

How emotions influence motivation and behaviour in career development learning



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As they prepare to transition into employment, university, or vocational training, young people face multiple challenges. They are looking towards what may be uncertain, unstable futures, while also dealing with present personal, social and financial stressors (Gleeson, 2023). Most contemporary post-school career transitions require daunting investments of time, money, effort and emotion. These investments sharpen expectations for making the 'right' career decision and the 'right' career moves and heighten the costs of missteps and failures.

Research shows that emotions influence students' cognitive performance, motivation, goals and proactive behaviour, as well as their wellbeing (Pekrun et al., 2023; Shuman & Scherer, 2014). Although positive emotions can enhance motivation, attention and creative thinking, they may also impede learning by limiting the effort or attention applied to a challenging task. Similarly, while negative emotions may disrupt focus, effort and creative thinking, they can also motivate a student to reassess their strategies and redouble their efforts.

This Insights paper offers a framework to help understand the variety of emotions at play in career development learning. It describes how these emotions might affect students' motivation, goal setting and proactive behaviours, and advises career educators how to effectively respond to their students' emotional states.

What are emotions?

An emotion is a relatively short-lived state of mental and physical stimulation that is focused on the particular experience that evoked it. The experience and expression of emotions is made up of several distinct components:

- **Physiological components**, such as brain activity, pulse or breathing.
- **Motor expression components**, such as facial expressions and body language.
- **Cognitive components**, such as appraisals, goals and beliefs.
- **Motivation and action components**, which influence behaviour and decision-making.
- **Subjective feeling components**, reflecting the personal experience and significance of emotions.

These components are interactive, dynamic and contextual (Shuman & Scherer, 2014). They mutually influence each other and change over time, adjusting as the context develops (Baumeister et al., 2007).

Emotion components tend to combine in various patterns, resulting in so-called basic emotions – such as happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust and surprise – that are universally experienced and recognised. At the same time, variations within these patterns are possible, leading to differing emotional experiences among individuals. This is due to differences in peoples' beliefs, values, culture and relationships (Shuman & Scherer, 2014).

Three dimensions of achievement emotions in career development

According to the *theory of achievement emotions* developed by Pekrun et al (2023), emotions arise from:

- students' appraisal of the personal significance and **value** of the learning task and
- their perceived ability to **control** the outcome.

Generally, high value and control lead to positive emotions such as enjoyment or pride, while low value and control result in negative emotions such as anxiety or boredom. These emotions, in turn, influence students' ongoing cognitive processing, motivation and behaviour (Baumeister et al., 2007).

To help understand various achievement emotions and their impact on student learning, Pekrun et al (2023) offer a three-dimensional framework, mapping emotions according to their **valence**, **arousal** and **object focus**.

- **Valence** distinguishes positive, pleasant emotions from negative, unpleasant ones.
- **Arousal** distinguishes emotions that activate responses and promote action from those that deactivate responses and inhibit action.
- **Object focus** distinguishes:
 - *retrospective emotions* about past experiences from *prospective emotions* about future experiences, as well as
 - emotions evoked by feelings about the *action* itself from those evoked by the *outcomes* of those actions.

Positive emotions about the past

Positive retrospective emotions relate to pleasant feelings about past actions or achievements. These can activate positive behaviours, such as seeking opportunities to perform similar tasks, developing more advanced skills, or setting goals to achieve

similar or greater outcomes. These emotions underpin a longstanding principle of career development: people should pursue a career that involves work tasks that they enjoy and can do well. For young people, early success – and the encouragement from parents and teachers that comes with it – can influence what they believe to be a suitable career choice. However, this influence may also result in career options being narrowed too soon, without allowing for adequate reflection, research or exploration of alternatives.

It's important to note that positive retrospective emotions can also prove deactivating and inhibit motivation and proactive behaviours. Contentment might mean that someone feels no need to pursue further experiences or achievements, despite enjoying and succeeding at an activity. Enjoying and being good at something doesn't necessarily mean that someone has a true desire to pursue a related career.

Negative emotions about the past

Negative retrospective emotions relate to a dislike of past activities or feelings of failure about their outcomes. For example, a student who has had their request for work experience rejected by their desired host might reflect on the discomforting experience of making the request itself or the disappointing outcome. They may feel intense emotions such as anger at the host's refusal, shame at a poorly presented request, or guilt for not meeting the hopes or expectations of their parents.

The behavioural consequences of negative retrospective emotions will vary. Some will reflect on their performance or seek feedback on the performance or advice for future efforts. Some will suppress their negative emotions and try to put the experience behind them, without learning from it. Others will contemplate their real or perceived failures, potentially spiralling into hopelessness, recrimination or despair.

Object focus		Positive		Negative	
		Activating	Deactivating	Activating	Deactivating
Retrospective	Activity	Enjoyment	Relaxation	Anger, frustration	Boredom, discomfort
	Outcome	Pride, retrospective joy, gratitude	Relief, contentment	Shame, guilt, anger	Disappointment
Prospective	Activity	Excitement, interest	Indifference	Fear	Apathy, disinterest
	Outcome	Hope, anticipatory joy	Assurance	Anxiety	Hopelessness

Table 1. shows the various ways these dimensions can combine, with illustrative emotions for each combination.

Positive emotions about the future

Positive prospective emotions refer to excitement about a future task or confidence in a successful outcome. These can activate positive behaviours such as a greater application of effort in the activity and emotional investment in the outcome. However, they may have a deactivating effect and diminish the strength of goals and motivation, such as when assurance develops into overconfidence and less effort is applied to a task.

In recent years, career development researchers have argued for the importance of positive feelings about the future, including emotions and attitudes such as self-efficacy, hope, optimism, proactivity, and adaptability (Spurk, 2021). In a study investigating the prospective emotions felt by students transitioning from high school to university, Parmentier et al. (2021) found that those who reported positive emotional profiles were likely to be more confident in their career decisions and more adaptable to change.

Negative emotions about the future

Negative prospective emotions refer to feelings of unease, anxiety or fear about future activities or experiences. The *object focus* of these emotions may be in the outcome, such as fear of being rejected in a job application, or in the activity itself, such as a general dislike of networking. Negative prospective emotions can influence a person's ability to perform a task successfully and, if intense enough, may motivate them to avoid the activity altogether.

In Parmentier et al.'s study (2021), most students with mixed or negative feelings about their school-to-university transition at the beginning of their final year of school moved into a more positive mindset by the end of the year. This suggests that although a significant career transition can evoke negative emotions such as anxiety and fear, this is in fact a normal part of the career development process that students can overcome with preparation and support.

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Working with emotions in career development practice

By applying Pekrun's theory of achievement emotions to career development, we can recognise a range of potential emotional responses to common career development activities and experiences. We can then consider how those emotions might support or undermine our students' motivation and proactive behaviours, and how we might best adapt our career education strategies in response.

First and most importantly, we can be **attentive to the impact of negative emotions on our students**.

We may be able to offer strategies to help manage fear and anxiety and to cope with disappointment. We should be prepared to refer students to professional mental health support when these emotions are particularly intense or develop into hopelessness or despair (Redekopp & Huston, 2020).

We should also **look for the influence of deactivating negative emotions such as apathy and disinterest**, which may be more common than more intense activating emotions. These emotions can be frustrating for career educators to confront, but we can look toward methods and interventions for fostering motivation (Rochat, 2018), purpose (Dik et al., 2015) and empowerment (Kenny et al. 2019) in career development.

Career educators can **play a vital role in helping their students cope with - and perhaps even embrace - failure** (Pryor & Bright, 2012). We should help young people to recognise failure as part of any career journey, support them to learn how to manage their negative emotions, and to reflect on what their negative emotions might mean for their emerging career identity.

Career educators can **help young people harness the motivational power of positive emotions**, directing it toward further proactive career behaviours. However, we should be careful not to assume that someone's past enjoyment and success is a guarantee that a related career pathway is the best choice. We should also not assume that self-assured students do not need motivational support.

More than anything, we need to ensure that we **help cultivate a safe environment for our students to experience, reflect on, learn from and manage their career development emotions**. This does not mean that we insulate students from uncertainty, pain or disappointment, all of which can be valuable triggers for their learning and development. Rather, it means that we recognise, value and respect our students' emotions and support them to do the same.

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