

Causes of Misconceptions about Employment in the Context of “Slow Employment” and Strategies for Addressing Them

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of global labor market transformations and the continued growth of university graduate populations, slow employment has become a pressing social issue. Employment misconceptions are a primary driver of this phenomenon. This paper systematically categorizes such misconceptions among university graduates from the perspective of slow employment identifying three main types: idealistic tendencies, conformity tendencies, and feelings of uncertainty. Drawing on individual, family, social, and school dimensions, the study explores the root causes of these misconceptions and proposes targeted strategies, including ideological guidance, school-family collaboration, and optimization of job supply structures. The aim is to clarify the formation mechanisms of employment misconceptions and provide theoretical insights to alleviate the trend of slow employment, thereby promoting high-quality and full employment for university graduates.

Keywords

Employment Concept, Graduate, Slow Employment

1. Background

Driven by technological innovation, demographic shifts, regional conflicts, environmental and climate change, and globalization, the global labor market is undergoing unprecedented and dramatic transformation. In 2024, the number of graduates from China's general higher education institutions is expected to reach 11.79 million, and in 2025, it is projected to reach 12.22 million—an increase of 430,000 from the previous year (Li & Zhang, 2024). The growing number of graduates, coupled with a tightening job market and an external environment marked

by accelerated industrial restructuring, has led to increasingly fierce competition in the job market. As a result, “slow employment” has evolved from an early rational choice made by individuals into a widespread social phenomenon (Liu & Hu, 2025). Deviations in employment concepts are the core underlying factor driving the spread of the “slow employment” phenomenon. This is primarily manifested in the cognitive biases and behavioral tendencies that college graduates develop during the process of career selection and employment decision-making, which run counter to actual market demand and the objective laws of career development (Wang & Li, 2022). Such discrepancies not only directly affect the employment efficiency and quality of graduates, but also exacerbate the mismatch between labor supply and demand, thereby hindering the effective alignment of talent cultivation in higher education with socioeconomic development. The academic community has already conducted research on slow employment and distorted employment attitudes, preliminarily identifying the factors influencing these attitudes and establishing a basic classification of the types of distortions (Gu, 2024). Against this backdrop, this study systematically identifies the specific types of employment mindset biases among college graduates in the context of “slow employment”. It conducts an in-depth analysis of the underlying causes from four dimensions—individual, family, market, and educational institution—and, based on these findings, proposes targeted guidance strategies. The aim is to provide theoretical insights and practical pathways for mitigating the trend of slow employment and promoting high-quality, full employment among college graduates.

2. Types of Misconceptions Regarding Employment among College Graduates

2.1. Idealistic Tendency

This phenomenon manifests as students holding overly high expectations for the workplace while ignoring the objective laws of career development. Researchers have summarized this phenomenon as “Employment misconceptions”, which refers to students, due to a lack of self-awareness and effective guidance, exhibiting problems such as voluntary unemployment and passive, slow employment. The idealistic tendency is mainly reflected in two aspects. First, the pursuit of a perfect job: many graduates expect their first job to simultaneously satisfy all conditions such as interest, high salary, and ease, refusing to accept any imperfection. Once reality falls short of their expectations, they readily give up employment opportunities. Second, misunderstanding the meaning of career: some students overemphasize the immediate realization of self-worth through work while underestimating the cumulative value of entry-level positions, making it difficult for them to settle down and grow steadily.

2.2. In Contrast to the Idealistic Tendency

Students with a conformist tendency lack independent judgment in their career

choices. Their decisions are often influenced by external environments, gradually overshadowing their true personal needs. This phenomenon is relatively common among current graduates and manifests in the following two forms. On the one hand, blind conformity: driven by social opinion or family expectations, many students blindly follow the trend in applying for popular industries or so-called stable positions. However, due to a lack of intrinsic motivation, they are prone to career confusion after starting work. On the other hand, peer referencing: in comparison with their peers, some students make hasty choices to avoid falling behind. However, such choices are often made merely to alleviate anxiety, rather than being based on their own long-term planning.

2.3. Sense of Uncertainty

Unlike the previous two types, the sense of uncertainty stems from students' insufficient understanding of themselves and the external world, leading them to hesitate and struggle with decision-making, making it difficult to take action. This state not only affects employment progress but also tends to increase students' psychological burden.

It manifests in the following two forms. On the one hand, vague self-awareness: many students lack a clear understanding of their own interests, abilities, and values. Faced with numerous options, they have no criteria for judgment and can only fall into a dilemma through repeated weighing of alternatives. On the other hand, limited career knowledge: due to a lack of in-depth understanding of industry development, job content, and the like, students are afraid to take the first step because of fear of the unknown.

3. Reasons for the Employment Concept Deviations of College Graduates

3.1. Individual Level

Contemporary college students' employment concepts show distinct characteristics of diversification and are deeply influenced by Internet culture. In career choices, they often go beyond the pursuit of simple material rewards and instead pay more attention to personal interests, work-life balance, self-fulfillment, and even social value. This interest-oriented approach to employment leads college graduates to prefer delaying employment rather than entering fields they dislike or are not interested in, thereby forming the subjective willingness for slow employment (Twenge, 2010). The multidimensional concept of employment is often intertwined with idealized career choices. On one hand, graduates have a strong preference for the stability, social reputation, and favorable benefits represented by jobs within the system. This inclination toward system-based employment leads some graduates to persistently pursue civil service or institutional exams, resulting in a wait-and-see attitude toward employment (Gregg & Wadsworth, 2011). On the other hand, facing the intense employment competition in reality and the mismatch between one's own abilities and market demand, which is the

so-called paradox of high expectations and low ability, many students feel a lack of confidence or fall into the predicament of having high aims but low skills (Lent & Brown, 2013). In order to bridge the gap between ideal and reality, or to avoid direct competitive pressure, engaging in the long-term struggle of postgraduate entrance exams, civil service exams, or public institution recruitment has become a common path (Schomburg & Teichler, 2011). This exam craze not only objectively prolongs the job-seeking cycle due to the extended preparation period and low admission rates, but also serves as a buffer zone for many individuals delaying entry into the labor market.

3.2. Family Level

Families play a dual role in the employment process of graduates, serving both as material supporters for slow employment and as a significant source of employment pressure. On one hand, with the current rapid economic development, parents have the capacity to provide long-term financial support to graduates (Newman, 2012). This effectively alleviates the survival pressure faced by graduates during their transition from campus to the workplace, providing a practical foundation for slow employment, exam preparation, or exploration. On the other hand, families' substantial investment in education is accompanied by high expectations for stable careers, which often align with traditional cultural values that favor institutional employment and conventional industries (Hamilton et al., 2016). This leads graduates to face conflicts between personal interests and family expectations, as well as between ideal careers and realistic opportunities. Some graduates opt to prolong their exam cycles or avoid competition, exacerbating the trend of slow employment.

3.3. Social Level

Macro-level pressures in the labor market are a significant external factor contributing to the phenomenon of slow employment. The number of university graduates has been increasing year after year, reaching 12.22 million by 2025. This has intensified the competitiveness of the overall job market, causing some graduates to feel apprehensive and choose to delay their job search. Additionally, the acceleration of industrial upgrading and technological substitution poses new challenges for the skills structure of talent: on one hand, the high-skill demands of emerging industries are at odds with the training models of traditional fields, leading some graduates to feel that their education is useless and being forced to use slow employment as a way to bridge the gap in their skills. On the other hand, automation and intelligence are replacing traditional jobs (McGuinness et al., 2018). This has further heightened the anxiety among graduates regarding job stability. Additionally, there are some irrational criteria in the hiring practices of employers, such as an excessive emphasis on prestigious educational backgrounds and general competencies that are not closely related to the core skills required for the job (Spence, 1973). This also creates a structural barrier to entry, under-

mining the confidence and sense of fairness among graduates from non-elite institutions when it comes to finding employment. This external environment prompts some individuals to choose to extend their preparation period or wait for a while.

3.4. School Level

The limitations of the higher education system are a key factor intensifying the slow employment phenomenon. On the one hand, there is a disconnect between the programs and course content offered by some universities and the rapidly changing demands of the job market (Humburg & van der Velden, 2015), making it difficult for graduates to apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired to meet the requirements of actual job positions, and leaving them at a disadvantage in the job market. On the other hand, the career guidance systems at some universities also suffer from a lack of systematic structure and practical effectiveness. At many institutions, career services remain limited to exam-oriented aspects such as resume writing and interview skills, failing to provide in-depth guidance for students' long-term career exploration and planning, and neglecting the active cultivation of their outlook on life, values, and career perspectives. As a result, many graduates lack clear self-awareness and direction when faced with career choices, making them prone to confusion and anxiety. This prolongs the decision-making and adjustment periods, further entrenching the trend of slow employment.

To clarify the internal causal mechanism, this subsection summarizes the matching relationship between influencing factors and employment misconceptions: individual cognitive defects primarily lead to idealized employment expectation bias, insufficient career information access gives rise to the uncertainty-oriented employment hesitation, and external social environment shapes students' irrational career positioning misconception.

4. Solutions to Biased Employment Perceptions among College Graduates

4.1. Rationalize Career Expectation Guidance

To address the idealized employment misconception that overemphasizes high-salary and stable jobs, universities as the core responsible party should carry out multi-dimensional ideological guidance. They can invite alumni from emerging industries to share practical career experiences and use big data of employment to show graduates the real industry salary structure, helping them establish rational career expectations.

4.2. Home-School Cooperation to Correct Conformity Career Bias

For the conformity-oriented misconception caused by family influence, families and universities should build a collaborative guidance mechanism. Universities need to actively inform parents of the latest employment market trends, and par-

ents are guided to avoid imposing their own career preferences on their children, jointly helping graduates form independent career judgment.

4.3. Improve Information Service to Eliminate Uncertain Employment Misunderstanding

Targeting the uncertainty misconception arising from information asymmetry, the government and universities should optimize the employment supply structure. Universities should adjust majors to match market demands, while the government can build a public employment information platform to reduce the information gap between graduates and employers.

5. Conclusion

Driven by technological innovation, demographic shifts, and the expansion of higher education, the number of university graduates in China has continued to rise. Slow employment has evolved from an individual choice to a collective phenomenon, with employment misconceptions serving as the core internal cause. These misconceptions fall into three categories: idealization, conformity, and uncertainty. This study analyzes the causes of such misconceptions from four perspectives—individual, family, society, and school—and proposes corresponding solutions, with the aim of fostering high-quality employment outcomes for university graduates.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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