Approaches to Improving Counselors' Professional Ability in Chinese Local Universities*



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Abstract

This study aimed 1) to examine the current and desired professional ability levels of local university counselors, 2) to develop approaches to improve the professional abilities of local university counselors, and 3) to evaluate these approaches in terms of clarity, relevance, and feasibility. The study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. First, we synthesized policy documents and prior research and combined them with interviews with 10 experts to develop a three-level, eight-dimension framework of counselors' professional abilities. Second, a dual-rating survey was administered to 247 counselors from 13 local universities in Guangxi, with each item rated for both current and desired ability levels. In the IPA step, desired ratings were used as a defensible operationalization of "importance" (perceived expectations), whereas current ratings represented "performance," linking gap diagnosis to prioritization. Third, improvement approaches derived from the gap analysis and Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) were reviewed by an expert panel.

The results revealed that 1) desired ability levels were significantly higher than current performance across all eight dimensions, signifying pervasive professional ability gaps. The most substantial gaps were identified in ideological and political education, career and entrepreneurship guidance, and professional growth, whereas daily affairs management showed the smallest gap. Mean gaps (desired – current) ranged from 0.43 to 1.47 on a five-point scale, pointing to sizable ability shortfalls in several domains. 2) Using IPA with overall mean performance of 3.32 and overall mean importance of 4.27 as reference points, the study developed a two-level priority scheme that placed ideological and political education at Priority Level I and employment and entrepreneurship guidance and professional growth at Priority Level II, and translated these priorities into a structured improvement package. 3) The expert panel confirmed that the proposed approaches were clear, relevant, and feasible for implementation in local universities. Overall, the study's core contribution is an evidence-based diagnostic-to-intervention cycle that integrates measurement, prioritization, and action planning for counselor development in local-university contexts.

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Introduction

University counselors occupy a central position in shaping students' development and the social climate of higher education institutions. In China, they are responsible for daily administration and student management as well as ideological and political education, academic guidance, career and entrepreneurship counseling, mental health support, and crisis response (Wang, 2023). Their work directly affects students' sense of security, belonging, and justice and thus contributes to peaceful and harmonious university communities (American College Personnel Association & NASPA, 2015; Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller, 2019; Tull, Hirt, and Saunders, 2009). In this study, "professional ability" is conceptualized as a structured and developable system of professional knowledge, practical skills, role-related dispositions, and ethical commitments that enables counselors to perform core functions effectively in real institutional settings (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986; Eraut, 1994). From a practice-based learning perspective, ability growth depends on what counselors can repeatedly do, reflect on, and receive feedback about in everyday work. Therefore, workload and task composition, together with evaluation incentives and institutional support structures, shape what abilities counselors can realistically strengthen over time. This conceptualization highlights ability development as an experience- and context-dependent process, rather than a static trait captured by a single assessment.

Against this backdrop, as higher education has expanded and student needs have diversified, counselors in local universities often face large student loads, heavy administrative duties, and complex issues such as academic stress, employment uncertainty, family difficulties, and value conflicts, while institutional structures and professional development systems lag behind. Here, "local universities" refer to non-elite, regionally governed institutions that are typically more resource-constrained than nationally elite universities and often operate with comparatively limited staffing, student-support resources, and professional development infrastructure (Yang, 2016). Routine tasks crowd out opportunities to cultivate higher-order abilities in ideological guidance, career counseling, and professional growth, weakening counselors' capacity to act as effective agents of peace-building and student well-being (Wang, 2023). In other words, resource constraints and incentive structures can systematically shift counselors' time allocation toward routine outputs and away from sustained developmental work—precisely the conditions under which higher-order abilities are hardest to cultivate.

National policies have emphasized the strategic importance of counselor teams for moral education, student affairs, and campus stability, calling for politically reliable, professionally competent counselors who can guide students' values, prevent conflicts, and

promote holistic development (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2014, 2017). While these policy documents underscore the institutional stakes, the present study is empirically motivated to diagnose counselors' ability profiles, gaps, and development priorities in local universities rather than to validate policy expectations. At the same time, international and domestic research on student affairs has highlighted multi-dimensional competency frameworks and the need for integrated developmental, ethical, and multicultural abilities (American College Personnel Association & NASPA, 2015; Pope et al., 2019; Tull et al., 2009). Notably, ideological and political education constitutes an institutionalized and context-specific domain of counselors' work in China. Accordingly, it is treated as a localized ability domain rather than assuming direct label-level equivalence with international role descriptions (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2014, 2017). However, many empirical studies use single ratings of current ability, describe results only at an aggregate level, and provide limited guidance on how to prioritize abilities or translate diagnostic findings into coherent, multi-level improvement strategies tailored to local universities (Shi, 2023). In less-resourced institutions, evaluation systems often reward visible administrative outputs more than developmental work such as value-oriented conversations, systematic career planning, and sustained professional learning, placing at risk the abilities most closely linked to a caring and just campus climate and underscoring the need for integrated, evidence-based approaches to diagnosing counselors' professional abilities and designing context-sensitive improvement strategies in local universities (Li, Chen, and Xu, 2021). Based on the Ministry's professional ability standards for university counselors, professional ability is operationalized into eight domains to support diagnostic clarity and improvement planning (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2014; Bai, 2022). The domain structure was refined through expert interviews to ensure content coverage of counselors' core functions. To enhance practical usefulness for local universities, importance–performance analysis (IPA) is used to translate diagnostic results into prioritized, multi-level improvement strategies (Martilla and James, 1977).

Objectives of the Research

1. To examine the current and desired professional ability levels of counselors in local universities in Guangxi, China.

2. To develop a prioritized framework of improvement approaches based on gap diagnostics and IPA.

3. To evaluate the clarity, relevance, and feasibility of the proposed improvement approaches by using a structured expert-rating form with predefined acceptance criteria.

Research Methodology

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design in three phases. First, documentary analysis of national policies, regulations, job descriptions, and prior studies, together with semi-structured online interviews with 10 purposely selected experts (senior counselors, student affairs administrators, and scholars), was used to construct a three-level, eight-dimension framework of counselors' professional abilities and to generate an initial pool of 110 items. Thematic analysis and expert review with the Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) reduced this pool to 104 content-validated items, which formed the draft questionnaire.

Second, a pilot survey with 30 counselors from a local university tested item clarity and basic psychometric properties. Item analysis and internal-consistency checks (Cronbach's α) led to the deletion of weak items and the development of a 58-item professional ability scale. Each item was rated twice on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very low to 5 = very high) to assess counselors' current and desired ability levels. The finalized questionnaire was administered via the Wenjuanxing platform to full-time counselors from 13 local universities in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region using a multi-stage convenience sampling approach. The sample comprised institutions of both undergraduate and vocational types, with one university selected from each prefecture-level city hosting higher education institutions, thereby ensuring broad geographic and institutional coverage. Participants also varied in gender, academic qualifications, professional ranks, and years of experience, providing a diverse empirical foundation for exploratory analysis. As data were collected online, participation depended on digital access and availability. A total of 260 questionnaires were distributed (20 per institution), yielding 247 valid responses. Descriptive statistics were calculated, ability gaps were computed as the difference between desired and current scores, and paired-samples t-tests were used to examine their statistical significance across the eight dimensions. Following established IPA methodology, desired scores were treated as proxies for importance and current scores as performance. While this operationalization facilitates interpretation, it is acknowledged that desired scores may reflect aspirational or policy-driven influences. To address this concern, the distributions of desired scores were examined for potential ceiling effects using descriptive statistics. Furthermore, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with Promax rotation and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were conducted to assess construct validity. Convergent and discriminant validity were evaluated via composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE), and measurement invariance across institution types (undergraduate vs. vocational) was tested using multi-group CFA.

Third, drawing on the gap analysis and IPA results, multi-level improvement approaches were formulated and evaluated by a panel of five experts using a structured five-point rating form for clarity, relevance, and feasibility, supplemented by qualitative comments that informed the final refinement of the proposed approaches. All participants provided informed consent, and the study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines.

Research Results

1. Properties of the Professional Ability Scale

The 58-item professional ability scale performed satisfactorily in the formal survey (N = 247). The eight dimensions were first outlined through documentary analysis of national and local policy documents and relevant studies, and then refined in consultation with 10 experts familiar with counselors' roles and required abilities. For content validation, five experts assessed an initial pool of 104 items using the Index of Item–Objective Congruence (IOC). Of these, 102 items reached IOC ≥ 0.75, while two items with IOC = 0.60 were revised or discarded (Rovinelli and Hambleton, 1977). A pilot survey with 30 counselors was subsequently conducted. Item analysis and internal-consistency checks led to the removal of 46 weak or redundant items and produced the final 58-item scale arranged into eight dimensions.

In the formal survey, the scale showed acceptable item discrimination and internal consistency. Corrected item–total correlations for the current ability scores within each dimension ranged from 0.323 to 0.668, with most items above the 0.30 benchmark, suggesting that they contributed adequately to their respective sub-scales (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Cronbach's α coefficients for the eight dimensions fell between 0.683 and 0.877, with higher values for larger sub-scales such as ideological and political education and daily affairs management, and somewhat lower coefficients for the four-item sub-scales of professional growth and innovation. Because this is a dual-rating instrument, reliability was computed separately for current (C) and desired (D) ratings. For readability and brevity, Q-codes were used throughout the results: Q1 (Ideological and Political Education), Q2 (Daily Affairs Management), Q3 (Academic Guidance), Q4 (Employment and Entrepreneurship Guidance), Q5 (Mental Health Education), Q6 (Crisis Incident Response), Q7 (Professional Growth), and Q8 (Innovation). For current ratings, dimension-level α ranged from 0.683 to 0.877 (Q1 = 0.877, Q2 = 0.857, Q3 = 0.714, Q4 = 0.847, Q5 = 0.849, Q6 = 0.865, Q7 = 0.683, Q8 = 0.688), and the 58-item total α was 0.764. For desired ratings, dimension-level α ranged from 0.663 to 0.869 (Q1 = 0.860, Q2 = 0.856, Q3 = 0.774, Q4 = 0.857, Q5 = 0.869, Q6 = 0.841, Q7 = 0.720, Q8 = 0.663), and the 58-item total α was 0.749. Consistent with best practice, the comparatively lower α values observed in the four-item subscales are interpreted cautiously as a function of short scale length rather than taken as evidence of fully stable reliability. For the 58-item total score, the overall mean current ability score was 3.32 (SD = 0.17). Construct validity was further examined using the current state data from the formal survey. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed on the 58 items using maximum likelihood extraction with Promax rotation. The data met factorability requirements (KMO = 0.874; Bartlett's test χ^2 = 8723.16, df = 1653, $p < .001$). Eight factors were extracted based on eigenvalues > 1 and scree plot inspection, explaining 65.4% of the total variance, consistent with accepted standards for EFA interpretation (Hair et al., 2010). Factor retention was guided by eigenvalues, scree

inspection, and theoretical interpretability of the eight-domain framework. Item loadings mostly exceeded 0.50 and aligned well with the eight hypothesized dimensions, with minimal cross-loadings (< 0.30). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) supported the model's structure, yielding good fit indices: χ^2/df = 2.31, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.054, SRMR = 0.046, which meet conventional cutoff values for acceptable model fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999). All standardized loadings were above 0.60 and significant ($p < .001$). Composite reliability (CR) ranged from 0.81 to 0.92, and average variance extracted (AVE) from 0.52 to 0.68, demonstrating convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was also established, as the square roots of AVEs exceeded inter-factor correlations. Measurement invariance across university types (undergraduate vs. vocational) was also tested using multi-group CFA. Configural, metric, and scalar models all demonstrated acceptable fit, with negligible changes in fit indices (ΔCFI < 0.01, ΔRMSEA < 0.015), satisfying standard criteria for measurement invariance (Chen, 2007). To further probe dimensionality, a one-factor CFA model was estimated as a competing specification. Compared with the correlated eight-factor model (CFI = 0.948), the one-factor model showed substantially poorer fit (CFI = 0.189), with worse absolute fit indicated by higher RMSEA and SRMR. This pattern supports the interpretation that the eight domains are empirically distinguishable rather than dominated by a single general factor. Because EFA and CFA were conducted on the same formal sample using the current (C) ratings, the CFA results are interpreted as within-sample model confirmation rather than strict cross-validation. Overall, these findings support the factorial validity and measurement equivalence of the Professional Ability Scale, reinforcing its use as a multidimensional evaluation tool for counselors in local universities.

2. Results of the 1st Objective: Current and Desired Ability Levels

For the first objective, counselors' desired ability levels were consistently higher than their current levels across all eight dimensions. Mean current scores ranged from 2.81 to 4.00, while mean desired scores ranged from 4.11 to 4.43. The largest gap appeared in Ideological and Political Education Ability (current 2.81, desired 4.28, gap 1.47), followed by Employment and Entrepreneurship Guidance Ability (gap 1.20) and Professional Growth Ability (gap 1.08). Daily Affairs Management Ability showed the smallest gap (0.43), and Academic Guidance, Mental Health Education, Crisis Incident Response, and Innovation Ability showed moderate gaps of about 0.87–0.91. For clarity of presentation, the complete dimension-level results are summarized in Table 1. Paired-samples t-tests confirmed that all differences between current and desired scores were statistically significant (t = 11.53–37.31, all $p < .001$). Given N = 247, practical significance was emphasized using paired effect sizes (Cohen's d_z) and 95% confidence intervals for the mean paired differences. Across dimensions, d_z ranged from 0.73 to 2.37, and all mean-gap confidence intervals excluded zero (e.g., Ideological and Political Education Ability: d_z = 2.37; 95% CI for the mean gap = [1.39, 1.54]). Substantively, a 1.47-point gap on a five-point scale indicates a large perceived ability shortfall, nearly one and a

half response categories, between current practice and expected ability in the highest-priority domain. To assess potential ceiling effects in the desired ratings, their distribution was further examined. Although desired scores were high across dimensions, the means remained below the maximum of the five-point scale (M = 4.11–4.43), and standard deviations indicated non-trivial dispersion. No dimension showed pronounced clustering at the upper boundary, suggesting that desired ratings retained discriminatory capacity and that severe ceiling effects were not present. Because the dimension-level comparisons were planned, interpretation relied primarily on effect sizes and confidence intervals rather than on p-values alone.

Table 1: Current vs. Desired Ability Levels by Dimension (N = 247)

Dimension	Current M (SD)	Desired M (SD)	Gap (D−C)	Cohen's d_z
Ideological and Political Education (Q1)	2.81 (0.47)	4.28 (0.43)	1.47	2.37
Daily Affairs Management (Q2)	4.00 (0.44)	4.43 (0.40)	0.43	0.73
Academic Guidance (Q3)	3.40 (0.42)	4.27 (0.43)	0.88	1.47
Employment and Entrepreneurship Guidance (Q4)	2.90 (0.45)	4.11 (0.44)	1.20	1.93
Mental Health Education (Q5)	3.41 (0.46)	4.28 (0.45)	0.87	1.35
Crisis Incident Response (Q6)	3.38 (0.47)	4.29 (0.42)	0.91	1.36
Professional Growth (Q7)	3.20 (0.46)	4.27 (0.45)	1.07	1.76
Innovation (Q8)	3.39 (0.46)	4.26 (0.44)	0.87	1.33

Note: Gap = Desired-Current. Cohen's d_z is the paired-samples effect size. All paired comparisons were statistically significant ($p < .001$).

3. Results of the 1st Objective: Item-Level Gap Patterns

Item-level analyses showed that performance gaps were concentrated in specific higher-order tasks rather than evenly distributed across the 58 indicators. The single largest gap (1.60) appeared in a Professional Growth item (Q7_3), and the next nine highest gaps (1.34–1.56) were all Ideological and Political Education items (Q1), mainly involving the design and implementation of value-oriented ideological activities and the use of new media and online platforms to guide students' values. Several Employment and Entrepreneurship Guidance items (Q4), especially those related to individualized career planning and support for student entrepreneurship, also showed relatively large discrepancies. By contrast, many items in Daily Affairs Management (Q2) and standardized tasks within Academic Guidance (Q3), Mental Health Education (Q5), Crisis Incident Response (Q6), and Innovation Ability (Q8)

exhibited smaller gaps, typically in routine operations and basic services. Overall, the item-level evidence confirms that the most serious shortfalls cluster in demanding ideological, career, and growth-related tasks rather than in routine administrative responsibilities. For transparency and reproducibility, the top 10 item-level gaps are listed explicitly in Table 2, which show a strong concentration in ideological and political education (Q1) and professional growth (Q7).

Table 2: Top-10 Item-Level Gaps with Item Wording (N = 247)

Rank	Item code	Item wording	Gap (D–C)
1	Q7_3	Able to conduct or assist in educational research and projects.	1.604
2	Q1_7	Able to guide the establishment and reform of the Youth League branch.	1.563
3	Q1_2	Able to continuously learn the theoretical knowledge of ideological and political education and understand current frontiers.	1.559
4	Q1_5	Able to correctly guide students' understanding of the Party and manage Party member development.	1.555
5	Q1_1	Able to take a firm political stance.	1.502
6	Q1_3	Able to keenly capture fluctuations in students' thoughts and carry out ideological education through online media.	1.462
7	Q1_6	Able to plan and organize Party and League activities and maintain records.	1.457
8	Q1_9	Able to fulfill duties and guide students in establishing correct worldviews and values.	1.392
9	Q1_4	Able to use Internet language and predict online public opinion timely.	1.377
10	Q1_8	Able to set a moral example and demonstrate strong professional ethics.	1.340

Note: Gap = Mean(Desired) − Mean(Current).

4. Results of the 2nd Objective: Importance–Performance Analysis

For the second objective, Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) was conducted using desired scores as indicators of importance and current scores as indicators of performance. The crosshairs were set at the overall mean performance (3.32) and overall mean importance (4.27). Ideological and Political Education (Q1) was located in the high-importance, low-performance quadrant, identifying it as a first-priority domain where expectations are high but capabilities lag significantly. Daily Affairs Management (Q2), Academic Guidance (Q3), Mental

Health Education (Q5), and Crisis Incident Response (Q6) fell in the high-importance, high-performance quadrant, representing established strengths that mainly require maintenance. Employment and Entrepreneurship Guidance (Q4) and Professional Growth (Q7) were positioned below the overall performance mean and were therefore flagged as low-performance domains requiring strengthening, while Innovation Ability (Q8) lay near the center of the grid with moderate needs. Figure 1 visualizes the IPA quadrant placement. For transparency and reproducibility, the exact dimension coordinates (mean importance, mean performance) are reported as follows: Q1 (4.28, 2.81), Q2 (4.43, 4.00), Q3 (4.27, 3.40), Q4 (4.11, 2.90), Q5 (4.28, 3.41), Q6 (4.29, 3.38), Q7 (4.27, 3.20), and Q8 (4.26, 3.39). All points represent dimension-level means (mean desired as importance; mean current as performance). Interpretive limitations were considered because importance is derived from desired ratings that are generally high, which can compress the importance axis and make quadrant membership sensitive to the choice of crosshairs, particularly for points near the reference lines. Therefore, alternative cutoffs may lead to reclassification in boundary cases. As a robustness check, using median-based crosshairs retained the same first-priority identification for Q1 and continued to flag Q4 and Q7 as lower-performance domains requiring strengthening, supporting the stability of the prioritization logic. Accordingly, “lower importance” is interpreted as relative salience within this sample rather than as evidence that employability-related domains are intrinsically unimportant. Given the compressed importance axis, priority domains for improvement were identified using an operational composite criterion emphasizing (i) high absolute importance (desired mean ≥ 4.0), (ii) substantial development need (desired − current ≥ 1.0), and (iii) below-average current performance (current mean < 3.32). On this basis, Q1, Q4, and Q7 were designated as the primary priority domains for developing improvement approaches. Accordingly, improvement approaches were organized into two priority levels, three main domains (Q1, Q4, Q7), nine sub-approaches, and thirty-five specific implementation actions covering counselor training, work process redesign, institutional support mechanisms, and policy level guarantees, forming a structured package for guiding counselor professional development in local universities.

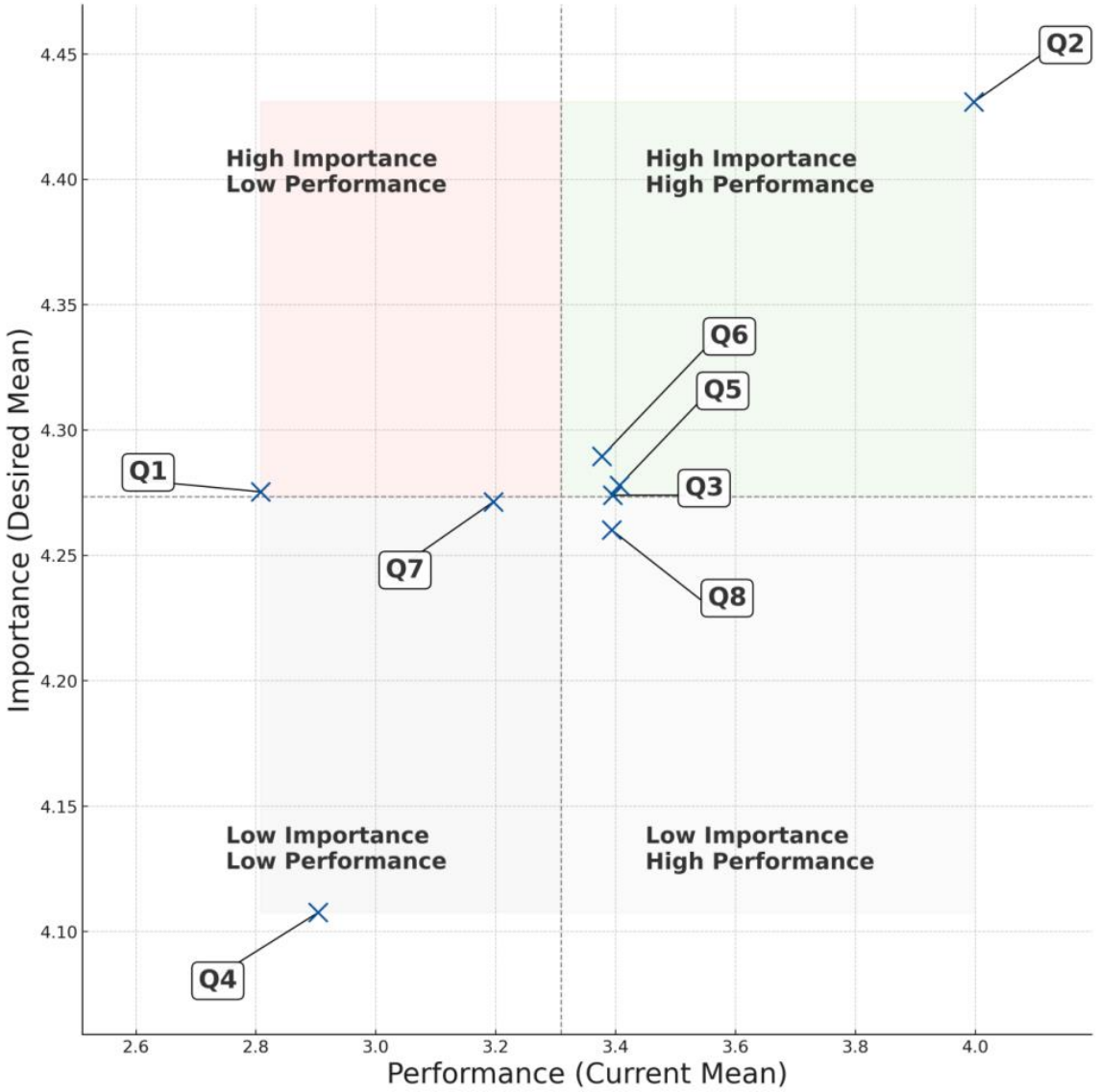


Figure 1: Importance–Performance Matrix for the Eight Ability Dimensions

5. Results of the 3rd Objective: Expert Evaluation of Improvement Approaches

Five experts with substantial experience in counselor work, student affairs, and higher education management reviewed the improvement package at three levels: main domains, sub-approaches, and specific actions. Experts were purposively recruited based on relevant professional roles and experience to provide complementary perspectives on counselor practice and higher-education administration. Eligibility criteria included senior professional roles in counselor supervision/student affairs management and substantial experience with counselor development and policy implementation in local universities. Potential conflicts of interest were screened, and the review was conducted independently. The expert review is framed as formative appraisal for refining the package rather than confirmatory validation. At the main-domain level, their ratings were in line with the IPA results. Ideological and Political Education (Q1) was reaffirmed as the first-priority domain, while Employment and Entrepreneurship Guidance (Q4) and Professional Growth (Q7) were endorsed as second-

priority domains. Mean importance scores ranged from 3.80 to 4.20, all above the scale midpoint, with Q1 rated highest (M ≈ 4.20) and Q4 and Q7 both around M ≈ 3.80. Feasibility means between 3.80 and 4.00 indicated that all three domains were judged to be realistically actionable.

At the sub-approach level, the nine sub-approaches received feasibility ratings from 3.60 to 4.40 (overall M = 3.96, SD ≈ 0.31), and none fell below the implementable range. Employment related sub-approaches, such as individualized career planning support and linking employment guidance with regional development needs, attracted the highest feasibility scores (M ≈ 4.40). By contrast, sub-approaches focusing on expanding the use of new media and online platforms for ideological work and on stabilizing and clarifying counselor career pathways were rated slightly lower, though still high (M ≈ 3.60), suggesting greater sensitivity to resource, policy, and coordination constraints. Between-expert variability was modest at both the sub-approach and action levels. Item-level feasibility SDs were typically below 1.0.

At the level of specific actions, the 35 proposed measures had feasibility means between 3.00 and 4.60 (overall M ≈ 3.83, SD ≈ 0.35). All were at or above the scale midpoint, and most exceeded 3.50. Requiring counselors to formulate individual annual professional development plans emerged as particularly feasible (M ≈ 4.60). Measures with more moderate means (M ≈ 3.00–3.40), such as developing an ideological education case repository, organizing workshops on digital content creation and online communication, collaborating with academic departments and career centers to provide integrated guidance, aligning human resource policies with the eight-dimension framework, and introducing reflective journals or portfolios, were still viewed as appropriate but as placing higher demands on time, cross-unit collaboration, and institutional support.

The qualitative comments were consistent with these quantitative patterns. Experts generally agreed that the three main domains, nine sub-approaches, and thirty-five actions corresponded closely to the diagnosed gaps in ideological guidance, employment counseling, and professional development, and that the package formed a coherent response to the gap and IPA analyses. Importantly, they emphasized several implementation prerequisites: more reasonable workload arrangements to free time for developmental work, clearer career pathways and promotion standards for counselors, targeted in-service training focused on developmental abilities, and stronger coordination between student affairs offices, academic departments, and human resource units. Accordingly, feasibility ratings should be interpreted as conditional on these prerequisites being in place, rather than as unconditional judgments. Overall, the expert appraisal supports the view that the proposed approaches are broadly feasible in local university settings, provided that these organizational and resource requirements are addressed. The improvement package is structured as 3 priority domains, 9 sub-approaches, and 35 actions. First priority: Q1 Ideological and Political Education Ability (n

= 11 actions), comprising 1.1 value-oriented ideological education activities (1.1.1–1.1.4), 1.2 new media and online platforms for ideological work (1.2.1–1.2.4), and 1.3 integrating ideological guidance into routine counseling (1.3.1–1.3.3). Second priority: Q4 Employment and Entrepreneurship Guidance Ability (n = 12 actions), comprising 2.1 individualized career planning (2.1.1–2.1.4), 2.2 entrepreneurship projects and competitions (2.2.1–2.2.4), and 2.3 linking guidance with regional development needs (2.3.1–2.3.4). Second priority: Q7 Professional Growth Ability (n = 12 actions), comprising 3.1 continuous learning and educational research (3.1.1–3.1.4), 3.2 stabilizing and clarifying career pathways (3.2.1–3.2.4), and 3.3 reflective and self-directed development (3.3.1–3.3.4). Figure 2 lists all 35 actions under their corresponding sub-approach codes (1.1.1–3.3.4).

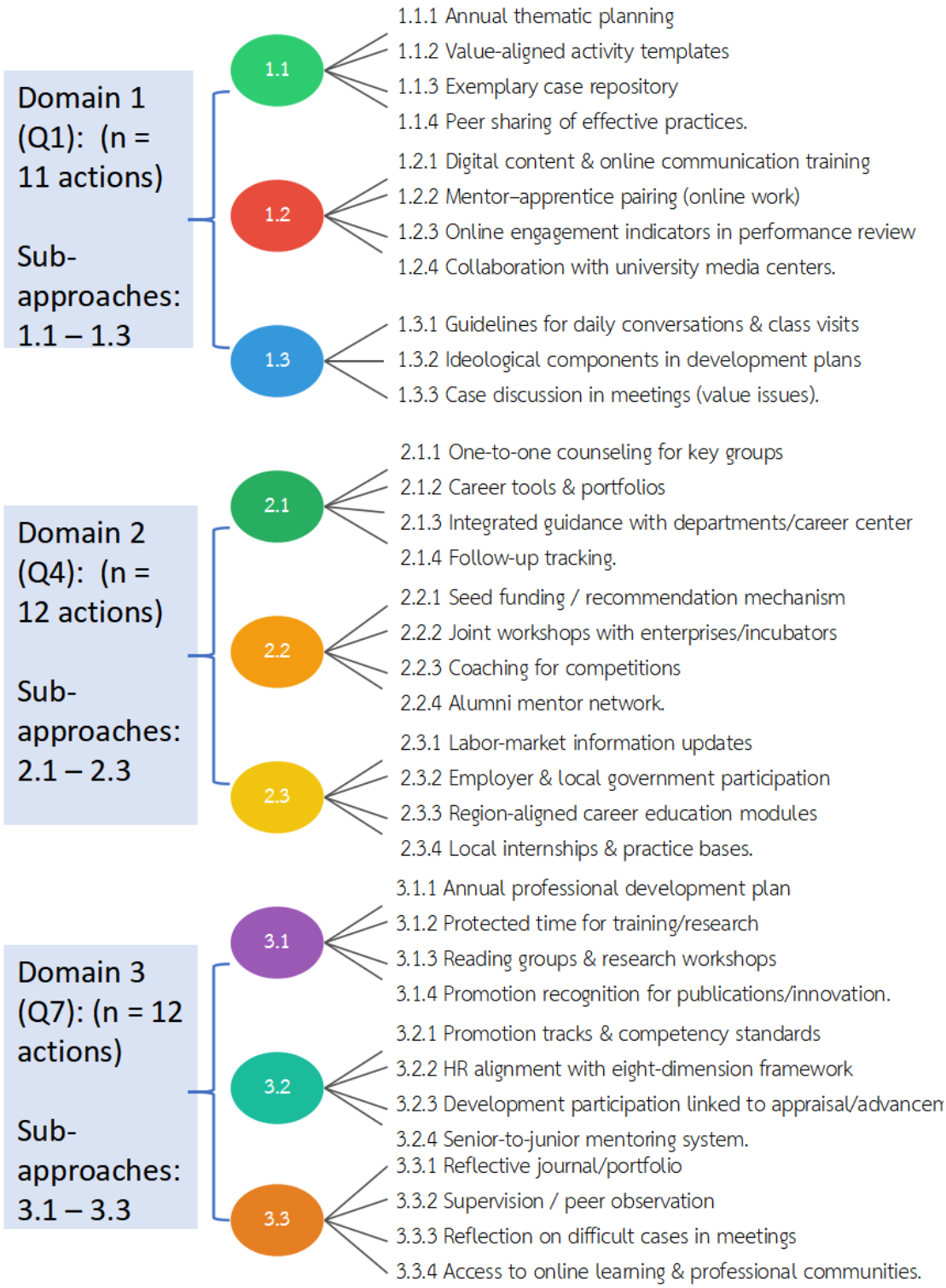


Figure 2: Structure of the Improvement Package: Three Priority Domains, Nine Sub-Approaches, and 35 Actions

The New Body of Knowledge

This study proposes a practice oriented model for strengthening the professional abilities of counselors in local Chinese universities. As shown in Model 1, it combines a three-level, eight-dimension framework of counselor abilities, a 58-item dual-rating scale capturing current and desired ability levels, systematic gap analysis with Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA), and a structured set of improvement approaches organized into three priority domains (ideological and political education, employment and entrepreneurship guidance, and professional growth), nine sub-approaches, and thirty-five concrete actions. Together, these components form a coherent diagnostic-to-intervention cycle. The contribution is to specify how identified "gaps" translate into change in practice in local university settings. In this model, gaps are treated as the ability to enact role expectations under routine institutional constraints, not simply as deficits in individual ability. IPA prioritization functions as a pragmatic decision rule for concentrating limited resources on domains where improvement is both needed and feasible, and intervention mapping links these priorities to specific actions and to the organizational supports required for implementation (e.g., protected time through workload allocation, clearer career pathways and standards, targeted in-service training, and cross-unit coordination). In use, universities can apply the scale and IPA to select priorities, implement the mapped actions through coordinated roles of counselors, supervisors, student affairs offices, HR units, and collaborating academic/career units, and then use monitoring evidence to adjust supports and refine the next diagnostic round.

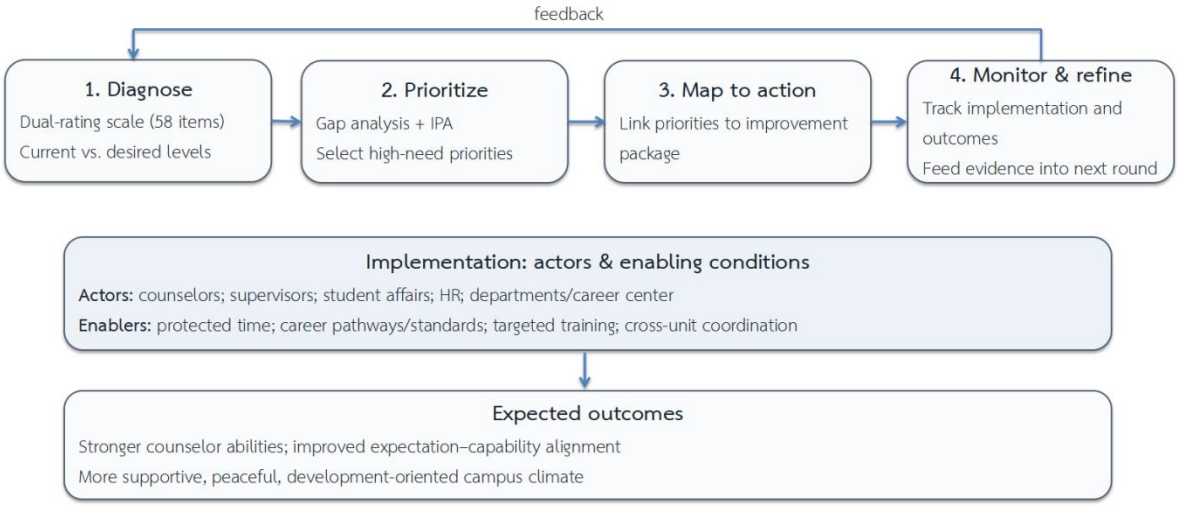


Figure 3: A Diagnostic-to-Improvement Cycle for Counselor Ability Development

Discussion of Research Results

Across the three research objectives, the results support four claims. First, counselors report stronger ability in routine management than in developmental work, indicating a persistent developmental–administrative tension in local universities. Second, IPA locates the

most consequential expectation–ability misalignment in developmental domains, implying that strengthening these domains requires supported progression rather than simple maintenance. Third, expert appraisal indicates conditional feasibility, identifying workload arrangements, career pathways/promotion standards, targeted in-service training, and cross-unit coordination as enabling prerequisites. Fourth, the observed gaps likely reflect institutional constraints and role strain that shape counselors' ability to enact role expectations in practice.

The first objective showed that desired ability levels were consistently higher than current levels across all eight dimensions, with the largest gaps in ideological and political education, employment and entrepreneurship guidance, and professional growth and the smallest gaps in daily affairs management. This pattern suggests that counselors in local universities feel more confident in routine administrative work than in developmental tasks requiring counseling, planning, and reflection, a tension also noted in studies of expanding counselor responsibilities and limited opportunities for systematic ability development (Bai, 2022). The eight-dimension framework adopted in this study reflects developmental views of professional ability, in which basic, core, and career-development abilities build toward more flexible, context-sensitive practice (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986; Eraut, 1994). Importantly, the "current–desired" gaps should be interpreted primarily as indicating developmental capacity needs, while also reflecting the influence of institutional conditions that shape what counselors can enact in practice. In particular, lower self-rated "current" performance in ideological and political education may be affected not only by ability but also by role ambiguity, political sensitivity, and limited authority/discretion. Similarly, uniformly high desired ratings may partly reflect normative expectations and social desirability. Accordingly, the measured gaps likely capture "role strain" and institutional constraints at least as much as individual skill shortfalls. Therefore, these self-report gaps should be interpreted cautiously. Additional triangulation (e.g., supervisor/student perspectives or practice-based indicators) would strengthen attribution.

For the second objective, Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) identified ideological and political education as a high-importance, low-performance domain and employment and entrepreneurship guidance and professional growth as lower-performance domains requiring progressive strengthening, while daily affairs management, academic guidance, mental health education, and crisis response were relatively strong and mainly require maintenance. This pattern is consistent with IPA's focus on attributes that are both important and underperforming and confirms that the most serious misalignment for local university counselors lies in developmental rather than procedural domains. However, because developmental domains are more time-intensive and cross-unit dependent, the IPA priorities should be read as areas requiring "supported progression" under enabling conditions, not merely individual improvement targets. In developmental terms, progression is expected to

move from routine execution toward increasingly adaptive, context-sensitive practice within each priority domain, consistent with the developmental framing noted above.

For the third objective, expert review indicated that the proposed improvement approaches are generally clear, feasible, and appropriate, particularly those targeting ideological work, employment guidance, and professional reflection, but also highlighted constraints such as limited staffing, heavy administrative loads, and restricted external resources. Accordingly, feasibility should be interpreted as conditional. Workload arrangements, clearer career pathways/promotion standards, targeted in-service training, and cross-unit coordination function as implementation prerequisites rather than optional recommendations. This conditional interpretation is consistent with the developmental framing. Progression in the three priority domains can be made observable as movement from routine delivery to context-sensitive ideological guidance (Q1), from generic information provision to individualized and coordinated career/entrepreneurship support (Q4), and from episodic training participation to systematic reflective development (Q7). Taken together, these implications indicate that strengthening developmental domains requires not only individual upskilling but also institutional redesign that makes higher-order practice feasible. Overall, the findings suggest that the key challenge is not counselors' awareness of standards but the gap between complex role expectations and the institutional conditions needed to develop and sustain the required abilities.

Conclusion

This study examined the professional abilities of counselors in local universities in Guangxi by comparing current and desired ability levels across eight dimensions, identifying priority domains through Importance–Performance Analysis, and validating improvement approaches with experts. Counselors consistently rated desired ability levels higher than their current levels, with the largest gaps in ideological and political education, employment and entrepreneurship guidance, and professional growth, and smaller gaps in daily affairs management; IPA confirmed ideological and political education as a high-importance, low-performance domain, while employment and entrepreneurship guidance and professional growth also required progressive strengthening. Expert review suggested that the proposed actions are clear, relevant, and generally feasible under local-university constraints; however, this appraisal should be interpreted as formative validation of clarity and implementability rather than evidence of intervention effectiveness. Overall, the study provides an integrated picture of ability gaps, priority domains, and expert-validated improvement approaches, highlighting the need to move beyond an exclusive focus on administrative compliance and to invest more systematically in developmental abilities through institutionally supported training, workplace-based learning, peer support, and incentive systems that recognize developmental work. While the study provides evidence-based priorities and an expert-

appraised improvement direction for local universities, generalization beyond Guangxi should be made cautiously given the self-reported dual ratings, convenience sampling, and single-region design.

Suggestions

1. The suggestions from the research

The findings indicate that counselors in local universities need stronger developmental abilities, particularly in value-oriented work, employment and entrepreneurship guidance, and professional growth, while routine management is relatively close to their expectations. Local universities should use the eight-dimension framework and the priority domains identified in this study as a reference for revising counselor ability standards, designing focused training and supervision, and adjusting workload and appraisal systems so that developmental work is explicitly encouraged and recognized. The expert-validated improvement approaches, including clearer tiered standards, mentoring and peer-learning arrangements, individual development planning, and structured reflection, can be selectively adopted and integrated into existing policies and practices to support counselors' long-term professional development. To move beyond broad policy aspirations and support actionable implementation, institutions should: 1) prioritize must-have enabling conditions (protected time and workload/appraisal alignment) before nice-to-have training supports, 2) monitor implementation with a small set of process indicators (e.g., protected-time compliance, mentoring/supervision hours, portfolio completion), and 3) adopt a pilot–refine–scale sequence. For low-resource institutions, a minimal viable package can combine a small protected-time block, monthly mentoring, and brief quarterly reflection.

2. The suggestions for future research

Future research should extend the sample beyond local universities in Guangxi to other regions and institution types to examine whether the identified patterns of ability gaps and priorities also occur elsewhere. It should also adopt multi-source evaluation, combining counselors' self-assessments with student feedback, supervisor ratings, peer assessments, and objective indicators to obtain a more comprehensive picture of professional abilities. In addition, longitudinal and intervention studies are needed to track changes in counselors' abilities over time and to assess the impact of different improvement strategies on sustainable professional growth in local university contexts. More specifically, future studies may: 1) quasi-experimentally evaluate one bundled sub-approach (e.g., mentoring plus protected time) using matched comparison units, 2) conduct multi-informant validation and measurement invariance tests across regions and institution types, and 3) explore associations with student-level outcome proxies (e.g., retention risk indicators, well-being referrals, career placement metrics) under explicit ethical safeguards and with cautious interpretation of attribution.

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