

Review Article

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22192/ijamr.2025.12.09.003>

A Study on the Influencing Factors and Countermeasures of Slow Employment among Vocational College Students in China

Jintong Wei^{1*}

¹Zhejiang Industry & Trade Vocational College, China

No. 717, Fudong Road, Lucheng District, Wenzhou City, Zhejiang Province, China

*Zhejiang Provincial Vocational Education Project: Research on the Influencing Factors and Countermeasures of Slow Employment in Vocational Colleges and Students (NO. ZJCV2025C10)

Keywords

Slow employment;
Vocational colleges;
Higher vocational
students

Abstract

College graduates in the new era constitute a nation's invaluable talent pool and remain a key focus for employment stability. With economic development, the persistent employment challenges faced by vocational college graduates have become increasingly severe. This study focuses on vocational students, analyzing their current employment status and difficulties through interviews, ultimately proposing solutions to address the chronic employment issues in vocational education institutions.

Introduction

China is in a new era of economic development, and the current phase marks a critical stage for college graduates' employment. To further tap into job opportunities and refine career guidance services, schools, enterprises, and relevant departments must ensure the implementation of student employment contracts. The Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee emphasized that under new circumstances, college graduates constitute a nation's valuable talent resource and form a key group for

maintaining stable employment. In recent years, the number of college graduates has reached unprecedented levels, with 11.58 million expected in 2023. Meanwhile, employment demands have become increasingly diversified and personalized. Against the backdrop of continuously growing pressure on total graduate employment and prominent structural contradictions, effectively enhancing employment outcomes for contemporary college students is both an essential commitment to nurturing talents for the Party and the nation, as well as a necessary measure.

Vocational education is employment-oriented, aiming to cultivate skilled professionals and fundamentally focused on promoting student employment, entrepreneurship, and enhancing career quality (Yang Shuchao, 2017). These practical factors have intensified employment pressures. The Chinese Ministry of Education has guided local authorities and universities to establish support records for graduates facing employment difficulties. Various departments have strengthened policy implementation to ensure continuous support services. For "slow-employment" graduates, many regions have issued supportive policies. Specialized career guidance is provided through universities for these students. As the "slow-employment" population continues to expand, academic research has explored two main aspects: First, empirical analysis based on survey data or workplace practices examines the manifestations, characteristics, and causes of "slow-employment"; Second, multi-perspective interpretations offer solutions. However, the complex social context and root causes of "slow-employment" make existing research recommendations insufficiently targeted, failing to fundamentally analyze its underlying logic.

Research demonstrates that prolonged engagement in "slow employment" leads to missing the optimal window for fresh graduates' job hunting, resulting in diminished status and heightened employment pressure. This not only exposes them to workplace discrimination but also subjects them to intensified competition with other graduates (Chen Shugen, 2017). Therefore, conducting systematic analysis and career planning for vocational college graduates opting for "slow employment" has become an urgent task and crucial initiative to promote active graduate employment (Fei Yunsheng, 2011). In essence, through studying the root causes and support mechanisms of "slow employment" among vocational graduates, we can better understand its current societal manifestations and provide practical guidance for career path selection. Notably, for graduates choosing "active slow employment", tailored follow-up arrangements should be implemented: facilitating academic

record transfers for those who successfully advance their studies, offering career counseling for unsuccessful graduates, and applying differentiated strategies to ensure every individual makes the most suitable career choice.

Theoretical overview

Current research on slow employment primarily focuses on conceptual definitions and influencing factors. First, the international manifestations of "slow employment" include "gap years" and "NEETs". A gap year refers to a six-month to one-year period during which college graduates work part-time jobs, stay in hostels, or volunteer at youth hostels (GEORGE ALAN BLACKBURN, GORDON CLARK, DAVID PILGRIM, 2005). NEETs describe young adults without stable employment, further education, or vocational training who rely on family support (PEISENSEN & ZHU YUGANG, 2007). This study defines graduates who secure employment within 3-6 months or enter new environments for continued learning as "mild slow employment", those finding jobs within 6-12 months as "moderate slow employment", and those remaining unemployed beyond 12 months as "severe slow employment". These individuals often lose confidence and opportunities in employment. Without course participation or psychological interventions, they risk becoming "parasite dependents" – a phenomenon that increases family burdens and hinders the development of a positive social employment environment.

Scholars generally agree that the emergence of "slow employment" stems from both objective factors in society, family dynamics, and educational systems, as well as subjective influences on graduates' career preferences. Current academic research on the determinants of slow employment primarily examines social structures, higher education institutions, family environments, and individual student characteristics. Zheng Dong and Pan Congcong (2019), among others, discussed this phenomenon through the lens of supply-side structural reform, emphasizing the need to "release new demands

and create new supply-demand relationships." The core strategy involves enhancing product quality through innovation, which equally applies to university career guidance services. They proposed that universities should promptly identify service needs of students experiencing slow employment, provide targeted support, strengthen service delivery capabilities, and promote precise employment solutions.

Existing literature primarily focuses on undergraduate and graduate students, whose reasons for choosing "slow employment" mainly include increased job-seeking pressure, changes in educational environments, and unclear career planning. However, as a special group among college graduates, the underlying logic and coping mechanisms behind their "slow employment" remain unclear. Therefore, this study will build upon existing research by conducting surveys across four dimensions—society, family, universities, and individuals—to examine graduates from vocational colleges in seven provinces. The research aims to clarify the employment perspectives of slow-employment vocational graduates, analyze their current status, and identify influencing factors.

Empirical interviews

Building on the theoretical framework outlined above, this study employs interview methods to analyze the "slow employment" phenomenon among vocational college students, aiming to construct a theoretical framework for this challenging situation through real-world case studies. The employment challenges faced by vocational graduates profoundly impact not only the graduates themselves but also society, higher education institutions, and families, with distinct characteristics emerging across different historical periods. The formation of "slow employment" stems from complex factors, including external environmental influences and evolving career perspectives coupled with competency gaps among graduates. Through interviews with 165 vocational graduates from eight colleges in Zhejiang Province, this research systematically examines four primary influencing factors: social

dynamics, educational systems, family attributes, and individual traits, providing a comprehensive analysis of the "slow employment" phenomenon in vocational education.

Social factors: unbalanced resources, poor social employment environment

The uneven distribution of resources and the existence of unfair, irregular employment environments in society present three key challenges. Firstly, the imbalance between labor supply and demand in the job market serves as the most visible manifestation of "slow employment." This reality stems from a mismatch between employer needs and graduate availability, where companies face recruitment difficulties while graduates struggle to find suitable positions. Many graduates note: "With the expansion of higher education, the growing number of graduates has led to insufficient job opportunities, making it hard for them to secure suitable employment." Meanwhile, there's strong market demand for graduates specializing in computer-related fields like software engineering, artificial intelligence, big data, and Internet of Things (IoT). In this context, some graduates remain unemployed temporarily during their job search process, while others opt out of the competitive job market altogether. Secondly, national policies supporting vocational college graduates have created platforms for "slow employment." The government encourages vocational graduates to seek employment at grassroots levels or in central-western regions, supports their entrepreneurship initiatives, and promotes military enlistment as a career option. Thirdly, rising human resource costs have intensified employers' demands for higher qualifications, with companies preferring candidates holding advanced degrees to reduce training expenses. As higher education transitions from massification to popularization, vocational graduates' perceived superiority and absolute advantages are gradually diminishing. Consequently, many pursue further education through programs like upgrading associate degrees to bachelor's degrees.

Higher education: Lack of pertinence, poor career guidance services

Higher education institutions' career guidance services generally lack specificity and relevance. Firstly, the employment climate of universities indirectly influences vocational college graduates' career choices, as students' employment perspectives are shaped by campus environment, cultural atmosphere, and value orientation. A positive employment climate helps graduates develop clearer understanding of their career planning and professional positioning. Secondly, generic career counseling often fails to address individual needs. Each student's employment preferences, career aspirations, and personal qualifications vary significantly. Graduates note that current universities offer "career selection guidance," "professional skills training," and "employment information services" to help them adapt to market changes more effectively. Thirdly, a university's location significantly impacts graduates' job-seeking outcomes. Institutions in developed urban areas typically provide better access to local job opportunities, making it easier for graduates to connect with the "primary labor market" as defined by labor segmentation theory. Conversely, graduates from schools in regions with limited job opportunities face greater challenges when seeking employment outside their hometowns compared to local job markets, which directly affects their employment prospects.

Family attributes: inappropriate intervention, old family education concepts

Parents should avoid excessive interference in graduates' career choices, and family education philosophies need to evolve with the times. As shown in Table 4-17, first, a family's financial foundation provides material support for vocational students' "slow employment". Most graduates remain income-free during this phase, with daily expenses covered by parents.

Therefore, family economic stability determines whether graduates can afford to "live freely". Second, parental employment perspectives significantly influence vocational students' "slow employment" decisions. Many families hold deep-rooted notions of "iron rice bowls" (government-backed stable jobs), prioritizing government agencies or state-owned enterprises for their stability and social status. Meanwhile, some parents encourage children to pursue entrepreneurship and innovation for personal growth. Third, family and parental support plays a crucial role in career selection. Parents' tolerance for "slow employment" empowers more graduates to embrace this pace, directly shaping their career choices. In vocational graduates' perception, parents generally maintain a neutral stance, offering neither strong approval nor criticism regarding employment decisions.

Vocational college graduates often struggle with unclear career positioning and lack intrinsic motivation for employment. Firstly, they lack core competitiveness in job hunting and are inadequately prepared for employment. This reflects the reality of some "slow-to-employment" graduates who fail to stand out in a highly homogeneous job market. After several unsuccessful job applications, they tend to give up, wasting both time and opportunities. Secondly, their career planning remains vague with unrealistic goals. Some graduates choose not to seek employment due to insufficient career planning, failing to utilize campus resources and time for self-improvement. As graduation approaches, they remain uncertain about their interests, personality traits, and strengths/weaknesses, lacking clear career objectives that make it difficult to secure suitable positions. Thirdly, graduates hold overly high expectations and refuse to settle for less. Most harbor idealized visions for their first job, mistakenly believing that starting at a prestigious institution will lay a solid foundation for future careers. However, setting employment expectations should align with personal circumstances and current job market realities rather than being overly idealistic. They must also

learn to adapt flexibly based on evolving conditions.

Suggestion and discussions

Give full play to the important functions of the government and create a standardized employment environment

Relevant government departments should promptly formulate policies and responsive measures for college graduates to strengthen the employment security system, optimize the allocation of vocational education graduates, and foster a fair and harmonious job market. Furthermore, society-wide promotion of the employment philosophy— "maximizing talent potential, utilizing skills effectively, and valuing individuals over academic credentials" —should be prioritized. This will boost vocational graduates' career motivation, ensure their active participation in the job market, and enable graduates from all levels of vocational programs to find employment opportunities across industries. Ultimately, this approach will establish a healthy, stable, and harmonious development model.

Give full play to the characteristics of higher vocational education and reasonably expand employment channels

To enhance vocational undergraduate education, it is crucial to expand core foundational courses. As an advanced academic program, vocational undergraduate education should provide students with a solid theoretical foundation that supports technical and practical skills development. Higher education institutions must prioritize the teaching of these foundational courses by innovating pedagogical approaches and reforming instructional methods. For both general and specialized foundational courses, educators should integrate theory with hands-on experiments, real-world case studies, and practical problem-solving scenarios. Vocational undergraduate programs aim to cultivate applied technical professionals for frontline production

roles. Compared to conventional bachelor's programs, they emphasize cultivating students' practical competencies through comprehensive implementation of integrated theory-practice curricula, professional training weeks, and on-the-job internships at enterprises, thereby providing graduates with ample opportunities for hands-on experience.

Promoting career planning through the home-school linkage mechanism

Vocational colleges and families should collaborate closely. They should not only analyze career development trends and employment prospects for vocational students, but also inform parents and seek their support for school operations. To strengthen communication between home and school, vocational colleges can regularly update parents on students' academic progress and daily life while gaining a comprehensive understanding of students' personalities, abilities, and family values regarding careers. This enables more targeted advice on career planning. Parents should clearly recognize the rapid development of the nation and society, actively embrace new concepts, and adapt traditional mindsets. Understanding current employment trends and national policies, respecting children's choices, encouraging grassroots employment opportunities, and guiding them to align personal aspirations with national development are essential.

Stimulate the employment motivation of higher vocational education and enhance the core competitiveness

Vocational college students should apply the essential skills and professional competencies acquired through specialized courses to real-world practice. By participating in vocational skill competitions, they can not only ignite their passion for learning and enhance practical application abilities, but also refine their technical expertise while identifying areas for improvement. Through continuous refinement of study methods and targeted training of weak areas, they strengthen core competitiveness,

achieving the "learning through competition" effect. This approach effectively elevates students' capabilities, stimulates critical thinking, broadens perspectives, and ignites innovative awareness. In problem-solving processes, it significantly enhances practical innovation skills, cultivating and developing the innovative and applied talents crucial for socioeconomic development.

Shortcomings and Future Research

The "slow employment" phenomenon, characterized by rapid development and broad coverage across all types of higher education institutions, has become a pressing social issue. Research on the current state of graduates' delayed job-seeking and the establishment of support mechanisms is crucial to national development, ethnic unity, and social stability. This paper synthesizes theoretical explorations, policy analyses, and real-world case studies to deliver concrete research conclusions and actionable recommendations.

Given the researcher's limited expertise and certain objective constraints, this study exhibits multiple limitations requiring further refinement. Firstly, while primarily examining common characteristics among vocational college graduates, insufficient exploration of individual conditions has resulted in inadequate consideration of special circumstances, creating inherent limitations. Secondly, research on "slow employment" remains time-bound. As social development trends, higher education reforms, and evolving job market dynamics remain unpredictable, comprehensive coverage proves challenging. Future efforts should focus on closely monitoring evolving patterns of slow employment, identifying emerging trends, summarizing recurring patterns, and proposing more refined targeted solutions.

To address these challenges, researchers will continue to enhance their professional expertise and investigative capabilities through ongoing studies. Grounded in solid theoretical foundations, they aim to develop practical, up-to-date strategies that contribute to resolving employment

issues for Chinese college graduates. Moreover, effectively tackling the career challenges of vocational college graduates requires multidisciplinary collaboration. By pooling diverse perspectives and implementing multifaceted efforts, we are confident that these employment challenges will be successfully addressed.

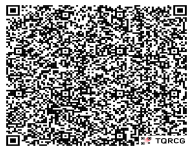
Subsequent research on the growth processes and career choices of vocational college students reveals complex and multifaceted factors, which are related to both macro-level social contexts and micro-level student experiences, as well as the influence of internet penetration. Although this study has identified specific factors affecting "slow employment" among vocational students through literature review, questionnaire surveys, and cognitive interviews, categorizing them into four main factors—"social factors," "higher education," "family attributes," and "personal characteristics"—the complexity of "slow employment" remains relatively limited in this context. The findings lack full representativeness and require further refinement. Future studies could control variables, refine research subjects, and conduct in-depth investigations into the influencing factors of "slow employment" among vocational students from different regions and educational levels.

Higher vocational education inherently has a delayed nature, as human development is fundamentally a long-term process. The "slow employment" phenomenon that has gained prominence in recent years reflects contemporary social dynamics. Its actual impact on vocational students remains unpredictable, which explains the ongoing debates across society. Moving forward, we should maintain continuous monitoring of these students' career trajectories, analyze their professional adaptation through developmental lenses, and evaluate how various subjective and objective factors influence their job-seeking decisions. Meanwhile, given the unpredictable variables in socioeconomic development, higher education reforms, and evolving employment landscapes, comprehensive research into all contributing factors to "slow

employment" remains challenging. Future efforts should focus on ongoing observations, timely summaries, and the formulation of more scientifically grounded recommendations.

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Access this Article in Online	
	Website: www.ijarm.com
	Subject: Education
Quick Response Code	
DOI: 10.22192/ijamr.2025.12.09.003	

How to cite this article:

Jintong Wei. (2025). A Study on the Influencing Factors and Counter measures of Slow Employment among Vocational College Students in China. Int. J. Adv. Multidiscip. Res. 12(9): 21-27.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22192/ijamr.2025.12.09.003>