

Analysis of the Causes and Influencing Factors of the "Slow Employment" Phenomenon Based on Graduates from Applied Universities in Henan Province, China

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the primary factors influencing the "slow employment" phenomenon among university graduates and propose practical measures to alleviate this issue, ensuring smoother entry into the labor market. The sample consisted of university graduates from Henan Province, either actively seeking employment or experiencing delayed employment. The graduates were selected using a multi-stage sampling method, and data were collected via a comprehensive questionnaire survey. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis to derive meaningful insights. The key findings are as follows:

1. The primary factors contributing to "slow employment" include unclear career planning, lack of employment motivation and initiative, excessive focus on self-fulfillment, and insufficient rational understanding of the job market. These factors are shaped by a combination of social, institutional, familial, and individual influences, with each playing a distinct role in how graduates approach the labor market.

2. Strong personal capabilities, adequate career preparation, family support, and social support systems significantly alleviate the "slow employment" phenomenon. These factors collectively empower graduates to feel more confident, reduce stress, and approach employment with a more proactive attitude, ultimately making their transition into the workforce smoother.

3. To effectively address "slow employment," universities should enhance career guidance services, offer psychological counseling to support graduates' mental health, provide more opportunities for internships and vocational training, and adjust academic curricula to better align with current industry demands. Additionally, enterprises should work toward improving the transparency of employment information, enabling graduates to make more informed decisions about their career paths and better understand the trends and prospects in their chosen fields.

Keywords: University Graduates; Slow Employments; Employment Expectations; Personal Career Planning

Introduction

In recent years, the phenomenon of "slow employment" has gradually gained attention as an emerging trend in Chinese higher education and labor markets. "Slow employment" refers to the choice of some graduates not to immediately seek employment or continue their studies after graduation, but instead temporarily and gradually explore life through study tours, part-time jobs, or entrepreneurial investigations (Zheng & Pan, 2019). When a large number of university graduates fail to secure employment as planned, it not only directly affects individual survival and development but also impacts the nation's economy and social stability. The high number of unemployed graduates wastes valuable human resources and hinders the healthy development of higher education and social harmony. As the "slow employment" phenomenon becomes more widespread, it is crucial to understand its developmental trends, underlying causes, and the social issues it reflects (Xu, 2018).

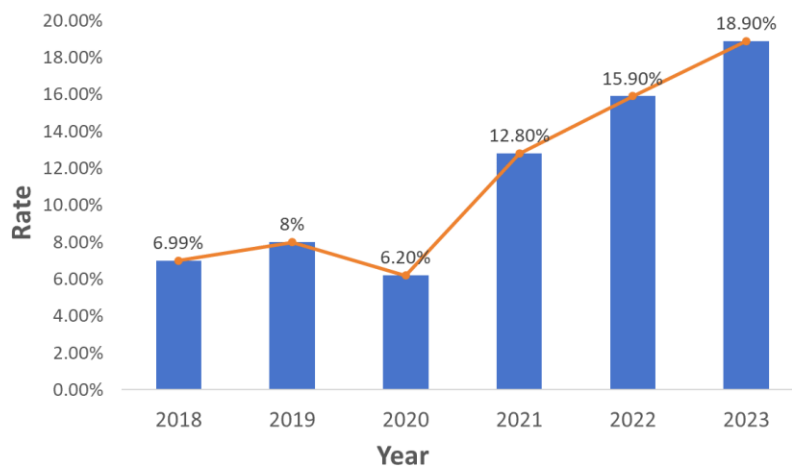


Figure 1 Proportion of graduates choosing "slow Employment" (2018–2023)

There are two key aspects to solving the employment problem: one is the availability of jobs, and the other is the willingness to accept them. The former is more related to conditions and opportunities, while the latter pertains more to mindset and attitude. For most university graduates, the latter is often more critical than the former (Huang, 2020). As Karl Marx noted in "Reflections of a Young Man on the Choice of a Profession" (1835), the privilege of choosing a profession can serve as a bridge to realizing one's life value, but it can also become an abyss that hinders individual development (Zhang, 2021). Therefore, a systematic study of the employment difficulties faced by university graduates helps deepen our understanding of employment attitudes and provides theoretical guidance for formulating effective strategies (Tang & Yin, 2023).

Especially in the context of China's ongoing social transformation, addressing the employment challenges faced by university graduates has become a core issue that requires coordinated efforts to improve government governance and advance comprehensive higher education reform. This is an urgent task in higher education reform, making further research in this field increasingly imperative (Jiang & Liu, 2020). However, despite the existing research offering preliminary insights into the "slow employment" phenomenon, significant gaps remain in the theoretical frameworks and practical recommendations. This study aims to fill these gaps by systematically analyzing the causes and influencing factors of "slow employment".

Research Objectives

1. To systematically analyze the prevalence and development trends of "slow employment" among university graduates by examining its proportion and growth patterns from 2018 to 2023, and to explore its implications at individual, educational, and societal levels.
2. To identify key influencing factors behind graduates' choice of "slow employment", including personal motivations (e.g., self-exploration, lack of clear planning), family background, institutional support mechanisms, and broader social and economic conditions.
3. To evaluate the societal and educational challenges posed by "slow employment", especially regarding resource allocation, higher education outcomes, and employment stability, and to propose multi-stakeholder strategies—incorporating governmental, institutional, and corporate roles to better guide graduates in career development and improve employment readiness.

Research Methodology

1. Location of the Study

The research was conducted in Henan Province, a key region in central China. The province serves as an important agricultural base and a major center for grain conversion and processing in the country. The capital city, Zhengzhou, is a comprehensive transportation hub and a key node for the flow of people, logistics, and information. While the geographical description of Henan Province provides context, it will not be further elaborated in this section to maintain focus on the research methodology.

2. Research Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research elements to examine the mechanisms influencing graduates' delayed employment. The primary method involves a questionnaire survey that targets 2024 graduates from applied universities in Henan Province. In addition, semi-structured interviews and bibliometric analysis were used to enrich the quantitative data and provide deeper insights into the factors behind "slow employment."

The initially constructed four-dimensional framework—covering social, institutional, familial, and individual factors—was refined based on a literature review and expert opinions, ultimately identifying 89 key predictive factors. To ensure the research's validity, a dual-criterion selection process was applied: (1) indicators cited frequently in existing literature were prioritized for their academic relevance, and (2) practical relevance was considered to ensure the factors had strong real-world explanatory power.

3. Data Collection

The data collection was carried out using a 5-point Likert scale in the questionnaire, which was designed to assess the perceived impact of various factors on "slow employment." The survey collected demographic information from respondents (e.g., gender, age, region, and major) and explored their views on the phenomenon of "slow employment," as well as their reasons for delayed employment. The questionnaire consisted of 103 items, including both objective and open-ended questions. It covered the following four main sections:

Basic Information of respondents

Current Status of "slow employment"

Respondents' Views on the "slow employment" phenomenon

Considerations Regarding the Causes of "slow employment"

The survey was administered online through a web-based platform, and a pilot test was conducted with 20 graduates to refine the questionnaire's structure and clarity. The final survey sample consisted of 417 valid responses after excluding incomplete submissions. Cronbach's alpha for the survey was 0.882, confirming the internal consistency and reliability of the instrument.

4. Research Scope

The study targeted fresh graduates from 18 applied universities in Henan Province who graduated in 2024 and had not secured employment by graduation. The focus was on undergraduate students from applied universities, as these institutions emphasize practical education over research-based programs. The research findings are intended to offer insights specifically into this group of graduates.

The formal survey was completed independently by respondents, ensuring anonymity and minimizing bias in their responses.

Research Results

1. Reliability Testing

We conducted reliability test on the scale data using SPSS software. Reliability was used to measure the consistency and credibility of the scale results, reflecting the stability and accuracy of the measurements. This study employed Cronbach's alpha coefficient to assess internal consistency. As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach's alpha value of 0.882 indicates good internal coherence of the questionnaire.

Table 1 Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's alpha	Number of Items
0.882	89

Objective: To analyze multivariate factors affecting slow employment of the graduates of applied universities in Henan Province in China.

The survey collected a total of 434 questionnaires, with 17 incomplete samples being excluded, resulting in 417 valid questionnaires for final analysis. The gender distribution of respondents showed

203 males (48.68%) and 214 females (51.32%). Basic characteristics of the survey data are presented in Table 2. Given that applied universities – defined as undergraduate institutions emphasizing practical orientation and undergraduate education as opposed to research–focused academic universities – form the research context, the study specifically focuses on analyzing the "slow employment" phenomenon among applied university undergraduates in Henan Province as its core research subject.

Table 2 Basic statistics of the survey sample

item	variables	Number	Proportion/%
Gender	Male	203	48.68
	Female	214	51.32
Location	Rural areas	274	65.71
	City	143	34.29

In terms of discipline distribution, there are 94 students in science, accounting for 22.54%; 103 in engineering, accounting for 24.7%; 132 in economics and management, accounting for 31.65%; 40 in liberal arts and history, accounting for 9.6%; 22 in education, accounting for 5.28%; and 26 in other categories, accounting for 6.24%. Based on the above analysis, our survey sample has a balanced gender ratio, an appropriate composition of professional disciplines, and a reasonable analogy distribution of educational qualifications and status. Therefore, this survey, which is based on the group characteristics of "slow employment", is highly representative.

Based on survey data, this study examines the "slow employment" phenomenon from multiple perspectives, including its prevalence, graduate status, stakeholder perceptions, and contributing factors. A systematic descriptive analysis was conducted to explore these dimensions.

The findings reveal that over 70% of respondents reported varying degrees of "slow employment" among their peers. Specifically: 47.27% of participants knew 1–2 graduates who had not secured employment promptly; 18.33% were acquainted with 2–6 individuals in this group; 6.94% had encountered more than 6 "slow employment" cases. Only 27.45% of respondents indicated no such graduates in their social circles.

The statistical results demonstrate an increasing tendency among university graduates to delay employment. As illustrated in Figure 4–1, this career–deferring pattern has become a pervasive trend, warranting significant attention from all societal sectors.

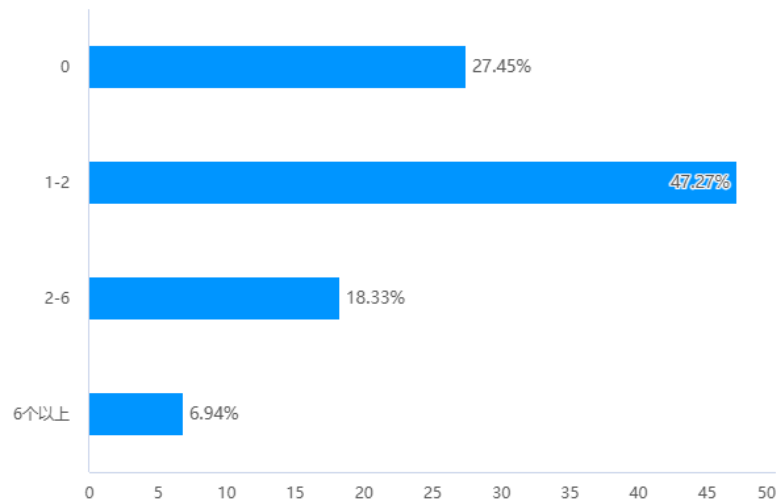


Figure 2 how many "slow employment" graduates are around you

The study reveals that graduates in a state of "slow employment" exhibit distinct preferences in career direction. Data indicates that approximately 75% of these graduates choose to pursue postgraduate studies or prepare for civil service and institutional recruitment exams during their unemployment period, with repeat examinees forming the majority of this group.

Concurrently, the survey found that 50% of "slow employment" individuals simultaneously prepare for professional qualification exams while actively seeking job opportunities. A notable gap exists between the skills required for ideal positions and graduates' actual competencies, necessitating a deliberate pace to bridge this divide.

Key findings include: 30% of graduates engage in entrepreneurship; 15.47% opt for teaching roles to contribute to society; Over 10% choose to travel or spend time with family after graduation.

Of particular concern is that 20.9% of the "slow employment" population lack any clear planning, suggesting that more than one-fifth of college graduates fail to effectively utilize this critical post-graduation period.

In recent years, "slow employment" has gradually emerged as a new career trend among university graduates (Yang, 2019). This study investigates graduates' career preferences through four core questions designed to explore different dimensions of the phenomenon, while also conducting an in-depth analysis of public perceptions. Detailed survey data is presented in Figure 3.

Key findings on attitudes toward "slow employment" reveal: 50.25% of respondents maintain a neutral stance; 29.14% express support, believing this approach allows graduates more time for self-reflection and career planning, leading to more deliberate decisions; 20.61% oppose the trend, arguing that delayed employment post-graduation not only wastes educational resources but also hinders personal development during critical years.

While the survey specifically targets recent graduates, making its findings highly representative for this demographic, extrapolating these results as reflecting broader societal views on "slow employment" has limitations. Nevertheless, the study underscores a growing societal tolerance toward diverse career timelines for university graduates.

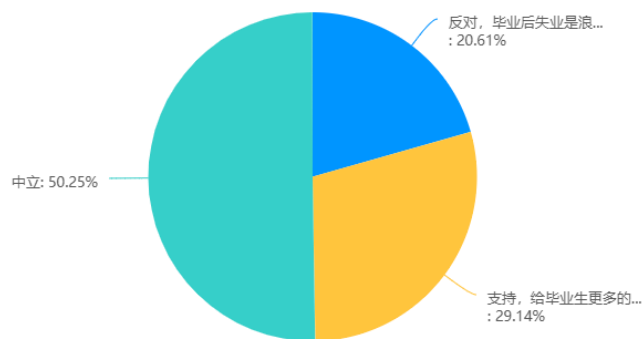


Figure 3 Your attitude towards slow employment

To understand the reasons behind university graduates' prolonged job search, this study first examines their key career decision criteria. Participants were presented with 10 selection factors, with survey data revealing "salary and benefits" as the predominant consideration.

Key Findings: Nearly 80% of respondents prioritized compensation as their primary job selection criterion. As illustrated in Figure 4, other influential factors (in descending order of importance) include: Career growth opportunities, Geographic location, Job stability, Corporate development platform, Team culture and interpersonal dynamics, Work-life balance, Alignment with academic major, Personal interest alignment, **Notable Trends:** 10% of job seekers exclusively target public-sector positions (e.g., civil service or institutional roles), reflecting graduates' heightened emphasis on career foundations and long-term prospects.

This evolving maturity in employment perspectives has become a critical factor influencing some students' deliberate delay in entering the workforce.

Implications:

The data underscores a paradigm shift where graduates increasingly weigh sustainable career trajectories over immediate employment, with compensation serving as both a baseline requirement and a strategic consideration in prolonged job searches.

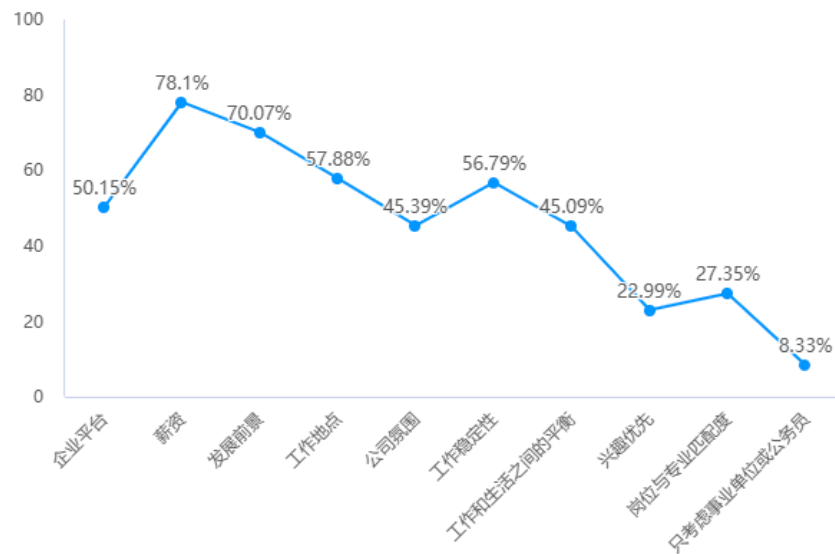


Figure 4 Regarding employment, what are your top priorities?

Against the evolving landscape, a growing number of college graduates are increasingly inclined to adopt a "delayed employment" approach. This phenomenon has become sufficiently prevalent to warrant serious attention and proper guidance.

Members of this group typically utilize their transitional period to repeatedly participate in various qualification examinations, including but not limited to: Postgraduate entrance examinations, Civil service recruitment tests, Professional certification assessments.

However, it should be noted that a subset of these individuals lack clear planning, resulting in inefficient use of this interim period. Research indicates that while recent graduates generally maintain a tolerant attitude toward delayed employment, they simultaneously emphasize that such periods should not extend excessively.

Further analysis of their career selection priorities reveals that when afforded choice flexibility, these graduates demonstrate heightened expectations regarding: Career development trajectories, Professional growth opportunities, Long-term vocational prospects.

This pattern suggests an emerging paradigm where graduates are willing to extend their job search duration to secure positions that better align with their elevated career aspirations, rather than settling for immediate but suboptimal employment.

Key Implications: The phenomenon reflects changing labor market perceptions among new graduates. Highlights the need for structured career guidance during transitional periods. Underscores the importance of strategic planning for those intentionally delaying employment

Discussion

A comprehensive review of international academic literature reveals that while no studies directly use the term "slow employment," two related concepts—"Gap Year" and NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training)—are closely aligned with this phenomenon.

The Gap Year, commonly observed in Western societies, refers to a period of deliberate delay in entering higher education or employment, often used by students to gain cross-cultural experiences. Key characteristics of this phenomenon include international travel, immersion in foreign cultures, participation in field-related internships, or volunteer work with NGOs. The Gap Year is often seen as a time for personal development, offering significant benefits in terms of global perspectives, life skills, and self-awareness before committing to a career. This approach aligns with career development theories, particularly Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory, which emphasizes the importance of self-concept in career choices and the role of exploration in career development.

On the other hand, NEET, a term coined by the UK's Social Exclusion Unit, describes a group of young people who are neither engaged in education, employment, nor vocational training. According to the International Labour Organization's (ILO) 2020 report on global youth employment trends, the NEET population reached 267 million worldwide in 2020, with 68% of this group being female. This growing phenomenon is a critical socioeconomic challenge, often linked to structural issues in education systems, labor markets, and family dynamics. From a human capital theory perspective, NEET individuals may

face barriers in acquiring the skills and experiences required by the labor market, leading to prolonged unemployment and underemployment.

In China, the academic attention to "slow employment" began around 2015, with the phenomenon typically defined as graduates intentionally delaying their job search after graduation. This delay may be attributed to various personal, institutional, and societal factors. The human capital theory suggests that this delay could be linked to graduates' investment in further education, skill development, or self-exploration, which they perceive as enhancing their future employability.

While this study contributes to our understanding of "slow employment," it also has limitations that warrant critical reflection. The research sample primarily focuses on graduates from applied universities in Henan Province, which may introduce potential biases. Applied universities tend to emphasize practical skills over theoretical knowledge, which might skew the results by over-representing graduates who prefer experiential learning or vocational pathways over immediate employment. Additionally, graduates from research-focused or more prestigious universities may have different motivations and challenges related to employment, making it difficult to generalize the findings to the broader student population. Future studies should aim to include a more diverse range of institutions and student backgrounds to offer a more comprehensive view of the "slow employment" phenomenon across different educational contexts.

Recommendations

1. Theoretical Recommendation

The rise of graduate "slow employment" reflects broader macro-level socioeconomic transformations, evolving higher education paradigms, and shifting generational values. This study specifically highlights the distinction between active slow employment (strategic career planning) and passive slow employment (structural unemployment), which can inform the development of targeted policies.

Theoretical insights drawn from the study suggest that policymakers should focus on addressing the root causes of passive slow employment, such as economic instability and misalignment between higher education outputs and labor market demands. For active slow employment, the emphasis should be on creating frameworks for career planning and support systems that enable graduates to make

informed, strategic decisions about their career paths. This study proposes a collaborative governance model that involves the following key elements:

Higher education curriculum reform to better align academic programs with industry demands.

Labor market policy innovation, including greater flexibility in employment regulations to support delayed entry into the workforce.

Strengthening family and social support systems to better assist graduates during this transitional period (Luo, 2019).

Policymakers should prioritize distinguishing between the two types of slow employment to allocate resources effectively. For example, interventions for active slow employment should focus on career development services, while support for passive slow employment may involve tackling economic factors like job market accessibility and industry growth.

2. Policy Recommendations

Given the dual-impact nature of slow employment where both personal career development and broader societal impacts are at stake policymakers must adopt a multidimensional assessment framework that goes beyond simplistic "good" or "bad" categorizations. This study's data supports a nuanced approach that evaluates the following dimensions:

Individual career trajectory: Understanding how delayed employment influences long-term professional development, particularly the benefits of self-exploration and skill-building during this period.

Mental health outcomes: The study's findings on psychological well-being during the transitional phase indicate the need for psychological support, as extended delays can lead to stress, uncertainty, and decreased self-esteem.

Household economic resilience: Economic stability during the employment gap was highlighted as a key concern for graduates from families with lower financial security, suggesting targeted family support policies.

Labor market efficiency: The study underscores the importance of aligning workforce needs with graduate skill sets. This includes fostering industries that support gradual career entry rather than immediate employment, thus facilitating smoother transitions into the workforce.

Prioritization of these dimensions should be based on regional or demographic factors. For instance, areas with high economic instability should prioritize economic resilience and mental health

support, while regions with skill mismatches may focus more on aligning educational outputs with market needs. The feasibility of each intervention will depend on available resources and the political landscape.

3. Practical Recommendations

Addressing the slow employment challenge requires a systemic analysis that considers multiple layers macro, institutional, and micro each influencing the employment decision-making process. The study reveals that:

At the macro level, policymakers should examine the economic cycles and labor market dynamics that influence the availability of jobs, particularly in sectors where "slow employment" is most prevalent (e.g., graduate unemployment in certain industries).

At the institutional level, universities need to improve curriculum alignment with industry needs and provide career development programs that guide students through strategic planning for their careers.

At the micro level, the psychological characteristics and family socioeconomic background of graduates play significant roles in shaping their employment decisions. As highlighted in the study, graduates from families with lower socioeconomic status were more likely to experience delayed employment, indicating a need for targeted family support.

Prioritizing Interventions:

High-priority interventions include enhancing career services at universities, providing psychological support to graduates facing uncertainty, and fostering industry collaborations that help connect education to real-world job opportunities.

Medium-priority interventions involve improving family support programs, particularly in rural or economically disadvantaged regions.

Low-priority interventions could include general policy changes aimed at promoting overall economic stability and growth, though these are important for addressing the broader context of slow employment.

Feasibility Assessment: The feasibility of these recommendations depends on both financial and institutional support. Universities with established career services can relatively easily expand their support systems, while broader economic or policy reforms (such as labor market adjustments) may require significant political will and investment. Thus, phased implementation, starting with high-impact, low-cost interventions, may be the most practical approach.

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