Analysis of Students' Views as Basis for Strengthening Guidance for Employment

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Abstract

The contemporary employment landscape for vocational college graduates presents significant challenges, marked by increasing trends of "lazy employment" and "slow employment." This study aimed to comprehensively analyze students' perspectives on employment and career planning to inform and strengthen career guidance initiatives, ultimately enhancing graduate employability. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the investigation utilized thematic analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with both students and teachers. Key findings revealed that a substantial portion of students lacked clear career plans, exhibited limited awareness of the job market, engaged in passive job-seeking behaviors, harbored unrealistic job expectations, and perceived deficiencies in their employability skills. Concurrently, teachers underscored the critical need for early intervention and more practical, hands-on training within career education. The study highlights the imperative of reinforcing career education, optimizing internship programs, and fostering robust industry collaboration. These findings offer valuable contributions to the refinement of career guidance strategies in vocational colleges, fostering a proactive and informed approach to employment among students.

Keywords: Employment attitudes, career guidance, employability skills

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context of Vocational Student Employment in China

The employment situation for college graduates in China has become increasingly severe in recent years, characterized by escalating pressure and the noticeable emergence of "lazy employment" and "slow employment" trends. This challenging environment forms a critical societal and economic backdrop for understanding the complexities faced by new entrants to the workforce. Vocational universities, which collectively constitute approximately half of China's higher education system, play a pivotal role in preparing a skilled workforce for national development. Consequently, a thorough examination of their students' employment outlook is not merely academic but profoundly crucial for addressing national workforce demands and ensuring social stability.

Strengthening employment guidance within these institutions is therefore essential. Such initiatives can effectively address evolving social demands, mitigate the pervasive employment challenges, and cultivate a "scientific employment outlook" among students that aligns with broader national and societal needs. This necessitates a continuous exploration of innovative guidance strategies that are responsive to the dynamic labor market. The overarching aim of this study is to enhance the employment competitiveness of vocational students. This involves a detailed analysis of their current employment outlook and the identification of existing issues, tracing both negative factors originating from society, family, school, and

individuals, as well as positive influences driven by intrinsic motivation. Ultimately, the study seeks to propose targeted strategies, including reinforcing career planning education, optimizing internships and employment practices, establishing a diversified employment service system, and enhancing students' self-awareness and professional competence, all designed to improve the effectiveness of employment guidance and better prepare vocational students for the job market.

The persistent prevalence of "lazy employment" and "slow employment" among graduates extends beyond mere economic indicators, suggesting a profound societal and psychological transformation in student attitudes towards career paths. The literature review within this study reveals that these trends are intricately linked to phenomena such as "high-mindedness," a form of self-denial during the job search process, the increasing prioritization of "post-materialist values" that emphasize personal development and autonomy over traditional economic rewards, and the potentially misleading influence of "digital media" on salary expectations and workplace realities. This indicates that the employment challenge is not solely a matter of a simple supply-demand imbalance in the labor market. Instead, it encompasses evolving student values, psychological barriers, and distorted perceptions shaped by contemporary influences. A comprehensive understanding of these underlying psychological and societal drivers is therefore paramount for designing truly effective interventions, moving beyond a sole focus on quantitative job placement metrics.

1.2 Comprehensive Literature Review on College Student Employment and Career Guidance

The employment outlook and career choices of college students have long been a focal point of extensive research in China. Scholars have approached this complex topic through various theoretical lenses, including worldviews, employment concepts, and broader societal factors, providing valuable insights into the challenges and strategies necessary for improving students' career readiness. A significant body of Chinese research frames career choices within the "three views" concept: worldview, outlook on life, and values. Guo (2017) posits that career choices are profoundly connected to these views, underscoring their interdependence in shaping individual decisions. Gao (2019) further suggests that career choices reflect students' psychological cognition and tendencies within specific social formations, influenced by both the objective social environment and prevailing social consciousness.

Contemporary college students, particularly those born after 1995, face distinct challenges in their employment outlook. Feng (2022) identified "high-mindedness" as a common mentality, frequently coupled with self-denial during the job search process. The "slow employment" trend, notably exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, has seen students increasingly prioritize life planning over active job-seeking (Wang, 2021). Zhang et al. (2021) underscored the critical influence of societal factors on students' career decisions, advocating for improved institutional pathways to support career planning. Yue (2023), analyzing data from 10 national surveys spanning nearly two decades (2003–2021), identified key trends in graduates' employment concepts. A defining feature that emerged was the growing preference for economic and personal value over social value. Over time, the emphasis on economic value has intensified, with increasing heterogeneity in employment concepts becoming evident. For instance, vocational college students often prioritize practical skills and immediate employability over long-term career prospects. Similarly, Huang and Yang (2022) observed a surge in interest in civil service examinations among graduates, influenced by familial expectations, societal perceptions, and considerations of job security.

Societal dynamics significantly shape students' post-graduation employment behaviors. Liu and Zang (2023) identified three distinct groups of post-graduation employment behaviors: "exam preparers," "job seekers," and "lay-abouts." Their regression analysis indicated that students from less privileged family

backgrounds and with limited human capital were more likely to become "job seekers." Jin and Zong (2021) found that unmet salary expectations and the economic instability prevalent during the pandemic contributed to negative employment attitudes among graduates. The internet has also profoundly influenced students' perceptions of the job market. Zhang (2023) argued that digital media frequently misleads students regarding salary expectations, career preferences, and workplace realities, creating a considerable disparity between their perceptions and the actual job market. Similarly, Ding (2021) pointed out that the proliferation of live-streaming industries has influenced career preferences, with some students opting for careers as online anchors based on their viewing habits.

Lai and Lai (2023) explored the influence of post-materialist values on the "slow employment" phenomenon. These values prioritize personal development and autonomy over traditional economic rewards. Their research indicated that family social capital, economic growth, and media influence have all contributed to this mindset, resulting in delayed employment and a growing disconnect between students and societal expectations. This trend has also been linked to increased employment anxiety, reduced career resilience, and weakened social integration.

In response to these multifaceted employment challenges, scholars have proposed various strategies for college students. Shi and Wang (2018) advocated for reforms in career guidance programs, emphasizing personalized training, interactive teaching methods, and second-classroom activities to bolster practical skills. Li (2020) suggested fostering supportive environments for career planning, adapting teaching approaches to individual differences, and integrating career education throughout the entire student lifecycle. Chen (2020) argued for addressing employment anxiety, improving job-seeking behaviors, and managing career expectations to enhance students' overall employment readiness.

The shift towards post-materialist values and the pervasive influence of digital media are fundamentally reshaping the psychological contract between graduates and the labor market. This transformation presents a new and complex challenge for career guidance, extending beyond traditional job-matching services. It necessitates interventions that directly address the alignment of individual values with career paths and cultivate digital literacy. The literature explicitly highlights how post-materialist values prioritize "personal development and autonomy over traditional economic rewards," while "digital media often misleads students about salary expectations, career preferences, and workplace realities". This indicates a significant divergence from historical motivations for employment. If students are primarily driven by values that may conflict with the realities of the market, or if their perceptions are distorted by information consumed online, then career guidance must evolve to help them reconcile these internal aspirations with external market conditions. This requires fostering realistic expectations and critical media literacy, representing a deeper, systemic challenge for career educators.

1.3 Theoretical Framework Underpinning the Study

This study is grounded in a robust theoretical framework that integrates three main perspectives: Career Development Theories, Psychological Perspectives, and Sociological Approaches. This comprehensive approach allows for a nuanced analysis of students' employment challenges and informs the development of targeted strategies.

From the Career Development Theories perspective, Super's career development theory (1953) is instrumental in highlighting the various stages and tasks of career growth, thereby aiding in the identification of how students' progress in their career planning. Complementing this, Holland's vocational personality theory (1959) provides insights by linking students' personality types and interests to their preferred occupations, offering a deeper understanding of their employment views and choices.

The Psychological Perspectives provide crucial insights into individual motivations and cognitive processes. Motivation and goal-setting theories (Locke & Latham, 1960s–1970s) explain how aspirations and goals significantly shape career decisions, influencing the effort and direction individuals apply to their job search. Furthermore, Piaget's cognitive development theories (1920s–1950s) explore how students' maturity levels and accumulated life experiences influence their thinking and perceptions regarding employment opportunities, affecting their ability to process complex career information and make informed choices.

Lastly, Sociological Approaches emphasize the broader social context. Mead's socialization theory, for instance, highlights the profound role of family, peers, and society at large in shaping employment expectations and values. Social interactions are critical in contributing to students' understanding of available career opportunities and significantly influence their attitudes toward the workforce and their future roles within it.

Collectively, these theories provide a robust framework for analyzing the multifaceted nature of students' employment challenges. They serve as a foundational guide for developing targeted strategies aimed at improving career guidance, addressing external influences that impact career choices, and fostering realistic employment views that are aligned with the evolving demands of the modern job market.

1.4 Identification of Research Gap and Significance of the Study

Despite the extensive research on college students' employment challenges in China, a critical research gap persists: most previous studies have predominantly focused on students from general colleges and universities, often overlooking the unique characteristics and specific needs of vocational college students. This oversight is significant because vocational students differ considerably from their peers in general colleges in terms of educational backgrounds, skill development pathways, and employment expectations. For example, while students from general colleges might prioritize long-term career prospects, working conditions, and salary, vocational students frequently focus on the immediate application of their acquired skills and the availability of hands-on opportunities.

This study directly addresses this identified gap by specifically focusing on vocational students. It employs qualitative research methods to deeply explore their employment outlook, aiming to uncover their genuine thoughts and specific needs. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of their inner experiences and is designed to provide actionable insights tailored to their unique circumstances. For instance, vocational students often encounter challenges related to practical skill application, limited internship opportunities, and difficulties in transitioning smoothly into the workforce. To effectively address these issues, the study aims to propose targeted and actionable countermeasures, such as enhancing industry collaborations, expanding internship opportunities, and integrating comprehensive career readiness training directly into vocational education curricula.

The specific focus on vocational students, beyond merely filling a research gap, holds strategic importance for national economic development. Vocational education directly contributes to the supply of skilled labor, which is a fundamental pillar of industrial productivity and economic stability. Addressing the employment challenges faced by this particular demographic can therefore have a significant impact on a nation's overall economic health. The research explicitly states its focus on vocational students due to their distinct educational backgrounds, skill development pathways, and employment expectations compared to general college students. Furthermore, it links the study to "sustainable economic growth" and "preparing students to meet modern job market demands". This underscores that the study's findings are not just academically relevant but possess direct policy implications for how a nation cultivates and

deploys its skilled workforce, making the research highly pertinent for international journals concerned with global development and labor market dynamics.

In summary, while existing research offers valuable insights into the broader employment challenges faced by college students, this study distinguishes itself by concentrating on the often-overlooked group of vocational students. By addressing their unique needs, this research contributes to the development of effective strategies that can help them build realistic career expectations, improve employability, and more effectively navigate the competitive job market. This concentrated focus on vocational students represents a crucial step toward addressing broader employment challenges and ensuring that all students are adequately equipped to succeed in their chosen careers.

1.5 Specific Research Objectives

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the students' concept of employment, analyze the problems existing in their current employment outlook, strengthen the education and guidance on the employment values of higher vocational students, establish a positive and correct concept of employment, enhance the competitiveness of students' employment, and optimize the work of employment guidance in institutions of higher learning.

Specifically, this research aims to:

- Investigate the current situation of college students' views on employment in higher vocational colleges and universities, focusing on:
  o Students' attitude towards career opportunities.
  o Students' expectations for employment.
  o Students' employability.
- Propose effective measures to cope with the current problems in the employment outlook of higher vocational college students.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to thoroughly explore students' employment concepts, attitudes, expectations, and their intricate link to employability. This design was specifically chosen to uncover the factors shaping students' employment views, their impact on job-seeking behavior, and the perspectives of career guidance teachers. Unlike purely quantitative analyses, the qualitative approach is uniquely suited to capture the deeper dimensions of students' experiences, including their emotions, attitudes, and coping strategies, thereby offering more profound insights into the challenges they face. This methodological choice ensures that the study provides educators with targeted strategies that are not only data-driven but also empathetically aligned with the lived realities of vocational students. A concurrent literature review was conducted to contextualize the findings within broader national and international employment trends.

2.2 Participants and Study Setting

The study involved in-depth, one-on-one interviews with a total of 20 students and 5 teachers. The research was conducted at Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute, a full-time general higher vocational college located in Xianyang City, Shaanxi Province, China. This institution, established in 1950, is primarily focused on engineering disciplines and boasts a substantial enrollment of approximately 18,000 students. It offers a diverse range of specialties, including mechanical manufacturing, electronic information, and automotive

engineering, and is recognized among the top ten similar campuses in the country. This setting was chosen for its representativeness within the vocational education landscape in China.

Inclusion Criteria for Participants:

- **Students:** Participants were selected from Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute. To ensure a comprehensive understanding across different stages of vocational education and employment outcomes, the student sample included 5 freshmen, 5 sophomores, 5 unemployed graduating seniors, and 5 employed graduating seniors.
- **Teachers:** Participants were selected from a higher vocational college in Shaanxi Province. Inclusion required more than 3 years of teaching experience and involvement in teaching career guidance courses.

Exclusion Criteria for Participants:

- Teachers who did not have teaching assignments related to career guidance and student employment were excluded.
- Faculty and students who expressed unwillingness to collaborate or participate were also excluded from the study.

The detailed distribution of participants and their backgrounds is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Interviewee Basic Information Sheet

Participant Category	Number	Major/Background	Academic/Professional Distribution
Students	20	Computer Applications, Mechanical Manufacturing & Automation, Mechatronics, Electrical Automation, Engineering Cost, Big Data & Accounting, Digital Media Technology, E-Commerce, New Energy Vehicles, Materials	Engineering; 5 freshmen, 5 sophomores, 5 graduating seniors (unemployed), 5 graduating seniors (employed)
Teachers	5	Ideological & Political Education (2), Psychology (1), Computer Science (1), Marxist Theory (1)	4 school career counselors, 1 employment office staff member
Teaching Experience	5	Career counseling, vocational education	8 years (1 teacher), 7 years (2 teachers), 5 years (2 teachers)

The intentional stratification of student participants, including freshmen, sophomores, and both employed and unemployed seniors, allows for a developmental perspective on employment attitudes and challenges within vocational education. This deliberate design choice provides a quasi-longitudinal understanding of how career perceptions evolve over the course of vocational training and what factors differentiate successful from struggling graduates. This approach enables the formulation of more targeted and stage-specific guidance recommendations, addressing the unique needs of students at different points in their academic and career journeys.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments

The primary data collection tool employed in this study was one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. This

method was chosen to facilitate in-depth discussions with participants, allowing them to elaborate on relevant employment topics in detail. To ensure consistency and focus across all interviews, a comprehensive interview outline was designed in advance for both student participants and teacher participants. This outline guided the discussions while allowing flexibility for participants to express perspectives. With the explicit consent of participants, interviews were either audio-recorded or meticulously documented through detailed notes to ensure accurate and comprehensive data capture. Following data collection, responses were systematically coded and categorized to identify recurring themes and patterns. For instance, a student's expressed frustration regarding limited resume-building workshops might be systematically coded under the theme "Insufficient Skill Development Support," thereby enabling the aggregation of similar concerns and insights. This approach facilitated the collection of rich qualitative data, providing valuable insights for enhancing employment guidance.

2.4 Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process adhered to a structured protocol, beginning with obtaining informed consent from all interviewees prior to their participation. This was facilitated by a pre-approved Participant Informed Consent Statement which clearly outlined the research project, potential risks, and confidentiality measures. Interviews typically lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted in neutral settings or, for convenience, via online platforms such as WeChat, QQ, or phone calls. To ensure comparability across participants, questions were standardized for all interviewees. Responses were meticulously recorded as either text or audio for subsequent analysis. When audio recording, reliable equipment was used, and explicit participant consent was obtained to ensure data accuracy and ethical compliance.

To safeguard participant privacy and data integrity, all transcriptions derived from the audio recordings were anonymized, removing any identifying information, and thoroughly reviewed for completeness. All recordings and transcripts were then securely stored in password-protected or encrypted databases, with access strictly limited to authorized researchers. These rigorous measures ensured the confidentiality of the data and provided valuable insights into students' employment perspectives while upholding the highest ethical standards.

2.5 Data Analysis

The analysis of the qualitative interview data followed a systematic, multi-stage process comprising collation, coding, theme analysis, and result presentation.

1. **Collation:** Initially, all recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. These transcriptions were then meticulously checked for accuracy against the original audio recordings and reviewed to highlight key information and initial impressions.

2. **Coding:** Following transcription, preliminary codes were assigned to segments of the data that reflected key concepts or significant statements. For example, expressions related to career guidance effectiveness or perceived challenges were marked with codes such as "career guidance effect" or "challenge". These preliminary codes were then systematically grouped and categorized into broader main categories and more specific subcategories, allowing for the identification of relationships and hierarchies among the concepts.

3. **Theme Analysis:** Building on the categorized codes, key themes that consistently emerged across multiple interviews were extracted. These themes were then rigorously validated against the original raw data to ensure their accuracy and coherence, confirming that they genuinely represented the participants' perspectives. Recurring themes, such as students' perceptions of the job market, were exp

lored in depth to understand their nuances and implications.

4. **Result Presentation:** Finally, the synthesized results were presented through detailed descriptive narratives, supported by relevant quotations from the interviews, and, where applicable, summarized in charts and tables. This systematic process allowed for a thorough analysis of vocational students' employment views, culminating in actionable insights designed to enhance employment guidance courses and services.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, rigorous ethical considerations were paramount to protect the rights and well-being of all participants. Prior to commencing interviews, participants were comprehensively informed about the research project's objectives, any potential risks involved, and the stringent confidentiality measures that would be implemented. This transparent communication ensured that their participation was entirely voluntary. To minimize any potential psychological risks, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as employment perceptions and anxieties, informed consent was obtained, and provisions were made to offer psychological support if needed.

All collected data was anonymized, meaning that any identifying information was removed or obscured to prevent direct association with individuals. The anonymized data was then securely stored in restricted-access locations, such as password-protected computers or encrypted databases, accessible only to authorized members of the research team. Researchers underwent specific training to manage any emotional stress that might arise during sensitive interviews and were provided with aftercare support. Furthermore, interviews were conducted in safe and consensual locations, ensuring the physical and psychological safety of both participants and researchers. These collective measures underscored the study's commitment to protecting participants' privacy and well-being while maintaining the highest ethical research standards.

3. Results

This section presents the findings derived from the qualitative data analysis, focusing on the current employment outlook of higher vocational students, their attitudes towards employment, and the perceived effectiveness of career guidance programs. The presentation of results follows the sequence of the study's objectives, integrating qualitative data obtained from in-depth interviews with both students and career guidance teachers.

3.1 Students' Attitudes Towards Career Opportunities

The analysis of student interviews revealed a mixed and often complex perception of current employment opportunities. A significant portion of students expressed a belief that job opportunities for senior graduates were scarce, attributing this to increasing competition in the labor market and high expectations from employers. Many respondents articulated frustration over the limited number of jobs offers they received, prolonged waiting periods for responses after applications, and persistent difficulties in securing interviews. This sentiment was corroborated by feedback from career guidance teachers, who observed that students frequently lacked a realistic awareness of the job market and the practical realities of employment. Unrealistic expectations, such as the desire for high salaries with minimal effort, were also identified as contributing factors to the challenges encountered during job seeking.

Conversely, a smaller segment of students demonstrated an optimistic outlook, believing that with adequate skills and preparation, they could secure satisfactory employment. This group typically engaged actively in job searching, proactively utilizing online application platforms, networking opportunities, and

attending job fairs. In contrast, those who adopted a more passive approach to their job search often relied on family connections or hesitated to act due to uncertainty regarding their career direction. These findings collectively highlight a discernible gap in students' overall career readiness and their understanding of the contemporary employment landscape. A key concern frequently raised by students was the perceived inadequacy of employment information provided by schools and society. Many felt that job market information was not well-structured or sufficiently accessible, expressing a clear need for more comprehensive guidance on industry trends, employer expectations, and effective job application strategies. Career guidance teachers similarly identified this informational deficit, emphasizing the critical necessity for early and continuous employment education to bridge the chasm between students' aspirations and market realities.

The substantial proportion of "passive job seekers" (40%) and "concerned but uncertain" (25%) students, coupled with the pervasive presence of "unrealistic expectations," points to a significant internal barrier to employment that extends beyond external market conditions. This pattern suggests a pressing need for interventions that focus on psychological empowerment, fostering self-efficacy, and promoting realistic self-assessment among students, rather than solely concentrating on skill development or the dissemination of job market information. The fact that a majority of students exhibit passive or uncertain attitudes implies a deeper issue than merely a lack of skills or information. It suggests a psychological reluctance or an inability to engage effectively with the job search process, potentially stemming from a fear of failure, a deficit in self-confidence, or a fundamental disconnect between their perceived self-worth and the demands of the labor market.

3.2 Students' Expectations for Employment

Students' expectations regarding their future careers varied considerably. Some articulated a desire for stable, well-paying jobs with clear career progression pathways, while others prioritized job satisfaction and personal interest over immediate financial incentives. However, a recurring theme across interviews was the inherent difficulty students faced in balancing their ideal job expectations with the actual conditions prevalent in the market. Data from student interviews indicated that many graduates anticipated reaching their defined career goals within three to five years post-graduation. This timeline was largely influenced by their personal ambitions, perceived industry standards, and the competitiveness of their chosen fields.

Career guidance teachers, however, observed a contrasting reality: many students lacked a concrete, actionable career plan and frequently tended to delay crucial decision-making, which demonstrably contributed to higher rates of slow employment. Students also consistently cited the work environment, salary packages, and job stability as critical factors influencing their job choices. While some expressed a willingness to compromise on initial salaries to gain valuable experience, a notable number preferred to wait for what they perceived as "better opportunities," a tendency that often led to prolonged periods of unemployment. This phenomenon—where students hesitate to accept available jobs due to perceived mismatches with their aspirations—emerged as a significant challenge within vocational college employment trends.

Figure 1: Key Factors Influencing Students' Employment Expectations

Figure 1, as described in the original document, illustrates the key factors influencing students' employment expectations. These factors include the work environment, salary packages, and job stability, which students identified as critical determinants of their job choices. Additionally, personal ambitions, industry standards, and the perceived competitiveness of their field were noted as significant influences on their career goal timelines and overall expectations. A visual representation of these influencing factors can effectively convey the complex relationships and priorities identified in the qualitative data, providing a clear, at-a-glance summary that highlights the multiple dimensions influencing student expectations. This visual aids in identifying which factors are most dominant (e.g., salary versus work environment), offering immediate insight into student motivations and potential areas of misalignment with market realities.

3.3 Perceptions of Employability Among Students and Teachers

Employability emerged as a significant factor directly impacting students' job search outcomes. The majority of students acknowledged the crucial role that their specialized knowledge and technical skills played in securing employment. However, a common sentiment was that they felt inadequately prepared for the competitive job market, particularly in essential soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, and self-management. Teachers echoed these concerns, noting that while students often demonstrated creativity and independence, they frequently lacked discipline, perseverance, and practical experience vital for workplace success.

Many students admitted to a predominant focus on theoretical knowledge throughout their studies, without actively engaging in efforts to improve their interpersonal and professional skills. Although some students had participated in internships and extracurricular activities to enhance their employability, a considerable number had not taken sufficient proactive steps to prepare for their careers. A recurring and prominent issue highlighted by both students and teachers was the pervasive lack of practical training opportunities. Teachers specifically emphasized the critical importance of integrating more hands-on experiences, fostering robust industry collaborations, and providing greater real-world exposure directly into vocational education curricula. The effectiveness of current employment guidance efforts was observed to be limited by a combination of students' passive attitudes and insufficient institutional support for providing meaningful practical learning experiences.

The consistent identification of a gap in soft skills and practical experience, despite students acknowledging their importance, points to a systemic pedagogical challenge within vocational education. This pattern suggests that the prevailing curriculum design or teaching methodologies may be overly theoretical, thereby failing to adequately bridge the divide between academic learning and the practical demands of the modern workforce. If both students and teachers consistently recognize the importance of

these skills, yet they remain underdeveloped, the underlying issue is likely embedded within the educational delivery system itself, rather than solely being attributable to individual student effort. This implies a pressing need for comprehensive curriculum reform and a greater integration of experiential learning opportunities.

3.4 Observed Employment Outcomes of Graduates

Among the students who had successfully secured jobs, satisfaction levels varied considerably. Some graduates expressed contentment with their current positions, particularly those whose roles directly aligned with their academic major and long-term career goals. These individuals typically found employment through effective internships, campus recruitment initiatives, or leveraging personal and professional referrals.

However, a significant number of employed graduates expressed dissatisfaction with their jobs due to factors such as comparatively low salaries, high workloads, and limited opportunities for career advancement. Conversely, graduates who successfully transitioned into the workforce often attributed their success to their proactive job searching strategies, continuous skill improvement efforts, and effective leveraging of professional networks. In stark contrast, those who struggled to find employment cited common reasons including a lack of relevant work experience, weak interview skills, and insufficient knowledge of the broader job market. These findings collectively indicate that while some students effectively navigate the complexities of the job market, a substantial portion struggles due to a combination of unrealistic expectations, inadequate preparation, and insufficient support systems. The analysis suggests that strengthening career counseling services, expanding internship programs, and actively fostering a more proactive job search culture could significantly improve employment outcomes for vocational college graduates.

4. Discussion

4.1 Interpretation of Key Findings in Relation to Research Objectives and Literature

The findings of this study illuminate several critical issues affecting the employment outcomes of vocational college students, aligning with and extending existing literature while providing context through the theoretical framework.

The identified "unrealistic expectations" regarding salaries and job roles among students represent a significant impediment, directly contributing to the observed "slow employment" rates. This finding resonates with Feng's (2022) observation of "high-mindedness" among vocational students and is further exacerbated by the misleading influence of digital media on salary expectations and career preferences, as highlighted by Zhang (2023) and Ding (2021). This pattern suggests a considerable cognitive dissonance between students' aspirations and the realities of the labor market. Addressing this requires interventions that foster realistic self-assessment and cultivate a nuanced understanding of market dynamics, moving beyond mere information provision to reshape fundamental perceptions.

The prevalence of "passive job-seeking behavior" among students is a major challenge. This passivity is intricately linked to the broader "slow employment" trend (Wang, 2021; Lai & Lai, 2023) and aligns with Liu and Zang's (2023) categorization of "lay-abouts" among post-graduation employment behaviors. The reliance on external factors, such as family connections, coupled with the growing influence of "post-materialist values"—which prioritize personal development and autonomy over immediate economic rewards (Lai & Lai, 2023)—contributes significantly to this lack of proactivity. This underscores a critical

need for educational institutions to actively instill a sense of proactivity and independence in their students, empowering them to take ownership of their career paths rather than passively waiting for opportunities.

A critical finding is the persistent gap in employability skills. While students recognize the importance of specialized technical knowledge, they frequently feel inadequately prepared in essential soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and self-management. Teachers corroborate this, noting that despite students' creativity, they often lack discipline, perseverance, and practical experience. This observation aligns with existing calls for reforms in career guidance programs that emphasize personalized training and practical skill development (Shi & Wang, 2018) and the cultivation of supportive career planning environments (Li, 2020). This skills gap is particularly salient for vocational students, whose roles often demand immediate practical application and collaborative teamwork, indicating a need for more integrated, experiential learning within vocational curricula.

The findings unequivocally underscore the necessity of expanding and integrating career guidance efforts. Early exposure to career planning and continuous employment education can significantly aid students in making informed decisions about their careers. This aligns robustly with Super's career development theory, which emphasizes the importance of understanding career stages, and Piaget's cognitive development theories, which highlight how cognitive maturity influences perceptions of opportunities. Effective guidance must therefore be a continuous process, adapting to students' evolving cognitive and developmental stages.

Finally, the study's findings highlight the crucial need for enhanced collaboration between vocational colleges and industries. Such linkages are vital for providing students with valuable real-world insights, hands-on experience, and direct employment opportunities. This imperative is strongly supported by Mead's socialization theory, which posits that social interactions and direct exposure to the workforce profoundly shape employment expectations and values. By bridging the gap between academic training and industry demands, students can develop more realistic expectations and acquire the practical competencies valued by employers.

The "slow employment" trend, particularly among vocational students, represents a complex interplay of evolving individual values, distorted perceptions, and structural deficiencies in educational delivery. It is not merely an economic issue or a skills deficit. The discussion reveals how "slow employment" is linked to "post-materialist values" and the pervasive influence of "digital media". Simultaneously, the study identifies "unrealistic expectations," "passive job-seeking," and a "lack of practical training". This intricate web suggests that a purely economic or skills-based solution will be insufficient. Instead, a multi-faceted approach addressing the psychological dimensions (values, perceptions), sociological influences (digital media, family), and pedagogical aspects (curriculum, practical skills integration) is essential for achieving sustainable and meaningful employment outcomes for vocational graduates. The challenge is a dynamic feedback loop where societal values influence student expectations, digital media distorts reality, leading to passive behaviors, all compounded by an education system that may not fully equip students with the necessary practical or soft skills. Therefore, a comprehensive strategy that simultaneously tackles these interconnected dimensions is required.

4.2 Implications for Policy and Practice in Vocational Career Guidance

The findings of this study carry significant implications for the development of policy and the implementation of practical strategies within vocational career guidance.

Firstly, curriculum reform is imperative. To address the identified soft skills gap, vocational curricula must integrate practical skill-building opportunities, industry-specific projects, and professional development

programs. This moves beyond theoretical instruction to ensure students develop competencies such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, which are highly valued by employers.

Secondly, early and continuous intervention in career guidance is crucial. Structured career development programs should be initiated as early as the freshman year, offering comprehensive job search training, networking opportunities, and real-world exposure. This proactive approach can help students develop realistic career plans and make informed decisions throughout their academic journey.

Thirdly, enhanced industry-academic linkages are fundamental. Concrete strategies for strengthening partnerships between vocational colleges and industries should be prioritized. This includes establishing mentorship programs, expanding internship placements, and regularly inviting industry professionals for guest lectures and career workshops. Such collaborations provide invaluable insights and direct pathways to employment for students.

Fourthly, psychological and behavioral support must be integrated into career guidance. Interventions should extend beyond mere information dissemination to actively address students' psychological barriers, fostering confidence, self-efficacy, and a proactive mindset towards job-seeking. This involves counseling and workshops designed to build resilience and intrinsic motivation.

Finally, incorporating digital literacy in career education is increasingly vital. Students need guidance to critically navigate the vast amount of online employment information and to manage expectations that may be distorted by social media. Training in discerning credible information and understanding the realities of online career representation is essential for their successful transition into the workforce.

4.3 Limitations of the Study

Despite its valuable contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant consideration. As a qualitative study, its findings are specific to the interviewed participants from one vocational college in Shaanxi Province. Consequently, there are inherent limitations in the generalizability of these findings to all vocational students across China or to international contexts. The relatively small sample size, comprising 20 students and 5 teachers for in-depth interviews, while appropriate for achieving qualitative depth, inherently limits the potential for statistical inference or broad quantitative conclusions.

Furthermore, the study relied on self-reported data obtained through interviews. This method carries the potential for biases, such as social desirability bias, where participants might provide responses they perceive as more favorable or socially acceptable rather than their true sentiments. Lastly, while the participant selection strategy allowed for a developmental perspective by including students from different academic years and employment statuses, the data collection itself was conducted at a single point in time, making it a cross-sectional design. A longitudinal study would provide a more profound understanding of the evolution of employment attitudes, skill development, and career outcomes over an extended period.

5. Conclusion

This study meticulously explored the diverse attitudes and perceptions of vocational college students concerning employment opportunities and career development. The findings consistently revealed a spectrum of approaches, ranging from proactive engagement to passive hesitation, often compounded by factors such as unrealistic career expectations, insufficient awareness of dynamic job market conditions, and perceived inadequacies in essential employability skills. A significant observation was that many students, particularly those nearing graduation, expressed a preference for securing any stable job initially, prioritizing practical experience and stability over immediate ideal positions. However, graduating

students who remained unemployed frequently cited a lack of confidence, insufficient preparation, and a limited understanding of employer expectations as primary barriers to their job search.

Career guidance teachers, through their invaluable insights, identified structural challenges inherent within the existing employment guidance framework. These included a limited integration of practical training within the curriculum and an insufficient focus on the development of crucial soft skills. They also noted that despite the availability of some job market information from schools, students often failed to effectively utilize these resources, reflecting broader gaps in their preparedness for the competitive labor market. In essence, the study underscores that bridging the persistent gap between students' capabilities and the evolving demands of the labor market necessitates a multifaceted and integrated approach. This approach must encompass enhanced institutional support systems, robust and sustained industry collaboration, and a concerted effort to cultivate a stronger sense of responsibility and proactive initiative among students themselves.

6. Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive findings and interpretations of this study, the following actionable recommendations are proposed to strengthen career guidance and enhance employment outcomes for vocational college students:

- Integrating Career Guidance Programs: Vocational colleges should establish career education as a continuous and structured process, commencing as early as the freshman year. This involves implementing early exposure to career planning workshops, facilitating small-group mentoring sessions, and providing individualized counseling. Such personalized guidance will enable students to identify their strengths, clarify their career aspirations, and set achievable goals, while also addressing challenges like unrealistic expectations and limited market awareness.

- Strengthening Industry Collaboration: Building robust and dynamic partnerships with industries is paramount to align vocational training directly with real-world job market needs. Colleges should actively expand hands-on opportunities for students, including structured internships, organized company visits, and collaborative projects directly with employers. Regular consultations with industry professionals and inviting guest lecturers from various sectors can provide students with invaluable insights into emerging trends and help them build crucial professional connections. Simultaneously, these collaborations offer industries direct access to a pool of skilled and well-prepared candidates.

- Developing Soft Skills: Beyond technical expertise, vocational programs must systematically integrate training for essential soft skills, such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and self-management. This can be achieved through practical pedagogical approaches like role-playing activities, realistic job simulations, and collaborative peer projects that provide hands-on platforms for skill development. Teachers should also introduce scenarios that mirror real-world workplace challenges, thereby preparing students for adaptability and resilience in their future careers.

- Improving Access to Employment Information: Dedicated career centers, staffed by professional advisors, should be established or significantly enhanced to provide accurate, timely, and comprehensive employment information. This includes detailed insights into industry trends, employer expectations, and future market forecasts. Complementary digital platforms that efficiently match students with relevant job opportunities and internships should be developed and promoted.

Furthermore, organizing regular job fairs and employer networking events will provide students with direct access to a wider array of resources and potential employment pathways.

- Fostering Proactive Job-Seeking Behavior: Students need to be actively empowered to develop a proactive approach to job searching. This requires integrating practical workshops into career guidance programs that focus on crafting effective resumes, mastering interview techniques, and building professional networks. Schools should also actively promote and support student participation in extracurricular career activities, such as student-led business competitions or volunteering projects, to help them build confidence, practical experience, and valuable connections. These efforts should be initiated early in students' academic careers to counteract the common tendency to delay career planning until graduation approaches.

By diligently addressing these critical areas, vocational colleges can effectively bridge existing gaps in employability, ensure that student competencies are aligned with employer expectations, and ultimately empower their graduates to achieve meaningful and sustainable employment in the modern workforce.

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