify the objectives (e.g. encourage, inform, but not impose their own choices), the sensitivity required (respecting students' and parents' aspirations), and the need to be positive role models. The program coordinator will moderate panel discussions to keep them on track. We will also solicit feedback from students after each session (through anonymous surveys or suggestion boxes) to learn what advice resonated or if any mentor went off-course. Using this feedback, we can refine which alumni to invite back and how to coach them. Overall, because alumni mentors have an emotional connection to the school, we expect them to act responsibly and in the students' best interest.

- *Student Engagement:* Will students be shy or reluctant to participate? – We plan to integrate the program into the school culture so that it's seen as a normal and exciting part of student life, not a forced activity. Teachers will prep the classes beforehand, helping students formulate questions and reflect on their interests. We'll highlight success stories (e.g. "Last session, a Grade-11 student discovered a passion for architecture after speaking with our alumni architect"). Peer ambassadors (perhaps senior students who help organize) will encourage others to engage. The use of

slightly younger alumni as mentors can also help – recent grads (early 20s) may be less intimidating to current students, making interaction more comfortable. By creating a friendly, open atmosphere – more like "big brothers and sisters" guiding them – we anticipate active participation. Attendance will be taken to ensure everyone in the target grades attends these important sessions (with opt-out only if parent refuses). Over time, as students see the value (like getting useful tips for college admission), their buy-in will grow organically.

- *Sustaining the Program:* How to maintain momentum as this is a new initiative (3.8)? – We are treating the first year as a pilot. Success will be measured by indicators such as: number of students reached, student feedback on reduced confusion/anxiety, number of alumni involved, and possibly outcomes like diversified college applications. We will present these wins to the school administration and parent body to secure ongoing support. Embedding the program into the annual academic calendar will institutionalize it. The formation of the alumni database and possibly an Alumni Association will give it a formal structure beyond one-off efforts. Furthermore, as the program matures, we can incorporate it into the school's official policy (e.g. mentioning in the prospectus that the school offers career mentoring). Given that many advanced education systems consider such guidance indispensable, it's likely this initiative will become a hallmark of the school if executed well. We will remain adaptable, ready to refine scheduling, format, or resources each year based on what we learn.

Expected Outcomes:

By implementing this alumni-led counseling program, we expect multiple positive outcomes:

- **Broader Horizons for Students:** Students will become aware of dozens of career trajectories – from conventional professions to new-age careers – that they might not learn about otherwise. For example, a student who only knew about medicine and engineering might discover fields like digital design, environmental science, or entrepreneurship through alumni interactions. This awareness can lead to more students pursuing fields aligned with their true passions, and a break from the narrow "doctor/engineer only" mindset. Over time, we could track diversity in students' chosen university majors or career plans as a metric.

- **Reduced Career-Indecision Stress:** With mentors to consult and a clearer idea of requirements for various paths, students' confidence in decision-making should improve. We anticipate a drop in career-related anxiety and confusion. Qualitatively, students should report feeling more "in control" and optimistic about their futures. They will know that if they have questions, they have a supportive network (alumni and school) to turn to, rather than feeling alone. This aligns with research that career guidance increases self-awareness and lowers stress in adolescents (27).

- **Stronger School Community:** The initiative will forge stronger bonds between the school and its alumni. Alumni engagement tends to create a virtuous cycle – involved alumni may donate resources, provide internships to students later, or contribute to

other school improvements. Current students, seeing supportive alumni, will themselves be more likely to give back when they graduate, sustaining the cycle. The school's reputation may also benefit as it pioneers a comprehensive counseling service (a relatively novel feature in Pakistani secondary education). It could become a model for other schools in the region.

- **Alignment with Global Best Practices:** By incorporating elements of successful methodologies (regular counseling, mentorship, experiential learning), this program positions the school at the forefront of educational innovation in Pakistan. We are effectively closing the gap identified in studies: Pakistani students "'consider career counselling to be really important... and they are really concerned in acquiring appropriate guidance" (33). Our school will be acting on this student need. Moreover, we comply with emerging standards – much like Nordic countries mandate guidance (30), we are voluntarily providing it; akin to the UK benchmarks, we are giving students multiple encounters with career advisors (alumni) and up-to-date career information (36); inspired by Japan, we involve the whole school (teachers coordinating with alumni) in supporting student transitions. In short, the program is built on evidence-based principles and local insight.

In conclusion, the proposed Alumni-Led Career Counseling Program is a structured, culturally attuned, and comprehensive plan to enhance career guidance for Grades 10–12 in our Pakistani high school. By learning from international best practices and leveraging our own alumni network, we address the critical gap in counseling services without significant costs or disruptions. The plan has clear objectives (improving awareness and reducing anxiety), a pragmatic implementation schedule (quarterly hybrid sessions), and safeguards to fit the Pakistani context (parental consent and community buy-in). It leaves little room for doubt on "how it would be employed" – we have outlined the who (alumni mentors, coordinators), what (panels, workshops, mentoring), when/how often, how (volunteer-based, hybrid delivery), and why (expected benefits with supporting studies). Each challenge has been anticipated with a solution, from engaging mentors to sustaining the initiative.

If executed with commitment, this program will empower our students to make informed, confident choices about their futures – ultimately contributing to their personal success and the nation's human capital development. As one mentoring organization aptly noted, "when we support youth in becoming their fullest selves... we provide the next generation of leaders with the guidance to enable them to thrive in school, at work, and beyond" (37). This is the vision we aim to realize at our school through the power of alumni mentorship and career counseling.