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**Bridging the Readiness Gap: A Comparative Study of Italian and International Students'
Perceptions of Their Adaptability and Preparedness for the Transition to Employment**

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Abstract

This master's thesis investigates the role of career adaptability, life satisfaction and ambiguity tolerance in the transition from academia to the labor market, with a particular focus on comparisons between Italian and international students. The study examines how these psychological resources shape graduates' preparedness and self-perception, which in turn, affects their entry into the workforce. A total sample of 64 students, evenly split between Italian and international participants, completed measures including validated scales such as Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS), Career Decision Ambiguity Tolerance Scale (CDAT), and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS).

The results indicate that career adaptability is a strong predictor of both life satisfaction and ambiguity tolerance, highlighting its crucial role in resilience when navigating uncertain career contexts. Italian students reported higher life satisfaction than their international peers, demonstrating systemic barriers persistent in policies, education, and career contexts. Furthermore, the use of career services was positively associated with adaptability and life satisfaction, emphasizing the importance of the availability and accessibility of institutional support in facilitating career transitions.

Keywords: Adaptability, Transition, Employment, Readiness Gap, Perceptions.

Bridging the Readiness Gap: A Comparative Study of Italian and International Students’ Perceptions of Their Adaptability and Preparedness for the Transition to Employment

1 Introduction

“I completed my degree - now what?” is a question that resonates with many recent graduates as they navigate the uncertain transition from academia to employment. A college diploma is often seen as a symbol of merit and worth, making students hopeful that the transition to “graduate” will align to their envisioned life they believe they earned (Ayala-Hurtado, 2024). However, Despite the efforts students put into completion of their degrees in order to move onto the next step of their career path, reach financial independence and find practical usage of their diplomas in the workforce, employment is often not guaranteed, as many of them are left to deal with limited job opportunities, not meeting selection criteria due to lack of experience, and unfamiliarity of recruitment process.

While thousands of students graduate from Italian universities every year – 386,000 in 2023 (Statista, 2023) - Italy reports lowest rates of employment for recent graduates across Europe (65%) (Eurostat, 2023) suggesting the existence of a problem in this transition. Although different educational cycles - undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral - provide students with educational and to some extent practical knowledge in their chosen fields, recent graduates are still left wondering how they can translate this knowledge into a viable career.

Both International and local, students are affected by this phenomenon; however, research shows international students face additional challenges when making this transition in an unfamiliar environment and without the support systems available to local students. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate how these two groups, Italians and Internationals, perceive their preparedness, self-perception, career adaptability, views and participation in social justice, and levels of their life satisfaction in the context of careers. The study seeks to emphasize that the extra hardships experienced by international students can impact their sense of readiness and other factors associated with it.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Connectivity Framework

Exploring how the acquired knowledge can be effectively applied to a successful career is essential to identifying the key areas graduates need to focus on. The connectivity framework explores this phenomenon and proposes the idea that, it is important for graduates to make connections between the theoretical and practical knowledge they acquire through education and the future workplace (van der Baan et al. 2023). This theory suggests that for increasing the connectivity it is crucial for these two parties to collaborate which can be through alignment, incorporation, and hybridization (Bouw et al., 2019).

Alignment and incorporation both focus on the connection between the higher education and the workplace, alignment suggesting that these two parties offer different kinds of learning, but they complement each other, while incorporation suggests integration of elements of one into another. For example, many students have to undertake a curricular internship in their final year to complete their studies. This reflects alignment as both theoretical and practical sides are coordinated through lectures and coursework and real-life application of this knowledge. On the other hand, hybridization offers a *hybrid* model in which workplace and education come simultaneously, an example being a student-run business (Bouw et al., 2019).

Together, these approaches provide a valuable framework for understanding how to connect education and employment, focusing on the link between these two contexts and gaining assurance and readiness for students. While studies on this framework suggest that hybrid learning contexts and university-facilitated internships enhance students' practical skills and expose them to the workplace elements – positively impacting their confidence (Cremers, 2016) - many challenges remain. Research highlights that despite these efforts, and curricular internships such as those mandated in Italian universities, “do not affect the likelihood of obtaining a matching qualified job” (Romanò & Nazio, 2025), leaving students still feeling

unprepared for the reality of entering the labor market. This emphasizes the persistent mismatch between academic and personal preparation and employer expectations.

2.2 Self-perception

At the heart of this mismatch lie students' self-perception (self-image) and understanding of their own preparedness, which play a crucial role in shaping their emotions, motivations and actions, ultimately affecting the success of the transition. Self-perception is a fundamental concept in psychology defined as “a person's view of their self of the mental or physical attributes that constitute of the self” (American Psychological Association, 2023). It is dynamic and influenced by new stimuli, social comparisons, and contexts as it is shaped through daily interactions and the feedback received from others. It is important to highlight that self-perception influences not only how individuals view themselves but also how they interpret and interact with their social environment (Baumeister, 1999), meaning that rather being purely personal, it is also a social experience.

Given its complex nature, it is crucial to differentiate between positive and negative self-image, as they have vastly different effects on individuals' actions, motivation, confidence, and overall well-being. A positive self-image involves accepting one's assets and potential while realistically acknowledging limitations. This can boost physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being, increase openness to new experiences, build resilience, foster social relationships, enhance decision-making, and even impact physical health (Albers, 2024). In contrast, a negative self-image is characterized by fixation on faults, weaknesses, failures, and imperfections, which decreases well-being, satisfaction, and ability to function effectively in these areas.

Beyond its impact on well-being, positive self-perception also serves as a strong predictor of success across various areas of life - “the general pattern of results has indicated that [positive self-perception] is a predictor, not a consequence, of life success” (Orth, 2014).

Individuals with positive self-perception are predicted to have greater success and well-being in life domains such as work, personal relationships, and physical health, with evidence indicating that it may even act as a protective factor against heart disease, highlighting its physiological importance (Mussatto et al., 2014).

On the other hand, negative self-image is associated with higher levels of anxiety, negative thoughts, negative appraisal of one's own performance, heightened social anxiety and its feared outcomes (e.g., stumbling over words, blushing, spilling things, etc.), self-criticism, low body-satisfaction and even reduced memory and cognition (Makkar & Grisham, 2011). These cognitive and emotional challenges caused by negative self-perception can significantly compromise one's functioning in the life domains discussed above, as individuals who experience heightened anxiety and self-doubt often face difficulties in performing effectively at work, in social interactions, and in relationships.

The significance of self-perception becomes especially clear during the transition from academia to the world of work, a period already characterized by uncertainty, heightened self-evaluation and self-doubt, fear of the unfamiliar environments and new social interactions. In this context, self-perception can be understood as a student's personal evaluation of their own capabilities and readiness to enter the labor market. However, it is important to note that this evaluation is not limited to the knowledge and practical skills acquired through education; it also takes into consideration confidence, personal skills, the ability to face rejection and setbacks, *adaptability*, especially in new social interactions and more.

Social relationships at this stage play significant role in shaping young adults' self-image. According to sociometer theory, social relationships are key determinants of people's self-esteem, with "self-esteem levels [providing] a gauge of people's social inclusion status" (Filosa et al., 2022). Thus, self-esteem increases when individuals experience greater inclusion and acceptance, underscoring how the nature of relationships and social interactions one experiences during this uncertain transition shape their self-image.

Beyond social interactions, this transition into workplace encompasses substantial changes in graduates' everyday lives: their daily routines and time organization are significantly altered; they are faced with new tasks and responsibilities as they acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for performing their jobs; they are granted greater autonomy as they become more self-reliant; and they form new relationships, interacting with coworkers, supervisors, subordinates, clients, and customers, often encountering relational dynamics different from those they were previously familiar with (Filosa et al., 2022). These changes and challenges, and the ways in which graduates overcome them, shape their understanding and perception of self, including an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, and the formation of self-evaluations based on their success in these domains.

2.3 Preparedness

One key dimension of formation of the self-perception during the school to workplace transition is how recent graduates assess their own preparedness for entering the labor market. An important part of this perception is related to the education they received, their academic success, and the skills and abilities they developed. Equally important, however, is the set of tools they acquired for both personal and professional development (García-Aracil, Monteiro, & Almeida, 2021). Graduates must be able to apply the knowledge gained during higher education to their chosen professions and develop competencies necessary to navigate the employment process. Together, these elements shape their overall perception of preparedness.

In exploring how various aspects of students' lives influence their self-perception on preparedness, mixed findings have emerged. Research indicates that while successfully navigating academic life is linked to higher levels of perceived readiness, regular attendance at lectures may actually have a negative effect (García-Aracil et al., 2021). Conversely, active participation in lectures and group work, along with engagement in study programs that emphasize employability-related competencies, have been identified as positive predictors of

preparedness. While higher education seems to contribute primarily to scientific knowledge, which forms the foundation of the training, it often lacks in developing practical or career competencies (Monteiro, Almeida, & García-Aracil, 2016). This gap highlights the need to include these specialized competences within an interdependent package of skills essential for career development in the 21st century (Allen and van der Velder, 2012). Overall, findings suggest that active engagement not only boost graduates' confidence but also enhances their self-perceptions of readiness, while more passive behaviors may be less beneficial in the preparation for this transition.

Another significant factor affecting mental preparedness of graduates is constantly evolving world in which new ways of learning and accessing information emerge almost daily. While older generations primarily relied on the books as their main source of knowledge, today's students must navigate through a variety of online and offline platforms to achieve the same goal. Although this technological shift allows for easier and faster access to desired texts and resources, it also introduces challenges. For example, students are overwhelmed with the sheer volume of learning platforms, sources, and available information. They are now responsible for discerning what is real or fake, credible, or unreliable – adding an extra layer of cognitive burden on the learning process.

A major shift in learning process occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the “new normal” modes of learning such as online and modular learning modalities were introduced (Faciolan, 2024), adding to the challenges of students' mental preparedness. Remote learning involves preparing and delivering information through online platforms, engaging in digital interactions between students and professors, and utilizing various e-learning applications.

On one hand, this mode of learning offers many benefits, including flexibility, reduced costs, more free time, increased course variety, career advancement opportunities, increased

collaboration, personalized education, enhanced time management skills, immediate feedback, and repeated access to course materials (Drexel University School of Education, n.d.).

On the other hand, e-learning comes with several drawbacks, such as limited feedback, social isolation, lack of self-motivation, underdeveloped communicational skills, limited hands-on learning, environmental distractions, difficulty adapting to new learning styles and technical issues (Tamm, 2023). Many students feel overwhelmed or insecure when using new technologies for academic purposes, especially those without consistent access or familiarity with these tools.

2.4 Career Adaptability

Unfamiliarity is best addressed through adaptability, which provides students with the ability and flexibility to navigate the "new normal", apply their existing skills in new contexts, acquire additional information, effectively utilize their competencies, and recognize their weaknesses. In examining the effects of distance learning, the most sensitive aspects affecting students' mental health were identified as "the lack of a full-fledged adaptation strategy, and inadequate time management" (Aditya & Ulya, 2021).

Adaptability, in general, is a construct denoting "individual's readiness and resources for coping with current and anticipated tasks, transitions, and traumas in their occupational roles" (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). For students and recent graduates, adaptability is especially important, as their transition processes involve many new tasks and changing roles for which they must be open and prepared. All four dimensions of career adaptability play distinct roles in this challenging transition: concern focuses on planning and preparing for the future; control reflects the responsibility for shaping one's career; curiosity includes exploring different selves and scenarios, and confidence represents self-belief in successfully executing career-related tasks (Gao, Li, & Pang, 2025).

Career adaptability and students' mental health are closely related. Each dimension has unique contribution: concern helps graduates feel optimistic about their future, thereby reducing anxiety; control fosters a sense of agency and self-efficacy, decreasing the feelings of helplessness; curiosity promotes openness and exploration, counteracting the stress of uncertainty; and confidence strengthens resilience against challenges and setbacks, enhancing overall psychological well-being (Gao, Li, & Pang, 2025). Therefore, it is no surprise that high career adaptability is often associated with greater mental well-being, higher preparedness, positive self-perception and lower rates of anxiety and depression among students.

Positive self-perception and career adaptability often go hand in hand, as young adults who have a higher view of themselves also tend to exhibit greater career adaptability. This positive perception makes them more willing to take initiative and risks, face challenges with confidence, and approach new occupations with greater readiness (Ataç et al., 2018). When recent graduates experience self-doubt and perceive themselves as unfit or unprepared for the new environments, they tend to perform worse in the job-hunting process and during the overall transition. Conversely, students who demonstrate self-confidence due to high career adaptability are more likely to perform successfully.

It is clear that career adaptability has many positive influences; however, attaining a high level of career adaptability may not be as straightforward for students. In order to develop this "skill", individuals must actively engage it strategies that strengthen their readiness. Research indicates that it is important to cultivate a mindset directed towards growth, accepting and viewing challenges as opportunities, rather than fearing or avoiding them (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Equally important is gaining exposure to diverse contexts and experiences, such as jobs, volunteering, internships, or work-study programs, which broaden horizons and foster the ability to deal with novelty and the unexpected (Guan et al., 2014). Another valuable strategy for building career adaptability is setting flexible career goals, which allows for change, adjustment, and improvement, thereby enhancing one's sense of control. Taken

together, these strategies contribute to greater career adaptability, which in turn positively influences both professional and psychological well-being.

Alongside individuals working to build their adaptability and psychological resources, university support through career services plays a critical role. Students must learn how to market themselves, build networks, look for internships, and develop the skills necessary for job hunting (VanDerziel, 2022). Usage of career services is often linked with higher chances of securing a paid internship, finding opportunities related to their degree, and reporting a more positive and equitable university experience, furthermore reinforcing adaptability.

2.5 Ambiguity Tolerance

Similarly, to career adaptability, which is a tool used for navigating through the unfamiliar, ambiguity tolerance enables individuals to manage the uncertainty of career decisions. It refers to the way individuals “respond to ambiguous situations or stimuli characterized by an array of unfamiliar, complex, or inconsistent clues” (Budner, 1962), such as unclear job prospects or misinformation about outcomes of their choices. People with low levels of ambiguity tolerance experience more stress, act prematurely and avoid ambiguous stimuli. In contrast those with higher ambiguity tolerance deal with unfamiliarity with ease and perceive it as desirable and interesting.

Lowering stress while dealing with ambiguity is crucial when it comes to career decision-making, especially during the transitional period faced by graduates, which is often full of uncharted territories, challenges, and new actions. Research suggests a strong positive relationship between ambiguity tolerance and entrepreneurial inclination (Xu & Tracey, 2014) , while also noting that 1 in 3 students who struggle with career indecision demonstrate lower ambiguity tolerance. Low ambiguity tolerance is associated with career decision-making difficulties, inconsistency in information, lack of confidence and motivation, and limited initiative. In contrast, high ambiguity tolerance goes hand in hand with greater career

adaptability and readiness, reduced anxiety, higher resilience, and openness, which are all factors supporting successful navigation of the unpredictability of the labor market.

Ambiguity tolerance is one of the key factors in navigating complex career decisions. It not only helps individuals cope with uncertainty but also influences how graduates explore their options, take risks, and remain open to unconventional opportunities. Higher ambiguity tolerance in students is associated with proactive planning, looking for diverse experiences and perspectives, and adapting to changing information and circumstances, thereby strengthening long-term employability in the constantly evolving labor market (Savickas, 2013; Budner, 1962). Developing ambiguity tolerance is therefore crucial not only for managing stress and reducing anxiety, but also for fostering strategic thinking, broadening horizons, and confidently taking risks which are all crucial steps for entering today's unpredictable job market.

2.6 Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction is a helpful measure for gaining a deep understanding of how people feel about themselves, their lives, career actions, prospects, and social relationships. This measure reflects individuals' evaluations of their life experiences and their overall contentment. While focusing on overall life assessment, it also takes into account different aspects such as health, education, income, and relationships (Owen, 2025). People have unique ways of evaluating the richness of their lives, depending on which categories they consider important and central. However, the main themes are usually consistent, with financial stability and opportunities for personal and career growth among the most significant (Diener et al., 1985).

Life satisfaction in the context of careers has many layers, as it reflects how individuals perceive their professional lives alongside their personal ones. It encompasses how they evaluate their contributions, financial security, career prospects, meaningfulness of their jobs, autonomy, alignment with personal values, and recognition of their talents (Judge & Klinger, 2008). Career satisfaction and life satisfaction are closely related: when people experience

greater satisfaction in their jobs, it also often translates to higher satisfaction in personal lives. Career adaptability is also connected to this concept, as when individuals are willing to take risks, step outside of their comfort zones to confront challenges and obstacles, and cultivate courage, they tend to experience higher overall life satisfaction (Magnano et al., 2021).

Transitioning from academia to work might be a challenging period that affects one's life satisfaction and overall happiness. Young adults' well-being is strongly influenced by the uncertainty, the pressure to succeed in a chosen career, and shifting roles. Research indicates that this transition, and how graduates navigate it, is closely tied to their overall life satisfaction, as it plays a key role in shaping their identities. Those who demonstrate higher preparedness, adaptability, and the ability to apply their knowledge to job opportunities tend to report greater life satisfaction (Magnano et al., 2021), whereas those who feel inadequately prepared for this new challenge often experience lower happiness and satisfaction.

While exploring the relationship between career and life satisfaction, it is important to consider how this relationship operates in both directions. Just as successful transition into the job market supports greater life satisfaction, individuals who are already satisfied with their lives tend to navigate this transition more smoothly and successfully. Students who are more satisfied with their life, are more willing and motivated to acquire new knowledge; they have greater confidence in their skills, which in turn helps them prepare for work and plan for the future (Yun Dai et al., 2020). In contrast, those who are dissatisfied may view the future with hopelessness, which can become the reason of the lack of motivation for developmental and career-related tasks. For this reason, life satisfaction is considered one of the key predictors of future work performance (Chong et al., 2022).

2.1.7 Social Justice

Life satisfaction and career adaptability not only shape the transition but also predict how individuals interact with the society and engage in broader issues such as social justice.

Those who are flexible, prepared, and exhibit confidence in their choices are more likely to also seek work that is aligned to their values and beliefs (Savickas, 2013), while those with lower self-perceptions of preparedness and lower life satisfaction may be disengaged from their civic responsibilities. To explore this phenomenon deeply, it is crucial to clearly define social justice. It encompasses a wide array of issues advocating for fair treatment of all people, regardless of their age, social status, sexual orientation, or other characteristics. The main themes of social justice are typically grouped into five categories, which include economic inequality, racial injustice, gender injustice, disability injustice, and environmental injustice (San Diego Foundation, 2024). It is important for young adults to be informed about and engaged with these pressing social justice issues, especially as they enter the workforce, since this stage is formative and predictive of their long-term values and identities. Basing career decisions on awareness of the existing inequalities, discrimination, environmental issues, and many other critical factors that come up in contemporary workplaces, is crucial for implementing ethical decision-making, which in turn influences their workplaces and broader society.

Even though career decision-making might be considered an individual process, it is important to recognize that private choices are simultaneously situated within a broader framework of social justice. Individuals from marginalized groups often encounter barriers, limited access, disparities, discrimination, and other restrictions throughout their career journeys, all of which shape the outcomes of their transitions. Power, privilege, socioeconomic status, and other intersecting factors strongly influence one's opportunities and access to employability. While it is crucial for graduates to take accountability for their career decisions and continue developing skills, confidence, and curiosity, it is equally important to acknowledge that resources and support are unevenly distributed, including access to education, social capital, and mentoring. Therefore, it becomes essential for young adults to advocate for ethical decision-making early in their careers and to challenge the inequities that act as persistent obstacles to fair and inclusive career development (Blustein et al., 2005).

Social justice became a focal point in career development practices. Viewing career development from this perspective uncovers many unconscious biases and injustices that are prevalent in employment, alongside with overt ones such as public laws and institutional policies (Arthur et al., 2009). The covert ones are even more dangerous, as often they go unnoticed despite being widespread, including in media, bureaucratic hierarchies, and market mechanisms. When individuals become aware of these issues and incorporate proactive steps in their career development to address them, it can positively influence their career transitions and advancement. Beyond a purely individual perspective, individuals begin reflecting on the status quo they are supporting through their work, the barriers they need to challenge, and values they need to uphold.

2.8 International students

When it comes to unequal access to resources, frequently encountered discrimination, lack of opportunities, and other social justice issues, international students are often disproportionately affected. Various barriers emerge for these students who strive for equal education, including limited internships, language barriers, difficulties obtaining visas, and discrimination in hiring (Arthur et al., 2009). Discrimination in the hiring process often occurs for international students and can be linked to factors such as stereotypes and prejudices regarding their language proficiency, educational background, cultural fit, and immigration status. Employers may often disadvantage these students because their long-term work eligibility might be uncertain. Additionally, employers often hesitate to sponsor international students due to the extra paperwork and costs and prefer to hire locally to avoid these additional steps.

Universities are no exception to such systemic biases against international students. They often pay significantly higher tuition fees than domestic students and have less access to scholarships and financial aid, which limits their access to educational resources (Beine et al.,

2014). Research shows that even in countries like Canada, which is considered immigrant-friendly, international students face more barriers and substantially higher fees than domestic students. For instance, while the average tuition for an undergraduate Canadian (domestic) student is around \$7,076 CAD, international students pay an average of \$38,081 CAD (over five times higher) for the same level of education (Moosapeta, 2023). In addition to higher tuition, international students often have to pay for extra expenses compared to their domestic peers, such as application fees, visa fees, moving costs, health insurance, language courses and certifications, airfare, and housing. Despite these additional costs, their funding from universities is often more limited than that available to domestic students. In the United States, which hosts the largest number of international students amounting 1.1 million in 2024 (Mowreader, 2025), they do not qualify for any federal or state aid, unlike domestic students. These costs are usually covered by families, personal savings or sometimes loans, which later become a long-term financial burden for the students.

Alongside visible discriminations and obstacles, international students are often subject to covert biases, which can have a significant influence on their educational and professional journeys. These biases are frequently embedded in policies, practices, interactions, and assumptions that shape everyday life and decision-making. In both workplaces and classrooms, such biases may manifest in group projects, limited access to mentorship, and denial of internships and opportunities that are readily available to domestic students. Prejudice and discrimination are commonly encountered inside and outside of the classrooms by these students, including racial remarks, mocking of the accent, unfair grading, and intentional social isolation (Wallen, 2025). These experiences often lead these students to fear speaking up, participating, or taking initiative, ultimately diminishing their confidence, motivating and engagement.

Building oneself confidence, preparedness and adaptability is a challenging task in general, but for international students there are many extra layers that makes this process even

more challenging. While the transition to employment and the accompanying emotions such as enhanced self-doubt and anxiety are challenges for all graduates, international students often encounter additional issues that further complicate this process and influence their perceived preparedness. Even before reaching the critical stage of entering the labor market, international students must navigate numerous difficulties associated with living in an unfamiliar environment. These include adapting to new social and academic norms, experiencing cultural shock, facing communication barriers, financial and housing insecurities, the loss of established support systems and social networks, feelings of loneliness and alienation, stereotyping and prejudice, social isolation, and homesickness (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Hirai et al., 2015; Mori, 2000). All these factors make it more difficult for international students to approach the job-seeking transition seeking with confidence and certainty (Gao, Li, & Pang, 2025).

For the confidence and certainty during this transitional process, it is crucial for international students to maintain a positive self-perception of their employability. Research demonstrates that due to the discriminations and obstacles frequently encountered by these students, they often have reduced motivation and self-efficacy (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017). The lack of work experience and limited career support during the academic journey further decreases international students' confidence in entering the labor market. Moreover, when students move abroad to pursue studies, they bring certain expectations about how their academic and career paths will unfold, however when reality does not align with what they have envisioned, the mismatch can contribute to a loss of confidence and negative self-perceptions. Many often feel discouraged by encountering the challenges of host countries' academic and labor markets, career prospects, administrative barriers, and immigration policies. Together, these systemic biases and obstacles reinforce negative self-images, making the transition into the workforce less smooth.

For the international graduates to develop positive self-perception and confidence in taking the first steps into their professional career, it is also important to have a sense of

preparedness. This may be mental, physical, intellectual, or financial, as all of these factors come into play when entering the workforce. Moving abroad and starting a new life for studies already requires a lot of mental preparedness; however, taking it a step further and secure a real-life job demands an even higher level of readiness. Students must be psychologically prepared for the challenges associated with a new labor market, including existing biases, cultural differences, and other obstacles they might come across in this process (Guan et al., 2016). They need to adapt to new norms and realities of works that they might not have encountered in their home countries, including work ethics, relationships, schedules, and organizational expectations. Moreover, maintaining optimism and hope is necessary for focusing on long-term goals and coping with the stress and anxiety that are frequently encountered during this transition. Cultivating these mental tools, through supportive relationships, access to resources, career counseling, and self-reflection can significantly enhance international students' experience in the transition process of their overall readiness for entering the workforce.

While the mental toll of these steps for international students is frequently addressed, physical preparedness is often overlooked, yet it is also an important factor influencing students' readiness. It requires a lot of energy, health, and stamina to meet the demands of a full-time job, resources that students who have moved abroad for their studies may never have held a job before might lack. Long working hours, commuting, adjusting to new time zones, moving from one accommodation to another, modifying daily routine, and adapting to new cuisines and lifestyles can all affect one's health. Physical well-being, in turn influences individuals' concentration, motivation, mood, and productivity in general (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017). Furthermore, students may face additional challenges due to unfamiliar environments, such as climate and dietary changes, limited access to healthcare resources, and reduced time for self-care, exercise and sleep. Therefore, all these physical aspects must be taken into consideration during this important transition process.

International students spend a great deal of their resources, time and money on academic advancement; however, their intellectual preparedness for entering the workforce remains crucial aspect to consider. Even though their academic programs may provide specific theoretical knowledge related to their chosen fields, students might still lack the necessary skills, critical thinking abilities, or practical knowledge to meet the expectations of the host country's labor market (Savickas, 2013). Many universities do not adequately teach students about local workplace practices, industry-specific norms, or applied skills, and these gaps become significant issues reducing their intellectual readiness. In addition to educating international students similarly to their local peers, it is important to help them develop capacities in cross-cultural communication, adaptability to diverse environments and professional settings, and problem-solving in real-life work contexts. Unfortunately, to this day many universities do not provide sufficient resources in career guidance, professional networks, practical internships, and other opportunities for supporting these graduates in their early career stages.

While discussing the resources international students must invest in their academic and career journeys, it is crucial to consider financial resources, as this may be the greatest challenge for them. Many of these students face difficulties managing everyday expenses, tuition fees, moving costs, and additional expenses associated with being an immigrant during their studies. As they step into the labor market, these financial burdens do not disappear; in fact, there are numerous additional costs to consider, such as professional attire, independent living expenses without the support of scholarships or university accommodation, deposits, commuting costs, networking and job search activities, work permit fees, training and certification, healthcare, insurance and more (International Centre for Migration Policy Development [ICMPD], 2024). For a recent graduate without a financial safety net in the host country, all these economic challenges may make the transition from academia to employment not just difficult, but potentially impossible.

How international graduates deal with this process is strongly influenced by two additional psychological factors: career adaptability and ambiguity tolerance. As discussed above (2.4 Career Adaptability & 2.5 Ambiguity tolerance), individuals adjusting to the ambiguity and unfamiliarity of new environments need to cultivate these skills. For international students, it is utmost important to be prepared for the unknown and remain tolerant of the challenges that come with uncharted territories, unfamiliar norms, language barriers, unexpected situations, and shifting regulations. For these students, adaptability is crucial, as it enables them to remain proactive and resourceful in pursuing the opportunities despite the systemic biases and challenges, they face. Research indicates that those with higher career adaptability experience greater success, satisfaction, and well-being in both career-related outcomes, such as job performance, and broader life outcomes, such as life satisfaction (Rudolph et al., 2017, Savickas, 2020). Additionally, individuals with higher ambiguity tolerance tend to perceive unfamiliarity not as a threat but as opportunity for growth, which reduces stress, enhance resilience, and supports better navigation through uncertain transitions.

In building resilience, better coping strategies, and high career adaptability and flexibility, life satisfaction plays a significant role in international students' lives. Research suggests that higher life satisfaction is a predictive aspect of greater adaptability, resilience, coping strategies, motivation, and initiative (Rudolph et al., 2017). When young graduates believe that their career pathways are proportionally aligned with their values, expectations, beliefs, and desires, they tend to experience a stronger sense of fulfillment, which helps reduce stress and anxiety often associated with biases and discriminations, while fostering a sense of inclusion and motivation. In contrast, international students who experience elevated levels of stress and anxiety, often face diminished mental health, leading to emotional depletion, burnout, and lower life satisfaction (Hahn, 2024). This relationship can be seen as bidirectional: when international students undergo a positive career transition, it enhances their life satisfaction. They gain a sense of achievement from the investment made in their academic

paths and find hope in their identity development and integration into new social contexts. Financial security, alongside stable employment, validates their belief that the education and skills obtained in their studies were worth the substantial investment of resources. Conversely, those unable to secure employment after graduation or who have trouble entering the labor market often report feelings of hopelessness, failure, negative self-perception, resulting in lower overall life satisfaction (Savickas, 2020).

2.9 Italian Reality

More and more graduate from Italian universities each year, yet as the number of graduates rises, employment does not become easier. Even with the regulated internships, curriculum-based practical education, and career resources available to students, graduates often struggle to adequately utilize their accumulated knowledge and skills and apply it to the real-life jobs. While the average employment rate for 20–34-year-old graduates in EU is around 82.3%, Italy reported a considerably lower number of 69.6% in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025). As this issue has become a topic of public debate, couple of contributing factors have been highlighted, including labor market supply and demand. Research suggests that the employability problems of Italian graduates may be associated with weak or poorly functioning communication channels between educational entities and firms, insufficient information exchange regarding jobs and candidates exchanged between the economic and educational sector, and the limited effectiveness of tools designed to connect supply and demand (Rostan & Stan, 2017). To improve this connection, the Bologna Process provided guidelines for curriculum-based traineeships and internships, allowing students and employers to interact more efficiently. However, current statistics indicate that these measures have not sufficiently closed the gap.

Apart from the lack of effective communication, the economic crisis plays a central role in shaping the transition and employability of graduates in Italy. Limited job opportunities are a major issue, which often force graduates into underemployment or positions for which they are

overqualified. Another important factor is the structural rigidity of the Italian labor market, which lacks flexibility in hiring and firing, involves long and complex bureaucratic procedures, and includes contracts that mostly benefit older workers (Rostan & Stan, 2017). These conditions reduce opportunities for fresh graduates and prolong the employment of already hired employees.

Unbalanced employment rates are also driven by regional disparities as southern Italy experiences higher unemployment rates compared to the north, making job prospects for graduates in these areas scarce (EURES, 2025). In these regions, it is also frequent to have cultural attitudes that can further affect the hiring process, for example, a preference for experienced or local candidates, avoidance of international or immigrant graduates, and preferential treatment of familiar individuals.

International students are often victims of such preferential treatments and face further challenges in securing jobs compared to locals. There are numerous difficulties that arise for these graduates when entering the Italian workforce, with one major barrier being language proficiency, which significantly limits access to job opportunities, networking, internships, traineeships, academic programs, and even volunteering positions. Research indicates that poor communication skills in Italian, such as speaking and understanding the language, pose a greater obstacle to entering the labor force than formal skills like reading and writing, highlighting the critical role that language fluency has in the process of securing employment in Italy (Ghio & et al., 2022). It is important to note that even positions that could be filled with English-speaking workers are often given to Italian candidates, as employers tend to prefer hiring domestic talent over hiring someone who doesn't speak their language fluently (Schueller & Slotte, 2025). As explained in the article, this can lead to a loss of talent, as many positions could effectively be performed by those who speak English and another language (e.g., Finnish), allowing them to communicate with colleagues whose native language is Finnish and reducing the issue of the language gap. However, linguistic discrimination persists in the hiring

process, starting from the job descriptions, which often include “Italian as a mother tongue” as requirement, to screening interviews and beyond.

Along with linguistic discrimination, gender is another factor contributing to disparities in hiring in Italy. Even though research suggests that female students are more likely to perform better academically, getting higher grades, completing their studies on time, and applying for jobs earlier, they remain more underemployed: “data shows that women, despite having higher educational qualifications, are disadvantaged in terms of the age at which they enter the workforce” (Di Bello et al., 2025). The authors further note the importance of considering the unique Italian context, where the labor market is characterized by segmentation and structural barriers that significantly affect internationals integration into the workforce.

3 Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Current Study and Rationale

The objective of this study is to examine how Italian and International students perceive their preparedness and career adaptability when transitioning from academia to the workforce. While both groups are affected by the challenges and complexities of this shift, international students encounter additional barriers and disparities, such as cultural, linguistic, financial, and psychological factors. Specifically, this study seeks to provide a comparative perspective that underlines how various elements, such as self-perception, adaptability, life satisfaction, sense of readiness, and views on social justice, influence the experiences of these two groups, in a similar or differing ways.

Additionally, this research seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on employability after graduation by examining how psychological factors, such as ambiguity tolerance, together with systemic barriers, shape the transition to labor market. By comparing Italians and Internationals within the same context, the study aims to demonstrate how the readiness gap emerges in both groups and what this implies for career counseling, university resources and services, government practices, employment policies, bureaucratic systems, and broader economic models.

Primarily, the main question of the present study is how Italian and International students compare on preparedness and adaptability during the transition from studies to work while also taking in consideration factors such as self-perception and life satisfaction.

To address this question, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: International students will report lower levels of career-preparedness and life satisfaction compared to Italian peers.

H2: Career adaptability will positively predict students' ambiguity tolerance, regardless of nationality, as these psychological resources are beneficial for both groups.

H3: Students with higher levels of life satisfaction will also demonstrate greater adaptability, reflecting the bidirectional relationship between one's overall well-being and confidence in navigating through the shifting of roles.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Participants

Sixty-five participants were recruited through snowball sampling. After excluding one participant who did not meet the eligibility criteria (being a recent graduate or graduating within the next six months), sixty-four participants remained in the final analysis, as reported in Table 1. Within this sample, 40 were female (62.5%), and 24 were male (37.5%). Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 37 ($M=25.16$, $SD=3.83$), out of which the majority reporting being single (73.43%).

In terms of education, 39.1% participants held a master's degree, 43.8% had completed a bachelor's degree, 7.8% had a high school diploma, 6.3% had attended some college, and 3.1% had completed a professional degree. The fields of study were diverse, with the most common areas being Psychology (23.8%), Business and Management (15.9%), Medicine/health Sciences (14.3%), and Computer Science/Informational Technology (11.1%). Additionally, slightly more than half of the participants (51.6%) reported having accessed career services during their academic studies. The sample was evenly divided between Italian (50%) and international students (50.0%).

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 64)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	24	37.5
	Female	40	62.5
Marital status	Single	61	95.3
	Married	3	4.7
Education level	High school graduate	5	7.8
	Some college	4	6.3
	Bachelor's degree	28	43.8
	Master's degree	25	39.1
	Professional degree	2	3.1
Field of study	Psychology	15	23.4
	Business and Management	10	15.6
	Medicine/Health Sciences	9	14.1
	Computer Science/IT	7	10.9
Career service use	Yes	33	51.6
	No	31	48.4
Identification	Italian student	32	50.0
	International student	32	50.0
Age (years)	Range = 20–37; most frequent = 24 (15.6%)		

Note. Demographic characteristics of the sample (N=64). Percentages are calculated within categories.

3.2.2 Procedure

Participants completed the online survey using an anonymous Qualtrics link. Initially, they were presented with a general description of the study to obtain their consent. Afterwards, they answered a screening question to indicate whether they were recent graduates or planning to graduate within the next six months, ensuring their eligibility for the research. For those who selected “No”, the survey ended, while those who selected “Yes” proceeded to the demographic part, which collected information such as age, gender, highest level of education, field of study, and whether they have accessed career services, among other details. On average, the survey took around 13 minutes to complete.

Once participants completed the demographic section, they were asked to fill out the following scales in order: Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), Career Decision Ambiguity Tolerance Scale (Xu & Tracey, 2015), The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). At the beginning of each scale, participants were given a brief instruction on how to proceed and complete the measure.

The study was conducted ethically to comply with the European Union Regulation 2016/679, ensuring voluntary participation, privacy, and anonymity of data. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's nature and objective, the confidentiality of their responses, and how the data would be used. They were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

3.2.3 Instruments

3.2.3.1 Career-Adapt-Abilities Scale

To assess career adaptability, the study used the Career-Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS) developed by Savickas and Porfeli in 2012. This self-report measure consists of 24 items, with 6 items in each of the four subscales: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. It is designed to measure individuals' psychosocial resources for managing career-related tasks, transitions, developmental demands, obstacles, works traumas, and uncertainties (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). As authors note, the CAAS is an international measure that demonstrated metric invariance, showing similar relationships among latent traits across countries. This suggests that it measures similar constructs across the world, making it appropriate for use in the current study.

Participants indicated their responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Not Strong") to 5 ("Strongest"), noting the degree to which they could perform each statement, such as "Thinking about what my future will be like". Subscale scores can be interpreted individually to understand how one performs in specific areas of career-adaptability; however, a

total score is often obtained by summing all items to measure overall adaptability. The total score ranges from 24 to 120, with higher scores indicating greater career-adaptability, while lower scores reflect lower levels of career adaptability. The scale demonstrated acceptable to good reliability measured with Cronbach alpha: Concern ($\alpha = .83$, 6 items), Control ($\alpha = .69$, 6 items), Curiosity ($\alpha = .76$, 6 items), and Confidence ($\alpha = .84$, 6 items). The total CAAS score showed excellent reliability ($\alpha = .90$, 24 items) shown in Table 1.

Table 2

Internal Consistency of CAAS (N = 64)

Scale / Subscale	Items	Cronbach's α
Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS)		
— Concern	6	.83
— Control	6	.69
— Curiosity	6	.76
— Confidence	6	.84
— Total Score	24	.90

Note. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients are used to measure internal consistency reliability of the survey scales. The range is from 0 to 1, with values closer to 1 indicating higher internal consistency reliability.

3.2.3.2 Career Decision Ambiguity Tolerance Scale (CDAT)

For evaluating participants' ambiguity tolerance levels, the Career Decision Ambiguity Tolerance Scale (CDAT) developed by Xu and Tracery in 2015 was used. It is an 18-item self-report measure that assesses individuals' psychological resources when dealing with ambiguous situations, specifically in career-decision making processes. The measure contains three

subscales: Preference, referring to interest and excitement in ambiguity, Tolerance referring to acceptance of ambiguity, and Aversion referring to avoidance of ambiguity (Xu & Tracey, 2015).

Participants were requested to respond on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 7 (“Strongly agree”), indicating to what extent they agreed with each statement. The items asked participants to describe their approaches in career decision-making, for example, “It is interesting to discover new strengths and weaknesses”. The total score of the measure ranges from 18 to 126, with higher scores indicating being comfortable with uncertainty and lower scores indicating avoidance of ambiguous situations. Some items, mainly those in the Aversion subscale, (e.g., “I try to avoid complicated career decision making tasks”) were reverse scored because they were negatively framed, which facilitates consistent interpretation across the scale. As demonstrated in the Table 2, for this sample, the subscales showed mixed reliability: Preference ($\alpha = .62$, 5 items), Tolerance ($\alpha = .67$, 6 items), and Aversion ($\alpha = .85$, 6 items). One item was excluded from the analysis as it did not fit the context of the present study.

Table 3

Internal Consistency of CDAT(N = 64)

Scale / Subscale	Items	Cronbach's α
Career Decision Ambiguity Tolerance (CDAT)		
— Preference	5	.62
— Tolerance	6	.67
— Aversion	6	.85

Note. One item was excluded from the analysis.

3.2.3.3 Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

The study used the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Diener et al. (1985), to assess the overall life satisfaction of participants. SWLS is a brief 5-item self-report measure which evaluates subjective well-being of individuals by examining their general perceptions of life quality. Unlike other instruments used in the study that include various subscales evaluating different life domains, this measure focuses solely on overall contentment. Participants rated each statement on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly agree” (7), indicating the degree of their agreement to the statements. For example: “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”.

The total score of SWLS ranges from 5 to 35, with higher scores indicating greater life satisfaction and lower scores reflecting dissatisfaction. Scores between 20 to 24 are generally considered average. The measure demonstrates strong psychometric properties, as it has high internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Diener et al., 1985). It was an appropriate measure for the present study as it has been validated across a diverse demographic groups and cultural contexts. In this sample, the scale also demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = .84$, 5 items).

3.3. Results

This section presents the findings of the study, including descriptive statistics, internal consistency of the study measures, and correlations among the key variables. Group differences between International and Italian students are examined using one-way ANOVAs. Furthermore, regression analyses are conducted to assess the predictive value of adaptability, ambiguity tolerance, life satisfaction, and students' preparedness and self-perception.

Prior to conducting the main analysis, the data was screened for completeness. Of the original 65 participants who were recruited, one was excluded as they did not meet the eligibility criteria, resulting in a final sample of 64. No missing data were present in the remaining dataset.

Pearson correlations were conducted among the study variables (see Table 4). The CAAS total score was strongly and positively correlated with Concern ($r = .78, p < .001$), Control ($r = .76, p < .001$), Curiosity ($r = .81, p < .001$), and Confidence ($r = .84, p < .001$). It was also positively associated with CDAT Preference ($r = .41, p < .001$), CDAT Tolerance ($r = .40, p = .001$), and Satisfaction with Life (SWLS; $r = .40, p < .001$).

At the subscale level, CAAS Concern was positively correlated with Curiosity ($r = .53, p < .001$), Confidence ($r = .48, p < .001$), CDAT Preference ($r = .27, p = .028$), CDAT Tolerance ($r = .25, p = .048$), SWLS ($r = .25, p = .046$). CAAS Control was positively associated with Curiosity ($r = .51, p < .001$), Confidence ($r = .57, p < .001$), CDAT Preference ($r = .37, p = .003$), CDAT Tolerance ($r = .27, p = .033$), and SWLS ($r = .36, p = .004$). CAAS Curiosity was positively correlated with Confidence ($r = .60, p < .001$), CDAT Preference ($r = .26, p = .041$), CDAT Tolerance ($r = .33, p = .008$), SWLS ($r = .30, p = .017$). CAAS Confidence was positively associated with CDAT Preference ($r = .41, p < .001$), CDAT Tolerance ($r = .44, p < .001$), and SWLS ($r = .39, p = .002$). Within the CDAT, Preference and Tolerance were positively correlated ($r = .25, p = .048$), and Preference was also positively associated with SWLS ($r = .25, p = .046$).

Table 4*Correlation Table of Scales and Subscales*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	1	.784**	.763**	.811**	.835**	.411**	.401**	-0.098	.402**	.412**	.257*	.337**
2		1	.411**	.534**	.481**	.274*	.248*	-0.058	.250*	.324**	0.075	0.143
3			1	.513**	.569**	.367**	.267*	-0.088	.355**	.388**	.297*	.275*
4				1	.603**	.256*	.330**	0.022	.297*	.361**	.292*	.416**
5					1	.411**	.435**	-0.171	.387**	.259*	0.198	.281*
6						1	.248*	-0.126	0.036	0.008	-0.088	0.176
7								-0.222	0.227	0.144	0.153	.249*
8								1	-0.009	0.029	0.061	0.075
9									1	.259*	0.072	0.102

Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

1= 1= CAAS_Total; 2= CAAS_Concern; 3= CAAS_Control; 4= CAAS_Curiosity; 5=CAAS_Confidence; 6= CDAT_Preference; 7= CDAT_Tolerance; 8= CDAT_Aversion; 9= SWLS_Total

1= CAAS_Total; 2= CAAS_Concern; 3= CAAS_Control; 4= CAAS_Curiosity;

5=CAAS_Confidence; 6= CDAT_Preference; 7= CDAT_Tolerance; 8= CDAT_Aversion; 9= SWLS_Total.

A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to examine whether participants differed in career adaptability (CAAS), ambiguity tolerance (CDAT) and life satisfaction (SWLS). The analysis focused on differences across career-service use (yes vs.

no), and student identification (Italian vs. International). Assumptions of homogeneity of variance were tested using Levene's test, and eta squared (η^2) was used as the measure of effect size.

The ANOVAs results, showed in Table 3, indicated that CAAS-Curiosity was higher among career-service users, $F(1, 62) = 4.69$, $p = .034$, $\eta^2 = .070$ (Yes: $M = 23.58$, $SD = 3.49$; No: $M = 21.81$, $SD = 3.00$), and marginally higher on SWLS $F(1, 62) = 4.01$, $p = .050$, $\eta^2 = .061$, with users ($M = 23.67$, $SD = 5.44$). Additionally, it showed that Italian students reported higher life satisfaction (SWLS) than international students $F(1, 62) = 4.57$, $p = .036$, $\eta^2 = .069$ (Italian: $M = 23.81$, $SD = 4.50$; International: $M = 20.53$, $SD = 7.42$). Levene's test indicated unequal variances ($p = .011$) but given equal group sizes ($n = 32$ each), the ANOVA is robust to this violation.

Table 5

Significant One-Way ANOVA Results for Gender, Career-Service Use, and Identification

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Group comparison	M (SD)	F(df1, df2)	p	η^2
Career Service Use	CAAS-Curiosity	Yes (n=33) vs. No (n=31)	23.58 (3.49) vs. 21.81 (3.00)	F(1,62)=4.69	.034	.070
Identification	SWLS	Italian (n=32) vs. International (n=32)	23.81 (4.50) vs. 20.53 (7.42)	F(1,62)=4.57	.036	.069

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; η^2 = eta squared (effect size). Only significant or marginally significant results are presented. Degrees of freedom for all F tests are (1, 62). All Levene's tests for homogeneity of variance were nonsignificant except SWLS by Identification ($p = .011$), for which group sizes were equal and ANOVA is considered robust.

For a further exploration of predictive relationships among the study variables, a series of multiple regression analyses were conducted which are presented in Tables 5 and 6. All assumptions of regression (linearity, normality, and multicollinearity) were checked and met within acceptable ranges. Effect sizes are reported as R^2 and standardized coefficients (β). A multiple regression was conducted with the four CAAS dimensions (Concern, Control, Curiosity, Confidence) as predictors of life satisfaction. The model was significant, $F(4, 59) = 3.22$, $p = .019$, accounting for 18% of the variance in SWLS ($R^2 = .179$, Adj. $R^2 = .123$). None of the individual predictors reached significance, although CAAS-Confidence showed the strongest trend ($\beta = .24$, $p = .141$).

Separate regression was performed with CDAT which demonstrated a significant model with CDAT-preference - significant predictors were CAAS-Confidence ($\beta = .34$, $p = .023$) and CAAS-Control ($\beta = .28$, $p = .048$). While, for CDAT-Tolerance the model was also significant $F(4, 59) = 3.08$, $p = .023$, with $R^2 = .173$ with CAAS-Confidence as a significant predictor ($\beta = .36$, $p = .014$) and CAAS total ($\beta = .40$, $p = .005$, $R^2 = .16$).

Table 6

Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Life Satisfaction, Ambiguity Tolerance from CAAS Total

Dependent variable	Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	R^2
SWLS	CAAS Total	0.15	0.05	.40	3.29	.002	.16*
CDAT – Preference	CAAS Total	0.12	0.04	.41	3.06	.003	.17*
CDAT – Tolerance	CAAS Total	0.10	0.04	.40	2.94	.005	.16*

Note. $N = 64$. SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale; CAAS = Career Adapt-Abilities Scale; CDAT = Career Decision Ambiguity Tolerance; $p < .05$.

Table 7

Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Life Satisfaction and Ambiguity Tolerance from CAAS

Subscales

Dependent variable	Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	R ²
SWLS	Confidence	0.25	0.17	.24	1.49	.141	.18*
CDAT – Preference	Control	0.21	0.10	.28	2.04	.048	
	Confidence	0.27	0.12	.34	2.34	.023	.18*
CDAT – Tolerance	Confidence	0.31	0.12	.36	2.53	.014	.17*

Note. $N = 64$. Only significant predictors are displayed. SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale;

CDAT = Career Decision Ambiguity Tolerance. $p < .05$; $p < .01$.

3.4 Discussion

This master's thesis examined career adaptability, ambiguity tolerance, and life satisfaction among students who had recently graduated (within the past six months) or were about to graduate. The literature review laid a foundation by providing insights into how these psychological resources contribute to the transition into the workforce and how fostering them may support a more successful adjustment. The results essentially supported the proposed hypothesis, showing that adaptability predicted ambiguity tolerance and life satisfaction, showing the bidirectional relationship between well-being and confidence. The comparison of two groups further revealed that international students have in fact lower life satisfaction than their Italian peers.

The findings align with previous research emphasizing the importance of adaptability resources a cohesive and interconnected system (Savickas, 2013; Budner, 1962). All four dimensions of CAAS showed strong correlations and were closely aligned with the total score, supporting Savickas' theory that adaptability functions as a holistic system. Moreover, adaptability was associated with ambiguity tolerance, demonstrating that adaptability helps individuals remain open, flexible, and resilient when dealing with ambiguous situations. The positive association between adaptability and life satisfaction is also notable, as graduates with higher adaptability reported greater life satisfaction. This finding is consistent with existing literature (Ataç et al., 2018; Gao, Li, & Pang, 2025; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), which emphasizes the role adaptability plays in mental well-being, success in career transitions, and a sense of confidence and contentment with oneself.

Furthermore, the present study indicates that overall career adaptability, as measured by the CAAS Total score, significantly predicted life satisfaction. This reinforces previous research indicating that career adaptability is a strong predictor of satisfaction by reducing anxiety and stress. (Gao, Li, & Pang, 2025). Specifically, individuals with higher levels of

career adaptability are better in navigating risks and confronting obstacles with greater courage and resilience, all of which contribute to enhanced life satisfaction (Magnano et al., 2021).

Notably, when CAAS dimensions (Concern, Control, Curiosity, and Confidence) were examined individually, none of them emerged as unique predictors of life satisfaction, while the total score was a significant predictor. This pattern once again shows the significance of adaptability as a unified resource (Savickas, 2013) and suggests that adaptability functions as an integrated system, whereby the combination of all subparts support well-being and satisfaction, while the distinct contributions of individual resources become less distinct once their shared variance is considered.

These findings emphasize the importance of viewing career adaptability as a whole and, therefore cultivating interventions aimed at enhanced adaptability through the simultaneous consideration of all aspects. While research has heavily focused on the unique contributions of CAAS dimensions, future orientation and optimism, agency and self-efficacy, openness and exploration, and resilience (Gao, Li, & Pang, 2025), it is important to consider the contributions when all these dimensions are treated as a holistic resource, and how these skills can be fostered simultaneously through interventions.

The study also showed that both the CAAS total score and specific subscales predicted greater preference for and tolerance of ambiguity in career decision-making. Students with higher adaptability were more likely to prefer ambiguous situations and to tolerate uncertainty. At the subscale level, Confidence and Control predicted Preference, whereas Confidence alone predicted Tolerance. These findings are consistent with the prior research linking adaptability to resilience, openness, and preparedness in dealing with uncertain situations and career contexts. As previous studies suggest, students higher in ambiguity tolerance tend to be more confident and more capable of adapting to changing circumstances and diverse experiences (Savickas, 2013; Budner, 1962). This pattern is reflected in the present study, where individuals who reported greater confidence were more willing to embrace ambiguous situations.

More specifically, the results revealed that CDAT-Preference was significantly predicted by overall career adaptability, highlighting that adaptability enables students to be open-minded towards career options and view uncertainty as an opportunity rather than a threat (Rudolph et al., 2017, Savickas, 2020). This openness, in turn helps them to take proactive career actions. Moreover, the significant role of Control suggests that students who feel a stronger sense of responsibility for shaping their careers are more likely to accept the insecurities of the career environment and take control of their actions (Gao, Li, & Pang, 2025). Similarly, Confidence indicates that when individuals' self-perception is high, they tend to feel more secure and decisive in their career decision making.

The results also showed that CDAT-Tolerance was predicted by career adaptability showing that adaptability is a valuable resource for graduates to remain composed in uncertain situations and take effective steps in career contexts. This finding reinforces prior literature emphasizing the link between flexibility, ambiguity tolerance and entrepreneurial inclination (Xu & Tracey, 2014). At the subscale level, Confidence emerged as the only predictor of tolerance, highlighting that positive self-perception plays a crucial role in maintaining individuals' sense of calmness when facing challenges of ambiguous transitional journeys, such as moving from academia to workplace. This aligns with prior research, emphasizing that positive self-perception and ambiguity tolerance are essential for reducing stress and anxiety, while fostering strategic and confident thinking when navigating risks and entering an unpredictable labor market (Albers, 2024; Budner, 1962; Orth, 2014).

The ANOVA results revealed that individuals who identified as Italian students reported significantly higher life satisfaction (SWLS) than those who identified as international students which aligns with prior research showing that international students face additional challenges, such as language barriers, complicated visa processes, limited hiring opportunities, and unequal education (Arthur et al., 2009), as well as more covert obstacles including discrimination, prejudice, limited social support, racial remarks, mocking, unfair grading, and social isolation

(Wallen, 2025). As demonstrated in the present study and supported by existing literature, these extra barriers contribute to lower life satisfaction among international students, which in turn tends to reduce confidence and result in negative self-perception in career contexts. These findings demonstrate the importance of providing targeted support to this group to help them navigate with the many stressors associated with transitioning to a new and uncertain environment.

Italian students reporting higher life satisfaction can be interpreted in different ways. Incorporating the existing literature suggests that familiarity with the environment and language, social support, and the preferential treatment that locals often receive over international students might explain this difference (EURES, 2025). Prior research shows that often Italian students are given priority even when they are less or similarly qualified, as employers often prefer hiring local citizens rather than offering opportunities to immigrants who may otherwise fit the position (Schueller & Slotte, 2025). This phenomenon helps explain the relative “success” Italian students experience in securing jobs after graduation and the higher life satisfaction associated with it compared to international students.

The ANOVA results also demonstrated that career-service use was associated with higher CAAS-Curiosity scores and marginally higher life satisfaction which suggest that engaging with career services fosters adaptability, particularly through curiosity, which is closely linked to openness and proactive career choices. Furthermore, the marginally higher life satisfaction indicates that career support in universities may positively affect mental well-being by reducing anxiety, providing a sense of support, decreasing uncertainty, and equipping students with necessary skills to navigate it. This interpretation is consistent with prior research emphasizing the role of career-service use in enhancing students’ overall university experience and serving as a valuable resource for cultivating career adaptability in career decision-making (VanDerziel, 2022).

While this study provides valuable insights into the transition from academia to employment among Italian and international students, it is not without limitations. First, the sample consisted of 64 participants, which is a relatively small sample and limits the generalizability of the findings. The use of snowball sampling may have introduced bias, as it could attract participants with similar social networks, thereby failing to capture diverse experiences among students. Moreover, the cross-sectional design provides only a picture of students' perceptions at a single point in time, making it difficult to examine how their adaptability, life satisfaction, and ambiguity tolerance change throughout the transition.

As with most self-report measures, responses were subject to biases such as social desirability, even though validated instruments were used. Despite assurances of anonymity and voluntary participation, changes in self-presentation might have still occurred. In addition, unmeasured contextual factors may have influenced the results.

Future research could address these limitations by replicating the study with more extensive and diverse samples to strengthen external validity. To observe how these perceptions evolve across different stages of transitions, longitudinal studies would also be valuable. Along with the self-report measures, it would be insightful to incorporate qualitative measures such as interviews or focus groups to understand in better details specific challenges faced by Italian and international students, as well as the most salient factors shaping the readiness gap.

From a practical standpoint, these findings have significant implications for universities, policy makers, and employers who play crucial roles in shaping students' transition from academia to the labor market. The strong between career adaptability and life satisfaction demonstrated in the study, shows the importance of cultivating and strengthening this skill in academic environments. Universities should therefore foster programs aimed at nurturing adaptability not only through its individual subscales but also by emphasizing its holistic value.

The results also highlighted the positive impact of career-service use, which was associated with greater curiosity, openness and overall satisfaction among students. Career

centers and services in universities can play important roles in shaping these students' experiences through this uncertain transition by providing support in job searches, networking, and the development of practical and psychological skills useful for career-decision making.

At the policy level, it is equally important to address inequities that remain, particularly for international students. Employers must ensure equal opportunities for all qualified candidates, regardless of ethnic or citizenship backgrounds. Addressing biases, prejudices, and discriminatory practices in both educational and hiring contexts is essential to ensure that international students receive fair and adequate opportunities, comparable to those of their local peers.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the critical role of career adaptability, life satisfaction, and ambiguity tolerance in shaping students' transition from academia to the workforce. Career Adaptability emerged as a strong predictor for both life satisfaction and ambiguity tolerance, emphasizing its importance for navigating challenges in career contexts. The comparison of international and Italian students also demonstrated meaningful differences, with international students reporting lower life satisfaction, highlighting persisting systemic and cultural barriers they continue to encounter. Finally, the positive association between career-service use and students' adaptability, particularly in curiosity, and overall satisfaction emphasizes the importance of organized, accessible, and equal institutional support for all students.

These findings provide clear evidence of the need for universities and employers to foster environments that reduce inequities, provide equal opportunities, strengthen adaptability and facilitate smoother transitions from academia to the labor market. Career services should focus on developing adaptability as a holistic skill set and provide inclusive practices, that provide balanced support to both international and local students. Future research should build on these findings and further examine these dynamics with more diverse and large samples, using longitudinal studies and qualitative measures.

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Appendix

Welcome to the Career Readiness Survey. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey. Your responses will be completely anonymous and used only for academic purposes.

Section 1: Demographic Questions

1. Are you about to graduate (within 6 months) or did you recently graduate?

Yes

No

2. What is your age? ____

3. What is your race/ethnicity?

White

Black or African American

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Other: ____

4. What is your gender?

Male

Female

Non-binary/third gender

Prefer not to say

5. What is your marital status?

Single

Married

Widowed

Divorced

Separated

6. What is the highest level of education achieved?

Less than high school

High school graduate

Some college

Bachelor

Master

Professional degree

Doctorate

7. What is your field of study? ____

8. Have you ever accessed university career services?

Yes

No

9. You identify as:

Italian student

International student

Neither

Section 2: Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS)

Instructions: Please rate how strongly can you do each of the following things?

1 = Not strong

2 = Somewhat strong

3 = Strong

4 = Very strong

5 = Strongest

Items:

1. Thinking about what my future will be like

2. Realizing that today's choices shape my future
3. Preparing for the future
4. Becoming aware of the educational and career choices that I must make
5. Planning how to achieve my goals
6. Concerned about my career
7. Keeping upbeat
8. Making decisions by myself
9. Taking responsibility for my actions
10. Sticking up for my beliefs
11. Counting on myself
12. Doing what's right for me
13. Exploring my surroundings
14. Looking for opportunities to grow as a person
15. Investigating options before making a choice
16. Observing different ways of doing things
17. Probing deeply into questions I have
18. Becoming curious about new opportunities
19. Performing tasks efficiently
20. Taking care to do things well
21. Learning new skills
22. Working up to my ability
23. Overcoming obstacles
24. Solving problems

Section 3: Career Decision Ambiguity Tolerance (CDAT)

Instructions: In general, how would you rate the degree of your difficulty in making a career decision?

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Somewhat disagree

4 = Neither agree nor disagree

5 = Somewhat agree

6 = Agree

7 = Strongly agree

Items:

1. It is interesting to discover new strengths and weaknesses
2. I am interested in exploring the many aspects of my personality and interests
3. I am excited to see a creative way to match my interests with a career
4. I am not interested in knowing new information about myself
5. I am excited that I can learn new things about myself or about the world when making a career decision
6. I am open to career which I have never heard of or thought of before
7. I do not mind changing my career in the future if necessary
8. I am tolerant with the possibility that my interests could change in the future
9. I am tolerant of the unpredictability of a career
10. I enjoy tackling complex career decision making tasks
11. I am tolerant of the potential difference between my perception and the reality of a career
12. I am able to make a choice when multiple options seem equally appealing
13. People's different or sometimes contradictory perspectives about a career makes me uncomfortable

14. I try to avoid complicated career decision making tasks
15. The career decision making process, which involves so many considerations, is just daunting
16. I find it difficult to make career decision as things cannot be predicted early
17. I try to avoid a career in which the prospects cannot be foreseen clearly
18. I am afraid of sorting out the complex aspects of a career

Section 3: Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

Instructions: Below are 5 statements that you may agree or disagree with. Indicate your agreement with each item. Please be open and honest in your response.

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Somewhat disagree
- 4 = Neither agree nor disagree
- 5 = Somewhat agree
- 6 = Agree
- 7 = Strongly agree

Items:

1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal
2. The conditions of my life are excellent
3. I am satisfied with my life
4. So far I have obtained the important things I want in life
5. If I could live my life over again, I would change almost nothing

Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey and contribute to my research. Your responses will help provide valuable insights and support the completion of my master's thesis at the University of Padova.