

Research Article

Academic Advising Support, Life-course Directional Agency, and Major-to-Career Transition Readiness in Higher Education: A Measurement-Informed Exploratory Analysis Based on Student and Teacher Samples

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Abstract

This exploratory article examines how academic advising and curricular support are associated with students' life-course directional agency (LDA) and readiness for the transition from major learning to future employment. The analysis is based on two student samples ($n = 408$; $n = 404$) and one teacher sample ($n = 211$). In response to measurement concerns identified during the review process, the revised article treats the study as a measurement-informed diagnostic inquiry rather than as a final validation of a causal or mediation model. Student Sample 1 used a 20-item LDA version and was used primarily for item diagnosis; Student Sample 2 used a 16-item LDA version and provided a more stable revised structure. The evidence indicates that stronger perceived academic advising/curricular support appeared together with clearer direction, more active employment preparation, and stronger transition readiness. At the same time, reverse-worded items in the LDA and decision clarity blocks produced instability, and exploratory factor evidence suggested that the construct boundaries among advising support, LDA, and preparation behaviour still require refinement. Teacher data were used as supplementary institutional evidence rather than as direct validation of the student-level model. The article contributes to higher education management by clarifying LDA as a directional capacity that links academic experience with future planning, while also showing how universities can organize staged advising support across undergraduate development.

Keywords

Academic advising, Life-course directional agency, Career readiness, Employment preparation, Student development, Higher education management

1. Introduction

Mass higher education has changed the practical meaning of undergraduate development. For many students, the challenge is no longer limited to completing required courses or accumulating credits. A more difficult task is to connect major learning, competence development, internship experience, postgraduate options, and employment expectations into a pathway that remains coherent over time. Student success research has shown that institutional support, engagement opportunities, and advising structures are related to persistence, confidence, and long-term planning rather than functioning as marginal campus services (Astin, 1993; Johnson et al., 2022; Tinto, 2012). In China, this issue has become more urgent because graduate employment has been placed at the centre of higher education policy, with recent national documents calling for stronger employment services, campus recruitment, and earlier career guidance for university students (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & General Office of the State Council, 2025; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024, 2025).

Academic advising should therefore not be reduced to course selection or administrative reminders. A developmental view of advising treats it as a teaching-related process through which students learn to interpret institutional requirements, clarify personal goals, and make informed choices (Crookston, 1972; NACADA, 2006). Recent studies also associate advising quality and student support services with student learning, persistence, informed decision-making, and smoother education-to-career transitions (Azhenov et al., 2023; Baghlaf, 2025; Johnson et al., 2022; Mathew, 2023). Yet curriculum guidance, faculty mentoring, career education, and employment services are still often organized separately. Students may receive information from several offices but still fail to form a stable sense of direction.

This article uses life-course directional agency (LDA) to describe students' capacity to maintain long-term orientation, evaluate the consequences of choices, recalibrate after setbacks, and continue meaningful preparation during the transition from university study to career life. LDA is related to self-efficacy, social cognitive career theory, and career adaptability (Bandura, 1997; Lent et al., 1994; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), but it is not identical to these concepts. Career decision self-efficacy emphasizes confidence in performing career decision tasks (Taylor & Betz, 1983). Career adaptability focuses on psychosocial resources for coping with career tasks and transitions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Career maturity describes readiness to make age-appropriate career choices (Crites, 1978). Career readiness is closer to an outcome state. LDA, by contrast, emphasizes continuity of direction across educational and career-related stages. It asks whether students can connect curriculum experience, competence accumulation, internship testing, setback recovery, and future planning into a continuing developmental line.

The article is deliberately cautious. It does not claim to prove a mature causal model. Instead, it offers a diagnostic analysis of how institutional support, students' directional capacity, and transition readiness appear together in the available data. This position is appropriate because early-stage construct development requires attention to item clarity, scale reliability, and conceptual boundaries before stronger structural claims are made. The revised manuscript therefore uses the newly provided questionnaire mapping and statistical analysis files as empirical anchors to improve methodological transparency and to reduce the risk that the study will be read as a methodological black box.

2. Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

The revised framework treats academic advising/curricular support as the institutional condition, LDA as a directional capacity, and transition readiness as a practical pattern reflected in decision clarity and preparation behaviour. The original model assumed that advising support may be associated with LDA and that LDA may be associated with decision clarity and employment preparation. Because the available data are cross-sectional and measurement diagnosis revealed item-level instability, the revised article uses research questions rather than causal hypotheses.

Table 1

Conceptual Boundary of LDA

Construct	Main emphasis	Difference from LDA
Career decision self-efficacy	Confidence in completing career decision tasks	LDA includes confidence but focuses more on sustained direction, recalibration, and action across several developmental stages.
Career adaptability	Resources for coping with career tasks and transitions	LDA overlaps with adaptation but emphasizes continuity of direction from major learning to career preparation.
Career maturity	Developmentally appropriate readiness for career choice	LDA is less age-stage based and more concerned with connecting academic experience, values, setbacks, and future plans.
Career readiness	Preparedness for employment or transition outcomes	LDA is treated as a developmental capacity that may accompany readiness, not as the readiness outcome itself.

The research questions are: (1) How are academic advising/curricular support, LDA, decision clarity, and employment preparation associated in the student samples? (2) Which measurement problems appear in the LDA and decision clarity blocks? (3) How does the teacher sample contextualize the student evidence from an institutional perspective? (4) What advising framework can universities use to support students at different undergraduate stages?

3. Research Design

3.1. Samples and questionnaire versions

The study used three valid samples: Student Sample 1 (n = 408), Student Sample 2 (n = 404), and a teacher sample (n = 211). The two student samples were not merged because the questionnaire mapping shows that they corresponded to different LDA versions. Student Sample 1 used a 20-item LDA version and was treated as the item-diagnostic and structural-diagnosis phase. Student Sample 2 used a 16-item LDA version and was treated as a revised measurement phase. The teacher questionnaire was treated as a unified teacher version and was used only for supplementary institutional evidence, not for a cross-level or nested model.

Table 2

Samples, Questionnaire Versions, and Analytical Roles

Sample	n	Questionnaire version	Likert scale	Analytical role	Approx. 95% margin of error
Student Sample 1	408	Student Version A: LDA 20 items	6-point	Initial item diagnosis and structure diagnosis	±4.9%
Student Sample 2	404	Student Version B: LDA 16 items	6-point	Revised measurement analysis and practical-pattern interpretation	±4.9%
Teacher Sample	211	Unified teacher version	7-point	Supplementary institutional evidence only	±6.8%

The margins of error in Table 2 are approximate values for sample proportions under maximum variability at the 95% confidence level. They are provided only as a descriptive indicator of sampling precision and should not be interpreted as a substitute for probability-sampling claims.

Table 3

Questionnaire Blocks and Theoretical Roles

Questionnaire	Item range	Variable codes	Block	Theoretical role
Student A	Q11-Q22	ASQ1-ASQ12	Academic advising/curricular support	Institutional support condition
Student A	Q23-Q42	LDA1-LDA20	Life-course directional agency	Directional capacity; diagnostic version
Student A	Q43-Q51	DCC1-DCC9	Decision clarity and commitment	Transition-readiness component
Student A	Q52-Q60	CPB1-CPB9	Career preparation behaviour	Transition-readiness component
Student B	Q11-Q22	ASQ1-ASQ12	Academic advising/curricular support	Institutional support condition
Student B	Q23-Q38	LDA1-LDA16	Life-course directional agency	Directional capacity; revised version

Student B	Q39-Q47	DCC1-DCC9	Decision clarity and commitment	Transition-readiness component
Student B	Q48-Q56	CPB1-CPB9	Career preparation behaviour	Transition-readiness component
Teacher	Q7-Q16	TASQ1-TASQ10	Teacher-rated advising/support system	Supplementary institutional condition
Teacher	Q17-Q24	TPP1-TPP8	Teacher-rated student pathway preparedness	Supplementary institutional outcome

3.2. Analytical procedure and transparency limits

The analytical procedure combined descriptive statistics, internal consistency analysis, KMO and Bartlett tests, factor-structure diagnosis, correlation analysis, and interpretation of teacher-sample evidence. The available statistical files provide detailed outputs for sample characteristics, reliability, validity diagnostics, factor evidence, and selected correlations. The archival materials do not provide enough information to reconstruct a longitudinal design, a nested multi-level structure, an independent pilot-test procedure, or a single named survey platform. Accordingly, the revised article reports the available statistical evidence and treats these administrative gaps as limitations rather than filling them with unverified details.

Reverse-worded items were originally included to reduce response acquiescence and to check whether respondents were reading items carefully. However, the diagnostic results showed that several reverse-worded items produced negative item-total correlations and weakened internal consistency. The revised interpretation therefore treats the reverse-worded items as a measurement problem and avoids using them to support strong causal or mediation claims.

4. Results

4.1. Sample characteristics

Table 4

Summary of Sample Characteristics

Indicator	Student Sample 1 (n=408)	Student Sample 2 (n=404)	Teacher Sample (n=211)
Largest academic year group	Year 3: 159 (38.971%)	Year 3: 162 (40.099%)	Teachers contacted Year 3 most frequently: 162 (76.777%; multiple response)
Major/field concentration	Engineering: 147 (36.029%); Business: 87 (21.324%)	Engineering: 162 (40.099%); Business: 91 (22.525%)	Engineering/information technology: 51 (24.171%); Education: 45 (21.327%)
Internship exposure	At least one internship: 285	At least one internship: 295	All respondents worked with student training plans or academic advising:

Gender balance	Male 209 (51.225%); Female 199 (48.775%)	Male 208 (51.485%); Female 196 (48.515%)	Roles: instructors 75 (35.545%), mentors 57 (27.014%), counsellors 41 (19.431%)
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Both student samples concentrated on second-, third-, and fourth-year undergraduates, which fits the article's focus on major-to-career transition. The strongest disciplinary representation came from engineering and business students, but humanities, science, medicine, and other fields were also represented. The teacher sample included instructors, mentors, counsellors, academic affairs personnel, and career guidance staff, all of whom were involved in training-plan or academic advising work.

4.2. Reliability and item diagnosis

Table 5

Reliability and Measurement Diagnosis

Scale/block	Student Sample 1	Student Sample 2	Teacher sample
Overall questionnaire	$\alpha = 0.960$	$\alpha = 0.976$	$\alpha = 0.920$
Academic advising/curricular support	$\alpha = 0.941$	$\alpha = 0.937$	TASQ $\alpha = 0.915$
LDA	20-item version: $\alpha = 0.819$; after removing four problematic reverse-worded items, $\alpha = 0.964$	16-item version: $\alpha = 0.959$	Not measured as student self-report; teacher-rated pathway preparedness $\alpha = 0.710$
Decision clarity and commitment	$\alpha = -0.043$; after removing three problematic reverse-worded items, $\alpha = 0.964$	$\alpha = 0.510$; after removing three problematic reverse-worded items, $\alpha = 0.979$	Included only as part of teacher-rated preparedness
Employment preparation behaviour	$\alpha = 0.915$	$\alpha = 0.925$	Related to teacher-rated preparedness block

The reliability evidence shows that most blocks had strong internal consistency, but reverse-worded items were a persistent source of instability. In Student Sample 1, four LDA reverse-worded items showed negative item-total correlations: delayed awareness of long-term consequences (-0.750), frequent directional change due to others (-0.718), difficulty returning to track after delay (-0.750), and inability to continue without short-term reward (-0.701). In the same sample, three decision-clarity reverse-worded items also showed negative item-total correlations: strong directional wavering (-0.753), repeated delay in key choices (-0.733), and commitment remaining at the idea level without implementation (-0.739). These results explain why the article does not claim

final scale validation.

Student Sample 2 showed improved LDA reliability after the 16-item version was used. Nevertheless, the decision clarity and commitment block still showed weakness because the three reverse-worded items continued to pull the scale in the opposite direction. The revised manuscript therefore reports decision clarity as a diagnostic block and recommends future item rewriting rather than presenting this scale as fully validated.

4.3. Validity and factor-structure diagnosis

The student data were suitable for factor analysis. In Student Sample 1, the overall KMO value was 0.988 and Bartlett's test was significant ($\chi^2 = 17565.649$, $df = 1431$, $p < 0.001$). In Student Sample 2, the overall KMO value was 0.989 and Bartlett's test was also significant ($\chi^2 = 16336.817$, $df = 1225$, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate that the items were sufficiently interrelated for factor analysis. However, suitability for factor analysis does not by itself prove that the proposed constructs are clearly separated.

Student Sample 1 provided useful confirmatory evidence at the item-loading level. Standardized loadings for academic advising/curricular support ranged from 0.724 to 0.794; positive LDA items ranged from 0.732 to 0.791; decision-clarity positive items ranged from 0.699 to 0.768; and employment preparation items ranged from 0.715 to 0.772. The reverse-worded items loaded in the negative direction, which was consistent with their wording but also made reliability interpretation difficult. The AVE values were above 0.50 for all reported blocks, but the decision clarity block had low composite reliability ($CR = 0.547$), again indicating measurement fragility.

The discriminant-validity and exploratory factor evidence require caution. In Student Sample 1, correlations among academic advising/curricular support, LDA, employment preparation, and supplementary items were very high and several correlations exceeded the square roots of AVE. Student Sample 2 also showed cross-loading and partial single-factor dominance in the exploratory factor diagnosis. Therefore, the revised article interprets the results as practical associations and measurement signals, not as evidence of a fully separated structural model.

4.4. Teacher-sample corroboration

The teacher sample offered supplementary institutional evidence. Its overall Cronbach's alpha was 0.920, the teacher-rated advising/support system block had $\alpha = 0.915$, and the teacher-rated student pathway preparedness block had $\alpha = 0.710$. One reverse-worded teacher item, 'students generally lack systematic job-search action,' had a negative item-total correlation (-0.673); deleting it would increase the preparedness block from 0.710 to 0.946. This result is consistent with the student data in showing that reverse-worded items created measurement instability.

The correlation between the teacher-rated advising/support system and teacher-rated student

pathway preparedness was strong and significant ($r = 0.862$, $p < 0.001$). Because the teacher respondents were not nested within the same student groups, this result is not treated as validation of the student-level model. It is interpreted as contextual corroboration: educators who perceived stronger advising systems also tended to observe more mature student preparation patterns.

4.5. Overall interpretation of empirical patterns

Across the student and teacher evidence, a consistent practical pattern appeared: stronger advising and curricular support tended to appear together with clearer developmental direction and more active preparation. However, the data do not support a strong causal claim. The high correlations among support, LDA, and preparation suggest that these dimensions may partly overlap in students' experience. In practical terms, students may perceive institutional support, personal direction, and employment preparation as one connected developmental experience rather than as sharply separated constructs. This overlap is substantively meaningful, but it also shows why further construct refinement is needed.

5. Discussion

The revised findings contribute to the advising literature in two ways. First, they show that advising should be interpreted not only as information delivery but also as a developmental structure that helps students connect learning experiences with future possibilities. Second, they identify a gap in existing discussions of student support and career readiness: many studies examine advising, student support, or career preparation outcomes, but fewer explain how students maintain direction across the middle period between major learning and career transition. LDA is useful because it directs attention to this middle process of interpretation, commitment, recalibration, and continuing action.

At the same time, the results require methodological modesty. The evidence does not prove that advising support causes LDA or that LDA mediates transition readiness. The more defensible interpretation is that these variables were closely associated in the available cross-sectional data. This distinction matters because universities should not assume that adding more information alone will automatically produce student readiness. Advising becomes developmental only when students can interpret information, test plans, identify competence gaps, and revise direction after setbacks.

Table 6

Staged Advising Framework for Undergraduate Transition Readiness

Stage	Main student need	Recommended advising focus	Examples of evidence-informed tasks
Early undergraduate stage	Understanding major requirements and possible pathways	Major orientation and curriculum literacy	Training-plan map; course sequence explanation; initial competence self-check

Middle undergraduate stage	Connecting courses with competence development	Faculty feedback and competence-building guidance	Competence portfolio; targeted skill plan; faculty mentoring session
Internship/pre-transition stage	Testing pathways and identifying gaps	Career exploration and experiential feedback	Internship reflection; pathway comparison; gap analysis; informational interviews
Final-year transition stage	Making realistic employment or postgraduate decisions	Individualized transition planning	Application timeline; resume/portfolio review; postgraduate or job-market decision review

This staged framework responds to the finding that transition readiness is not a final-year issue only. First- and second-year students need curriculum comprehension and early direction formation; middle-stage students need competence development and feedback; internship-stage students need structured reflection; and final-year students need concrete transition planning. Such a framework also connects the empirical evidence to institutional action, which is important for higher education management.

The measurement findings also have theoretical value. The instability of reverse-worded items suggests that hesitation, delay, and difficulty may not simply be the opposite of LDA. They may reflect temporary anxiety, reading confusion, situational pressure, or a different construct altogether. Future LDA instruments should therefore use clearer positive wording, separate stable direction from temporary uncertainty, and distinguish directional agency from decision clarity and preparation behaviour. This refinement would strengthen the construct's boundary relative to career adaptability, decision self-efficacy, career maturity, and career readiness.

6. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

This study should be read as a measurement-informed exploratory diagnosis. Its main conclusion is that academic advising/curricular support, LDA, decision clarity, and employment preparation are meaningfully connected in practice, but the available data do not justify a final causal or mediation model. Student Sample 1 revealed item-level problems in the 20-item LDA version and the decision-clarity block; Student Sample 2 showed stronger LDA reliability with the 16-item version but continued to show weakness in reverse-worded decision items. Teacher evidence supported the institutional relevance of the advising-readiness relationship, but only as supplementary contextual evidence.

Several limitations should be emphasized. The data were cross-sectional, and most student evidence relied on self-report. The teacher sample was not nested within the student samples, so it could not be used for multi-level validation. The available analysis files did not provide enough administrative metadata to reconstruct the exact data-collection period, survey platform, or

independent pilot-test process. The factor-structure evidence also suggests that construct boundaries require further refinement. These limitations are not reasons to dismiss the study; rather, they show why the article is positioned as diagnostic and exploratory.

Future research should revise the LDA scale, reduce or redesign ambiguous reverse-worded items, test differences by academic year and field of study, and use longitudinal or multi-institutional data. In particular, future studies should compare whether LDA and readiness differ between early, middle, and final undergraduate stages, and whether discipline-specific pathways shape students' directional agency. With stronger measurement and longitudinal design, the framework can better explain how advising systems help students transform academic experience into coherent future readiness.

For universities, the managerial message is clear: transition readiness should be cultivated through an integrated developmental advising system rather than through fragmented services offered only near graduation. A mature advising system allows students to review progress repeatedly, receive timely correction, test possible routes, and connect academic learning with occupational possibilities before the final year.

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Author contributions

Conceptualization, J.Y.; methodology, J.Y.; formal analysis, J.Y.; investigation, J.Y.; data curation, J.Y.; writing—original draft preparation, J.Y.; writing—review and editing, J.Y.; visualization, J.Y.; project administration, J.Y. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data availability

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval

No formal ethics approval number was issued for this study.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participation was voluntary.

Consent for publication

Not applicable. (This manuscript contains no identifiable personal data in any form.)

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