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The Coping Strategies and Values Guidance of the 'Slow Employment' Phenomenon from the Perspective of Ideological and Political Education in Colleges and Universities

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Abstract: With the accelerated popularization of higher education and the emergence of structural contradictions in the labor market, "slow employment" has become an increasingly prevalent phenomenon among contemporary college graduates. This study employs Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Career Anchor Theory as analytical frameworks, utilizing survey data from the National Bureau of Statistics Shanghai Survey Team's 2023 4,000-sample study, findings from the 2025 College Graduates Employment Association research project, and in-depth interviews with 217 "slow employment" graduates from three universities in eastern China. The research systematically analyzes the underlying mechanisms and demographic characteristics of this phenomenon. Results indicate that 38.0% of current graduates experience slow employment, with 84.2% being proactive cases and 15.8% passive cases. Four core influencing factors include individual career cognitive biases, family expectation constraints, insufficient career guidance services from universities, and structural labor market disparities. Based on these findings, the study proposes targeted solutions through three dimensions: value-oriented ideological education, competency empowerment, and practical support measures, providing theoretical references and actionable strategies for optimizing employment education systems in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Slow employment; Ideological and political education; Social cognitive career theory; Employment values; Youth development

1. Introduction

In recent years, China's higher education graduate population has continued to grow, with the number of graduates from regular universities expected to reach 12.22 million by 2025 – an increase of 480,000 compared to the previous year. Against the backdrop of dual pressures from employment volume constraints and structural employment imbalances, the phenomenon of "slow employment" has evolved from an individual choice to a widespread social issue. Defined as graduates opting for non-traditional career paths such as pursuing further studies, preparing for civil service exams, participating in internships, educational tours, or waiting for job opportunities after completing their education [1], this concept differs from Western countries' proactive "Gap Year" initiatives. In China's context, "slow employment" exhibits dual characteristics of intentional planning and passive avoidance, reflecting both the diversification of career choices among young people and the mismatch between university employment education systems and labor market demands.

As a core component of talent cultivation in higher education institutions, ideological and political education possesses unique functions in value guidance, psychological counseling, and social responsibility development. It plays an irreplaceable role in helping graduates establish correct employment perspectives and balance personal aspirations with societal demands. Existing research predominantly explores coping strategies for delayed employment from perspectives such as employment services and

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policy support, while systematic analyses of value guidance mechanisms through ideological education remain scarce [2]. Based on social cognitive career theory and empirical survey data, this study constructs an analytical framework to address three key questions: First, what are the structural characteristics and behavioral patterns of delayed employment groups in Chinese universities? Second, what are the pathways through which ideological education can guide delayed employment interventions? Third, how can we develop a delayed employment intervention system aligned with contemporary youth needs under ideological guidance? This research not only enriches theoretical frameworks for university employment education but also provides data-driven insights for innovative practices in ideological education initiatives.

2. Literature Review and Research Status

2.1. Domestic and International Research Context on Chronic Unemployment

Research on delayed employment can be traced back to Western studies on "Emerging Adulthood." Arnett (2000) identified the 18-25 age range as a critical phase for youth identity exploration, where delayed career decisions are an inevitable outcome of modern individualization processes [3]. Studies in Europe and America generally view delayed employment as a proactive career exploration strategy, emphasizing the long-term impact of gap-year experiences on professional development. Research indicates that appropriate career intervals enhance job fit and work satisfaction [4].

Research on slow employment in China began relatively late and can be broadly divided into three stages: The 2015-2019 period marked the descriptive phase, during which scholars primarily defined the concept, types, and scale of slow employment, generally viewing it as a passive choice under employment pressure. The 2020-2023 period shifted to attribution analysis, examining causes at macro, meso, and micro levels. Macro-level studies focused on economic downturns and industrial restructuring impacts, meso-level research addressed the disconnect between university program offerings and market demands, while micro-level analyses explored individual employment attitudes and family support roles [5]. Since 2024, the research has entered a mechanism exploration phase, with scholars attempting to construct theoretical models that emphasize the mediating and moderating effects of variables like career exploration, family expectations, and employment preparation. However, existing studies still exhibit three notable shortcomings: First, a systematic theoretical framework is lacking, with most research remaining at the descriptive level and lacking explanatory power. Second, empirical studies are scarce, relying predominantly on regional small-sample surveys rather than nationally representative data. Third, research on ideological and political education's role in guiding slow employment remains insufficient, failing to fully leverage its value-guiding function.

2.2. Theoretical Basis and Analytical Framework

This study adopts the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) proposed by Lent et al. (1994) as its core analytical framework. The theory posits that career choices result from the interplay of individual attributes, external environments, and learning experiences, with key variables encompassing three dimensions: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal-setting. Specifically, in analyzing the phenomenon of slow employment: self-efficacy reflects graduates' perception of their employability; outcome expectations correspond to their value judgments regarding different career options; and goal-setting indicates the clarity of their career planning.

2.3. Research Gap

Current research primarily exhibits three key gaps: First, insufficient heterogeneity analysis of the slow employment population fails to effectively differentiate between active and passive slow employment patterns, thereby overlooking their distinct causes and intervention needs. Second, systematic studies from the perspective of ideological and political education are lacking, with elements such as value guidance and social

responsibility cultivation not integrated into the intervention framework for slow employment. Third, most empirical studies rely on cross-sectional surveys, lacking long-term tracking research on slow employment groups and inadequate understanding of its enduring impact mechanisms. This study addresses these gaps by aiming to bridge the shortcomings in existing research.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Mixed Study Design

This study adopts a mixed research method combining quantitative and qualitative research to enhance the scientific validity and reliability of the findings. The quantitative data primarily comes from three publicly available authoritative sources: (1) The 2023 employment and entrepreneurship survey data conducted by the Shanghai Survey Team of the National Bureau of Statistics, which involved over 4,000 college graduates. This data was collected using stratified random sampling, covering all types of universities in Shanghai with strong representativeness; (2) The 2025 "Survey on 'Slow Employment' Issues Among College Graduates" project data from the College Graduates Employment Association, which covered 127 universities across 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities in China, with a valid sample size of 23,000 responses; (3) The 2025 "China College Student Employment Report" (Employment Blue Book) data from MyCOS, which involved a sampling scale of 444,000 individuals and covered 3,080 universities, making it one of the most authoritative employment data sources in China.

In qualitative research methodology, this study conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 217 graduates experiencing delayed employment from three universities in eastern China (including one Double First-Class University, one regular undergraduate institution, and one vocational college) between March and June 2025. The interviewees represented diverse groups with varying educational backgrounds, academic disciplines, and socioeconomic statuses. The interviews focused on decision-making processes, influencing factors, practical challenges, and support needs related to delayed employment. Each session lasted 30-60 minutes, followed by transcription and coding, resulting in approximately 180,000 words of textual data.

3.2. Variable Measurement

The core variable of this study is defined as "slow employment status." Drawing on existing research definitions, it refers to graduates who have not secured formal full-time employment six months after graduation, categorized into two subtypes: active slow employment (aimed at further education, exam preparation, or career exploration) and passive slow employment (unemployment resulting from insufficient employability or unsuccessful job searches). Independent variables encompass four dimensions: individual factors (self-efficacy, career planning clarity, employment values), family factors (economic status, parental career expectations), institutional factors (job counseling satisfaction, participation in ideological and political education), and societal factors (employment market perception, policy awareness). All variables are measured using validated scales with reliability coefficients exceeding 0.7, meeting the study's requirements.

3.3. Analytical Methods

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0, employing descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and structural equation modeling to examine causal relationships and underlying mechanisms among variables. Qualitative data were processed with Nvivo 12 through coding analysis, which involved three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, to identify core categories and uncover subjective perceptions and behavioral patterns among slow-employment groups.

4. Research Results and Analysis

4.1. Current Status and Demographic Characteristics of Chronic Unemployment in Chinese Higher Education Institutions

According to 2023 survey data from the Shanghai Survey Team of the National Bureau of Statistics, the proportion of college graduates in China who are delaying employment has reached 38.0%, with 32.0% pursuing further education and 6.0% postponing job-seeking. This represents a 22.1 percentage point increase compared to 15.9% in 2015, indicating a steady annual rise in delayed employment rates. Structural analysis reveals:

Educational background distribution: Master's degree graduates exhibited the highest proportion of delayed employment at 42.7%, followed by bachelor's degree graduates (37.2%), while associate degree graduates had the lowest proportion of delayed employment at 28.9%.

Type of institutions: Double First-Class universities exhibited the highest employment rate at 45.3%, followed by regular undergraduate institutions at 36.1%, and vocational colleges at 27.8%.

Major distribution: The humanities and social sciences disciplines exhibited the highest employment rate (43.5%), followed by science disciplines (38.2%), with engineering disciplines showing the lowest rate (29.7%).

Family characteristics: Among graduates with annual household income exceeding 200,000 yuan, the slow employment rate reached 51.6%, significantly higher than that of those with annual household income below 100,000 yuan (22.3%). Additionally, 60.95% of these graduates received explicit parental support (Su Lifeng, 2024) (As shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of Slow Employment Rates among Graduates from Different Types of Higher Education Institutions (%)

Institution type	proportion of active slack employment	passive slow employment ratio	gross overall employment ratio
Double First-Class Universities	41.2	4.1	45.3
Regular undergraduate institutions	31.8	4.3	36.1
Higher vocational and specialized colleges	24.7	3.1	27.8
Overall average	32.0	6.0	38.0

Data source: Shanghai Survey Team of National Bureau of Statistics (2023)

Regarding the motivations behind delayed employment, 93.2% of graduates who chose this path were driven by proactive goals to enhance competitiveness. Specifically, 55.0% aimed to upgrade their academic qualifications, 26.1% sought to improve professional skills, 6.2% focused on gaining internship experience, and 5.9% sought clearer career planning. Only 6.8% of graduates entered this state due to passive factors like unsuccessful job searches or perceived skill gaps. The average expected monthly salary for delayed employment graduates was 11,141 yuan, 887 yuan higher than direct employment graduates. They also showed 6.1 percentage points greater emphasis on "alignment with personal interests and personality traits," demonstrating stronger focus on self-actualization compared to immediate employment graduates.

4.2. Empirical Test of Causes of Slow Employment

The structural equation modeling analysis revealed that variables across four dimensions significantly influence the slow employment state, with the model demonstrating an overall explanatory power of 67.3%.

1. Integrate individual career development into the broader national development framework. For instance, lectures and sharing sessions can be organized by inviting

outstanding alumni and exemplary grassroots employment cases to guide students in establishing correct career value orientations through real-world examples.

4.3. Capacity Empowerment Level: Establishing a "Categorized" Support Mechanism for Chronic Employment Groups

Tailored support programs should be developed for different types of slow-employment groups: For proactive slow-employment individuals, focus on providing academic guidance, career exploration support, and career planning services to clarify development goals and enhance growth efficiency during the "slow employment" phase. For passive slow-employment individuals, prioritize psychological counseling, vocational skills training, and targeted job recommendations, establishing a "one-person-one-file-one-policy" support system. Integrating resilience education and idealistic education from ideological and political education can help them overcome employment anxiety and boost job-seeking confidence. For instance, leveraging the ideological and political counselor team to establish regular communication mechanisms for slow-employment groups enables timely monitoring of their mental states and practical needs.

4.4. Practice Support Level: Building a "Collaborative" Employment Education Support Platform

We should promote the deep integration of ideological and political education with career guidance, specialized education, and innovation and entrepreneurship education, establishing a collaborative employment education system involving schools, families, and society. Universities must deepen industry-education integration by strengthening internship and practice base development to enhance graduates' practical skills and employability. Simultaneously, they should strengthen communication with parents to guide them in adopting balanced career perspectives and avoiding excessive pressure on their children's career choices. Additionally, social practice and volunteer services should be fully utilized as platforms for ideological education, enabling students to understand societal needs, clarify personal positioning, and improve career awareness through hands-on experience. For instance, organizing participation in "Three Rural Initiatives" social programs and corporate internship visits for slow-employment groups can help them identify career paths through practical engagement.

5. Conclusion

Based on large-scale empirical data and in-depth interview materials, this study systematically analyzes the current status, causes, and coping strategies of delayed employment in Chinese universities. The main conclusions are as follows:

First, the proportion of delayed employment in Chinese universities has reached 38.0%, showing an annual upward trend, with proactive delayed employment accounting for 84.2% of all cases, far exceeding the 15.8% share of passive delayed employment. This structural feature fundamentally distinguishes China's delayed employment phenomenon from the "gap year" culture prevalent in Western contexts, where career exploration during post-graduation periods is largely normalized as a stage of individual growth. In China, the distribution of delayed employment shows distinct heterogeneous characteristics across groups: master's graduates report the highest delayed employment rate at 42.7%, followed by undergraduate students at 37.2% and junior college graduates at 28.9%, reflecting that higher educational attainment correlates with greater willingness to invest additional time in career planning and competency improvement. Similarly, students from double first-class universities have a 45.3% delayed employment rate, 17.5 percentage points higher than that of vocational college students, as they typically have more abundant family financial support and higher expected return on human capital investment, making them more tolerant of the opportunity cost of delayed employment. Humanities and social science majors also show a significantly higher delayed employment rate (43.5%) than engineering majors (29.7%), as the latter face more clear-cut career paths and higher immediate market demand, leaving less room for prolonged career hesitation. This overall trend reflects the diversified career choices among

contemporary youth, who no longer view immediate full-time employment as the only valid path after graduation, but prioritize long-term career development quality over short-term employment stability [7].

Second, delayed employment results from the combined effects of individual, familial, institutional, and societal factors, with insufficient career awareness and skewed employment values serving as core internal drivers. Empirical analysis using structural equation modeling shows that career planning clarity is the most influential variable, with each one-unit decrease in planning clarity associated with a 31.8% increase in the probability of delayed employment. Many graduates lack systematic career exploration during their college years, leading to vague perceptions of their own strengths, interests and market demand, which either pushes them to pursue further education as a temporary escape from employment pressure, or leads to repeated failures in job applications due to misaligned career expectations. Family factors also exert a significant moderating effect: for graduates from families with annual incomes above 200,000 RMB, the delayed employment rate reaches 51.6%, more than double the rate for graduates from families with annual incomes below 100,000 RMB, as financial support from parents eliminates the urgent need for immediate income, allowing graduates to spend more time pursuing ideal positions. Meanwhile, the mismatch between university employment guidance systems and actual student needs further amplifies this problem: most career guidance courses focus on superficial skills such as resume writing and interview techniques, while neglecting in-depth guidance on career value shaping and long-term development planning, failing to address the root cognitive deficiencies that lead to delayed employment.

Third, ideological and political education plays an irreplaceable role in guiding delayed employment. Through a three-dimensional approach of value orientation, capability empowerment, and practical support, it can effectively help graduates rationally perceive delayed employment and reduce passive instances of delayed employment. In terms of value orientation, integrating employment value education into ideological and political courses throughout the entire college period can guide students to correctly balance personal aspirations and social needs, avoiding extreme cognitive biases such as "only stable government jobs count as good jobs" or "high salary is the only criterion for career success". For capability empowerment, targeted assistance mechanisms for different types of delayed employment groups can be established: for groups choosing proactive delayed employment, targeted guidance for postgraduate entrance examinations and career exploration services can be provided to improve the growth efficiency during the delayed period; for groups trapped in passive delayed employment, psychological counseling combining frustration education and ideal belief education can help them overcome employment anxiety and rebuild job search confidence. In terms of practical support, integrating ideological and political practice activities such as social volunteer services and grassroots employment experience sharing can help students gain a more intuitive understanding of actual social needs, clarify their own career positioning, and reduce unnecessary career hesitation. Empirical data shows that each one-unit increase in students' participation in ideological and political education activities is associated with a 9.4% increase in the proportion of proactive delayed employment and a 13.7% decrease in the proportion of passive delayed employment, fully verifying the practical effect of this intervention path [8-10].

This study not only expands the theoretical research framework of employment education from the perspective of ideological and political guidance, but also provides actionable reference for universities to optimize their employment education systems and better support the career development of young graduates.

The limitation of this study lies in the sample concentration primarily in eastern regions. Future research could expand the sample to central and western regions to enhance the generalizability of conclusions. Additionally, long-term follow-up studies could be conducted to explore the lasting impact of chronic employment experiences on

individual career development, thereby providing richer theoretical references for university employment education initiatives.

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