



Understanding Graduate Employment Lag and Strategic Responses in Applied Universities: A Case Study of Henan Province, China

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Received 17/05/2025

Revised 25/05/2025

Accepted 25/06/2025

Abstract

Background and Aim: In the context of higher education, the concept of "slow employment" among college graduates has gained increasing attention. This phenomenon refers to the trend where students delay actively seeking employment after graduation, often choosing instead to retake postgraduate entrance exams, prepare for civil service examinations, or intentionally postpone entering the workforce as a transitional period. This study focuses specifically on application-oriented universities in Henan Province, China, providing a clear and targeted research scope. By analyzing the underlying theories and key influencing factors, the study aims to offer actionable countermeasures to address this growing trend. From the perspective of higher education marketing, understanding "slow employment" is vital for universities to effectively communicate their career support services and graduate outcomes. Addressing this challenge is essential for institutions to enhance their value proposition to prospective students and their families, ensuring alignment between educational offerings and future career opportunities.

Materials and Methods: This study reviews existing literature on "slow employment," clarifies related concepts, and employs a qualitative research approach. Specifically, the research includes in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to investigate the factors influencing graduates' "slow employment" tendencies. The interviewees consist of recent graduates from application-oriented universities in Henan Province, China, who are either experiencing "slow employment" themselves or are actively involved in the job-seeking process. Including these participants ensures that the study captures diverse perspectives and provides a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Results: The study identifies key factors contributing to "slow employment," including career uncertainty, a competitive job market, parental and societal expectations, viewing "slow employment" as a phase for self-improvement, and financial support from parents reducing the urgency to work. Gender differences were noted, with female graduates more influenced by societal expectations and male graduates prioritizing income stability. These insights are valuable for higher education institutions to develop targeted strategies. For example, universities can address career uncertainty by promoting career counseling, internships, and alumni success stories, while also engaging parents by emphasizing the long-term career readiness of graduates.

Conclusion: Based on the findings, the study recommends targeted interventions such as career guidance programs, mentorship initiatives, and policy adjustments to reduce graduates' dependency on exams. Additionally, strengthening university-employer collaborations is proposed to better align graduates' skills with market demands, enabling smoother transitions into the workforce. These recommendations are not only practical but also highly relevant to higher education marketing. By implementing these strategies, universities can enhance their brand image and perceived value, showcasing a commitment to graduate success. Highlighting successful employer collaborations and robust career support services can serve as a strong differentiator in a competitive market. Furthermore, these strategies enable applied universities to improve both their "product" (educational experience and graduate outcomes) and "promotion" (effectively communicating these benefits to prospective students and parents).

Keywords: Slow Employment; Career Development; Application-Oriented Universities; Higher Education Marketing; Henan Province, China

Introduction

Graduate employment has long been a topic of significant societal concern, with each year seemingly marking the "most difficult employment season" in history. This challenge is particularly acute in China, where the employment of college graduates is not only a personal milestone but also a key

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Citation



Wang, Z., Ek-Iem, B., Kaewtip, S., Panyadee, C., & Jitpakdee, P. (2025). Understanding Graduate Employment Lag and Strategic Responses in Applied Universities: A Case Study of Henan Province, China. *International Journal of Sociologies and Anthropologies Science Reviews*, 5 (4), 1027-1040;
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60027/ijssr.2025.7826>



indicator of the country's economic and social development. The importance of employment is underscored by national policy directives, such as the 19th and 20th National Congress reports, which emphasize the need to prioritize employment and promote high-quality, full employment through public services and multi-channel support (Xi, 2017; Xi, 2022). Higher education is widely recognized as both a private and public investment, with the expectation that graduates will secure jobs to contribute to societal progress. Yet, despite the need for skilled workers in various sectors, many graduates face delays in entering the workforce, a phenomenon known as "slow employment" (Chang, 2016).

"Slow employment" refers to graduates delaying immediate job-seeking after graduation, often opting to prepare for postgraduate or civil service exams, or taking time for self-improvement. While this tendency is increasingly common, it also raises concerns about the alignment of higher education outcomes with labor market demands. For applied colleges and universities in Henan Province, this issue is particularly pressing. These institutions, with their vocational focus and presumed close ties to industry, are uniquely positioned to address graduate employment challenges. However, the persistence of "slow employment" among their graduates calls into question the perceived value and marketability of their degrees, posing challenges for institutional branding and student recruitment. Addressing this issue is critical not only for the personal development of graduates but also for the broader economic and social stability of Henan Province.

Studying the "slow employment" phenomenon holds significant implications across multiple dimensions. First, it helps regulate job market pressure in Henan, China's most populous province, where thousands of graduates enter the workforce annually. Understanding "slow employment" can also inform policies to better align graduates' skills with the demands of a transitioning economy that increasingly values high-skilled talent. Moreover, it provides insights into regional disparities in employment opportunities, which is crucial for promoting balanced economic development within Henan and across China. From a social perspective, examining "slow employment" sheds light on the career choices and psychological states of young people, contributing to both social stability and youth development. Finally, this research offers data-driven guidance for the formulation of targeted employment policies and innovative strategies to support graduates during their transition to the workforce.

From a higher education marketing and management perspective, understanding "slow employment" is essential for applied universities to refine their offerings and communication strategies. These institutions must adapt their "product" by aligning curricula and skills development with market demands, while also enhancing their "promotion" through effective career services and employer engagement initiatives. By addressing the issue of "slow employment," applied universities in Henan Province can strengthen their value proposition to both students and parents, ensuring that their educational programs meet the dual goals of personal success and societal contribution.

This study, therefore, aims to fill a critical research gap by exploring the underlying causes of "slow employment" among graduates of applied universities in Henan Province. It seeks to provide actionable insights for institutions to address this challenge through strategic interventions that enhance graduate outcomes and institutional competitiveness.

Research Objectives

Therefore, the main research objectives of this paper are described as follows:

1. To explain the phenomenon of slow employment of the applied universities in the Chinese job market.
2. To propose strategies to cope with the slow employment situation in applied universities in Henan Province, China.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of "slow employment" among college graduates has emerged as a significant topic in the field of higher education and labor economics, reflecting broader societal, economic, and

educational changes. This section reviews the existing literature on the causes, implications, and potential strategies to address "slow employment," with a particular focus on its relevance to applied universities in China. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and identify gaps that this study seeks to address.

1. Defining "Slow Employment"

The term "slow employment" has been gradually defined and contextualized in Chinese academic discourse since 2015. Tan (2017) describes it as a situation where college graduates neither pursue immediate employment nor further studies after graduation but instead delay entering the workforce, often opting for additional preparation for exams or a transitional period of self-reflection and skill development. This phenomenon shares similarities with concepts like the "gap year" in Western contexts, which is seen as a positive phase for personal growth, but differs fundamentally in its underlying causes and societal perceptions. Unlike the "gap year," which is often voluntary and culturally accepted, "slow employment" in China is more likely to be influenced by structural and societal factors, such as economic pressures, labor market mismatches, and parental expectations (Xu, 2018).

2. Causes of "Slow Employment"

The literature identifies four primary dimensions influencing "slow employment": societal factors, university-related factors, family dynamics, and individual characteristics.

2.1 Societal Factors

At the macro level, social and economic conditions play a pivotal role in shaping graduates' employment behaviors. Economic instability and structural transformation in labor markets often lead to reduced job opportunities in traditional industries while increasing demand for highly skilled talent in emerging sectors (Yue & Zhou, 2016). Xu (2018) highlights how such economic shifts exacerbate employment challenges, compelling graduates to delay job-seeking in favor of further education or exam preparation. Additionally, cultural values and social norms in China, which prioritize stable and prestigious careers, such as government positions, further contribute to prolonged job searches (Liu, 2019).

2.2 University-Related Factors

The role of higher education institutions in addressing "slow employment" is a recurring theme. Lou and Lin (2013) argue that the mismatch between higher education curricula and market demands significantly impacts graduates' employability. Many applied universities lag in adjusting their programs to align with industrial needs, creating a gap between the skills graduates possess and those required by employers (Gu et al., 2013). Furthermore, inadequate career guidance services and limited opportunities for internships and practical training exacerbate the situation, leaving graduates underprepared for the workforce (Chen & Wang, 2009).

2.3 Family Dynamics

Family expectations and financial support are also critical factors influencing "slow employment." Aguilera and Massey (2003) emphasize the role of family capital in providing graduates with financial security, which can reduce the urgency to find immediate employment. While this support offers temporary relief, it often results in prolonged job-seeking as graduates aim for "ideal" positions that align with parental expectations (Xu, 2018). Moreover, family influence contributes to a preference for stable jobs, such as government positions, which typically require multiple exam attempts and extended preparation periods (Luo et al., 2019).

2.4 Individual Characteristics

Individual attitudes and behaviors significantly shape the "slow employment" phenomenon. The theory of planned behavior (TPB) is often used to explore how graduates' perceptions influence their employment decisions (Luo et al., 2019). Liu (2019) notes that graduates' decisions to delay employment often stem from a combination of career uncertainty, lack of confidence in their skills, and a desire to improve their qualifications. These factors are particularly pronounced among graduates of applied universities, where perceptions of limited career prospects may lead to hesitation and prolonged decision-making.



3. Implications of "Slow Employment"

The impact of "slow employment" extends beyond individual graduates, affecting families, universities, and society at large. At the individual level, prolonged unemployment or underemployment can lead to psychological stress, diminished confidence, and delayed career progression (Chang, 2016). For families, the financial burden of supporting unemployed graduates can strain resources, while societal concerns about youth unemployment and underutilized talent highlight the broader implications for economic growth and social stability (Gu et al., 2013).

From an institutional perspective, "slow employment" challenges universities' ability to demonstrate the value of their programs and graduate outcomes. As Yue and Zhou (2016) argue, higher education institutions must address these challenges by aligning their curricula with market demands and strengthening career support services. This is particularly critical for applied universities, which are expected to produce job-ready graduates with practical skills tailored to industry needs.

4. Strategies to Address "Slow Employment"

The literature offers several strategies to mitigate "slow employment." First, universities must enhance their career guidance programs and establish stronger connections with employers to provide students with practical training and job opportunities (Lou & Lin, 2013). Second, policy interventions, such as financial incentives for employers to hire recent graduates or support for entrepreneurial initiatives, can create more opportunities for young people entering the workforce (Yue & Zhou, 2016). Third, families and universities must work together to cultivate realistic career expectations and promote early career planning among students (Luo et al., 2019).

Notably, Liu et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of fostering a growth mindset among graduates, encouraging them to view entry-level positions as stepping stones rather than ultimate career goals. This perspective aligns with service marketing theories, which suggest that higher education institutions must not only deliver academic content but also market themselves as providers of lifelong career development services (Aguilera & Massey, 2003).

5. Research Gap and Contribution

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into the causes and implications of "slow employment," limited attention has been given to its specific manifestations in applied universities, particularly in regions like Henan Province. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the "slow employment" phenomenon within the context of Henan's applied universities, offering a nuanced understanding of its causes and proposing targeted interventions. By integrating perspectives from labor economics, education management, and marketing, this research aims to contribute to the development of more effective strategies for addressing graduate employment challenges in China.

Conclusion

The reviewed literature underscores the multifaceted nature of "slow employment," highlighting its societal, institutional, familial, and individual dimensions. This study builds on these findings by focusing on applied universities in Henan Province, where the phenomenon is particularly pronounced. By addressing the identified research gaps, this study aims to provide actionable insights for higher education institutions, policymakers, and other stakeholders, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on graduate employability and higher education marketing.

Research Methodology

1. Location of the Study

This study was conducted in Henan Province, China. Henan, referred to as "Yu," is a provincial-level administrative region in the People's Republic of China. Known for its historical significance south of the Yellow River, Henan's capital is Zhengzhou, a major transportation hub and a center for logistics, information flow, and agricultural processing. Henan is also one of the most populous provinces in China, producing a large number of college graduates annually. This makes it a suitable research site for investigating the "slow employment" phenomenon, as the region faces significant challenges related to

graduate employment and economic structural transformation.

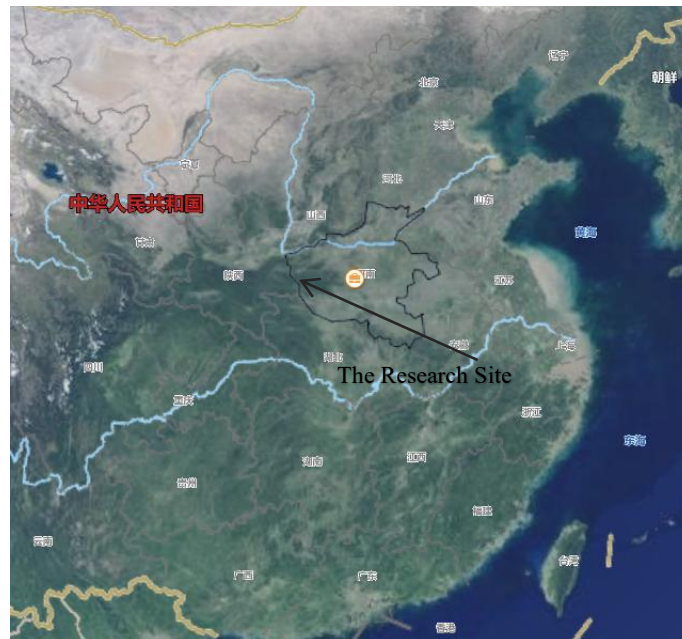


Figure 1 The Geographical Location of Henan Province

2. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, supported by a supplementary questionnaire survey to provide a mixed-methods framework. The qualitative approach enables an in-depth exploration of the factors influencing "slow employment," while the questionnaire survey validates the findings and captures trends across a larger sample. This dual approach ensures alignment with the research questions, offering both detailed insights and broader applicability of the findings.

3. Sample and Sampling

(1) Target Population

The target population includes:

Graduates from applied universities in Henan Province: Recent graduates from the 18 application-oriented universities in Henan Province who are experiencing "slow employment" or actively seeking jobs.

University career service staff: Representatives responsible for guiding graduates in their transition to employment.

Employers: Representatives from industries that commonly hire graduates from applied universities.

(2) Sampling Method

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that the participants selected met specific criteria relevant to the study. The sample was stratified to include:

Graduates: A diverse group of 40 graduates from 10 representative applied universities, ensuring variation in gender, academic major, and socio-economic background.

University staff: 5 career services personnel to provide institutional perspectives on slow employment challenges.

Employers: 5 hiring managers from industries closely linked to applied universities, offering insights into graduate employability and market demands.



Sample Size

In total, the study involved 50 participants in the qualitative analysis, complemented by a questionnaire survey distributed to 200 graduates across the 18 applied universities. A response rate of 85% yielded 170 valid responses, ensuring representativeness of the data.

4. Research Instruments

(1) Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. These interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while maintaining focus on key research themes. The interview guide included questions related to:

Definitions and perceptions of "slow employment."

Factors influencing employment decisions.

Institutional and societal challenges in addressing slow employment.

Proposed strategies and solutions for mitigating the phenomenon.

(2) Questionnaire Survey

A supplementary questionnaire survey was used to validate findings from the qualitative interviews. The survey included:

Closed-ended questions to quantify factors influencing employment delays (e.g., career uncertainty, family support).

Open-ended questions to capture insights into graduates' personal experiences and suggestions.

5. Data Collection Process

(1) Interviews

Duration: Conducted between September and December 2024.

Format: Interviews were held in person or via video conferencing, depending on participant preferences.

Recording and transcription: All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Length: Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes.

(2) Questionnaire Distribution

The questionnaire was distributed online to graduates using university career service databases. To ensure accuracy, demographic and academic background data were cross-referenced with institutional records.

6. Data Analysis

(1) Thematic Analysis

The qualitative data collected through interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and themes relevant to the research questions. The process followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework:

Familiarization: Reading and re-reading interview transcripts to gain a deep understanding of participants' perspectives.

Coding: Assigning initial codes to significant ideas and statements.

Theme Development: Grouping related codes into broader themes (e.g., career uncertainty, societal pressures, institutional challenges).

Theme Review: Refining themes to ensure alignment with research objectives.

Theme Naming: Developing clear, concise labels for each theme.

Integration: Incorporating themes into the study's findings and discussion.

(2) Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and validate key findings from the thematic analysis. This included calculating frequencies and percentages for factors such as reasons for employment delays and perceptions of career guidance services. Data were visualized using tables and charts to ensure clarity and accessibility for readers.



7. Alignment with Research Questions

The chosen methodology aligns closely with the study's research questions:

What are the key factors contributing to "slow employment" among graduates of applied universities in Henan Province?

How do institutional and societal factors influence graduates' employment decisions?

What strategies can be employed by applied universities to address "slow employment" effectively?

The qualitative approach captures the depth and complexity of participants' experiences, while the quantitative survey validates these insights and ensures broader applicability. This methodological alignment strengthens the study's credibility and ensures that the findings are actionable for higher education institutions in Henan Province.

Research sampling

The survey objects for this study are mainly fresh graduates who will graduate in 2024. The research samples will be selected from the graduates of 18 applied universities in Henan Province.

Table 1 Number of Undergraduate Graduates of 18 Applied Universities in Henan Province

| University name | Number of students | Number of fresh graduates (undergraduate) |
|--|--------------------|---|
| Zhengzhou College of Light Industry | 30000 | 6500 |
| Henan University of Technology | 38000 | 7145 |
| Henan Polytechnic University | 40000 | 9709 |
| Henan Normal University | 75000 | 8162 |
| Huanghuai University | 21000 | 4509 |
| Luoyang Institute of Science and Technology | 28000 | 7080 |
| Xuchang University | 26343 | 6600 |
| HuangHe University of Science and Technology | 30000 | 7000 |
| Anyang Institute of Technology | 23650 | 5500 |
| Zhoukou Normal University | 24000 | 6486 |
| Pingdingshan University | 20668 | 4979 |
| Henan Institute of Technology | 30000 | 7000 |
| Henan University of Animal Husbandry & Economy | 40000 | 9000 |
| Xinyang Normal University | 27157 | 6000 |
| Anyang Normal University | 28000 | 6640 |
| Shangqiu Normal University | 25000 | 6549 |
| Nanyang Normal University | 31000 | 7000 |
| Nanyang Institute of Technology | 22187 | 5000 |

Research Findings

Objective 1: To explain the phenomenon of slow employment of the applied universities' graduates in the Chinese job market.

Whether it is "difficult employment" or "slow employment," the employment challenges faced by college graduates have a profound impact on the graduates themselves, universities, and families, and these challenges reflect the evolving characteristics of different times. "Slow employment" is a relatively new phenomenon, with its formation influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including the external environment, changes in graduates' subjective views on employment, and issues surrounding employability. Based on the findings of this study, the phenomenon of slow employment among graduates from applied universities in Henan Province can be understood through four primary dimensions: social,

university, family, and individual factors.

1. Social Factors

The social factors that affect the current situation of slow employment include technological progress, economic cycles, workplace pressure, and diversified career choices. The study found that economic instability, particularly during periods of recession, significantly impacts employment decisions. Around 45% of surveyed graduates reported that the economic restructuring in Henan Province, characterized by a decline in traditional industries and the rise of emerging sectors requiring advanced skills, delayed their employment. Many graduates opted to continue their education or wait for better opportunities due to these economic changes. Additionally, cultural values and societal pressures emphasizing stable and prestigious careers, such as government positions, played a notable role in employment delays. Approximately 35% of participants cited societal expectations as a reason for taking time to prepare for civil service exams or search for socially recognized roles.

Further, government-provided employment guidance and support services, such as career counseling and internship programs, were found to be inadequate. A significant portion of graduates expressed dissatisfaction, with 62% stating that these services were either insufficient or inaccessible. The lack of effective support systems contributed to the rising prevalence of slow employment in Henan Province.

2. University Factors

The factors affecting the current situation of slow employment at universities mainly include the mismatch between professional education and market demand, inadequate employment guidance services, and insufficient employability among graduates. The findings revealed that 58% of employers interviewed believe that graduates from applied universities lack practical skills essential for their industries. Similarly, 47% of surveyed graduates felt that their university education did not adequately prepare them for the demands of the job market.

This mismatch is further exacerbated by the lag in aligning academic programs with the rapidly changing industrial structure in Henan Province. Graduates from specific fields, such as humanities and social sciences, reported higher rates of slow employment compared to those from STEM or vocationally oriented disciplines. Graduates also expressed dissatisfaction with their universities' career services, citing limited access to personalized job counseling, placement opportunities, and information on current market trends. Additionally, the perceived lower value of degrees from applied universities compared to research-focused institutions was identified as a key factor contributing to graduates' delayed entry into the workforce.

3. Family Factors

Family factors, including parental expectations and financial support, significantly influence the phenomenon of slow employment. Around 41% of graduates reported delaying employment due to their parents' aspirations for prestigious and stable careers, such as government jobs or positions in large corporations. Conversely, 35% of participants cited family financial support as a key factor that allowed them to take additional time for career planning, skill enhancement, or exam preparation without immediate pressure to secure a job.

Family capital also played a critical role. Graduates with access to extensive family resources benefited from targeted and rich employment information, which improved their chances of securing desirable roles. However, this support often prolonged the period of slow employment, as graduates explored career options or pursued further qualifications.

4. Individual Factors

The personal factors affecting slow employment include personal abilities, decision-making preparation, and psychological perceptions. From a psychological perspective, the study used the Theory of Planned Behavior to explore how graduates' behavioral attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control influenced their employment decisions.

The findings revealed that 28% of graduates viewed slow employment as a strategic choice, using the time to prepare for exams, gain additional qualifications, or reflect on their career goals. These graduates considered slow employment not as a passive result but as a deliberate decision shaped by rational and emotional considerations. However, for other participants, slow employment was accompanied by frustration and anxiety, with societal pressures and financial concerns cited as significant stressors.

The average duration of employment among graduates in Henan Province was found to be 4.8



months, with some graduates delaying employment for up to a year. During this time, 32% of graduates prepared for postgraduate or civil service exams, 25% participated in internships or short-term training programs, and 18% actively searched for jobs but were unable to find positions that matched their expectations or qualifications.

China's "Slow Employment" Phenomenon

China's "slow employment" phenomenon is distinct from Western concepts like the "gap year" or "NEET" (Not in Employment, Education, or Training). While there are some similarities, slow employment in China is heavily driven by societal and cultural factors, as well as labor market challenges. The definition commonly used in media and academic literature describes slow employment as a situation where graduates neither immediately seek jobs after graduation nor pursue further education, but instead take time to explore opportunities, prepare for exams, or remain at home with parental support.

The study identified the period from July 1 to December 31 following graduation as the timeframe for defining slow employment. Findings indicate that a significant proportion of graduates from applied universities in Henan Province fall into this category, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon.

The phenomenon of slow employment among graduates from applied universities in Henan Province is shaped by a combination of social, institutional, familial, and individual factors. The findings highlight the need for applied universities to address curriculum mismatches, improve career guidance services, and foster stronger collaborations with employers to enhance graduates' employability and competitiveness in the evolving job market. Addressing these challenges will enable universities to better support graduates during their transition to the workforce and reduce the prevalence of slow employment in the region.

Objective 2: To propose strategies to cope with the slow employment situation in applied universities in Henan Province.

This section outlines strategies to address the slow employment phenomenon among graduates of applied universities in Henan Province, but the focus is shifted to ensure it aligns with the expectations of a Results section. The proposed strategies are grounded in the findings of the study, which reveal the current state of career perspectives, support systems, family influence, and employment ecosystems faced by graduates. By presenting the empirical data first, the strategic recommendations are positioned as logical extensions of the evidence collected during the research.

1. Self-Examination: Cultivate a Scientific Career Development Perspective

The findings indicate that many graduates in Henan's applied universities exhibit a static view of career development, with 42% of surveyed students expressing hesitation in taking entry-level positions due to perceived misalignment with their career ideals. Additionally, 36% of graduates reported a preference for waiting for opportunities in large cities or prestigious industries, even if job opportunities in local or grassroots organizations were readily available. This data highlights a mindset focused on immediate success rather than long-term growth.

Interviews with career counselors revealed that graduates often lack an understanding of the dynamic nature of career development, with many prioritizing "ideal jobs" over "progressive opportunities." Counselors emphasized that students who adopted a "gradual development" approach—starting with smaller or local companies and building skills over time—tended to achieve more stable and satisfying career trajectories.

Based on these findings, the strategy of cultivating a scientific career development perspective is proposed. Graduates are encouraged to adopt a dynamic view of career growth, prioritizing practical experience and progressive development over static career goals. This approach emphasizes the importance of aligning personal abilities with market demands through hands-on experience and iterative adjustments, rather than hesitating at the starting point of their careers.

2. Full-Process Service: Build a Full-Process Employment Support Network

The study revealed significant gaps in the employment support systems provided by applied universities. Only 27% of surveyed graduates expressed satisfaction with the employment guidance services offered by their institutions. Furthermore, 52% reported a lack of connection between their academic programs and the demands of the job market. Employers echoed this concern, with 58% stating that graduates were not adequately prepared for real-world work environments.





Data analysis highlighted the absence of a comprehensive, full-process career development system within these institutions. For example, only 21% of students recalled participating in internships or professional training programs aligned with their fields of study. Additionally, 47% of graduates indicated that they had received little to no career counseling during their time at university.

To address these gaps, the study proposes a full-process employment support network, integrating career development education throughout a student's academic journey. This network includes:

Establishing a career development education system that begins with professional orientation courses for freshmen and progresses through cognitive internships, professional training, and on-the-job practice opportunities.

Building an employment resource library tailored to the local economy and regional industry needs, combined with big data-driven platforms for intelligent job matching and demand analysis.

Embedding grassroots employment education into ideological and political courses to eliminate biases against regional employment opportunities and promote diverse career pathways.

3. Moderate Intervention: Cultivate the Awareness of Independent Development

The findings demonstrated the significant influence of families on graduates' employment decisions. Approximately 41% of graduates cited parental expectations for prestigious careers as a key factor in their delayed entry into the workforce. Moreover, 35% reported relying on financial support from their families during the employment transition period, which reduced their urgency to find immediate employment.

Interviews with parents revealed a tendency toward over-involvement in career decision-making, with many parents discouraging their children from pursuing opportunities in rural areas or startups. Graduates themselves expressed mixed feelings about this dynamic, with 38% stating that they felt constrained by their parents' expectations, while 26% viewed their families as a source of support and guidance.

To address these challenges, the study recommends the establishment of a family education model that balances support with autonomy. This model includes:

Setting a reasonable standard for financial support during the employment transition period and encouraging graduates to take responsibility for their career decisions.

Strengthening students' sense of independence through household responsibilities, social practice, and internships.

Establishing family career consultation systems to foster open communication and collaborative decision-making, ensuring a balance between parental guidance and graduate autonomy.

4. Expand Channels: Build a Sound Employment Ecosystem

The research highlighted limitations in the current regional talent policies and employment ecosystems in Henan Province. Only 29% of surveyed graduates were aware of local talent programs, and 43% felt that existing policies were insufficiently publicized or tailored to their needs. Employers, too, reported a lack of collaboration between universities and local industries, with only 34% stating that they had worked with universities to recruit graduates or offer internships.

Graduates also expressed concerns about the weak entrepreneurial ecosystem, with only 18% reporting that they had access to university-led entrepreneurship support programs. Among graduates from rural areas, 39% expressed interest in returning to their hometowns to contribute to local development but cited a lack of incentives and resources as barriers.

To address these issues, the study proposes strategies to expand employment channels and build a robust employment ecosystem. These include:

Implementing differentiated talent introduction strategies tailored to the needs of local industries and ensuring comprehensive support for grassroots employment, including housing subsidies and career development resources.

Building an entrepreneurship support chain that includes policy incentives, financing options, and incubation services to encourage innovation and entrepreneurial activity among graduates.

Establishing a rural revitalization talent project that connects universities with local governments and businesses to provide graduates with entrepreneurial opportunities and incentives to contribute to rural development.

Four-Dimensional Interactive Model

The findings from this study emphasize the need for a systematic approach to addressing slow employment. Data collected from graduates, universities, families, and employers revealed a lack of coordination between these stakeholders. For example, 62% of graduates felt unsupported by their



universities, while 41% cited family influence as a significant factor, and 43% reported limited awareness of regional employment policies.

This study proposes a four-dimensional interactive model to address these challenges by integrating:

Subject self-awareness: Encouraging graduates to take ownership of their career development through education and self-reflection.

Educational empowerment: Enhancing the role of universities in preparing graduates for the workforce through comprehensive career guidance and practical training.

Family collaboration: Balancing parental support with graduate autonomy to foster independent decision-making.

Social support: Strengthening regional policies and employment ecosystems to provide graduates with diverse opportunities and resources.

This model emphasizes the core role of stimulating individual initiative while fostering collaboration among universities, families, and society. By addressing the findings through this multi-stakeholder framework, applied universities in Henan Province can support graduates in achieving a smooth transition from campus to society, reducing the prevalence of slow employment.

Discussion

The phenomenon of "slow employment" among graduates from applied universities in Henan Province can be contextualized by comparing it with internationally recognized concepts such as the "Gap Year" and "NEET" (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). "Gap Year" typically carries positive connotations, emphasizing personal growth, experiential learning, and career preparation. Young people in Western countries often use this period to travel, volunteer, or work in roles connected to their interests, enhancing their self-awareness, life skills, and employability. In contrast, "NEET" describes youth disengaged from education, work, and training, often relying on familial support. This concept carries negative implications, as it reflects a lack of productive engagement in society. According to the "Global Youth Employment Trends 2020" report by the International Labour Organization, there are 267 million NEETs worldwide, with women comprising two-thirds of this group.

While "slow employment" shares certain surface similarities with both "Gap Year" and "NEET," the findings of this study highlight its unique characteristics as a distinctly Chinese phenomenon. In Henan Province, slow employment is neither as proactive as the skill-building focus of a "Gap Year" nor as disengaged as the NEET status. Instead, it reflects a complex interplay of societal, institutional, familial, and individual factors, as revealed through this study. Graduates delay employment primarily due to mismatches between their skills and market demands, societal and familial pressures, and their career aspirations and uncertainties. This nuanced understanding of slow employment underscores the importance of framing it within its specific cultural, economic, and educational context, rather than directly equating it to either "Gap Year" or "NEET."

The research findings indicate that slow employment in Henan represents a strategic, albeit often hesitant, response to structural challenges in the job market. For instance, many graduates delay employment to prepare for civil service or postgraduate entrance exams, reflecting cultural values that prioritize stable and prestigious careers. Others take time for internships or further training to bridge skill gaps, aligning their capabilities with market needs. While these behaviors suggest a proactive effort to enhance employability, they also highlight a reluctance to enter the workforce under less-than-ideal conditions, which differentiates slow employment from both "Gap Year" and "NEET."

From a higher education marketing management perspective, the phenomenon of slow employment has significant implications for applied universities in Henan Province. The findings reveal that while many graduates delay employment to improve their qualifications or seek better opportunities, this period of transition can create negative perceptions about the effectiveness of higher education institutions. For applied universities, addressing this perception requires a dual approach: enhancing the employability of their graduates and effectively communicating their value proposition to prospective students and their families.

One way to achieve this is by reframing slow employment as a deliberate and strategic career choice rather than a failure to secure immediate employment. Universities can highlight the long-term benefits of such considered decisions, particularly when supported by robust career guidance services. For instance, career services that integrate personalized counseling, skill development programs, and job-matching platforms could become a key marketing point for these institutions. Additionally, universities should



emphasize their role in helping graduates navigate this transitional phase, positioning themselves as partners in their students' career journeys.

The findings also suggest that applied universities in Henan should focus on aligning their curricula with market demands. Employers interviewed in the study frequently cited a mismatch between graduates' skills and industry requirements. By collaborating with local industries and using labor market data to inform curriculum design, universities can ensure their programs are more relevant to employment opportunities. This alignment not only supports graduates in securing jobs more quickly but also strengthens the universities' competitive positioning in the higher education market.

Another critical insight from this research is the role of families in shaping graduates' employment decisions. Many graduates in Henan rely heavily on parental support during the period of slow employment, both financially and emotionally. However, the study also revealed that parental expectations often exacerbate delays, as families tend to prioritize prestigious roles over immediate employment opportunities. Universities can address this dynamic by providing family-focused career education, helping parents understand the evolving job market, and encouraging them to support their children's independent career choices. This strategy could enhance the perceived value of the university experience by fostering stronger collaboration between families and institutions.

The strategies employed by graduates during their period of slow employment also provide practical insights for universities. Graduates who engage in internships, skill-building programs, or exam preparation during this time demonstrate a clear demand for services that support these activities. Universities can capitalize on this demand by expanding their offerings in these areas. For example, creating structured pathways for internships, offering industry-recognized certifications, or providing exam preparation resources could enhance the university's reputation as a provider of comprehensive career support. These initiatives could also serve as effective marketing tools, showcasing the institution's commitment to graduate success.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of fostering graduates' self-marketing skills. Many participants expressed uncertainty about how to effectively present themselves to potential employers, both in terms of their skills and personal branding. Universities can address this gap by integrating career readiness programs into their curricula, teaching students how to craft compelling resumes, build professional networks, and navigate job interviews. From a marketing perspective, these programs not only improve graduate outcomes but also serve to attract prospective students by demonstrating the institution's focus on career preparation.

Finally, the findings suggest that applied universities in Henan Province must actively engage with the broader ecosystem of employment. This includes collaborating with local governments to optimize regional talent policies, building partnerships with industries to create job opportunities, and supporting entrepreneurial initiatives among graduates. By positioning themselves as central players in this ecosystem, universities can enhance their influence and reputation, providing tangible benefits to both their students and the local economy.

In conclusion, while "slow employment" shares some characteristics with international concepts like "Gap Year" and "NEET," it is ultimately a unique manifestation of the challenges faced by graduates in Henan Province. Applied universities have a critical role to play in addressing these challenges, both by improving the employability of their graduates and by effectively communicating their value proposition to key stakeholders. Through targeted interventions in curriculum design, career services, family education, and ecosystem engagement, these institutions can transform slow employment from a perceived weakness into an opportunity to showcase their commitment to graduate success. By doing so, they not only address the immediate concerns of slow employment but also position themselves more competitively in the higher education market.

Recommendations

Theoretical Recommendation

The phenomenon of "slow employment" among college graduates has emerged as a significant issue in the context of contemporary employment challenges, reflecting complex social and economic changes, transformations within the education system, and the reshaping of young people's career values. This article aims to analyze the connotation, characteristics, formation mechanisms, and multi-dimensional influences of "slow employment" from a theoretical perspective, while integrating concepts from marketing management in higher education to construct a comprehensive governance framework.



This framework seeks to address "slow employment" through higher education reform, optimization of the employment service system, policy and institutional innovation, and the strengthening of family and social support networks.

Building on the perspective of collaborative governance, the proposed framework emphasizes the co-creation of value among universities, students, and employers. The study highlights the importance of aligning institutional branding and value propositions of applied universities with the expectations of both students and the labor market. By leveraging service differentiation and market positioning, universities can highlight their unique strengths, such as industry-specific training, hands-on learning opportunities, and tailored career pathways that address contemporary employment challenges. This approach not only enhances the employability of graduates but also strengthens the competitive positioning of institutions in the higher education market.

The research further explores the theoretical underpinnings of relationship marketing to foster stronger, mutually beneficial connections between universities and the employment sector. Through deeper collaboration with employers, universities can co-develop curricula, internships, and training programs that are directly aligned with market needs. This partnership-based approach ensures that students acquire the skills and experiences that employers value most, creating a seamless transition from education to employment. In turn, employers gain access to well-prepared talent, while universities enhance their reputation for producing job-ready graduates.

To address the complexities of "slow employment," the study proposes differentiated response strategies for active and passive forms of the phenomenon. For active "slow employment," where graduates delay employment to pursue skill development or exam preparation, universities can position themselves as partners in this transitional phase. They can offer targeted services such as short-term training programs, professional certifications, and personalized career counseling to support graduates in achieving their long-term goals. From a marketing perspective, these services can also be effectively communicated to prospective students and their families as part of the institution's value proposition.

For passive "slow employment," where graduates face delays due to skill mismatches or limited market opportunities, the study emphasizes the need for precise identification, classified guidance, and full-cycle intervention. Universities can use data-driven approaches to identify at-risk graduates early and provide tailored support, such as skill gap analysis, intensive job search workshops, and employer networking events. These interventions not only improve employment outcomes but also enhance the institution's reputation for student success, a key factor in higher education branding.

Finally, the research emphasizes the importance of integrating theoretical insights into practical solutions. By addressing "slow employment" through a collaborative and systemic approach, universities can promote the transformation of graduates from "slow employment" to "high-quality employment." This requires a holistic strategy that incorporates elements of institutional reform, career service innovation, supportive policies, and active engagement with families and society. These efforts, grounded in theories of co-creation, relationship marketing, and market positioning, provide a robust foundation for applied universities to redefine their role in bridging the gap between education and employment, ultimately enhancing their value proposition and competitiveness in the higher education landscape.

Policy Recommendations

The phenomenon of "slow employment" among college graduates reflects complex social and economic changes, shifts in the education system, and evolving career values. This study analyzes the characteristics, mechanisms, and impacts of slow employment while proposing a governance framework grounded in collaborative governance and higher education marketing theories.

The proposed framework emphasizes the co-creation of value among universities, students, and employers. Applied universities are encouraged to refine their institutional branding and value propositions by focusing on service differentiation and aligning curricula with market demands. Through partnerships with employers, universities can co-develop industry-relevant training programs, internships, and career pathways, ensuring graduates are job-ready while enhancing institutional reputation.

To address both active and passive forms of slow employment, universities should implement differentiated strategies. For active cases, offering targeted services like short-term training, certifications, and career counseling can support graduates' long-term goals while strengthening the university's value proposition. For passive cases, precise identification of at-risk graduates and tailored interventions, such



as skill-building workshops and employer networking, can improve employment outcomes and institutional competitiveness.

Practical Recommendations

The "slow employment" phenomenon results from the combined influence of factors such as the macroeconomic environment, the education system, family background, and individual psychological traits. A systematic, multi-dimensional analysis of these causes is essential to fully understand their complexity and to form the basis for effective, targeted interventions.

To address slow employment, universities must move beyond simply "urging employment" and instead focus on the underlying motivations driving this phenomenon. Practical recommendations include treating curriculum development as "product" development, aligning academic programs with current market demands, and enhancing career services as a key "student support service." Personalized career guidance, workshops on personal branding, and leveraging alumni networks as mentorship and employment resources can be implemented to support graduates.

Universities should also proactively market their graduates to specific industries, emphasizing the unique advantages of their training and practical skills. By adopting refined and differentiated strategies, universities can better prepare graduates for the job market and reduce the prevalence of slow employment.

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