

A Study on Delayed Employment Among College Graduates in the New Era and Its Guidance Strategies from the Perspective of Employment Value Transformation and Reconstruction

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, with ongoing shifts in the employment landscape, the phenomenon of delayed employment among college graduates has become increasingly prominent and has emerged as a critical issue in higher education. Essentially, delayed employment represents a selective behavioural choice influenced by graduates' personal employment values. This group is typically characterized by ambiguous career cognition, diversified value orientations, hesitant decision-making, and fluctuating job-seeking attitudes. Research suggests that without effective interventions to promote a positive transformation of employment values, delayed employment may exert adverse effects on both individual career development and the allocation of human resources in society. To address this issue, the present study constructs a four-dimensional integrated framework for cultivating proactive employment values, encompassing value guidance, behavioural decision-making, cognitive enhancement, and contextual construction. This framework provides a systematic approach to facilitating positive shifts in employment attitudes among the delayed employment cohort.

Keywords: *Delayed employment, College graduates, Positive employment values.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Employment represents the most fundamental aspect of people's livelihood, as it directly concerns the well-being of the population, the sound development of the economy and society, and the long-term stability of the nation. The number of college graduates in the class of 2025 is projected to reach 12.22 million, an increase of 430,000 compared with the previous year, indicating a severe employment situation. However, amid the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and the structural mismatch between talent supply and market demand, the employment landscape for college graduates has undergone profound changes. In this context, an increasing number of graduates exhibit the phenomenon of "delayed employment", characterized by the deliberate postponement of job-seeking or employment. Survey data show that the proportion of college graduates choosing delayed employment has risen steadily year by year,

increasing from 18.9% in 2023 to 19.1% in 2024 [1]. This trend presents new challenges and complexities for employment guidance and management in higher education institutions.

2. A REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON THE PHENOMENON OF DELAYED EMPLOYMENT AMONG COLLEGE GRADUATES

Scholars have provided diverse definitions of the phenomenon of delayed employment. Jin Jing argues that, from a superficial perspective, delayed employment primarily refers to graduates who are not in a hurry to seek employment, but instead choose to travel, reflect on life, wait for better opportunities, or repeatedly attempt competitive examinations while remaining unemployed [2]. Zheng Xiaoming and Wang Dan define delayed employment as a situation in which college graduates, for various reasons, extend the period of

job selection and consequently remain without formal or stable employment for a relatively long time [3].

Zhu Leping proposed that delayed employment can be categorized into different types according to various dimensions. First, in terms of impact, delayed employment can be divided into positive delayed employment and negative delayed employment[4]. Second, from the perspective of subjective consciousness, it can be classified into active delayed employment and passive delayed employment. Third, in terms of goals, delayed employment can be further subdivided into delayed employment aimed at improving personal competence and competitiveness, delayed employment motivated by the pursuit of better job opportunities, and delayed employment chosen to avoid employment pressure [5]. However, with the advent of the new economic normal, industrial restructuring, and the rapid development of new productive forces, the author believes that delayed employment refers to the state in which graduates do not enter the workforce or engage in paid labor during the year of graduation. New forms of flexible employment emerging under current circumstances are beyond the scope of this discussion, such as live streaming, self-media, and e-sports. Compared with most graduates who step directly into the workforce, those experiencing delayed employment often suffer from significant anxiety due to uncertainty about their career direction and future development path, which may negatively affect their long-term career development.

Regarding the advantages and disadvantages of delayed employment, there are three representative academic perspectives. Some scholars argue that since certain college graduates are not fully prepared for employment, delayed employment can help them transition more smoothly from the role of a student to that of a professional. They view delayed employment as a rational behavior that reflects a more responsible attitude toward the future [6]. It is also believed that delayed employment can improve the employment stability of college graduates and serves as an important factor in reducing frequent job-hopping among them [7]. Scholars holding opposing views contend that delayed employment reflects excessively high career expectations among young people. Some are influenced by the current live-streaming and influencer economies, hoping to find jobs with high pay but low effort. Others, often regarded by teachers as underperforming students, tend to lack

self-discipline during college, like spending time playing games, sleeping late, skipping classes, and neglecting studies, and choose delayed employment merely to avoid employment pressure and responsibility upon graduation [8]. Research has shown that delayed employment can hinder graduates from achieving high-quality employment and significantly reduce their salaries and job positions [9]. Some scholars take a neutral stance, arguing that people's attitudes toward employment are constantly evolving with social progress. Delayed employment, immediate employment, and even non-employment are all personal choices that have nothing to do with others [10]. Other scholars believe that a considerable number of college graduates choose delayed employment in order to pursue further education, enhance their skills, gain more internship experience, or participate in social activities. Delayed employment is not equivalent to unemployment. Once graduates choose the path of delayed employment, they should formulate a detailed and feasible plan, maintain a positive employment mindset, refine their career planning, identify their strengths and motivations, and adapt quickly to new environments [11].

However, some scholars have pointed out that contemporary college students' attitudes toward employment are showing signs of negative change. Specifically, this is manifested in the increasing prevalence of delayed employment and new forms of financial dependence on parents, as more graduates choose delayed employment, delayed further study, or delayed civil service examinations, with the majority relying on parental financial support to sustain their living [12]. Moreover, the tendency to prioritize job selection over employment itself has become more pronounced, characterized by preferences such as "only civil service, only stability, only high income, and only top-tier employers." [13] In addition, some students pursue higher academic degrees blindly as a means to avoid entering the job market [14]. Obviously, these phenomena are inconsistent with the fundamental mission of moral education in higher education and run counter to the goals of talent cultivation in universities. Therefore, they deserve serious attention.

As a distinctive manifestation of college graduates' career decision-making behavior, delayed employment is essentially the result of the interaction between employment concepts and individuals' subjective consciousness. It represents a choice mechanism grounded in personal career awareness. In response to the current delayed

employment phenomenon, particularly the negative tendencies in college students' employment attitudes, it is urgent to implement interventions through value guidance and cognitive reconstruction. Therefore, promoting a paradigm shift in students' employment attitudes from passive adaptation to active construction, and systematically advancing the positive transformation of employment concepts, should become a key focal point in addressing the dilemma of delayed employment.

3. THE POSITIVE TRANSFORMATION OF EMPLOYMENT ATTITUDES AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS EXPERIENCING DELAYED EMPLOYMENT

Employment perception refers to college students' views, attitudes, and behavioral choices when facing career decisions. For college students, employment perception influences their career cognition, value judgment, behavioral choices, and attitudes toward job seeking. Therefore, guiding students to actively construct a positive employment perception is an important means to alleviate the current delayed employment phenomenon and a prerequisite for achieving high-quality and adequate employment. Hence, the author believes that the cultivation of a positive employment perception among college students can be approached from the following four aspects.

First, in terms of career cognition, they are shifting from idealized expectations to rational and pragmatic choices to establish a career development awareness that aligns with market demands.

Career expectation refers to an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and overall anticipation regarding future occupations, income, and career prospects within a given social context [15]. It encompasses post-graduation plans, the type of professional one aspires to become, the preferred type of organization to work for, expected starting salary, as well as confidence and feelings toward future career development [16]. Studies have shown that excessively high expectations for future career development are one of the main reasons why undergraduate students choose delayed employment [17]. Currently, there exists a structural mismatch between college students' employment cognition system and the actual demands of the job market. Many students have

insufficient understanding of the rapidly changing employment environment, labor market, and job requirements. Some even remain entrenched in traditional elite notions of being "favored by heaven," holding idealized expectations about employment. This often leads to the awkward situation of "aiming too high to accept lower positions." However, in today's era of mass higher education, the supply-demand imbalance in the job market and the structural contradictions between graduates and employment opportunities cannot be alleviated in the short term. If college students continue to dwell on idealized visions shaped by the "ivory tower" environment, a significant gap between expectations and reality will inevitably emerge. Therefore, it is essential for students to broaden their career horizons comprehensively and gain an in-depth understanding of the current employment landscape — including national and social priority industries, the latest developments across various sectors, competency requirements for different positions, and employer talent demands. By deepening their exploration and understanding of the professional world, students can shift their career cognition from idealized expectations to rational and pragmatic choices, and develop a scientific career outlook based on the real dynamics of market supply and demand, thereby laying an objective and rational foundation for future career development.

Second, in terms of value orientation, they are shifting from personal confusion to social responsibility, transforming individual uncertainties into the realization of value by serving national needs.

In the 14th collective study session of the 20th Central Politburo on May 27, 2024, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized the need to strengthen public education and guidance to foster a correct employment outlook across society. He called for the cultivation of a positive social discourse and an inclusive environment conducive to employment and entrepreneurship, encapsulated in slogans such as "No occupation is inferior, labor deserves respect," "Excellence emerges in every profession," and "Employment in grassroots areas can also achieve distinction," thereby opening new opportunities through a modernized perspective on career choice [18]. Against the backdrop of accelerated technological revolutions, industrial transformation, and profound regional economic restructuring, the employment market for college graduates exhibits new structural characteristics. This macro-level environment presents an

important opportunity to guide graduates toward grassroots employment. The comprehensive implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, in particular, is generating numerous new professional positions and career development opportunities. Graduates' employment prospects are no longer confined to first-tier or new first-tier cities; substantial potential exists in rural and grassroots areas. In alignment with national policies encouraging graduates to settle and serve in grassroots regions, a series of preferential programs and projects have been introduced, including the College Students' Volunteer Service Program in Western China, the "Three Supports and One Assistance" initiative, specialized teaching positions, and the recruitment of college graduates for village-level positions in the West. Graduates are encouraged to apply their professional knowledge and skills in accordance with local rural development needs, truly root themselves at the grassroots level, and enhance their competencies. In this way, individual career confusion can be transformed into a sense of responsibility and contribution to the needs of the country and the people.

Third, in terms of behavioural choices, they are shifting from conceptual exploration to the integration of knowledge and action to validate and refine career directions through practical engagement.

Social learning theory focuses on the influence of environmental factors on individual behavior, emphasizing the roles of observational learning and self-regulation in shaping human actions. The theory posits that individuals can learn not only through direct experience but also by observing the behavior of others, the outcomes of those behaviors, and the reinforcement or punishment associated with them. Through this process, individuals acquire knowledge and skills and adjust their own behavior accordingly [19]. As the saying goes, "Learning from books alone is never enough." College students should fully recognize the immense value of internships and practical experiences, actively engaging in social practice to transform their perspectives and deepen their understanding through both observation and firsthand experience. During internships, students can not only enhance their comprehension and application of professional knowledge, focus on improving their overall competencies, particularly the transfer, adaptation, and application of integrated skills—but also advance self-awareness, facilitating a faster socialization transition from

student to professional. At the same time, by comparing their original career perceptions with the realities of the labor market, students can further clarify their career choices. Through the three-step process of clarification, adjustment, and consolidation, they can achieve the transformation from cognition to action [20], effectively overcoming the employment dilemma of "armchair theorizing."

Fourth, in terms of career mindset, they are shifting from vulnerability to resilience and developing mechanisms to enhance occupational adaptability and career resilience.

Career resilience refers to an individual's ability to maintain a positive attitude and adaptability when facing occupational challenges [21]. Scholars have noted that "the coexistence of high career expectations and low career resilience is one of the characteristics of college students experiencing delayed employment" [22]. Insufficient career resilience makes students more prone to negative emotions, such as preferring "non-employment" over accepting "employment first, then career adjustment," when encountering challenges and difficulties in the job market. They may lack the courage to confront challenges, feel lost when facing new environments, technologies, or tasks, and struggle to adapt quickly to workplace changes. As a result, they risk missing valuable development opportunities and find it difficult to achieve self-transcendence and breakthroughs in their career paths [23]. The job-seeking process for college students is arduous and lengthy, requiring substantial investment of time, energy, and psychological preparation. This constitutes a significant psychological test for graduates. Therefore, it is crucial to prepare mentally in advance, particularly by cultivating career resilience, in order to address the problem of "high career expectations and low career resilience" and achieve a positive transformation toward "reasonable career expectations and high career resilience."

4. RECONSTRUCTION AND CULTIVATION STRATEGIES FOR POSITIVE EMPLOYMENT PERCEPTIONS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS EXPERIENCING DELAYED EMPLOYMENT

Currently, cultivating college students' employment perceptions requires the construction of a systematic and multidimensional guidance and development framework. Establishing an integrated system that combines value guidance, behavioral choices, cognitive enhancement, and contextual support provides a comprehensive solution to promote the positive transformation of employment attitudes among students experiencing delayed employment.

The first is to shape career ideals oriented toward national needs. Against the backdrop of profound changes in the international competitive landscape, China faces critical challenges in key technological areas that require a large pool of highly qualified talents in strategically important fields. Graduates should recognize that at the forefront of technological innovation, young professionals with solid expertise are needed to break technical barriers; in rural revitalization, there is an urgent demand for dedicated grassroots builders with a strong work ethic. This era-driven mission requires students to transcend narrow considerations such as location and salary, and resolutely overcome negative employment tendencies like "not working in non-central cities" or "refusing positions with lower pay." University career education should concretize the socialist core values into career ideals, guiding students to adopt a professional value system of "integrating the small self into the greater self" and "choosing what the country needs is the best choice." This fosters a value transition from "pursuing individual interests" to "serving national strategies," showcasing the youthful spirit of ambition and responsibility, and ultimately forming an employment pattern that resonates with both personal development and national rejuvenation.

The second is to cultivate practical skills guided by a rational and pragmatic employment outlook. Part of the delayed employment phenomenon arises from a gap between career expectations and reality, leading students to perceive the highly competitive job market irrationally. Particularly under the dual pressures of record-high graduate numbers and

economic slowdown, job-seeking difficulties continue to rise, with short-term improvements unlikely. Structural imbalances in the labor market, such as "jobs without candidates" and "candidates without jobs," further complicate the situation. Students should, on one hand, engage in professional internships, social practice, and enterprise placements to understand the real workplace environment and employer demands, forming an objective view of the current job market. On the other hand, they should enhance psychological resilience through stress management training and scenario-based simulations, improving career resilience, adopting a rational and pragmatic mindset, accurately assessing their strengths, and identifying appropriate career paths. Simultaneously, cultivating a spirit of perseverance strengthens personal willpower, maintains enthusiasm, and reinforces responsibility, in line with Xi Jinping's guidance: "A happy life is created through labor. Everyone should maintain a modest heart, objectively assess personal conditions and social demands, choose careers and positions based on reality, love labor, and grow step by step through practice. Students should consciously practice the socialist core values and strive for holistic development in morality, intellect, physique, aesthetics, and labor" [24].

The third is to promote the systematic development of scientific employment competence. Employment perception involves understanding and evaluating careers. One reason for delayed employment is that students often fail to establish correct career cognition and lack career planning during college, resulting in a mismatch between their career choices and their training cycle. Systematic career education and employment guidance can cultivate scientific awareness, helping students develop a rational employment outlook based on objective circumstances and personal characteristics. Through career planning courses and one-on-one consultations, students learn methods for career development, prepare in advance, acquire professional skills, and understand the corresponding industries and career paths. Internships, practical experiences, and interviews with professionals help students systematically explore career trajectories, forming a clear career cognition map. Students should solidify core professional skills and cross-disciplinary competencies, while leveraging school-enterprise cooperation platforms and alumni networks to acquire industry insights, structured interview techniques, and other practical job-seeking skills,

thereby building comprehensive employability. Universities should focus on cultivating students' career awareness throughout their academic journey, integrating continuous career consciousness into their overall development, and providing targeted guidance tailored to the diverse needs of Generation Z students to enhance their scientific employment and career decision-making capabilities.

The fourth is to create a multidimensional and coordinated employment ecosystem. Delayed employment is a social phenomenon that requires coordinated efforts from universities, families, society, and government to create a positive employment environment and guide students in reshaping proactive employment habits. Universities can establish multi-layered career guidance mechanisms, innovate career education platforms, and leverage exemplary role models through initiatives such as "Great Country Craftsmen" campus programs, "Grassroots Employment Pioneer" talks, and alumni career-sharing sessions to cultivate a culture of dedication and practical contribution. Presenting real-world cases illustrates diverse career possibilities, strengthens students' sense of professional mission through value resonance, and counters the tendency toward delayed employment, forming a systematic, immersive, and normalized model of career education. Families are crucial in shaping students' employment perceptions. Parents and other significant figures influence career decisions, particularly when they expect children to secure stable positions or pursue civil service and institutional employment, often providing financial support during multiple attempts at examinations. Parents should therefore adjust their expectations, encouraging graduates to adopt a "employment first, then career adjustment" approach and take the first step toward gaining practical experience. Society should move beyond credentialism, and enterprises should assess candidates based on personal capabilities and comprehensive competencies rather than background or degree alone, preventing delayed employment driven by excessive focus on academic credentials. The government can introduce policies to optimize the employment environment, remove barriers to proactive employment, strengthen market supervision, prevent discrimination based on education, region, or gender, and create an inclusive, open, and orderly labor market for graduates.

5. CONCLUSION

As perceptions guide actions and directly determine individual choices, the negative delayed employment phenomenon among some students is rooted in passive employment values. Promoting the shift of employment values toward positivity is therefore a critical approach to addressing the delayed employment dilemma. However, it must be recognized that the formation of college students' employment values is a complex socialization process, meaning that their reconstruction and guidance constitute a long-term, systematic undertaking.

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