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Article

Strategies for Enhancing University Students' Career Planning Competencies from the Perspective of Flexible Employment

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Abstract: In recent years, the total number of college graduates in China has grown exponentially year by year, while the structural gap between job supply and demand remains pronounced and highly visible. Consequently, the employment difficulties facing contemporary college students have become increasingly severe, complex, and multifaceted. As flexible employment rapidly emerges as a vital and dynamic new field in the modern labor market, college students have exposed significant deficiencies in adapting to its unique characteristics, alongside a notable lack of comprehensive and proactive career planning ability. To address these pressing challenges, this paper systematically investigates the underlying mechanisms of career development within the broader context of the modern gig economy. Starting from three critical aspects—family support, school education, and home–school collaboration—this empirical study proposes targeted intervention strategies. These strategies specifically focus on three core dimensions of career planning ability: the cognition of career-stage development, the strategic planning of viable career-path choices, and the establishment of practical paths for continuous career exploration. By integrating theoretical frameworks with practical, real-world applications, the proposed methodologies aim to bridge the existing gap between academic preparation and labor market realities. Ultimately, this research seeks to provide actionable, evidence-based insights for educators and policymakers, with the primary aim of significantly enhancing graduates' core competitiveness and adaptability in the rapidly evolving and highly competitive field of flexible employment.

Keywords: flexible employment; career planning; career development; career exploration; higher education; graduate employment

1. Introduction

Employment is the greatest livelihood issue, and achieving prosperity in the employment field for college students is an important foundation for promoting high-quality economic development in China and realizing the strategy of building a talent-strong country; the Chinese government has therefore always attached great importance to the employment of college students. Against the background of global economic fluctuations and the domestic economy's transition period, many employers have substantially reduced the number of jobs they offer. Although the scale of Chinese higher education has continued to expand and the number of college graduates has risen year by year, activity in the domestic graduate employment market has remained persistently low. Statistics show that the number of college graduates in China has grown annually over the past decade, rising from 7.49 million in 2015 to 11.87 million in 2024. In 2023 the average surveyed urban unemployment rate in China was 5.2%, and the surveyed unemployment rate of the 16–24 age group was 14.9%. This means that out of every 100 people aged 16–24, about 14.9 were unemployed, and college students face a severe employment situation [1, 2].

With the transformation and upgrading of China's economic structure and traditional industries and the revolution in digital information technology, workers facing severe employment conditions have developed new demands and choices regarding the

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form of work and the degree of work freedom, prompting some workers to develop a willingness to take up flexible employment. Statistics show that among 2024 graduates, 55.5% chose employment in an organisation, 2 percentage points lower than the previous year; about 2 million 2023 graduates took up flexible employment, accounting for 17.3% of the total number of graduates that year, and the number of graduates in flexible employment in 2024 is expected to exceed 2.2 million. As the proportion of flexible employment continues to rise, its diversity and flexibility, together with its rapid development in diversified fields such as services and online digital platforms, have made it a core driver of the prosperity of the employment market and an increasingly prominent new trend in graduate employment [3, 4].

Nevertheless, some college students have not yet recognised that sound career planning is a prerequisite for choosing a job. Survey data indicate that a majority of college students consider career planning courses unimportant, many are unclear or not very clear about their future occupational direction, and a substantial proportion believe that employment preparation is primarily relevant to senior students. This lack of understanding of sound career planning leaves some students without well-developed career planning ability, making it difficult for them to accumulate the knowledge and skills they need in a targeted way during their studies. When entering the emerging field of flexible employment, they often lack clear career goals and development paths and cannot fully leverage their professional strengths in fierce competition [4]. Therefore, in the current highly competitive job market, professional career planning ability plays an inestimable role in students' growth and targeted job choice. However, improving career planning ability is not a single-dimensional act: cognition of career-stage development, planning of career-path choices, and practical paths of career exploration are important influencing factors, with career-stage cognition as the foundation, career-path choice planning as the core link, and career exploration practice as the practical path; none of the three can be dispensed with in building career planning ability.

As an important indicator of an individual's career development, cognition of career-stage development reflects the degree of career development an individual has achieved on the basis of his or her own situation. At present, however, college students' cognition of career-stage development is generally at a medium level, and different groups differ significantly in career planning ability under the influence of major, gender, self-efficacy and other factors. Planning of career-path choices refers to the career choices individuals make on the basis of their own and social circumstances during career planning; the quality of such planning has a direct impact on personal career choice and development. Yet some students know little about the employment prospects of their major and face difficulties in career-path choice planning because they lack relevant information and preparation; their career planning awareness and ability are weak, so that some cannot make reasonable and correct career decisions [5]. Practical paths of career exploration refer to the continuous exploration and practice individuals undertake to advance their careers, and they are the key route for transforming theoretical knowledge of career planning into concrete practice. College students' career exploration practice mainly includes internal and external aspects; research shows that current career exploration practice is still at a medium level, with self-exploration and environmental exploration mostly at medium-high levels, while a relatively large number of students fall at or below the medium-low level in environmental exploration. Current exploration behaviour tends to increase with age; because lower-year students lack a correct understanding of their future career development, senior students display more comprehensive practical paths of career exploration than junior students.

In summary, college students' career planning ability remains an issue that urgently requires attention, and there is still significant room for improvement in cognition of career-stage development, planning of career-path choices, and practical paths of career exploration. A lack of career planning ability not only leaves students without correct cognition and long-term planning for career development after they enter the field of flexible employment, but may also aggravate employment difficulties. As one of the core

competencies required for graduate job choice, sound career planning ability can guide students to establish a correct understanding of career development and correct channels for information collection, thereby enhancing the scientific nature of stage-development cognition, accelerating the in-depth development of self-knowledge, and improving the precision of exploration practice, so as to promote the coordinated development of all three dimensions [6, 7]. In improving individual career planning ability, the family, the school and home–school collaboration all play indispensable roles; this paper therefore starts from these three aspects and, taking the three dimensions as entry points, proposes targeted strategies for improving career planning ability and offers guidance for college students' flexible employment.

2. Establishing a New Employment-Cognition Coordinate for Children's Career Growth in the Family

As the first setting in which individuals engage with career development education, the family plays a continuous and profound role—from shaping foundational career awareness to supporting pathway decisions—making it uniquely indispensable in guiding college students' career planning and employment readiness. However, many families currently hold outdated perceptions of flexible employment: they tend to prioritize stability and formal institutional affiliation, question the long-term viability of non-traditional work arrangements, and view flexible employment primarily as a transitional phase rather than a viable, sustainable career path [8, 9]. Consequently, families often lack the capacity to provide informed, forward-looking career guidance when students pursue flexible employment options. Furthermore, family-based education frequently emphasizes academic credentials over holistic learning capacity; under employment pressure, it tends to focus narrowly on improving test scores and acquiring discrete vocational skills, reducing learning to rote memorization of textbook content. This approach leaves some students ill-equipped to respond to rapidly evolving occupational landscapes and insufficiently motivated to continuously develop the diverse, adaptable competencies required in flexible employment contexts. To foster a renewed alignment between employment realities and career cognition for children's growth, the following strategies aim to strengthen students' career planning capabilities and better prepare them for flexible employment pathways.

Parents should cultivate an evidence-informed understanding of flexible employment trajectories and promote balanced occupational values, moving beyond assumptions that equate flexibility with informality or instability. They should recognize that, amid rapid socioeconomic transformation, flexible employment is expanding in scale, diversity, and institutional maturity. Shifting away from credential-centric thinking, parents can support their children in appreciating that career development encompasses more than theoretical knowledge or narrow technical training. Joint use of accessible, validated online career assessment tools—such as interest inventories grounded in established vocational psychology frameworks—can deepen self-awareness, strengthen career decision-making capacity, and clarify personal vocational positioning. Concurrently, parents should offer comprehensive career support: affirming their children's vocational interests while encouraging exploration across varied domains, and nurturing adaptability and proactive planning skills aligned with the dynamic skill demands of flexible employment.

Families should establish structured, stage-appropriate collaboration in career-path discussions. Across developmental phases, family members can jointly participate in reflective career planning dialogues, examining how flexible employment evolves alongside broader socioeconomic shifts. During these discussions, objective data—including comparative analyses of job security, social insurance coverage, and labor rights protections in freelance and platform-based work—should be reviewed alongside labor market indicators for conventional occupations such as teaching and public service roles. Such evidence-based comparison helps families grasp structural imbalances in traditional job markets and recognize the growing relevance, resilience, and forward momentum of

flexible employment models. Parents are encouraged to stay informed about emerging trends in this domain and appreciate the centrality of adaptability and multifaceted skill development in today's employment environment [10]. They should also attentively consider their children's aptitudes, interests, and individual circumstances when supporting career pathway decisions.

Direct engagement in career exploration activities offers a powerful means to address misconceptions about flexible employment. When students undertake experiential learning related to flexible work—such as project-based collaborations, digital platform internships, or creative portfolio development—parents are invited to observe and, where appropriate, co-participate. This immersive involvement enables parents to witness firsthand the collaborative structures, professional standards, and operational rigor characteristic of contemporary flexible work arrangements. Sustained participation helps transform abstract concerns into grounded understanding, reinforcing that flexible employment represents a legitimate, innovative, and increasingly institutionalized dimension of modern labor markets. Parents should further encourage active student engagement in diverse career experiences, facilitate exposure to varied occupational settings, stimulate curiosity and initiative in learning, and support the accumulation of practical, context-rich experience—thereby narrowing the gap between academic instruction and real-world career application.

3. Building Flexible Career-Development Education for Students in Schools

With the emergence of flexible employment models, strengthening students' vocational education has become a key factor in enhancing their adaptability and competitiveness in evolving labor markets. As primary venues for student learning, schools—through their teaching personnel and educational resources—are uniquely positioned to serve as foundational platforms for developing responsive career-development education. However, many schools currently underemphasize career-development education; curricular materials often fail to reflect rapid socioeconomic transformations, and such courses are frequently treated merely as credit-fulfillment requirements. This approach diminishes student engagement and undermines the development of robust career-planning capabilities [11]. Furthermore, instructional capacity faces dual challenges: some educators lack specialized training and real-world professional experience, while others rely on inflexible pedagogical approaches with insufficient experiential components. Consequently, course content struggles to sustain student interest, offers limited concrete guidance, and falls short of addressing the heterogeneous needs arising from contemporary flexible employment pathways. To address these gaps, targeted improvements should be advanced across three interrelated dimensions of career planning competence, thereby strengthening students' readiness for flexible employment.

Institutions of higher education should prioritize career planning courses, enhance their academic rigor and relevance, and support students in cultivating sound career-development understanding. Such courses constitute a vital avenue for self-awareness development and labor market orientation. Curriculum design should follow a progressive, stage-based sequence: early modules may emphasize self-assessment—including interests, aptitudes, and awareness of flexible employment trends—while later stages guide students in formulating realistic employment goals and actionable implementation strategies grounded in prior insights. Course content must remain dynamically aligned with evolving labor market conditions; for instance, current instruction can foreground flexible employment structures to foster accurate understanding and promote balanced, forward-looking employment perspectives. Moreover, students must be positioned as active participants: classroom activities should encourage reflection, peer exchange, and personalized application, ensuring theoretical frameworks are meaningfully connected to individual circumstances. Only through high-caliber, student-centered career planning instruction can institutions effectively advance career maturity and equip learners for success in flexible employment contexts.

Second, institutions of higher education should establish a coordinated support system to strengthen the quality of students' career decision-making and mitigate tendencies toward prolonged job search periods. A core component is the provision of professionally trained career advisors [12]. Students frequently encounter uncertainty during career transitions due to information asymmetry or limited exposure to diverse employment options, which may delay timely, well-informed decisions. Advisors offer tailored, in-depth consultation to assist students in clarifying priorities, navigating uncertainties, and identifying viable pathways—including non-traditional and informal work arrangements. They should present objective analyses of labor market dynamics and emerging occupational trends, encouraging students to broaden their conceptions of work beyond conventional employment forms. Advisors must also attentively engage with students' perspectives on flexible employment before offering constructive, context-sensitive guidance. Additionally, within career planning courses, instructors should help students define incremental objectives and decompose complex career choices into manageable steps, thereby supporting more deliberate and effective decision-making.

Students should be actively supported in developing career adaptability through structured exploration opportunities. Educational institutions can facilitate participation in varied part-time roles and project-based engagements; firsthand experience across multiple occupational settings enables students to gather practical insights about labor market realities and flexible employment possibilities [8]. Such experiences not only build foundational knowledge for informed career planning but also deepen experiential understanding of flexible work models and support alignment with personal strengths and aspirations. Institutions may further enrich this process by inviting alumni from diverse professional backgrounds to share current industry perspectives through campus talks and interactive forums, fostering authentic dialogue and up-to-date labor market awareness. Greater engagement in exploratory activities cultivates stronger capacities for continuous learning and enhances students' confidence and resilience when responding to dynamic employment landscapes.

4. Home–School Collaboration in Empowering Graduates' Planning Awareness for Flexible Employment

As a mode of cooperation between family and school, home–school collaboration transcends the sum of individual contributions by enabling mutual complementarity in information, resources, and strengths. This synergy confers distinctive advantages for graduates' career development. However, the current home–school collaboration mechanism remains underdeveloped: communication and information sharing between schools and parents are limited; interactions often lack balanced participation, with schools typically assuming a leading role; and formal feedback mechanisms are insufficient [13, 14]. Consequently, students struggle to convey accurate, timely information about their flexible job-seeking process to both parents and schools, hindering precise enhancement of career planning capacity and limiting adaptability to the uncertainties inherent in flexible employment. To address these challenges, the following strategies are proposed to strengthen planning awareness through home–school collaboration and further enhance graduates' career planning ability in alignment with the demands of flexible employment.

First, home–school cooperation should establish a shared career-cognition framework and a jointly accessible resource bank for career understanding, ensuring balanced participation from both sides. Regarding stage-based career understanding, responsibilities should be clearly differentiated: schools provide systematic theoretical knowledge and an overview of career development stages, supporting macro-level comprehension of professional growth trajectories, while families contribute lived experience—such as parental occupational pathways and life transitions—to enrich micro-level insight into occupational realities and practical challenges. Through this integrated approach, students can bridge theory and practice to develop a scientifically grounded and holistic understanding of career progression. Second, schools and parents

can co-develop a resource bank encompassing occupational profiles, career planning methodologies, and illustrative career development cases, and jointly maintain an open home–school sharing platform. For instance, schools may regularly disseminate updates on emerging career trends and relevant policy developments to parents, while parents may contribute anonymised career narratives or case examples to the platform. Such bidirectional resource exchange enables students to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of career stages and lays a robust foundation for subsequent career planning in flexible employment contexts.

Second, schools and parents should jointly support the development of individualised career-path planning, centred on each student's unique needs and evolving aspirations. Drawing on academic performance, personal interests, vocational inclinations, and other relevant factors, schools can collaborate with parents—leveraging their professional backgrounds and industry awareness—to formulate adaptable, evidence-informed career pathways. Given the dynamic nature of flexible employment, students' career objectives may diversify over time and require periodic recalibration. Home–school collaboration can facilitate this through iterative assessment and responsive feedback mechanisms that monitor planning progress and enable timely adjustments aligned with labour market shifts and personal growth. For example, schools and parents may co-design a career planning timeline with clearly defined milestone goals and support students' autonomous exploration through scheduled career-development assessments.

Finally, home–school cooperation can integrate institutional and familial resources to expand students' access to diverse career practice opportunities, deepening experiential understanding of occupational goals and strengthening the responsiveness of career planning. Schools and families may jointly construct a career exploration platform: schools can organise enterprise visits, sector-specific workshops, and structured career experience activities, while parents may mobilise personal and professional networks to offer authentic, flexible-employment-related experiences—such as short-term project engagements, part-time roles, or freelance assignments [15]. This coordinated resource pooling helps students grasp the breadth and adaptability of contemporary labour markets, supporting the formulation of realistic and resilient career goals. Additionally, structured reflection sessions—including career practice report forums and peer-led experience-sharing meetings—can be implemented to assist students in synthesising insights and refining their plans. With sustained home–school support, students can systematically feed back observations and reflections from practice to both parents and educators, enabling continuous, context-sensitive refinement of career goals and planning strategies.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the diversification of employment forms and the rapid expansion of the flexible-employment market have become pivotal in alleviating employment pressure on college students. However, many students hold incomplete or inaccurate understandings of career planning, and their underdeveloped career planning ability often results in unclear developmental goals and limited awareness of actionable pathways when pursuing flexible employment. To address these challenges, this paper develops a systematic and targeted framework for enhancing career planning ability, grounded in three institutional levels—family, school, and home–school collaboration—and structured around three core dimensions: cognition of career-stage development, planning of career-path choices, and implementation of career exploration practices. At the family level, strategies focus on guiding parents to cultivate sound occupational values, overcome limitations in occupational identity, and establish collaborative mechanisms for career-path decision-making while supporting experiential learning opportunities. At the school level, interventions emphasize strengthening vocational education through enhanced career planning curricula, professional counselling services, and diversified platforms for employment-related practice. At the home–school

collaboration level, efforts center on co-constructing a shared career-cognition framework, integrating resources into a unified support bank, and jointly designing and implementing career planning pathways.

This study advances practical guidance and conceptual grounding for strengthening college students' career planning capacity within flexible employment contexts. Nevertheless, its scope is bounded: the analysis centers exclusively on family, school, and home–school collaboration, with comparatively limited attention to broader societal and policy-level influences—a constraint that reflects the chosen analytical focus. Future work may extend the proposed home–school collaboration mechanism and three-dimensional capability framework to incorporate macro-level factors, thereby constructing a more comprehensive flexible-employment planning system and generating deeper, more actionable insights for enhancing students' career planning proficiency and labor-market competitiveness.

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