

A Model for Enhancing Future Employment Skills among Vocational Students in Henan Province, China*



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Abstract

This study reconsiders employability in Henan's higher vocational colleges by focusing on students' ability to sustain employment and adapt to change. The research objectives were: 1) to describe the profiles of emotional intelligence (EI), career adaptability (CA), and employability among final-year vocational students in Henan and identify key dimensions for the Henan Vocational Employability Model (HVEM); 2) to examine how EI and CA dimensions contribute to core employability components; and 3) to validate and refine the HVEM through expert review and teacher focus groups. A mixed research-and-development (R&D) design was adopted. The research population consisted of final-year students from six higher vocational institutions in Henan Province across engineering/manufacturing, information technology/management, agriculture/agri-processing, and chemical/environmental programmes, from which 384 valid questionnaires were collected using systematic sampling. Instruments included WLEIS, CAAS-SF, and an employability scale. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability testing, exploratory factor analysis, and multiple regression, while model validation used IOC ratings and teacher focus groups.

The research result was found that: 1) Students reported moderate-to-high EI, CA, and employability overall; teamwork and use of emotion showed the highest mean scores, while curiosity and career planning were comparatively lower, indicating priority areas for model emphasis. 2) Career adaptability was the strongest driver: models explained 31%–36% of variance ($R^2 = .31-.36$), with concern ($\beta = .31$) and curiosity ($\beta = .22$) predicting career planning, control ($\beta = .27$) predicting self-management, and others' emotion appraisal ($\beta = .29$) predicting teamwork. 3) Expert review confirmed all HVEM domains as relevant ($\text{IOC} \geq 0.73$), and teacher feedback led to practical revisions, resulting in a final HVEM organised into three clusters—applicable to classroom practice, internship preparation, and provincial-level policy improvement in vocational education.

Keywords: Vocational Employability; Emotional Intelligence; Career Adaptability; Higher Vocational Education; Henan Province

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Introduction

Across the world, discussion about graduate employment has shifted from “Can students find a job?” to “Can they cope with change once they are in work?”. Forecasts on the future of jobs point to rapid technological disruption and large-scale reskilling needs by 2030, which means that young people will have to update not only their technical knowledge but also the way they handle pressure, relationships and career choices (Di Battista et al., 2023). Concepts such as emotional intelligence and career adaptability offer useful lenses here: they draw attention to how individuals read their own emotions, respond to others and adjust their plans when work or life conditions change (Savickas, 2005).

China’s higher vocational sector is right at the centre of these challenges. On paper, the system performs well: graduate employment rates are high and vocational expansion has opened up opportunities for many students from non-elite backgrounds. Yet, follow-up studies show that a considerable share of these graduates leave their first job within a few years, and employers in provinces like Henan still report gaps in teamwork, communication and willingness to adjust to workplace demands. Urban–rural differences, uneven institutional resources and sector-specific requirements in areas such as manufacturing, agriculture and services further complicate the picture and make “one-size-fits-all” employability policies difficult to implement.

Using survey data from vocational students, the study examines the relationships among these dimensions to identify which aspects of EI and CA most strongly support employability development among vocational graduates in Henan. The resulting model is further refined through expert evaluation and teacher feedback so that it can be realistically embedded into vocational curricula, internship preparation, and career guidance practices.

Objectives of the Research

1. To describe the profiles of emotional intelligence (EI), career adaptability (CA) and employability among final-year vocational students in Henan and identify the key dimensions to be reflected in the HVEM.
2. To examine how different EI and CA dimensions contribute to core employability components so as to prioritise domains within the HVEM.
3. To validate and refine the HVEM through expert review and teacher focus groups in order to ensure its relevance and feasibility for vocational colleges in Henan Province.

Research Methodology

The 1st Step: Literature review

A targeted literature review was systematically conducted to identify the major theoretical constructs related to employability. Relevant studies were selected from recent peer-reviewed research, with emphasis on vocational education, emotional intelligence, and

career adaptability to ensure theoretical relevance and coverage. Previous research generally treats employability as a dynamic capability that develops through educational experiences and labour-market interaction. Jackson et al. (2024) show that internships, industry projects, and co-curricular activities significantly improve students' readiness for real workplace tasks such as teamwork and communication. From a systemic perspective, Chen and Pastore (2024) find that the outcomes of vocational education vary considerably across regions and institutions, indicating that employability is shaped not only by individual competencies but also by programme structure and labour-market conditions.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been widely recognized as a psychological resource supporting employability development. Ubago-Jimenez et al. (2024) report that students with higher emotional intelligence tend to demonstrate stronger academic performance and better emotional regulation in learning contexts. Similarly, Li et al. (2024) find that emotional intelligence is positively related to self-perceived employability among Chinese university students, particularly in competencies such as communication, teamwork, and self-management.

Career adaptability (CA) provides another important theoretical perspective for understanding the transition from education to employment. Rudolph et al. (2017) show through a meta-analysis that career adaptability is strongly associated with proactive career behaviours, including career planning and job-search activities. Chiesa et al. (2024) further demonstrate that individuals with stronger career adaptability are better able to adjust career goals and report higher levels of perceived employability. Together, these studies suggest that career adaptability plays an important role in connecting students' educational experiences with their career development processes.

The 2nd Step: Conceptual Synthesis

Based on the literature review, the key theoretical constructs related to student employability were identified and organized. This step applied a qualitative synthesis strategy to integrate findings across studies, allowing recurring dimensions and relationships to be systematically extracted and compared. Previous studies consistently highlight employability as a multidimensional capability shaped by educational experience, personal competencies, and psychological resources. In particular, emotional intelligence and career adaptability are frequently discussed as important factors influencing students' career development and readiness for employment.

By synthesizing the findings of prior research, this study integrates these constructs into a coherent conceptual perspective. Emotional intelligence reflects students' ability to perceive, regulate, and utilize emotions in learning and social interaction, while career adaptability represents individuals' capacity to plan, adjust, and respond to career-related challenges. These factors are considered important resources that may influence employability development.

The 3rd Step: Framework Development

After identifying the major constructs, a conceptual framework was developed to clarify the relationships among the variables. The framework was constructed based on measurable dimensions derived from validated instruments (EI, CA, and employability scales), ensuring consistency between theoretical constructs and empirical indicators. Employability is positioned as the outcome variable, reflecting students' readiness to enter and adapt to the labour market, while emotional intelligence and career adaptability are treated as key explanatory variables influencing employability development.

The framework specifies the directional relationships among variables and provides a basis for subsequent statistical testing. This conceptual structure provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the mechanisms through which personal capabilities contribute to employment readiness.

The 4th Step: Analytical Interpretation

Based on the conceptual framework, the study integrates and interprets empirical results concerning employability, emotional intelligence, and career adaptability. Quantitative findings were complemented by qualitative validation through two teacher focus groups (n = 17), where participants were purposively selected based on teaching experience, involvement in internship supervision, and familiarity with student career development. A semi-structured discussion guide was used, covering three key areas: (1) observed student difficulties in employability development, (2) feasibility of integrating EI and CA into existing curricula, and (3) constraints such as time availability and institutional support.

This analytical interpretation links statistical outcomes with practical implications, highlighting the role of emotional regulation, adaptive career planning, and experiential learning in shaping employability outcomes. The resulting framework provides a theoretical reference for future empirical studies on student employability development.

Research Results

The 1st objective is to describe the profiles of emotional intelligence (EI), career adaptability (CA), and employability among final-year vocational students in Henan and identify key dimensions for the Henan Vocational Employability Model (HVEM). From the research result, it was found that:

After data cleaning (removal of incomplete and patterned responses), 384 valid questionnaires from the six vocational colleges were retained for analysis. Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the student sample. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with a slight majority of male students. Just over half of the respondents reported a rural background, reflecting the intake profile of several colleges in the eastern and southern parts of Henan. Students were drawn from all six institutions in fairly comparable numbers, and the major fields were mainly engineering, manufacturing, information technology and

agriculture-related programmes, which are typical for higher vocational education in the province.

Table 1: Sample characteristics (N = 384)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	196	51.04
	Female	188	48.96
Place of origin	Urban	172	44.79
	Rural	212	55.21
Institution	Henan Institute of Technology	80	20.83
	Luoyang Vocational College	64	16.67
	Zhumadian Vocational & Technical College	54	14.06
	Xinxiang Vocational College	72	18.75
	Shangqiu Vocational College	56	14.58
	Anyang Vocational College	58	15.10
Major field (collapsed)	Engineering / manufacturing	142	36.98
	Information technology / management	98	25.52
	Agriculture / agri-processing	76	19.79
	Chemical / environmental engineering	68	17.71

On this basis, the sample can be regarded as broadly reflecting the main types of programmes and student backgrounds in higher vocational education in Henan Province, while still allowing comparisons across different institutional and regional contexts.

Table 2 summarises mean scores and standard deviations for the main EI, CA and employability dimensions. All scales used a five-point Likert format (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for EI, CA and Employability Dimensions (N = 384)

Construct	Dimension	Mean	S.D.
Emotional Intelligence	Self-emotion appraisal	3.62	0.61
	Others' emotion appraisal	3.55	0.64
	Use of emotion	3.78	0.59
	Regulation of emotion	3.49	0.67
Career Adaptability	Concern	3.71	0.63
	Control	3.58	0.66
	Curiosity	3.42	0.69
	Confidence	3.53	0.65
Employability	Knowledge application	3.68	0.58
	Teamwork	3.82	0.56
	Self-management	3.60	0.62
	Career planning	3.46	0.71

On average, students rated themselves moderately to moderately high on most dimensions. Teamwork and use of emotion showed the highest means, while curiosity and career planning were relatively lower. Internal consistency for the scales in this sample was satisfactory: Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.82 (curiosity) to 0.93 (employability total).

Exploratory factor analyses (principal-axis extraction, oblique rotation) were conducted separately for EI, CA and employability items. In each case, the expected four-factor structure was broadly supported. For example, EI items designed to tap regulation of emotion loaded strongly (0.63–0.81) on a single factor, with only minor cross-loadings. A similar pattern was observed for CA dimensions (concern, control, curiosity, confidence). These results confirmed that the eight EI and CA subdimensions from the dissertation could be treated as distinct building blocks when drafting the HVEM.

At the same time, the descriptive profiles suggested areas of relative weakness that would need particular attention in the model. Lower scores on curiosity and career planning, for instance, indicated that many students were less proactive in exploring labour-market options or in planning concrete steps beyond graduation. These patterns were taken as an empirical starting point for deciding which competences the HVEM should foreground.

The 2nd objective is to examine how different EI and CA dimensions contribute to core employability components in order to prioritise domains within the HVEM. From the research results, it was found that:

To address the second objective, multiple regression analyses were conducted with each employability component as a dependent variable and the eight EI/CA subscales as predictors. Standardised beta coefficients (β) for the main models are shown in Table 3. Only coefficients significant at $p < .05$ are reported.

Table 3: Standardised Regression Coefficients for Employability Components

Dependent variable	Key predictors (EI/CA)	β	p	R ²
Knowledge application	Use of emotion	.24	<.001	.31
	Regulation of emotion	.18	.002	
	Confidence (CA)	.21	<.001	
Teamwork	Others' emotion appraisal	.29	<.001	.34
	Regulation of emotion	.20	.001	
	Concern (CA)	.15	.014	
Self-management	Control (CA)	.27	<.001	.33
	Regulation of emotion	.19	.002	
	Confidence (CA)	.17	.006	
Career planning	Concern (CA)	.31	<.001	.36
	Curiosity (CA)	.22	<.001	
	Self-emotion appraisal	.13	.028	

Several patterns are noteworthy for the design of the HVEM:

Teamwork was most strongly predicted by others' emotion appraisal, indicating that students who reported being better at reading peers' feelings also felt more capable in collaborative situations. Regulation of emotion also made an additional contribution.

Self-management and knowledge application were closely linked to CA dimensions of control and confidence, suggesting that students who feel able to take charge of their decisions and to cope with challenges also see themselves as more able to manage tasks and apply what they have learned.

Career planning was dominated by concern and curiosity, with a smaller but significant effect of self-emotion appraisal. Students who think ahead, explore options and have some awareness of their own emotional responses seem more willing to plan their next steps.

In all four models, the combination of EI and CA dimensions explained around one-third of the variance in employability components ($R^2 = .31-.36$). This confirmed that EI and CA are not marginal, but central, elements of how students understand their own work-related capabilities.

On the basis of these findings, a first draft of the HVEM was specified around six core domains:

(1) Emotional self-awareness and regulation, emphasising recognition of one's own emotional states and strategies for managing frustration or stress during internships and early employment; Empathic communication in teams, focusing on reading others' emotions and adjusting communication in group tasks; (2) Career concern and forward planning, covering awareness of future possibilities, goal setting and concrete planning steps; (3) Career control and responsibility, emphasising decision-making, ownership of choices and persistence in the

face of setbacks; (4) Curiosity about local industries, encouraging exploration of different roles, technologies and workplaces in the Henan context; (5) Confidence in problem-solving, linking emotional regulation and adaptive behaviour in unfamiliar work situations.

Each domain was then mapped onto possible teaching or support activities (e.g. reflective exercises in internship preparation courses, scenario-based projects, guided labour-market exploration tasks). This draft structure was used as the basis for expert review.

The 3rd objective is to validate and refine the Henan Vocational Employability Model (HVEM) through expert review and teacher focus groups to ensure its relevance and feasibility for vocational colleges in Henan Province. From the research results, it was found that:

1. Expert Review

The five experts rated each proposed domain of the HVEM using the three-point Item-Objective Congruence scale. Table 4 summarises the mean IOC scores.

Table 4: Mean IOC Scores for Draft HVEM Domains (Expert Panel, n = 5)

Domain	Mean IOC
Emotional self-awareness and regulation	0.93
Empathic communication in teams	0.87
Career concern and forward planning	1.00
Career control and responsibility	0.93
Curiosity about local industries	0.73
Confidence in problem-solving	0.80

All domains reached the minimum threshold of 0.50. Experts agreed most strongly on the importance of career concern and forward planning, given the high turnover and uneven retention rates in Henan. Emotional self-regulation and career control were also seen as highly relevant and clearly defined.

The relatively lower IOC for curiosity about local industries reflected two concerns that emerged in written comments:

(1) Some experts felt that curiosity was partly covered under career concern; (2) Others pointed out that opportunities to explore different industries vary greatly between urban and rural colleges, so implementation would need careful adjustment.

In response, the model was revised in two ways. First, curiosity was no longer presented as a stand-alone domain, but folded into a broader “career exploration and industry awareness” domain that links concern, curiosity and concrete information-gathering activities. Second, examples of activities were differentiated for colleges with stronger and weaker industry connections (e.g. on-site visits versus virtual company tours or alumni talks).

2. Teacher Focus Groups

The revised HVEM was then discussed in two teacher focus groups (total of 17 teachers). Table 5 summarises key themes and the resulting adjustments to the model.

Table 5: Selected Teacher Feedback and Model Adjustments

Theme from teacher discussion	Implication for HVEM	Adjustment made
Internship stress is the most visible point where EI problems show	EI work should be integrated into internship courses	Added “emotional debriefing” activities to EI domain linked to pre- and post-internship modules
Rural students lack information about non-local job options	Career concern and exploration need explicit scaffolds	Included step-by-step career planning tasks and simple labour-market mapping tools
Time in existing curricula is very tight	New content should build into existing modules	Reframed domains as “infused” elements in core courses rather than separate stand-alone subjects
Teachers feel unsure how to teach EI explicitly	Need for practical tools rather than abstract labels	For each domain, added 2–3 concrete classroom strategies and simple reflection questions

Overall, teachers confirmed that the six domains captured issues they regularly observe among students. They particularly recognised emotional self-regulation and teamwork as problematic areas during internships and group projects. However, they stressed that any model would remain rhetorical unless accompanied by workable teaching ideas that fit into packed timetables.

Consequently, the final version of the HVEM was reorganised into three clusters, each including several domains and indicative practices:

Cluster A: Emotional Resources for Work-Based Learning

(1) Emotional self-awareness and regulation; (2) Empathic communication in teams; (3) Sample practices: short weekly reflection logs during internships, role-plays on conflict situations, peer feedback on group communication.

Cluster B: Career Adaptability for School-to-Work Transition

(1) Career concern and forward planning; (2) Career control and responsibility; (3) Career exploration and industry awareness (combining curiosity with concrete information-seeking); (4) Sample practices: guided goal-setting worksheets, small projects mapping local and non-local job opportunities, simple action-plan templates for the first year after graduation.

Cluster C: Confidence and Institutional Support

(1) Confidence in problem-solving; (2) Supporting structures at college level (e.g. mentoring, career guidance, links with enterprises) that help students practise and reinforce the above competences; (3) Sample practices: problem-based learning tasks linked to real company cases, small group coaching sessions, and joint activities with enterprise mentors.

To provide a concise overview for practitioners, the main elements of the final HVEM are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Overview of Final Henan Vocational Employability Model (HVEM)

Cluster	Domain	Main focus in practice
A	Emotional self-awareness and regulation	Recognising feelings, managing stress in study and work
A	Empathic communication in teams	Reading others' cues, adjusting communication in groups
B	Career concern and forward planning	Thinking ahead, setting realistic short- and mid-term goals
B	Career control and responsibility	Taking ownership of choices, persisting with plans
B	Career exploration and industry awareness	Learning about jobs and sectors in and beyond Henan
C	Confidence in problem-solving	Tackling unfamiliar tasks, drawing on support when needed
C	Institutional support mechanisms	Mentoring, guidance and partnerships that anchor the model

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings show that the HVEM is grounded in students' actual EI, CA and employability profiles, and has been iteratively adjusted in light of the practical knowledge of experts and frontline teachers. The final model thus offers a compact but operational framework that vocational colleges in Henan can adapt when designing courses, internship preparation and support services aimed at strengthening students' vocational adaptability and future employment prospects.

The New Body of Knowledge

This study adds a context-specific layer to employability research by turning Emotional Intelligence and Career Adaptability into a workable vocational adaptability model for Henan, rather than treating them as loose background variables. It shows, empirically, which EI and CA dimensions matter most for key employability components, and reshapes them into three practice-oriented clusters that fit typical vocational teaching and internship settings. Through expert and teacher validation, the Henan Vocational Employability Model (HVEM) also

demonstrates how abstract constructs can be translated into concrete activities under real timetable and resource constraints, offering a portable framework for provincial-level vocational reform (Figure 1).

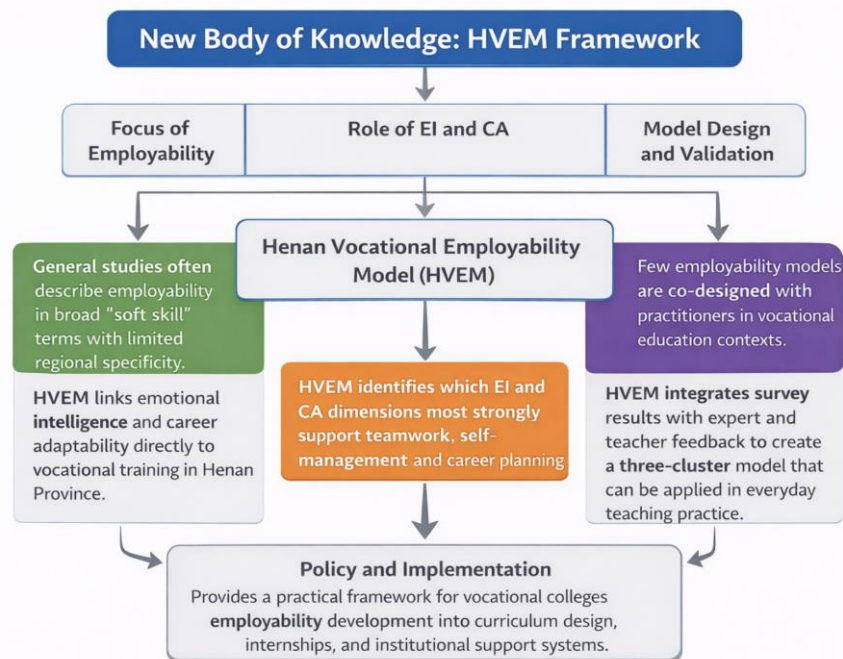


Figure 1: Henan Vocational Employability Model (HVEM) as the New Body of Knowledge

Discussion of Research Results

From the research result of the 1st objective, it was found that final-year vocational students in Henan Province generally demonstrated moderate to relatively high levels of emotional intelligence, career adaptability, and employability, although certain dimensions such as curiosity and career planning appeared comparatively weaker. The results suggest that students possess basic interpersonal and emotional competencies, but may still lack proactive exploration and long-term career awareness. This is because emotional intelligence helps individuals understand and regulate emotions in academic and collaborative environments, which supports learning effectiveness and interpersonal interaction in educational contexts. This finding is consistent with the concept, theory, and research work of Ubago-Jimenez et al. (2024), who reported that emotional intelligence contributes to students' academic engagement and performance through improved emotional management and self-concept.

From the research result of the 2nd objective, it was found that career adaptability dimensions—especially concern, control, curiosity, and confidence—showed strong relationships with employability components such as knowledge application, teamwork, self-management, and career planning. Compared with emotional intelligence, career adaptability appeared to play a more direct role in shaping students' perceived employability and readiness for the labour market. This is because career adaptability reflects individuals'

capacity to anticipate career tasks, make decisions, and adjust behaviour in response to changing work environments. This finding is consistent with the concept, theory, and research work of Rudolph et al. (2017), whose meta-analysis demonstrated strong associations between career adaptability and employability outcomes.

From the research result of the 3rd objective, it was found that the Henan Vocational Employability Model (HVEM) was refined through expert review and teacher feedback and organised into practical clusters linking emotional resources, career adaptability, and institutional support. The model reflects both established theoretical constructs and the practical realities of vocational education in Henan Province. This is because employability development is strongly influenced by learning experiences and institutional practices that support students' participation in work-related activities and career preparation. This finding is consistent with the concept, theory, and research work of Jackson et al. (2024), who emphasised that employability skills are gradually developed through structured learning activities, internships, and engagement with real workplace contexts.

Conclusion

This study developed and tested the Henan Vocational Employability Model (HVEM), which integrates Emotional Intelligence and Career Adaptability into vocational training. Based on survey data from six higher vocational colleges and feedback from teachers, the study identified a three-part structure consisting of emotional intelligence, career adaptability, and integrated learning activities connected to workplace situations.

The results showed that career adaptability plays the strongest role in perceived employability, while emotional intelligence mainly supports planning, persistence, and problem-solving. Overall, the HVEM provides a practical and context-sensitive framework that reflects the labour market conditions and student characteristics of Henan Province, offering a useful reference for vocational colleges seeking to strengthen students' long-term employability rather than focusing only on initial job placement. At the policy level, the model may serve as a reference for provincial authorities, such as the Henan Provincial Department of Education or vocational education administrative bodies, in developing quality assurance standards, curriculum guidelines, and school-enterprise cooperation mechanisms.

Suggestions

From the results of the research, the researcher has the following suggestions:

1.The suggestions from the research

From the research result of the 1st objective, it was found that vocational students in Henan generally demonstrated moderate levels of emotional intelligence, career adaptability, and employability, but certain aspects such as curiosity and career planning were relatively weaker. Therefore, the related institutes should apply as follows: vocational colleges should

integrate structured activities that develop emotional awareness and career exploration into existing professional courses and internship preparation modules.

From the research result of the 2nd objective, it was found that career adaptability dimensions—especially concern, control, curiosity, and confidence—played a significant role in students' employability development. Therefore, the related institutes should apply as follows: vocational colleges should strengthen curriculum components that encourage career planning, decision-making, and problem-solving, such as project-based learning, career planning workshops, and guided labour-market exploration activities.

From the research result of the 3rd objective, it was found that the Henan Vocational Employability Model (HVEM) provides a practical framework integrating emotional resources, career adaptability, and institutional support within vocational education. Therefore, the related institutes should apply as follows: vocational institutions and educational administrators should adopt the HVEM as a guideline for curriculum design, internship preparation, and career guidance services in order to strengthen students' long-term employability and adaptability to labour market changes.

2. The suggestions for future research

2.1 Future studies should examine the long-term impact of the HVEM on graduates' employment outcomes, such as job stability, career progression, and workplace adaptability.

2.2 Comparative studies could be conducted across different provinces or vocational institutions to explore whether the HVEM framework is applicable in other regional and institutional contexts.

2.3 Future research should combine quantitative surveys with classroom observation, employer evaluation, and longitudinal tracking in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of vocational employability development.

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