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Research Article

Pastoral Accompaniment for Final-Year Students Experiencing Future Anxiety

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Abstract: Final-year university students occupy a fragile transitional space between academic completion and an uncertain future. This article examines future anxiety among final-year students as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing academic pressure, employability uncertainty, identity formation, family expectations, spiritual struggle, and consequential life decisions under limited control. It employs a constructive conceptual literature review, synthesizing scholarship on university student mental health, career anxiety, career construction and career self-management, religious coping, and contemporary pastoral care. The analysis develops a pastoral accompaniment framework that neither reduces anxiety to a private psychological symptom nor replaces professional mental health or career services. Three constructive findings are proposed: first, future anxiety should be understood as a vocational-existential crisis intensified by final-year transitions; second, pastoral accompaniment contributes through relational presence, meaning-making, spiritual discernment, and referral-aware care; and third, an integrated model should combine stabilization, vocational reframing, and agency-building within accountable communities. The article concludes that pastoral accompaniment is most responsible when it is theologically grounded, psychologically informed, ethically bounded, and collaborative. Its main contribution is a practical-conceptual framework for campus ministries, theological schools, and Christian higher education institutions seeking to accompany final-year students without fabricating empirical claims or spiritualizing distress.

Keywords: Career Anxiety; Constructive Literature Review; Final-Year Students; Future Anxiety; Pastoral Accompaniment.

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1. Introduction

The final year of university is often narrated as a season of achievement, maturity, and imminent opportunity. In practice, it can also become a concentrated period of uncertainty. Students are expected to complete theses or capstone projects, meet institutional requirements, prepare for employment or further study, negotiate family expectations, and imagine a credible future as an adult. These pressures do not occur in a psychological vacuum. They unfold in higher education systems shaped by competitive labor markets, economic instability, technological disruption, post-pandemic adjustment, and changing expectations about employability. Young people continue to face persistent vulnerability in the transition from education to work (International Labor Organization, 2022). Mental health also remains inseparable from social, relational, and economic conditions (World Health Organization, 2022). For final-year students, the future is not an abstract concept; it becomes an immediate demand.

Research on university student mental health confirms that anxiety is a significant and recurring concern in higher education. The WHO World Mental Health International College

Student project demonstrates that common mental disorders are distributed across student populations in multiple countries (Auerbach et al., 2018, pp. 623–638). A systematic review and meta-analysis report a high pooled prevalence of non-specific anxiety among undergraduate students (Ahmed et al., 2023). These studies do not prove that all final-year worry is clinical anxiety, but they establish that student anxiety deserves serious institutional and pastoral attention.

The specific phenomenon addressed in this article is future anxiety among final-year students. Future anxiety refers to persistent apprehension, fear, or cognitive-emotional tension concerning uncertain future outcomes. In the final year, this anxiety often attaches to employability, career choice, financial independence, unfinished academic tasks, relational expectations, and the question of whether education will lead to a meaningful life. Qualitative work on career anxiety describes uncertainty, self-doubt, and pressure surrounding career decisions (Pisarik et al., 2017, pp. 339–352). Scale-development research in tourism and hospitality education shows that career anxiety can be examined as a specific dimension of student transition (Tsai et al., 2017, pp. 158–165). Research on final-year university students identifies uncertainty, pressure, and transition-related stress as central themes (Keane et al., 2021, pp. 2621–2630). Pandemic-related stress has also been linked to future career anxiety among final-year students (Rahmadani & Sahrani, 2021, pp. 979–984). Together, these studies suggest that future anxiety emerges at the intersection of developmental transition, social expectation, and perceived lack of control.

Existing approaches to student anxiety are valuable but incomplete for the present problem. Universal mental health prevention programs have demonstrated benefits for higher education students (Conley et al., 2015, pp. 487–507). Career planning and proactivity can shape perceptions of employability in uncertain labor markets (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020, pp. 435–455). Social cognitive career theory explains career agency through self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, supports, and barriers (Lent & Brown, 2013, pp. 557–568). Career adaptability further clarifies how students develop concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012, pp. 661–673). However, much of this literature gives limited attention to pastoral and spiritual dimensions of anxiety. Conversely, pastoral care literature is rich in relational, theological, and meaning-oriented resources. However, it often lacks a specific constructive model for final-year students whose anxiety is linked to graduation, employability, and future planning.

This gap matters for Christian universities, theological schools, campus ministries, and congregations that accompany students during the final stage of study. Pastoral care is often present in these contexts, but its function is not always conceptually clear. It may become informal encouragement, prayer without assessment, advice without structure, or spiritual language that unintentionally suppresses distress. Responsible pastoral care should not replace clinical counseling, psychiatric care, or career services. At the same time, it should not withdraw from students' future anxiety as though meaning, vocation, faith, hope, and belonging were irrelevant to mental health. The challenge is to articulate a form of pastoral accompaniment that is spiritually meaningful, psychologically aware, and institutionally collaborative.

The research problem guiding this article is: How can pastoral accompaniment be constructively conceptualized to support final-year students experiencing future anxiety without reducing pastoral care to psychotherapy, career coaching, or generic spiritual encouragement? The article offers a constructive solution by integrating student mental health research, career construction theory, social cognitive career theory, religious coping studies, and contemporary pastoral care. Its contribution is fourfold: it clarifies future anxiety as a vocational-existential phenomenon; it identifies the distinctive but bounded contribution of pastoral accompaniment; it proposes a three-movement framework of stabilization, vocational reframing, and agency-building; and it offers implications for institutional collaboration in Christian higher education. The article proceeds through a literature review, a methodological explanation of the constructive review design, three analytical results and discussion sections, a brief comparison with previous studies, and conclusions.

2. Literature Review

The literature relevant to pastoral accompaniment for final-year students can be organized around four converging areas: student mental health, career-related anxiety, career development theory, and pastoral-spiritual care. Studies of student mental health establish the scale and seriousness of anxiety in higher education. Common mental disorders among college students are not marginal issues (Auerbach et al., 2018, pp. 623–638). Student mental health continues to raise questions for universities, particularly regarding prevention, support,

and institutional responsibility (Brown, 2018, pp. 193–196). Psychological distress among university students is linked with academic, personal, and environmental pressures (Sharp & Theiler, 2018, pp. 193–212). Evidence on anxiety prevalence among undergraduates has been consolidated through systematic review and meta-analysis (Ahmed et al., 2023). Students' use of mental health services remains inconsistent, even when need is evident (Osborn et al., 2022). The implication is clear: support for anxious students must be more than episodic crisis response; it should include preventive, relational, and context-sensitive forms of care.

Career-related anxiety narrows this discussion to the transition from study to post-university life. Career anxiety can be understood as a phenomenological experience involving uncertainty, identity threat, and pressure to decide (Pisarik et al., 2017, pp. 339–352). It can also be operationalized and measured among students preparing to enter specific sectors (Tsai et al., 2017, pp. 158–165). Final-year student anxiety is shaped by impending transition and the expectation to appear competent at precisely the moment students feel uncertain (Keane et al., 2021, pp. 2621–2630). Stress during the COVID-19 pandemic intensified future career anxiety among final-year students (Rahmadani & Sahrani, 2021, pp. 979–984). These findings support the argument that future anxiety is both emotional and vocational: it concerns what students feel, but also how they imagine their place in the world.

Career development theories help explain why final-year students may feel vulnerable. Robert W. Lent and Steven D. Brown's social cognitive career theory emphasizes self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, contextual supports, and barriers (Lent & Brown, 2013, pp. 557–568). When students doubt their competence, perceive limited opportunity, or lack supportive networks, future-oriented anxiety becomes more likely. Career construction theory adds a narrative and adaptive dimension. Mark L. Savickas and colleagues describe career construction as a process of giving meaning to experiences and designing lives in changing contexts (Savickas et al., 2009, pp. 239–250). Mark L. Savickas and Erik J. Porfeli identify career adaptability through concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012, pp. 661–673). Career planning and proactivity are associated with perceptions of employability in uncertain labor markets (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020, pp. 435–455). These theories are not pastoral in themselves, but they illuminate how students move from paralysis toward purposeful agency.

Pastoral care and spirituality bring another dimension into view. Carrie Doehring presents pastoral care as interpretive, relational, and attentive to lived experience rather than merely the application of doctrine to problems (Doehring, 2015). Emmanuel Y. Lartey emphasizes intercultural sensitivity and shows that distress is shaped by culture, power, family, and social location (Lartey, 2003). Religious coping research also matters because students may interpret anxiety through spiritual categories. Kenneth I. Pargament and colleagues distinguish positive and negative forms of religious coping (Pargament et al., 1998, pp. 710–724). A concise measure of religious coping, the Brief RCOPE (Pargament et al., 2011, pp. 51–76), has been developed for empirical research. Positive religious coping can support meaning, connection, and hope, while negative religious coping may involve spiritual struggle, perceived abandonment by God, or punitive interpretations of suffering. Spirituality and religiousness are related to mental health in complex rather than automatically protective ways (Lucchetti et al., 2021, pp. 7620–7631). A specifically pastoral perspective on university students emphasizes belonging, trust, embodied experience, and relational care (Johannessen, 2022).

Despite these contributions, the literature remains fragmented. Mental health studies often identify anxiety and service-use gaps but do not address pastoral accompaniment. Career studies explain future-related concerns but rarely integrate spiritual discernment, vocation, or pastoral ethics. Pastoral care literature provides theological depth but often lacks a model tailored to final-year transitions and career uncertainty. The gap, therefore, is not the absence of research on anxiety, careers, or pastoral care; it is the lack of an integrated, constructive framework that brings them into accountable conversation. This article addresses that gap by proposing pastoral accompaniment as a relational, meaning-centered, referral-aware, and agency-building practice for final-year students experiencing future anxiety.

3. Proposed Method

This article uses a constructive conceptual literature review design. It is not an empirical field study, does not report interviews or surveys, and does not claim statistical findings from a new dataset. Its research purpose is theoretical-practical: to synthesize relevant scholarship and construct a pastoral framework that can guide further empirical testing and institutional practice. Conceptual research is appropriate when a phenomenon is multidimensional, when

existing studies are distributed across different disciplines, and when the research task is to clarify relationships among concepts rather than to measure prevalence in a specific population. In this article, the key concepts are future anxiety, final-year student transition, career adaptability, religious coping, vocation, and pastoral accompaniment.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the literature on university student anxiety and career anxiety was read diagnostically to identify the main pressures facing students in late-stage higher education. Second, career development theories were examined to identify resources for moving from uncertainty to adaptive agency. Third, pastoral care and religious coping literature were interpreted constructively to clarify what pastoral accompaniment can contribute without collapsing into psychotherapy or career advising. Fourth, the findings were synthesized into a three-movement framework: stabilizing anxiety, reframing the future vocationally, and mobilizing agency through community and institutional collaboration. This method is deliberately integrative. It assumes that a single discipline cannot adequately address future anxiety among final-year students.

Validity in this conceptual study is pursued through coherence, interdisciplinary triangulation, and critical boundary-setting. Coherence requires that the proposed framework follow logically from the reviewed literature. Interdisciplinary triangulation means that claims about anxiety, career development, and pastoral care are tested against relevant bodies of scholarship rather than asserted from a single perspective. Critical boundary-setting requires explicit recognition that pastoral accompaniment is not clinical diagnosis, psychiatric treatment, or professional career counseling. Where symptoms suggest severe anxiety, depression, panic, self-harm risk, trauma response, or functional impairment, pastoral caregivers should refer students to qualified mental health professionals. Where students require labor-market information, curriculum vitae review, internship preparation, or job placement support, pastoral caregivers should collaborate with career services.

The ethical considerations of this study are also conceptual but important. Because no human participants were recruited and no new data were created or analyzed, institutional research ethics approval was not required. Nevertheless, the proposed model is shaped by ethical commitments relevant to practice: confidentiality within institutional limits, informed consent for prayer or spiritual practices, non-coercive care, cultural sensitivity, attention to power differences between staff and students, and referral when pastoral competence is exceeded. The article avoids fabricated cases and invented empirical data. Its contribution is therefore not an evidence claim about intervention effectiveness, but a theoretically grounded framework that can later be tested through qualitative interviews, program evaluation, or mixed-methods research.

4. Results and Discussion

Future Anxiety as a Vocational-Existential Crisis in the Final-Year Transition

The first constructive finding is that future anxiety among final-year students should be interpreted as a vocational-existential crisis rather than merely as private nervousness about employment. The final-year context gives anxiety a specific structure. Students are confronting the loss of familiar academic rhythms and the demand to enter a less predictable world. Graduation replaces the university timetable, classroom identity, peer group, and assessment system with harder questions: What work will I do? Will my education be useful? Can I meet family expectations? What if I fail? These questions show why future anxiety is psychological, vocational, and existential.

This interpretation is consistent with research on student distress. University anxiety cannot be separated from academic expectations, social pressure, and institutional environments (Brown, 2018, pp. 193–196). Psychological distress among university students is also linked to pervasive academic and environmental pressures (Sharp & Theiler, 2018, pp. 193–212). Final-year students face these pressures at heightened intensity because the consequences of performance appear immediate. A thesis delay can affect graduation; a failed job application can feel like a judgment on years of study; uncertainty about income can intensify family conflict or self-doubt. Anxiety among undergraduates is widespread, but the final-year situation adds a transition-specific dimension (Ahmed et al., 2023). Final-year students experience anxiety in relation to uncertainty and expectations (Keane et al., 2021, pp. 2621–2630). Stress can intensify future career anxiety (Rahmadani & Sahrani, 2021, pp. 979–984). These studies support a shift from asking only "How anxious is the student?" to asking "What future is the student being forced to imagine, and what resources does the student have to face it?

Career anxiety research deepens this analysis. Career anxiety includes ambiguity, fear of failure, and emotional struggle around career decision-making (Pisarik et al., 2017, pp. 339–

352). Career anxiety can also be related to industry-specific expectations, suggesting that students may fear not only unemployment but also a mismatch between educational preparation and workplace reality (Tsai et al., 2017, pp. 158–165). The final-year student is therefore often caught between identity and opportunity. The student asks not only whether a job is available, but whether the available future is meaningful, stable, socially recognized, and compatible with personal calling. This is where pastoral care has a legitimate entry point, because the problem involves meaning, hope, guilt, belonging, discernment, and fear.

A pastoral interpretation must avoid two errors. The first is over-pathologizing ordinary developmental uncertainty. Some anxiety before graduation is expected and can motivate preparation, planning, and support-seeking. The second is under-recognizing serious distress. When anxiety produces persistent insomnia, panic symptoms, inability to function, withdrawal, depressive symptoms, self-harm ideation, or severe impairment, it should not be treated only with advice, prayer, or encouragement. Students with perceived mental health needs often do not obtain professional help (Eisenberg et al., 2012, pp. 222–232). Recent systematic review evidence also shows uneven patterns of university student mental health service use (Osborn et al., 2022). Pastoral accompaniment must therefore include basic mental health literacy and awareness of referral options.

Theologically, future anxiety can be understood as a crisis of imagined belonging. Students are asking where they will belong after the familiar student role ends. Pastoral care with university students should attend to belonging, trust, and embodied life (Johannessen, 2022). This insight is relevant because anxiety is experienced in the body, in relationships, and in spiritual interpretation. Students may interpret uncertainty as divine silence, personal inadequacy, parental disappointment, or moral failure. Some may believe that faith should eliminate anxiety and, therefore, feel guilty for being afraid. Others may fear that they have missed God's will by choosing the wrong major, delaying graduation, or failing to secure employment. Pastoral accompaniment should create space where students can name anxiety truthfully without being shamed for lacking faith.

Career construction theory helps translate this pastoral insight into the language of student development. Individuals design lives through meaning-making in changing contexts (Savickas et al., 2009, pp. 239–250). Career adaptability can be described in terms of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012, pp. 661–673). Future anxiety often distorts these dimensions: concern becomes catastrophic worry, control becomes helplessness, curiosity becomes avoidance, and confidence becomes self-condemnation. Pastoral accompaniment can support the restoration of adaptive capacities by helping students interpret their stories, recognize resources, and imagine faithful next steps. This reframing prevents simplistic responses and clarifies why pastoral care should be integrated with academic advising, career development, and mental health referral systems.

Pastoral Accompaniment as Relational Presence, Meaning-Making, and Referral-Aware Care

The second constructive finding is that pastoral accompaniment contributes through relational presence, meaning-making, and referral-aware care. The word "accompaniment" implies walking with rather than fixing, controlling, or prematurely advising. Final-year students experiencing future anxiety often receive many instructions: submit the thesis, apply for jobs, improve skills, trust God, be strong, and stop overthinking. Some advice may be useful, but advice offered before careful listening can reinforce shame. Pastoral care begins by creating a relational space where fear can be heard and interpreted without immediate judgment. Carrie Doehring emphasizes that pastoral care attends to lived experience and to the interpretations people use to make sense of suffering (Doehring, 2015). For future anxiety, this means asking how the student narrates the future, God, self, family, and failure.

Relational presence is active rather than passive. It includes listening to emotional content, noticing spiritual language, asking clarifying questions, and discerning whether the student needs immediate referral. It also requires cultural humility. Emmanuel Y. Lartey argues that pastoral care must be intercultural because distress is shaped by social location and cultural meaning (Lartey, 2003). In many student contexts, future anxiety is inseparable from family obligation, economic limitation, first-generation university status, religious expectations, and communal definitions of success. A student may not fear unemployment solely for personal reasons; they may fear disappointing parents, losing social standing, or failing to support siblings. Pastoral accompaniment that ignores these cultural layers risks giving individualistic advice to a socially embedded problem.

Meaning-making is the second pastoral contribution. Religious and spiritual frameworks can either help students endure uncertainty or intensify distress. Positive and negative religious coping have distinct implications for how people interpret major life stressors

(Pargament et al., 1998, pp. 710–724). Religious coping can be assessed through patterns of trust, connection, struggle, and conflict (Pargament et al., 2011, pp. 51–76). Positive religious coping may include seeking spiritual support, reinterpreting stress through hope, practicing prayer, receiving communal care, and perceiving life as meaningful. Negative religious coping may include feeling punished by God, abandoned by God, or trapped in spiritual failure. Spirituality and religiousness can relate to mental health in complex ways and are not automatically protective (Lucchetti et al., 2021, pp. 7620–7631). Pastoral accompaniment must therefore assess spiritual meaning rather than assume that more religious activity will reduce anxiety.

For Christian pastoral care, meaning-making involves vocation but must avoid determinism. Students often ask, "What is God's plan for my life?" This question can sustain hope, but it can also become a trap if interpreted as the need to discover one hidden career path and avoid every wrong choice. A pastoral theology of vocation should help students discern faithful participation in God's work through gifts, responsibility, community, service, and wisdom. In this respect, career construction theory and pastoral theology can support each other. Life design theory emphasizes narrative meaning in changing contexts (Savickas et al., 2009, pp. 239–250). Pastoral care invites students to interpret their stories within a wider horizon of grace, calling, and communal responsibility. The future becomes not a puzzle to solve perfectly, but a field of faithful action.

Referral-aware care is the third contribution and boundary. Pastoral caregivers need not become clinicians, but they must know when pastoral support is insufficient. Many students with perceived need do not obtain professional help (Eisenberg et al., 2012, pp. 222–232). University students' use of mental health services remains uneven across contexts (Osborn et al., 2022). In Christian higher education and campus ministry settings, pastors, lecturers, mentors, and chaplains may be more accessible than counseling centers. This accessibility creates opportunity and risk. The opportunity is early support. The risk is that severe distress may remain within informal pastoral conversations without adequate assessment or referral. A referral-aware pastoral approach should normalize help-seeking, clarify confidentiality and its limits, ask direct questions when safety is at risk, maintain referral pathways, and follow up relationally after referral.

Pastoral presence, meaning-making, and referral awareness also protect students from spiritual bypassing, where religious language is used to avoid or minimize psychological pain. For final-year students, bypassing may sound like "Do not be anxious; just pray," or "A faithful person will not fear the future." Such statements may intend encouragement, but they can silence honest lament and increase guilt. Responsible pastoral accompaniment allows prayer and Scripture to function as resources of truth, hope, and companionship, not as instruments for suppressing emotion. The student is not "an anxious failure"; they are a person facing a difficult transition who may need spiritual, psychological, academic, and social support.

An Integrated Pastoral Framework: Stabilizing Anxiety, Reframing the Future, and Mobilizing Agency

The third constructive finding is an integrated pastoral framework consisting of three movements: stabilizing anxiety, reframing the future, and mobilizing agency. These movements are not rigid stages; students may move back and forth among them. Their value lies in preventing pastoral care from becoming either purely affective comfort or purely practical advice. The first movement is stabilizing anxiety. Stabilization means helping the student become sufficiently grounded to think, pray, decide, and seek help. It does not mean eliminating all anxiety. In a pastoral session, stabilization may include attentive listening, naming the pressure without exaggeration, encouraging bodily regulation, and distinguishing immediate tasks from imagined catastrophes. It may include prayer, silence, lament, or Scripture when the student consents and when these practices do not function as avoidance. Stabilization also requires basic risk awareness: sleep, eating, class attendance, functioning, panic, withdrawal, hopelessness, and self-harm risk. The caregiver does not diagnose, but must identify risk and refer appropriately. Evidence on universal mental health prevention programs should encourage collaboration rather than pastoral overreach (Conley et al., 2015, pp. 487–507).

The second movement is reframing the future vocationally. Once immediate distress is held, students need help interpreting the future in ways that are neither catastrophic nor naive. Reframing does not deny the existence of labor-market difficulties or academic pressure. It changes the question from "What if my whole life fails?" to "What faithful next step is available, and what resources can support it?" Career adaptability emphasizes concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012, pp. 661–673). Pastoral reframing

can reinterpret concern as responsible attention rather than obsessive fear, control as stewardship rather than total mastery, curiosity as discernment rather than confusion, and confidence as trustful agency rather than self-sufficiency. Self-efficacy and outcome expectations are shaped by supports and barriers (Lent & Brown, 2013, pp. 557–568). Pastoral caregivers can therefore help students identify false beliefs, spiritual distortions, and contextual barriers while strengthening realistic confidence.

Vocational reframing should include narrative work. Students can be invited to tell the story of how they chose their field, what experiences have shaped them, what forms of service draw their attention, what fears dominate their imagination, and what communities have affirmed their gifts. This narrative work resembles career construction's emphasis on life design (Savickas et al., 2009, pp. 239–250). It also adds theological attentiveness to grace, calling, wisdom, and community. It resists narrow success narratives. A student may need to hear that delayed graduation is not the end of vocation, that a first job need not define an entire life, that uncertainty does not equal divine absence, and that faithfulness can include experimentation. The pastoral aim is not to guarantee outcomes but to rebuild a truthful and hopeful imagination.

The third movement is mobilizing agency. Future anxiety often grows when the future remains vague. Agency increases when students translate fear into small, concrete, supported actions. Pastoral accompaniment can help students identify next steps without becoming a career office: meeting an academic supervisor, listing remaining thesis tasks, contacting career services, preparing a curriculum vitae, scheduling one job-search block, joining a peer support group, consulting with family with clear boundaries, or seeking counseling. Career planning and proactivity are associated with perceptions of employability in uncertain labor markets (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020, pp. 435–455). Pastoral care can reinforce this process by connecting action with vocation, responsibility, and hope.

Mobilizing agency should also be communal. Final-year anxiety isolates students by convincing them that everyone else is more prepared. Pastoral accompaniment can counter this isolation through small groups, mentoring, prayer communities, alum conversations, and structured final-year reflection programs. The community should not become a space for comparison in which success stories shame anxious students. It should become a space where uncertainty can be normalized, resources can be shared, and students can witness diverse vocational pathways. In Christian institutions, this could take the form of final-year pastoral groups that combine theological reflection, emotional check-in, career service collaboration, and peer accountability. Such programs should include clear referral protocols and should not promise clinical outcomes without evaluation.

The integrated framework can function at universal, selective, and indicated levels of care. At the universal level, institutions can provide pastoral literacy and future-oriented formation for all final-year students through seminars, chapel series, reflection guides, or graduation preparation programs. At the selective level, students with visible stress or transition difficulty can be invited into small groups or mentoring relationships. At the indicated level, students experiencing significant anxiety can receive one-to-one pastoral accompaniment alongside counseling, academic advising, or career services. The model's strength lies not in replacing existing services, but in connecting them through a pastoral logic of presence, meaning, and hope.

5. Comparison

Compared with previous research, this article makes a distinctive integrative contribution. Student mental health studies establish the prevalence and seriousness of anxiety among university students (Ahmed et al., 2023). Intervention reviews evaluate psychological and preventive programs for students (Conley et al., 2015, pp. 487–507). These studies rarely examine pastoral accompaniment or the spiritual interpretation of future anxiety. Career anxiety studies explain how students experience uncertainty (Pisarik et al., 2017, pp. 339–352). Social cognitive career theory explains self-efficacy and contextual factors in career agency (Lent & Brown, 2013, pp. 557–568). Career adaptability theory explains concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012, pp. 661–673). Career anxiety scale development shows that career anxiety can be examined empirically in student populations (Tsai et al., 2017, pp. 158–165). However, they rarely address prayer, vocation, religious coping, spiritual struggle, or pastoral boundaries.

Pastoral care and religious coping scholarship provide theological and spiritual depth. Pastoral care can be understood as interpretive, relational, and attentive to lived experience (Doehring, 2015). Intercultural pastoral care foregrounds culture, power, family, and social location (Lartey, 2003). Spirituality and religiousness have complex relationships with mental

health (Lucchetti et al., 2021, pp. 7620–7631). Religious coping research distinguishes constructive and harmful spiritual responses to stress (Pargament et al., 1998, pp. 710–724). The Brief RCOPE provides a concise instrument for assessing religious coping (Pargament et al., 2011, pp. 51–76). However, much of this literature is not specifically organized around final-year university students facing graduation and employability anxiety. This article differs by treating future anxiety as a vocational-existential crisis and by constructing a framework that connects pastoral care with career development and student mental health. Its advantage is conceptual integration: it can guide campus ministries and Christian universities toward a collaborative care model rather than a single-service response.

The article's limitation is also clear. Because it is a conceptual review, it does not provide empirical evidence that the proposed framework reduces anxiety or improves career outcomes. It does not represent the voices of final-year students through interviews, nor does it test the framework across cultural, denominational, or institutional settings. It is therefore best understood as a theoretically grounded model for future research and practice. Subsequent studies should examine how final-year students describe pastoral support, how chaplains and lecturers actually respond to future anxiety, and whether structured pastoral accompaniment programs can improve help-seeking, vocational clarity, perceived support, and anxiety-related outcomes.

6. Conclusions

Future anxiety among final-year students is best understood as a vocational-existential crisis intensified by academic completion, employability uncertainty, identity transition, family expectation, and spiritual interpretation. The purpose was not to generate field data but to construct a responsible pastoral framework from existing scholarship. The analysis produced three main findings. First, future anxiety should not be reduced to ordinary worry, individual weakness, or lack of faith; it emerges from a complex transition in which students must imagine life beyond the university. Second, pastoral accompaniment contributes through relational presence, meaning-making, spiritual discernment, and referral-aware care. Third, an integrated framework should move through stabilization, vocational reframing, and agency-building within communities and institutional support systems.

The theoretical contribution of the article lies in connecting student mental health research, career development theory, religious coping studies, and pastoral care into a single conceptual framework. Its practical contribution is the proposal of a model that can guide Christian higher education institutions, campus ministries, and congregations in supporting final-year students without replacing counseling or career services. Pastoral accompaniment is most responsible when it is theologically grounded, psychologically informed, ethically bounded, and collaborative.

The study has limitations. It does not include empirical data, participant narratives, program evaluation, or quantitative measurement. It is also written primarily from a Christian pastoral perspective and therefore requires contextual adaptation in multi-faith or secular institutions. Future research should test the framework through qualitative studies with final-year students, interviews with pastoral caregivers, and evaluation of structured accompaniment programs. Further studies should also examine cultural differences in family expectations, economic pressure, and religious interpretations of anxiety. Even with these limitations, the article affirms that final-year students need more than instructions to prepare for the future. They need communities and caregivers who can help them face the future with honesty, hope, and responsible agency.

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