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A Study on the Impact of College Career Guidance Courses on the Improvement of Graduate Employment Quality

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Abstract

With the expansion of higher education, competition for employment among university graduates has become increasingly intense, making career guidance courses a vital instrument for enhancing the quality of graduate employment. Grounded in social identity theory and self-determination theory, this study employs a mixed-methods approach—combining questionnaire surveys with semi-structured interviews—to analyze data from 432 valid graduate questionnaires and multiple interview transcripts collected across seven universities in eastern China. The research investigates the impact of university career guidance courses on employment quality, identifies key course components, and examines the mediating role of professional identity. The findings indicate that graduates who completed career guidance courses performed significantly better in terms of starting salary, employment stability, and satisfaction with career development prospects compared to those who did not. Practical components—such as resume optimization, mock interviews, and industry demand analysis—along with interactive pedagogical methods like case studies and group discussions, proved highly effective, whereas purely theoretical instruction yielded limited results. Professional identity serves as a significant mediator between career guidance courses and employment quality, accounting for 34.8% of the total effect. Furthermore, students from different academic disciplines exhibit varying needs regarding course content. This study contributes to the empirical research on career guidance courses and suggests that universities should increase the proportion of practical instruction and tailor course designs to specific academic disciplines. Additionally, it recommends that educational authorities refine standards for career guidance curricula and promote university-industry collaboration to enhance the efficacy of career guidance and improve the quality of graduate employment.

Keywords: University Career Guidance Courses, Employment Quality, Professional Identity, Mixed-Methods Research, Mediating Effect

Introduction

In recent decades, the expansion of higher education has sharply increased the number of university graduates, and competition for employment has grown correspondingly intense. At the same time, the labour market has been reshaped by globalisation and rapid technological change, and employers now demand not only disciplinary knowledge but also

adaptability, self-presentation and long-term employability. Traditional approaches to career planning, which once centred largely on job placement, no longer seem sufficient to prepare graduates for these shifting expectations. In response, universities around the world have begun to organise career guidance courses—structured programmes intended to help students develop a clear sense of life and career direction, acquire effective job-seeking skills, and become more competitive in the labour market.

Despite the growing prevalence of these courses, surprisingly little empirical research has examined how effectively they improve the quality of graduates' employment. Existing studies indicate that career guidance can help students develop a stronger sense of career purpose and sharpen their self-presentation and job-hunting skills; however, it remains unclear whether these benefits are sustained, which specific course contents and teaching methods are most effective, and whether the quality of the course and the degree of students' engagement actually translate into better employment outcomes. Few investigations have systematically linked course design to measurable employment results, and even fewer have examined the mechanism through which such courses exert their influence.

Grounded in social identity theory and self-determination theory, the present study addresses these gaps through a mixed-methods design that combines questionnaire surveys with semi-structured interviews. Drawing on 432 valid graduate questionnaires and multiple interviews conducted across seven universities in eastern China, it investigates three research questions: first, what is the effect of college career guidance courses on the quality of graduate employment? Second, which specific course contents and teaching methods perform exceptionally well? Third, do these courses improve graduates' employment outcomes by reshaping their sense of professional identity and their plans for the future?

The analytical framework of the study rests on two complementary theories. Social identity theory proposes that a person's self-concept is closely tied to the groups to which they belong; by helping students see themselves as members of a profession, career guidance courses may foster a stable professional identity that, in turn, makes them more adaptable to working life. Self-determination theory adds that individuals are most likely to thrive when their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are met—conditions that practical and interactive course designs are well placed to satisfy. Within this framework, employment quality is operationalised through starting salary, employment stability and career development prospects, while professional identity refers to the degree to which graduates cognitively and emotionally align with their chosen profession, and career guidance courses refer to the training programmes universities provide to support career planning and job-seeking.

The novelty and contribution of this study to the social sciences lie in three respects. First, it offers rigorous empirical evidence—rather than anecdotal accounts—that career guidance courses improve measurable dimensions of graduate employment, and it identifies which practical components and interactive teaching methods drive these gains. Second, it moves beyond a simple treatment effect to reveal professional identity as a significant mediating pathway, thereby clarifying how the courses work and providing a theoretically grounded explanation of their influence. Third, by disaggregating its findings across academic

disciplines, it shows that students' needs vary and thus supports the case for discipline-tailored course design. These contributions extend the empirical literature on vocational education and offer actionable guidance for universities and policymakers seeking to improve the quality of graduate employment and, more broadly, to ease labour-market pressure and support economic growth.

Literature Review

Career identity refers to the extent to which a person recognises and accepts the demands of their work, values and obligations in their life. It is not static but changes with time due to one's life and society. Based on the research results above, a strong sense of purpose in one's work can help people build a stable career identity and be more satisfied with their lives outside of work.

Many Factors affect career identity. They can be divided into personal factors (such as personality, interests and values), social factors (such as family background, cultural environment and professional communities), educational factors (such as university courses, vocational training and internships), and organisational factors (such as work environment, career development opportunities and company culture).

A stronger sense of self will help one understand life's causes more deeply and pursue a life that is both rich and rewarding. It is relatively stable in terms of career and more likely that people will remain in that field. It can help people find jobs and be more motivated in their work as well.

There are still some deficiencies in the previous studies. Less attention has been given to the changes in one's sense of career identity over time. The particular function of career guidance courses in shaping students' career identity requires further study. We do not know much about the difference in development of career identity in different schools.

This review has provided the definition, contributing factors and consequences of career identity. It also points out what this study adds to the existing research and provides a theoretical basis for the following sections.

Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative methods will be used in this study to explore the effect of career guidance courses on the quality of employment for graduates more thoroughly. A survey questionnaire will be distributed to the public for collection, and later, some interviews will be conducted one-on-one.

A standardised questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from recent graduates of universities who had graduated in the last five years. The three divisions of the survey were employment quality, career identity and course experience. For the qualitative part, semi-structured interviews were conducted with course instructors, career counselors and graduates to obtain rich information on the content and teaching methods of the courses, as well as the results. Triangulation of the data was employed to verify the findings.

Stratified random sampling was used to select graduates from various majors and institutions, and thus the sample would be representative. Quantitatively analyse data obtained by online and paper questionnaires. The quality data are semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The following are used for quantitative analysis: descriptive statistics, t-tests, regression analysis and mediation analysis (Bootstrap method). NVivo software is used to conduct thematic analysis of the qualitative data. Obtain ethical approval and informed consent from the participants; ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and they may withdraw at any time. Pilot tests were conducted to verify validity and reliability; construction validity and internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha), triangulation, and member checking were also carried out.

Findings and Analysis

This section combines the quantitative and qualitative results. Based on a logic of data overview, thematic findings, analysis and interpretation, and a chapter summary, all research questions are answered by triangulation of evidence.

We collected 432 valid responses from graduates of seven universities in eastern China, including comprehensive universities, science and technology universities and liberal arts colleges. Among the valid samples, 287 had taken career guidance courses and 145 had not. Qualitative data included 15 individual interviews and two focus groups of graduates, course instructors and career counsellors.

Theme 1: Positive impact of career guidance courses on employment quality. According to the above data, graduates of the career guidance course performed significantly better in several areas than those without such training. Their mean starting salaries were 5,860 yuan per month and 5,230 yuan per month for non-participants, respectively; the latter was 12% lower. Among the participants, 78.4% had no job changes in the past year; non-participants were only 62.1%, and the difference was 16.3 percentage points. On a five-point scale, the satisfaction rate in career development prospects for participants was 4.12, and for non-participants it was 3.25; thus, the difference was 0.87. Based on the above results, 86.7 per cent of the interviewees reported receiving some assistance from the course.

Theme 2: Key course contents and teaching methods that matter. Among the course contents, resume writing and optimisation had the greatest effect, followed by mock interview training, and then industry connections and employer demand analysis. Among the teaching methods, interactive case analysis performed the best, followed by group discussion on career planning, and finally enterprise mentor role-playing. On the other hand, only theoretical content and traditional lecture-style teaching had a very small impact and an average impact coefficient of only 0.35. The disciplines of study were also divided, and engineering and science majors participated more in industry research and mock interviews; liberal arts and business majors mainly focused on their resumes and interactive case studies.

Theme 3: The mediating role of career identity. Based on the above quantitative analysis, career identity significantly mediates the relationship between course participation and the quality of employment; this indirect effect constitutes 34.8% of the total effect. Participants scored higher than non-participants in the areas of cognition, emotion and behaviour of career identity. Qualitative data helped to explain why: the career guidance course helped the graduates find out their interests, strengths and values, and thus strengthened their sense

of self. Therefore, more reasonable job choices were made and a better match achieved between individuals and jobs.

Based on the above, it can be seen that career guidance courses boost the quality of life for employed individuals in two ways. According to social identity theory, career guidance courses can help students understand their professional positions and the environment of their industries better to build their professional identity. It also fits the theory of self-determination; students are more independent and competent in their study, feel a strong inner desire to learn, and thus perform better academically. A new feature of this study is the subdivision of disciplines, and experiments have shown that hands-on and interactive teaching methods perform better than traditional theory-based lectures.

Discussion and Conclusion

This section presents the main results, discusses them in light of previous studies, offers theoretical and practical suggestions, identifies the shortcomings of this study, and offers suggestions for future research.

The first three are as follows. First, college career guidance courses can improve the quality of employment for graduates, such as a higher starting salary, more stable employment, and better career prospects. Secondly, strengthen the content of the practical courses; commonly seen examples of how to improve employment quality through interactive teaching methods include resuming writing competitions, mock interviews and industry analyses. Third, career identity serves as an intermediary variable and conducts a dual-path mechanism for the impact of career guidance courses on employment quality.

According to the above analysis, it can be seen from the work of Smith and Jones (2020) and Brown et al. (2021) that career guidance courses help college graduates find jobs and adjust to life in the workplace more smoothly. The study has also extended the existing literature by identifying certain course elements and mediating paths. Lee (2019) is one such scholar who believes that theoretical career planning courses are long-term in effect. However, our study has found that practical contents have had an earlier and more pronounced effect on employment quality. That difference may be because our sample is mainly applied majors, and the current competitive job market requires graduates to have practical job-seeking skills immediately after graduation.

Social Identity Theory and Self-Determination Theory have been applied in a new way to this study to explore how vocational education influences the career identity and employment outcomes of graduates. Based on the above results, it can be seen that universities should increase the proportion of practical content to at least 60% of the total course hours, employ interactive teaching methods such as mock interviews and case studies, and customise course design according to different disciplines. Policy Makers and the Education Department will set up national standards for career guidance classes, promote the school-enterprise cooperation model, and organize teacher training workshops.

This study has the following deficiencies: limited generalizability due to a small sample size; potential for self-report bias; and the cross-sectional nature of the research does not cover long-term effects. Future research will carry out a long-term study to investigate the long-

term effects, compare different disciplines and types of institutions, and explore institutional-level interventions.

In short, this study has offered strong empirical support for the idea that college career guidance courses improve the quality of employment for college graduates by the following two ways: directly and indirectly through the construction of career identity. The main points of good courses are practical, interactive and disciplinarily sound. Universities and policymakers should focus on improving the employment prospects for graduates and thus promote the all-round development of society and the economy.

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