

Article

Slow Employment among University Graduates: Group Characteristics, Generative Mechanisms, and Targeted Guidance Strategies

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of a growing number of university graduates postponing entry into stable full-time employment, this study examines slow employment as a heterogeneous transitional condition rather than a single form of withdrawal from the workforce. A mixed-methods design was adopted to ensure analytical depth and triangulation. A stratified survey was administered to 1,236 graduates from eight universities in central China; 46 graduates meeting the operational definition of slow employment participated in semi-structured interviews, and 24 of them were followed longitudinally for six months. Additional interviews were conducted with 15 university career-guidance practitioners and 10 human-resource professionals. The analysis identifies four interrelated dimensions of slow employment: psychological characteristics, behavioral patterns, capital endowment, and employment values. Within this population, three analytically distinct profiles emerge: proactive explorers, passive transitioners, and stress-related avoiders. Their trajectories are shaped by the interaction of individual career adaptability and decision-making efficacy, family support and expectations, university training and career services, and labor-market and cultural conditions. On this basis, the study develops an identification-classification-guidance-evaluation framework that integrates career planning, psychological support, capability development, resource matching, and dynamic follow-up. A small-scale pilot involving 30 participants suggests that differentiated guidance may improve goal clarity, job-search activation, and transition efficiency, although the pilot is exploratory and does not establish causal effects. The findings support a shift in university career services from uniform placement-oriented provision toward developmental, differentiated, and process-sensitive support.

Keywords: slow employment; university graduates; school-to-work transition; career guidance; employment services

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Problem Statement

The transition from university to work has become less linear as higher education has expanded, occupational structures have diversified, and young adults have gained access to a wider range of postgraduate, civil-service examination, internship, entrepreneurial, and flexible employment pathways. In China, the number of university graduates continues to rise [1]. Recent official data indicate that the graduating cohort in 2025 is projected to reach approximately 12.22 million, an increase of 430,000 compared with the prior year. This quantitative pressure coincides with evolving perceptions among young people regarding desirable career trajectories, optimal timing for entering employment, and the interplay between professional engagement and personal growth.

Within this context, delayed entry into stable full-time employment has become an increasingly visible transitional pattern [1]. Some graduates do not immediately pursue long-term positions after completing their studies. Instead, they may prepare for further

academic study or public-sector selection processes, engage in internships or short-term assignments, travel, explore business ideas, acquire new competencies, or take time to reflect on future directions. While such patterns appear similar in administrative reporting—since all involve postponement of formal employment—they stem from diverse motivations and situational factors. For some, the delay reflects a purposeful strategy to enhance future career alignment; for others, it arises from repeated challenges in securing suitable opportunities; for still others, it may be associated with psychological hesitation, uncertainty, or temporary disengagement.

Treating all instances of delayed transitions as functionally equivalent risks generating inaccurate assessments and misaligned support measures. An approach overly focused on immediate job placement may encourage proactive explorers to accept roles inconsistent with their long-term goals, while an entirely permissive stance may overlook cases where prolonged delay is linked to persistent psychological discomfort, diminished confidence in one's capabilities, or extended withdrawal from professional activity. The central analytical objective is therefore not to assign inherent value—positive or negative—to delayed employment, but to distinguish among its manifestations: as constructive exploration, as transitional accommodation, or as unproductive disengagement [1].

1.2. Research Questions

The study addresses three questions [1]. First, what common characteristics and internal differences can be observed among university graduates experiencing delayed employment? Second, how do individual, family, university, job-market, and cultural factors interact in the formation and persistence of delayed employment? Third, how can university career services design differentiated guidance strategies that respond to these distinct trajectories without reducing employment support to a single placement outcome?

1.3. Contributions of the Study

The study makes three contributions. Empirically, it integrates a large-sample survey with interviews, case tracking, and insights from career-service professionals and employers, enabling examination of the phenomenon from both participant and institutional perspectives. Conceptually, it moves beyond a binary distinction between employment and non-employment by framing delayed entry into the workforce as a transitional process marked by heterogeneity in motivation, resources, psychological state, and behavioral patterns. Practically, it translates this typology into a differentiated support framework that links early identification with customized assistance and subsequent assessment.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Conceptualizing Slow Employment

There is no single standardized definition of slow employment in the existing Chinese literature. For the present study, it refers to graduates who, during approximately six to eighteen months after completing their studies, have not entered a stable full-time work arrangement and are instead engaged in examination preparation, travel, internships, entrepreneurial experimentation, temporary work, or a period of waiting, while relying primarily on family support or temporary personal income. This operational definition is intended for empirical classification rather than for normative judgment [2].

Slow employment should be distinguished from conventional unemployment, frictional job transition, the gap year, and the category of young people not in employment, education, or training. Unemployment is typically defined by active job-seeking behavior and availability for work; a gap year is more often a planned interval used for travel, study, volunteering, or personal development; and NEET is a broader status category that does not necessarily reflect the subjective intent behind the transition. The distinctive feature of slow employment in this study lies in the coexistence of delayed stable work entry, transitional activities, and varying degrees of personal agency.

2.2. Existing Research and Remaining Gaps

Recent Chinese scholarship has approached slow employment from several directions [3]. Some studies describe the phenomenon as a response to intensified competition, evolving employment values, and the desire to identify a better alignment between personal expectations and available opportunities. Others emphasize the role of broader higher education development, intergenerational support, structural shifts in the job market, and the growing social acceptance of non-linear career pathways. A third strand focuses on institutional responses, including targeted assistance, career education, employment-guidance curricula, and service optimization.

Despite these advances, three limitations remain. First, a considerable proportion of the literature remains descriptive or conceptual, with comparatively fewer studies integrating large-sample survey data and qualitative follow-up analysis. Second, slow employment is often discussed as if it were a uniform condition; such treatment can obscure significant differences in individual agency, emotional well-being, family resources, and job-search strategies. Third, proposed support measures are frequently articulated at the level of broad principles—while recognizing the need for enhanced guidance, they typically offer limited specificity regarding target groups, timing of implementation, and methods for evaluating effectiveness.

2.3. Career Construction Theory

Career construction theory offers a valuable framework for understanding delayed entry into stable employment as an integral component of broader career adaptation. It highlights how individuals interpret evolving circumstances, cultivate adaptive resources, and construct meaningful career narratives through exploration and decision making [2]. From this viewpoint, a temporary postponement of employment may serve developmental purposes when accompanied by curiosity, forward planning, self-directed learning, and purposeful experimentation. Conversely, such a period may diminish in adaptive value when characterized by low self-confidence, diminished sense of control, and persistent difficulty in making decisions.

2.4. Ecological Systems Perspective

An ecological perspective complements the individual focus of career construction theory by situating graduate transitions within interconnected social environments. Family resources and expectations shape the economic and emotional costs of delaying employment; universities influence employability through curricula, internships, and career services; employers and labor market conditions affect opportunity structures; and broader cultural narratives influence graduates' perceptions of legitimate or successful transitions. Slow employment can therefore be understood as an outcome of dynamic interaction between individual agency and environmental affordances rather than as a purely personal choice [4].

2.5. Integrated Analytical Framework

The two theoretical perspectives are synthesized into an integrated framework. At the micro level, analysis focuses on career adaptability, decision-making difficulty, self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and personal values. At the meso level, attention is directed toward family support, peer influence, university education, and career guidance services [5]. At the macro level, the framework considers employment-market conditions, policy-related opportunities, and culturally embedded expectations regarding the timing and significance of entering employment. This multilevel framework informs both the identification of distinct slow-employment patterns and the development of tailored support strategies.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Design and Study Sequence

The study adopted a mixed-methods design organized around three linked stages: population profiling, mechanism explanation, and guidance framework development.

The quantitative component was used to describe the distribution of employment states, psychological characteristics, job-search behavior, family support, and employment values among recent graduates [6]. Qualitative interviews and longitudinal follow-up were subsequently used to interpret the motivations and transition processes underlying the statistical patterns. The final stage translated the resulting typology into a differentiated guidance framework and evaluated its practical applicability through a small-scale pilot in a university career center.

3.2. Participants and Data Sources

The survey was administered to graduates from eight universities located in a major central Chinese city, including comprehensive universities, science and engineering institutions, and teacher-training universities. A stratified sampling strategy was used to ensure representation across institutional types and academic disciplines [7]. A total of 1,365 questionnaires were returned, of which 1,236 were retained as valid responses after data screening. Among the valid cases, 318 respondents met the operational criteria for slow employment, representing 25.7% of the survey sample.

The qualitative component was drawn from the same survey population. Forty-six graduates classified as experiencing slow employment participated in semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 15 to 30 minutes. Twenty-four of these participants were followed longitudinally over six months through monthly telephone interviews or online communication to document changes in career plans, emotional state, job-search behavior, and employment status [8]. To incorporate institutional and employer perspectives, the study also included interviews with 15 university career-guidance practitioners and 10 human-resource professionals.

3.3. Operational Definition of Slow Employment

For empirical classification, slow employment is defined as a transitional state in which a graduate has not entered stable full-time work within approximately six to eighteen months after completing university and is instead engaged in activities such as postgraduate or public-sector examination preparation, internships, temporary assignments, travel, entrepreneurial exploration, skills development, or a period of reflection and reassessment. This definition does not frame delayed entry into the workforce as inherently problematic; rather, it distinguishes the timing of stable occupational integration from the underlying motivations, structural conditions, and developmental quality of the transition [9].

3.4. Survey Instrument and Measures

The questionnaire assessed six domains: demographic and educational background, current employment status, career-related psychological characteristics, employment values and job-search behavior, family support, and experience with university employment services [8]. It incorporated categorical items, behavioral-frequency scales, ranked-choice questions, and five-point Likert-type items. Rather than defining delayed transition solely by employment status, the survey distinguished whether it co-occurred with purposeful preparation, active exploration, passive waiting, or significant psychological difficulty.

3.4.1. Career Adaptability and Decision Difficulty

Career-related psychological characteristics were assessed using items grounded in established theoretical frameworks of career adaptability and decision-making processes. Participants responded to statements addressing future planning, clarity regarding life and career goals, confidence in selecting suitable occupations, perceived challenge in evaluating alternatives, confidence in navigating job-search barriers, openness to exploring different occupational paths, and emotional responses to workplace entry. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement [9].

The study emphasized the configuration of these indicators rather than collapsing 'slow employment' into a single psychological metric [10]. Specifically, the analysis

investigated how exploration and indecision co-occur—for instance, a graduate may demonstrate high openness to diverse career options while concurrently reporting low confidence or limited perceived agency in managing the transition.

3.4.2. Employment Values and Job-Search Behavior

Employment values were assessed by evaluating the relative importance respondents assigned to salary and benefits, job stability, disciplinary alignment, personal interest, professional development opportunities, geographic location, employer reputation, workload, and family expectations. Behavioral indicators encompassed weekly time investment in job applications, examination preparation, internships, and skills enhancement, as well as primary sources used to access recruitment or examination information [11]. These metrics served to differentiate purposeful career investment from extended inactivity.

3.4.3. Family and Institutional Support

Family support was assessed along two dimensions: financial assistance and emotional engagement. Respondents indicated the degree to which family members covered living expenses and the extent to which they demonstrated understanding, encouragement, pressure, or direct involvement in employment-related decisions. Institutional support was evaluated based on graduates' utilization of and perceptions regarding career-planning consultations, résumé and interview preparation, employment-related psychological counseling, vocational skills training, entrepreneurship support services, and internship referral systems. This dual framework enabled analysis not only of support availability but also of its specific modalities and potential influence on labor market transition behavior [7].

3.5. Qualitative Interviews and Longitudinal Follow-Up

The graduate interviews examined experiences following graduation, including reasons for delaying stable employment, whether this delay was perceived as intentional or externally constrained, shifts in emotional well-being, personal conceptions of an ideal job, influences from family and peers, daily activity patterns, perceived challenges, channels for information and support, and near-term career intentions. The six-month follow-up enabled observation of evolving transitional patterns not evident in a single interview, such as progression from active exploration to discouragement, from passive waiting to renewed job-seeking efforts, or from emotional distress and avoidance toward more purposeful engagement.

Interviews with career-guidance practitioners addressed identification protocols for graduates experiencing delayed employment, current support mechanisms, and institutional challenges in delivering tailored services [5]. Employer interviews explored perspectives on applicants with extended post-graduation transition periods, competencies prioritized in graduate hiring, and the practicality of offering short-term internships or project-based roles during this phase.

3.6. Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted in two stages [1]. First, descriptive statistics characterized the distribution of psychological, behavioral, family, and employment-value indicators within the slow-employment subsample. Second, cluster analysis identified internally differentiated profiles based on the joint configuration of motivation, psychological state, family support, behavior, and future orientation. The resulting clusters were interpreted in conjunction with qualitative findings rather than treated as self-explanatory statistical categories.

Qualitative materials were organized through iterative thematic coding. Key coding domains included transition motivation, perceived barriers, family interaction, career expectations, emotional change, job-search behavior, institutional support, and future orientation. Cross-case comparison across interviews and follow-up records identified recurring mechanisms and assessed whether similar employment states reflected distinct

developmental processes. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation to inform the design of the differentiated guidance framework [5].

3.7. Pilot Intervention and Evaluation

A one-semester pilot implementation was conducted through a collaborating university career center with 30 volunteers, comprising ten participants from each of the three identified profiles. The program integrated career planning, skills development, resource matching, psychological support, and structured follow-up, with emphasis adjusted according to participant profile [2, 7]. The pilot aimed to assess practical feasibility and preliminary outcomes rather than establish causal effectiveness.

3.8. Ethical Considerations and Methodological Boundaries

Participants were informed that questionnaire responses would be handled with confidentiality and used exclusively for academic research purposes, and participation in interviews and follow-up activities was voluntary. No personally identifying information is included in the study [11]. The design also has several methodological limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the results. The sample is geographically concentrated, the longitudinal component is relatively brief, and the pilot activity involved a small self-selected group without a randomized control condition.

In addition, the source dataset available for the present manuscript did not contain a complete set of item-level psychometric diagnostics. Accordingly, the analysis does not report unverified reliability coefficients or factor-analytic results. Where such statistics are available from the original survey database, they should be incorporated prior to journal submission to strengthen the measurement evidence for the psychological constructs used in the classification.

4. Findings

4.1. A Four-Dimensional Profile of Slow Employment

4.1.1. Psychological Characteristics

A central psychological feature of the slow-employment sample was the coexistence of a relatively strong willingness to explore with substantial difficulty in making occupational decisions. Participants often expressed curiosity about alternative career paths and a desire to avoid premature commitment, yet many also reported uncertainty about whether they possessed sufficient information or ability to make a satisfactory choice. This pattern aligns with survey results showing that the concern and curiosity dimensions of career adaptability were comparatively stronger than confidence and control.

The distinction is important because exploration alone does not guarantee adaptive progress. For some graduates, exploration generated new information, clarified preferences, and increased readiness for action. For others, repeated comparison of options heightened uncertainty and reinforced the belief that an acceptable job must satisfy multiple conditions simultaneously. When the search for fit evolved into a search for an ideal fit, postponement tended to persist.

4.1.2. Behavioral Patterns

Behavioral patterns among the slow-employment population were markedly heterogeneous. The largest subgroup—comprising 45.3% of the sample—focused intensively on preparing for postgraduate entrance examinations, civil-service recruitment, or employment in public institutions. A second subgroup, representing 28.6%, engaged in internships, part-time employment, travel, vocational training, or entrepreneurial exploration to accumulate practical experience. The remaining 26.1% exhibited limited goal-directed activity, lacking a stable career plan and relying more substantially on familial support.

These distributional patterns underscore that employment status alone is inadequate for assessing support requirements. Two graduates may both be classified as unemployed, yet one adheres to a disciplined academic preparation routine while the other

demonstrates diminished agency in career decision-making. The substantive meaning of slow employment thus hinges on indicators such as intentionality of activity, temporal structuring of goals, and experiential learning feedback [7].

4.1.3. Capital Endowment and Family Support

Family socioeconomic resources were generally moderate or above moderate among respondents. Approximately 76% reported that their families could provide sufficient or relatively sufficient financial and emotional support. Such support lowers the immediate material cost of delaying employment and creates a buffer that makes longer exploration possible [1, 6]. At the same time, the quality of social capital varied considerably. Some graduates could draw on relatives, alumni, or professional networks for information and opportunities, whereas others received financial support without comparable access to job-market information.

Family support therefore has an ambivalent role. It can protect graduates from accepting unsuitable work under acute financial pressure, but it can also reduce the urgency of action when support is unconditional and long-lasting [9]. In several interview accounts, family encouragement promoted purposeful exploration; in others, extensive protection coexisted with weak independent decision-making.

4.1.4. Employment Values

Employment values have gradually shifted from a predominantly survival-oriented orientation toward greater emphasis on personal development, intrinsic interest, meaningful contribution, and work-life balance [9]. While salary and job stability remain important, they are now increasingly weighed in conjunction with opportunities for growth, occupational alignment, geographic location, organizational culture, and the long-term sustainability of employment arrangements. This evolution reflects not a decline in preference for stable employment, but rather the emergence of more nuanced and multifaceted criteria for evaluating its value.

This evolving value framework helps explain why some graduates choose to defer formal employment commitments rather than accept the first available opportunity. It also presents a challenge for career support services that continue to prioritize short-term placement metrics. When graduates assess job opportunities through multiple developmental dimensions, guidance focused solely on application skills or immediate contract signing may overlook the complexity of their actual decision-making process.

4.2. Internal Typology: Three Slow-Employment Profiles

Cluster-based classification identified three profiles: proactive explorers, passive transitioners, and cautious delayers. These categories represent ideal types rather than fixed identities. Individuals may shift among profiles as their personal resources, emotional conditions, and employment-market experiences evolve. The typology is thus most valuable as a diagnostic tool for career guidance rather than as a permanent classification (As shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the Three Slow-Employment Profiles

Dimension	Proactive Explorer (Type A, ~40%)	Passive Transitioner (Type B, ~35%)	Anxiety Avoider (Type C, ~25%)
Core motivation	Self-directed planning; pursuit of self-realization and better career fit	Buffering after setbacks or under external labor-market pressure	Fear of work, low confidence, and difficulty making decisions
Psychological state	Lower anxiety; stronger curiosity and perceived control	Moderate anxiety; usually retains a job-search timetable	Higher anxiety; self-doubt and avoidance are more evident

Family support	Primarily emotional support that encourages exploration	Both financial and emotional support	Substantial financial support, sometimes accompanied by overprotection
Behavior	Planned practice, learning, examination preparation, or experimentation	Active applications and recruitment participation, but unsatisfactory targets or outcomes	Procrastination, weak job-search activation, and irregular routines
Future orientation	Relatively clear and connected to longer-term goals	Moderately clear; expects employment after a short transition	Unclear and marked by uncertainty

4.2.1. Proactive Explorers

Proactive explorers view delayed employment as a purposeful investment period. Their activities tend to be structured and aligned with identifiable long-term objectives. Internships, examinations, travel, or project work are typically interpreted as sources of information that help clarify and refine career direction. The primary risk they face is not inactivity but overextension: prolonged exploration may become inefficient if successive experiences are not synthesized into coherent decisions.

4.2.2. Passive Transitioners

Passive transitioners are more significantly influenced by external setbacks. Many persist in job applications and recruitment activities, yet the positions they secure or encounter fall short of their expectations, or they face repeated rejections. Delayed employment serves as a buffer, enabling them to retain options while continuing their search. Their primary needs typically center on more accurate occupational information, enhanced application competencies, pragmatic goal recalibration, and broader access to opportunities.

4.2.3. Anxiety Avoiders

Individuals exhibiting avoidance tendencies show the weakest alignment between intention and behavior [1]. They may express a desire for improvement while consistently deferring concrete action. Interview data indicate that concerns about potential setbacks, diminished self-assurance, and challenges in managing ambiguity can reinforce a pattern where postponement offers short-term relief but impedes opportunities to develop competence and resilience. For this group, generalized encouragement to act more decisively may heighten stress without resolving underlying psychological constraints.

4.3. Generative Mechanisms of Slow Employment

4.3.1. Micro-Level Mechanisms

At the individual level, unclear self-concepts, low career-decision self-efficacy, perfectionistic expectations concerning job fit, and insufficient confidence in managing transition uncertainty were recurrent themes. These factors manifested differently across behavioral profiles [3]. Among proactive explorers, uncertainty prompted information seeking; among those exhibiting avoidance tendencies, the same uncertainty more often led to postponement and withdrawal. Thus, the impact of uncertainty was contingent upon the individual's adaptive resources.

4.3.2. Family and University Contexts

At the meso level, family support presented both enabling conditions and potential constraints. Substantial economic resources facilitated experiential exploration, while empathetic engagement helped mitigate social perceptions associated with extended transition periods. However, certain families coupled elevated expectations with overprotective involvement, resulting in heightened pressure to achieve socially valued

outcomes alongside diminished opportunities to develop autonomous decision-making capacity.

University-level factors also played a critical role. Stakeholders identified misalignments between selected academic curricula and evolving occupational demand, inconsistent access to meaningful professional engagement opportunities, and career development services that tended to be time-bound and concentrated near degree completion. A service framework primarily oriented toward employment placement metrics is less effective in addressing core challenges such as career identity formation, decisional self-efficacy, or the practical implementation of exploratory experiences.

4.3.3. Labor-Market, Cultural, and Policy Contexts

At the macro level, economic structural adjustment and shifts in sectoral demand have narrowed some traditional entry pathways, while the expansion of flexible work arrangements, project-based roles, and emerging occupations has broadened transitional options for graduates. Increasing societal acceptance of non-linear career trajectories has also reduced the expectation that graduation must be immediately followed by stable employment. These developments afford graduates greater space for exploration, yet simultaneously heighten the complexity of career decision making [4].

Policy initiatives supporting further education, public-sector recruitment, entrepreneurship, and vocational skills development offer legitimate alternatives to immediate employment. Concurrently, sustained media coverage of employment challenges may amplify perceived uncertainty, prompting some graduates to defer job-seeking until conditions improve. Thus, delayed employment arises from the interplay of individual interpretation, accessible resources, institutional practices, and overarching opportunity structures (As shown in Table 2).

Table 2. Multilevel Mechanisms Associated with Slow Employment

Level	Key Mechanisms	Possible Effects on Transition
Individual	Career adaptability, decision self-efficacy, anxiety, perfectionistic fit expectations, self-concept clarity	Can turn uncertainty into exploration or, when adaptive resources are weak, into avoidance
Family	Financial support, emotional support, expectations, protection, employment information	Provides a safety net but may also reduce urgency or reinforce dependence
University	Curriculum-market fit, internships, career education, guidance timing, placement-oriented evaluation	Shapes employability, access to information, and ability to convert plans into action
Labor market	Sectoral demand, recruitment competition, flexible employment, emerging occupations	Changes opportunity structures and the perceived cost of waiting
Culture and policy	Acceptance of non-linear transitions, further-study opportunities, public recruitment, entrepreneurship support, media narratives	Legitimizes alternative pathways while also shaping expectations and perceived risk

4.4. A Targeted Guidance Framework

4.4.1. Design Principles

The empirical findings indicate that a uniform support approach cannot effectively address the diverse needs of graduates experiencing delayed employment. The proposed framework is grounded in four principles: early identification conducted with dignity and respect, flexible classification that accommodates evolving circumstances, tailored support aligned with the primary challenge confronting each graduate, and assessment that values both developmental growth and employment outcomes. The objective is to

enable graduates to transform transitional periods into opportunities for meaningful personal and professional development, while also recognizing instances where extended delays may reflect emerging psychological or social concerns.

4.4.2. Identification and Dynamic Follow-Up

The first component is a dynamic monitoring process spanning the pre- and post-graduation periods. Key indicators include job application frequency, participation in recruitment activities, examination preparation status, engagement in internships or skill development, consistency of daily routines, perceived career clarity, and fluctuations in emotional well-being. Classification of graduates must not rely on any single indicator. The objective of monitoring is to identify evolving patterns and shifts that inform timely, supportive interventions.

Dynamic follow-up is essential because slow-employment trajectories are inherently fluid rather than fixed categories. A graduate initially exhibiting proactive exploration may shift toward passive transition following repeated setbacks; similarly, prolonged unsuccessful job searching without constructive feedback may reinforce avoidance behaviors [5]. Conversely, timely access to accurate information, mentoring, or psychological support can foster more active and structured career-related behaviors.

4.4.3. Differentiated Intervention Modules

Support for Proactive Explorers

For proactive explorers, the central focus is enhancing the quality and efficiency of career exploration rather than curtailing it prematurely. Universities can facilitate access to high-quality internships, entrepreneurial incubation programs, project-based learning opportunities, short-term academic exchanges, and mentorship from alumni or industry professionals. Career guidance should assist graduates in synthesizing diverse experiences, identifying consistent strengths and preferences, and establishing time-bound decision milestones—ensuring exploration yields cumulative insight rather than fragmented, unconnected activities [4].

Support for Passive Transitioners

Passive transitioners benefit from targeted capability development and precise opportunity alignment. Structured workshops can strengthen résumé preparation, interview performance, job-search strategy, sectoral analysis, and realistic expectations regarding compensation and work location. Smaller-scale, regionally or industrially focused recruitment events often prove more effective than broad, general career fairs, as they enable closer alignment between graduate profiles and employer requirements. Guidance should also affirm the value of strategic initial employment by helping graduates differentiate between a transitional first role and one fundamentally misaligned with their long-term goals.

Support for Hesitant Graduates

For hesitant graduates, foundational support and gradual engagement should precede intensive placement efforts. Group and individual counseling sessions can address concerns related to career uncertainty, self-assessment, feedback sensitivity, and habitual delay. Behavioral objectives should be specific, achievable, and observable—for example, finalizing a revised résumé, attending a single recruitment event, or submitting multiple applications within a defined timeframe. This approach fosters repeated experiences of manageable action and constructive feedback, supporting the gradual restoration of confidence in personal agency.

Family involvement plays a meaningful role for this group [5]. Overly protective reassurance may inadvertently reinforce hesitation, while persistent external pressure may intensify stress. Career practitioners can guide families in offering balanced support—setting reasonable expectations, encouraging autonomous decision-making, and recognizing behavioral progress rather than comparing outcomes with peers.

4.4.4. Multi-Stakeholder Support Network

Effective support extends beyond the career center. A coordinated network involving universities, families, employers, and community organizations can broaden the range of developmental opportunities available during the transition. Universities can provide assessment, counseling, and learning resources; families can offer emotional support while encouraging independent decision-making; employers can create short-term projects, internships, and realistic occupational information; and community organizations can provide volunteering or service opportunities that sustain routine, foster social connection, and strengthen transferable skills.

4.4.5. Evaluation Beyond Signing Rates

Evaluation should integrate final employment outcomes with process-oriented indicators. Key developmental metrics include career adaptability, decision clarity, job-search self-efficacy, psychological well-being, quality of occupational information, engagement in skill development, and consistency of job-search behavior. This comprehensive approach helps differentiate productive career transitions from prolonged inactivity and discourages universities from equating rapid contract signing with effective career guidance (As shown in Table 3).

Table 3. Differentiated Guidance Framework by Slow-Employment Profile

Profile	Primary Need	Recommended Support	Key Evaluation Indicators
Proactive explorer	Integrate exploration and reach a timely decision	High-quality internships, mentoring, career coaching, reflective integration, decision milestones	Goal clarity, quality of exploration, decision readiness
Passive transitioner	Improve competitiveness and access to appropriate opportunities	Résumé and interview training, targeted recruitment, labor-market information, expectation calibration	Application quality, interview conversion, search duration, opportunity fit
Anxiety avoider	Reduce avoidance and rebuild action confidence	Counseling, graded action plans, structured routines, family communication, close follow-up	Anxiety level, action initiation, self-efficacy, consistency of search behavior

4.5. Pilot Application and Preliminary Assessment

The guidance framework was piloted for one semester through a university career center with 30 volunteers, including ten participants from each profile. Preliminary assessment indicated varying degrees of progress. Among proactive explorers, career goals became clearer and exploratory activities became more structured. Among passive transitioners, the average job-search duration decreased by approximately 1.5 months and self-rated job-search proficiency improved. Among individuals exhibiting employment-related hesitation, reported levels of concern diminished and the rate of active job-search engagement increased from 20% to 70%.

These findings are encouraging but should be interpreted cautiously. The pilot involved a small volunteer sample, lacked a control group, and integrated multiple support components simultaneously. It therefore cannot isolate the contribution of individual components or confirm generalizability across institutions. Its main value lies in demonstrating the feasibility of differentiated implementation and identifying practical challenges, including the time required for case management and the higher professional demands placed on career-guidance staff.

5. Discussion

5.1. Slow Employment as a Heterogeneous School-to-Work Transition

The findings challenge interpretations that equate slow employment with simple unwillingness to work. Delayed entry into stable employment can involve both adaptive and maladaptive processes. For proactive explorers, delay may serve as a period of career construction in which experiences are tested and preferences refined. For individuals exhibiting avoidance behaviors, however, the same temporal delay may reflect a cycle of emotional strain and disengagement. The policy and educational significance of slow employment therefore depends less on the duration of delay alone than on the nature and quality of activities undertaken during that period.

This distinction also helps reconcile competing public narratives. Slow employment can be understood as rational when graduates use additional time to improve occupational fit, accumulate skills, or pursue clearly defined qualifications. It becomes more concerning when the transition lacks clear goals, constructive feedback, or active behavioral engagement—and when emotional strain intensifies over time. A developmental perspective allows these possibilities to be evaluated without romanticizing delay or pathologizing every non-linear transition.

5.2. Family Support as Both Buffer and Behavioral Context

The high proportion of respondents reporting substantial family support suggests that delayed employment is partly facilitated by intergenerational resources. This support mitigates immediate economic pressures associated with unemployment and affords graduates time to prepare for competitive examinations or pursue more suitable career opportunities. However, family resources do not invariably yield positive outcomes. Their impact depends on whether such support fosters self-directed goal setting and purposeful exploration or inadvertently discourages independent initiative.

This finding indicates that family engagement merits greater integration into graduate career development frameworks. Universities need not assign decision-making roles to parents, but can offer practical guidance on encouraging responsible independence, discussing realistic career timelines, and responding constructively to challenges. Such outreach may be particularly beneficial in contexts where high familial expectations coincide with strong protective involvement.

5.3. From Placement Administration to Developmental Career Services

The typology reveals a misalignment between heterogeneous student needs and standardized employment support. A career center primarily focused on job vacancy dissemination and employment contract facilitation may effectively serve graduates with well-defined goals and strong self-efficacy, yet proves less effective for those struggling with self-awareness, psychological preparedness, or persistent misalignment with available opportunities. Career services thus require an expanded professional scope encompassing individual assessment, personalized coaching, labor market analysis, mental health referral pathways, employer collaboration, and longitudinal tracking.

This does not diminish the significance of placement outcomes. Rather, placement should be understood as one phase within a broader developmental trajectory. A graduate who secures employment rapidly but enters a poorly aligned role may not reflect a more successful transition than another who invests several months in skill development before entering a better-matched position. Evaluation frameworks should therefore assess both timeliness and substantive quality.

5.4. Implications for Universities and Policymakers

For universities, the findings support integrating career education earlier in the student life cycle. Career exploration, labor-market awareness, internship opportunities, and decision-making competencies should be cultivated prior to the final year, when employment-related stress intensifies. Proactive preparation can help reduce the number of graduates who complete their studies with insufficient occupational knowledge or diminished confidence in making career choices.

For policymakers, attention should be directed toward supporting graduates during transitional phases. Access to skills development, employment information, internships,

flexible work arrangements, and foundational protections under employment regulations can shape whether delayed entry into full-time work evolves into constructive professional growth or extended disengagement. Policy frameworks should accommodate reasonable periods of exploration while ensuring that young adults facing challenges remain connected to support systems—even if they do not meet conventional definitions of unemployment.

5.5. Avoiding Stigmatization in Targeted Guidance

Targeted guidance carries a potential risk of oversimplification. If graduates are categorized too rigidly, labels such as 'avoider of challenging situations' may be perceived as evaluative rather than supportive [5, 6]. Categorization should therefore remain provisional, confidential, and serve only to inform the appropriate level of service intensity—not to assign fixed personal attributes. The central focus must remain on identifying the most effective form of support for an individual's current developmental stage, rather than assigning a definitive classification.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Main Conclusions

This study conceptualizes slow employment among Chinese university graduates as a heterogeneous school-to-work transition shaped by the interplay of individual agency and social context. Four dimensions are especially salient: psychological characteristics, behavioral patterns, capital endowment, and employment values. Within this broader population, proactive explorers, passive transitioners, and cautious deliberators differ substantially in motivation, emotional disposition, behavior, family context, and future orientation.

The formation of slow employment cannot be reduced to a single cause. Individual career adaptability and decision efficacy interact with family resources, university education and career services, labor-market structure, cultural expectations, and policy opportunities. Because these mechanisms differ across graduates, differentiated support is more appropriate than a uniform approach. An identification-classification-support-evaluation framework offers one practical way to organize such assistance while preserving attention to both developmental progress and employment outcomes.

6.2. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the study integrates a career-construction perspective with an ecological understanding of social context, offering a framework for analyzing delayed employment as a dynamic process rather than a fixed status. Practically, it indicates that employment services should shift from administrative placement to developmental support, from reactive assistance to proactive preparation, and from standardized delivery to individualized guidance.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample was drawn primarily from universities in a major central city, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other regions or institutional types. The six-month follow-up captures short-term changes but cannot establish the longer-term consequences of slow employment for wages, occupational stability, well-being, or subsequent career mobility. The pilot program was small and non-randomized, and its preliminary outcomes should not be interpreted as causal effects.

Future research could compare slow-employment trajectories across regions, disciplines, socioeconomic groups, and types of higher-education institution. Longer panel studies would help clarify whether different profiles converge or diverge over time. Further work could also examine how digital recruitment, platform work, the gig economy, and evolving family resources reshape the boundary between unemployment, flexible work, preparation, and career exploration.

6.4. Data and Research Materials

The full survey questionnaire and semi-structured interview protocols are omitted from the main manuscript to maintain concision in journal-article format. They may be provided as supplementary materials upon journal request. De-identified research materials may be shared, subject to ethical approval and institutional data governance requirements.

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