Value Orientations of the "Delayed Employment" Cohort of Hebei College Graduates and Their Impact on Long-Term Employment Quality

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ABSTRACT

We have now investigated the backward college graduates living in Hebei Province, under what circumstances, what values they have and what impact they have on the quality of their work. In this study, questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview are used. We collected 1724 valid questionnaire and 20 samples of in-depth interviews from the graduates of the representative universities in Hebei Province from 2022 to 2025. The statistical results show that graduates who do not work in Hebei Province can be roughly divided into four categories. That is, those who are actively looking for jobs, those who are studying for exams, those who are looking for jobs in a free form, and those who have a little rest. The most people are those who are actively looking for jobs and those who are studying for exams. Graduates have a clear tendency to like stable jobs. Under the expectation of their families, more than half of the people give priority to the work of government or public institution. There are great differences in the choice of delaying employment among graduates with different academic qualifications and different family economic conditions. Furthermore, while the employed group has relatively high satisfaction with their current jobs, they generally lack confidence in long-term career development. This study clearly depicts the overall picture of the delayed employment group in the region and can provide data reference and practical basis for employment guidance in Hebei Province universities and the formulation of local employment policies.

Keywords: Slow Employment; College Graduates; Value Orientation; Employment Quality; Hebei Province

1. INTRODUCTION

With the number of college graduates increasing year by year and the job market becoming increasingly competitive, delayed employment has become a common phenomenon among young people. Hebei Province has a large number of college graduates, and influenced by factors such as preparation for further education, civil service exams, and traditional family values, the number of people experiencing delayed employment in the province is constantly expanding. However, targeted regional empirical research is still relatively lacking. Conducting this research will not only fill the gap in regional studies and enrich local theories related to youth employment, but also provide a reference for universities to improve employment guidance services and for local governments to formulate employment support policies, helping graduates achieve fuller and higher-quality employment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The domestic academic community's research on "slow employment" of college graduates has gradually emerged along with the rising employment pressure and the craze for postgraduate and civil service examinations. In terms of conceptual definition, Wang Yiliang (2023) understands "slow employment" as a "temporary non-employment" state in which graduates delay employment by taking the form of study tours, postgraduate entrance examinations, civil service examinations , etc. [1]; Xiao Hongxin (2023) emphasizes that "slow employment" graduates set up an employment buffer period for themselves and improve themselves in various ways [2]; Xu Ming et al. (2024) further pointed out that the "slow employment" group does not reject employment itself, but only realizes life experience and ability accumulation through transitional activities [3]. In terms of classification, Huang Shaocheng et al. (2024) divided "slow employment" into "proactive" and "passive" types based on subjective will [4]; Li Juanjuan et al. (2023) divided it into "waiting", "avoidance" and "superiority" types based on employment attitude [5]; Zhao Xiaoyun and Tang Lina (2026) further subdivided it into four types based on the motivational dimension (proactive-passive) and developmental outcome dimension (positive-negative) of individual behavioral decision-making: proactive-proactive, proactive-negative, passive-proactive, and

passive-negative [6]. From the perspective of causal analysis, Jiang Bo et al. (2025) found in empirical research that achievement motivation is significantly positively correlated with employment value orientation, but negatively correlated with career adaptability and employment ability, indicating that graduates with lower achievement motivation are more likely to fall into a state of slow employment [7]. At the mechanism level, existing studies have revealed how behavioral attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control work together to influence graduates' slow employment decisions based on the theory of planned behavior. Among them, the subjective norms formed by family and society are important external factors that cause graduates to have a wait-and-see attitude towards employment. In recent years, domestic research has moved beyond mere description of phenomena and has gradually delved into deeper issues such as employment values, career development, and employment quality, proposing differentiated employment assistance strategies. Recent studies have further examined the causes, group characteristics, and governance pathways of slow employment from the perspectives of local universities, private universities, full employment, and post-2000 college students [10-14]. Other studies have proposed targeted intervention and support strategies from the perspectives of solution-focused approaches, classified assistance, career planning, and the governance of employment difficulties [15-18, 22]. Meanwhile, scholars have also examined the profiles of slow-employment students, career decision-making processes, specific graduate groups, and the relationship between employment values and the intention to choose slow employment [19-21, 23]. However, overall, research still focuses on macro data or individual university cases, with relatively insufficient regional empirical characterization at the provincial level.

Foreign studies have focused on the transition from school to workplace earlier. Eurofound (2012, 2016) proposed the analytical framework of "NEET" (Not in Education, Employment or Training) to describe the youth group aged 15 to 29 who have neither received education nor participated in employment and training. In the policy discourse of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union, NEET is regarded as an important indicator for predicting the risk of social exclusion of youth [8] [9]. In terms of conceptual distinction, foreign scholars place the occupational uncertainty of youth during the transition period in the "threshold space" for examination, emphasizing that the NEET group has high heterogeneity and can be divided into different types such as "vulnerable NEET" who lack skills or encounter external obstacles and "opportunity seekers" who postpone employment due to insufficient market matching. Through the actual investigation, the research in the world shows that delayed employment will have adverse effects on people's long-term wage. Recent studies using self-determination theory have found that career aspirations do not directly reduce graduates' social withdrawal behavior. Just accumulating human capital is not enough to improve the state of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Only when knowledge and skills are transformed into the ability to solve problems will people's feelings of avoiding be greatly reduced. Research on employability and career transition has also highlighted the role of higher education in facilitating students' transition from university into the labor market [24]. Generally speaking, the results of the theory survey related to the world can be used as a reference for understanding the phenomenon of delayed employment in China.

The summary of the above documents shows that the influence of local culture, industrial structure and institutional environment on the employment decision of college graduates has not attracted enough attention. In addition, there are few summaries of large samples based on provinces. The new contribution of this paper is as follows. Firstly, taking Hebei Province as the analysis unit, using large sample questionnaires and in-depth interviews, this paper summarizes and describes the demographic characteristics, structural types, values orientation and behavior patterns of the local slow-employment group, and describes the local population. Secondly, through the mixed-methods research design, it reveals the differences in the internal quality of slow employment and its mechanism for long-term employment quality, which provides empirical evidence for implementing local youth employment policies in different ways.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND SURVEY OVERVIEW

The research uses a mixed research approach. Combining questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview, the field research was conducted twice. At the same time, the overall macro-level situation and everyone's micro-level motivation are considered to confirm the integrity of the data and the reliability of the research conclusions.

3.1 Research Design and Implementation will be carried out in stages from December 2024 to November 2025.

This approach not only balances the overall situation, but also considers everyone's motivation, ensuring the integrity of data and the reliability of conclusions. Participants in the survey are university graduates of Hebei Province. Select 8 representative universities covering the fields of comprehensive science, engineering, teacher training, finance and economics, and medical treatment. Among them are Hebei University, Yanshan University and Hebei Normal University.

The survey was conducted twice. For the first time, taking the graduates from 2022 to 2024 as the object, we collected 244 valid questionnaire by stratified sampling and snowball sampling, and conducted an in-depth interview with 20 representative participants. The second time was to distribute Questionnaires to the 2025 graduates who have not found jobs online, and collected 1480 valid Questionnaires. The total number of valid questionnaire is 1724, and the data of interview is 20. The survey is divided into six parts: demographic characteristics, employment status, value orientation, job-seeking behavior, employment quality, and service needs. In the interview, the psychological motivation, influence from family and future work plan of slow-employment group were mainly investigated. Data processing was performed using SPSS 27.0, employing descriptive statistics, cross-analysis, reliability and validity testing, factor analysis, and other methods to process quantitative data. Meanwhile, interview data was analyzed using coding methods to achieve mutual complementarity and verification between quantitative and qualitative analyses.

3.2 Questionnaire reliability and validity testing

The reliability and validity of the 13 items in the questionnaire from the first phase of the survey were tested. The reliability analysis results (see Table 1) show that the overall Cronbach ‘s α coefficient of the questionnaire is 0.910, indicating that the scale has excellent internal consistency.

Table1. Reliability Statistics.

Kronbach Alpha	Number of items
0.910	13

Validity was tested using exploratory factor analysis. The KMO sampling suitability measure was 0.913, and the approximate chi-square value of the Bartlett’s test of sphericity was 1487.793 (df = 78), with a significance $P < 0.001$ (see Table 2), indicating that the data were very suitable for factor analysis.

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett’s Test.

KMO sampling suitability measures	0.913	
Bartlett’s sphericity test	Approximate Chi-square	1487.793
	Degrees of freedom	78
	Significance	<0.001

Principal component analysis was used to extract factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, resulting in three factors. The cumulative variance explained was 63.577%, and the factors were rotated using the method of maximum variance. After removing items with cross-loading values greater than 0.4, the remaining seven items formed a clear three-factor structure. Based on the item content, the three factors were named stability and security orientation, development achievement orientation, and environmental multivariate orientation, respectively. All factor loadings were greater than 0.5, and there were no significant cross-loadings, indicating that the questionnaire has good construct validity.

Table 3. Rotated component matrix.

Measurement items	Stability and security orientation	Development Achievement Orientation	Environmental pluralism
6. Job stability and security	0.798	0.172	0.313
6. Salary and benefits level	0.833	0.274	0.237
6. Social prestige and status	0.109	0.757	0.262
8. The definition of “success” is diverse and is not limited to stable employment.	0.049	0.726	0.260
7. I’d rather spend more time finding the “perfect” job.	0.229	0.252	0.654

Table 3. (continued) Rotated component matrix.

Measurement items	Stability and security orientation	Development Achievement Orientation	Environmental pluralism
7. I am willing to accept the risk of having no income temporarily.	0.180	0.218	0.719
8. My parents/relatives expect me to work within the system.	0.230	0.265	0.600

The second phase of the questionnaire consisted mainly of factual choices and state classification items. Since most items were nominal or ordinal variables, they were not suitable for reliability and validity testing. The analysis of this part of the data primarily employed frequency statistics and cross-analysis. The basic distribution characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 5 below.

Based on the comprehensive testing and statistical analysis of the two-stage questionnaire, the first-stage scale demonstrated good reliability and construct validity, while the second-stage data effectively supported descriptive statistical analysis. The following section will systematically characterize the current situation of delayed employment among college graduates in Hebei Province, based on the aforementioned sample data.

4. STATISTICAL DESCRIPTION OF BASIC SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

This study uses a phased mixed study design to statistically describe the characteristics of the samples in the first and second phases respectively.

4.1 Sample characteristics

In the first phase, 244 valid questionnaires were collected. The demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 4. Regarding gender, there were 147 females and 97 males, with females significantly outnumbering males. In terms of graduation year, 125 were from the class of 2024, 78 from 2023, and 41 from 2022, indicating that the sample primarily consisted of graduates from the last two years. Parents' education levels were mainly high school/junior college, junior college, and bachelor's degree, and their annual family income was primarily concentrated in the range of 50,000 to 200,000 yuan, indicating that most respondents came from middle-income families.

Table 4. Sample distribution in the first stage (N=244).

Variable	Category	Frequency (People)	Percentage (%)
gender	male	97	39.75
	female	147	60.25
Graduation year	Class of 2022	41	16.80
	Class of 2023	78	31.97
	Class of 2024	125	51.23

In the second phase, a total of 1,480 valid questionnaires were collected, all of which were from 2025 graduates who had not yet found employment. The sample distribution is shown in Table 5. In terms of educational background, 844 students have associate degrees, 542 have bachelor's degrees, and 95 have master's degrees or above. Associate and bachelor's degrees combined account for 93.58% of the sample, forming the main body. Regarding gender, 839 are female and 641 are male, with females slightly outnumbering males. In terms of academic disciplines, 247 are engineering, 195 are science, 193 are management, 167 are medicine, and 152 are economics, accounting for 64.46% of the total. Philosophy, history, and agriculture each account for less than 2%, indicating a concentration of applied disciplines such as science, engineering, medicine, management, and economics. Regarding place of origin, 896 are from rural areas, 354 are from county towns, and 230 are from cities, with rural students making up the vast majority. In terms of family economic situation, 1049 are from ordinary families, 329 are from families with general financial difficulties, and 102 are from families with special difficulties such as those registered as impoverished, receiving minimum living allowances, or in extreme poverty.

Families with financial difficulties (including those with general and special difficulties) account for 29.12% of the total, meaning nearly 30% of students face varying degrees of economic pressure.

Table 5. Second-stage sample distribution (N=1480).

Variable	Category	Frequency (People)	Percentage (%)
Education	Associate Degree	844	56.96
	Undergraduate	542	36.62
	Postgraduate and above	95	6.42
gender	male	641	43.31
	female	839	56.69
discipline	Engineering	247	16.69
	Neo-Confucianism	195	13.18
	Management	193	13.04
	medicine	167	11.28
	economics	152	10.27
	Other (including law, literature, education, etc.)	526	35.54
Place of origin	rural areas	896	60.54
	county seat	354	23.92
	City	230	15.54
Family economic situation	ordinary family	1049	70.88
	Families with general financial difficulties	329	22.23
	Families facing special difficulties (registered impoverished households/ those receiving minimum living allowances /those in extreme poverty)	102	6.89

4.2 Two-stage sample location and comparison

The first phase sample primarily consisted of graduates from 2022 to 2024, covering eight representative universities in Hebei Province. While the sample size was relatively small, its structure was balanced, and it was mainly used to deeply explore the value orientations and decision-making mechanisms of the slow-employment group. The second phase sample focused on 2025 graduates who had not yet found employment. With a larger sample size and broader coverage, it was mainly used for macro-level profiling and status distribution analysis. The two phases of samples have different focuses in terms of survey subjects, sample size, and functional positioning, together forming the data foundation of this study. From a key characteristic perspective, the second phase sample showed a higher proportion of graduates from vocational colleges, rural areas, and applied disciplines, indicating that these groups constitute the main body of those unemployed after graduation and are also the key targets for subsequent employment assistance.

5. CURRENT STATUS AND CLASSIFICATION STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SLOW-EMPLOYMENT GROUP

Based on survey data from the second phase of the study of unemployed graduates, the “slow employment” group is categorized into four types: actively seeking employment, preparing for exams, flexibly seeking employment, and taking a break. The following analysis examines their overall distribution, type characteristics, educational background, and differences in family economic status.

5.1 Overall State Distribution

The survey results (see Table 6) show that among the 1,480 unemployed graduates, the highest proportion (703 people, 47.5%) are actively seeking employment. This includes 584 people "currently looking for work" and 119 people "who have left their jobs and are now seeking employment again," indicating that nearly half of the unemployed graduates are actively seeking full-time positions. The second largest group (436 people, 29.5%) are preparing for exams, reflecting a significant trend of "delayed employment" through postgraduate entrance exams, civil service exams, and other similar options. The third group (275 people, 18.6%) are engaged in flexible employment, working in temporary jobs such as food delivery, ride-hailing, short-term part-time work, and freelancing, while still searching for more ideal positions. The fourth group (66 people, 4.4%) is in a "resting" state, the smallest proportion, indicating that the vast majority of graduates are actively seeking employment rather than passively waiting.

Table 6. Distribution of Unemployed Graduates After Leaving School (N=1480).

State type	Subdivision status	Frequency (people)	Percentage of the sample (%)
Active job seeker	Looking for a job	584	39.5
	Resigned and seeking employment	119	8.0
	Subtotal	703	47.5
Exam preparation type	Preparation for postgraduate entrance exams/ civil service exams/civil service exams	436	29.5
Flexible employment	Flexible employment/temporary work	275	18.6
Repair type	Employment is not being considered at this time.	66	4.4
total		1480	100.0

5.2 Description of the characteristics of different types of slow-employment groups

1. Proactive job seeker

The job seekers are highly motivated and proactive. Over half submitted more than six resumes, and 81.8% participated in interviews. Their predicament manifests as a dual squeeze of "skill anxiety" and "opportunity scarcity." Their employment preference is primarily for government-affiliated positions, while remaining open to the internet and emerging industries.

2. Exam Preparation Type

Using "competition avoidance" as a strategy, job hunting was significantly delayed, with 32.3% not submitting resumes and 40.4% never having an interview. The perception of intense competition was strongest, while anxiety about insufficient skills was moderate. Employment intentions were highly focused: 73.8% preferred civil service/public institution positions, 47.9% favored social service roles, and the willingness to pursue market-based positions was below 14% for both. Essentially, this represents a strategic delay in employment.

3. Flexible employment type

They are in temporary employment, actively seeking interviews, but conservative in submitting resumes. They face the dual dilemma of "self-doubt" and "path dependence." Their career intentions are highly market-driven, with 36.6% expressing interest in emerging industries and 33.0% in the internet/information technology sector, both the highest among the four categories.

4. Trimmed type

Despite representing the smallest proportion, they face systemic difficulties. Their "comprehensive perception of hardship" is significantly higher than other groups. Their contradictory job-seeking behavior—" low application submissions, high interview submissions"—reflects a cautious strategy after setbacks. Their employment intentions lean towards technology-

driven fields, with a lower willingness to work within the system, and a preference for re-entering the job market based on skills.

5.3 Differences in the status of slow employment among graduates with different educational backgrounds

The cross-analysis results show (see Table 7) that educational level is closely related to the status of slow employment.

Undergraduate graduates exhibit a significant "further education and government-affiliated career orientation," with 53.7% choosing to prepare for exams, representing the absolute majority; 36.1% actively seek employment, while only 7.9% opt for flexible employment. This indicates that undergraduates are more inclined to seek career paths through further studies or entering the government system.

Associate degree graduates exhibit characteristics of "market entry and transitional employment," with the highest proportion (54.5%) actively seeking employment and the highest proportion (26.2%) opting for flexible employment, significantly higher than other educational groups; only 13.2% are preparing for exams. This reflects that associate degree graduates tend to enter the labor market directly, using flexible employment as a transition.

Graduates with master's degrees or above are in a dual-track state of "seeking high-level jobs and preparing for exams in parallel". 50.5% are actively seeking jobs, 35.8% are preparing for exams, and the lowest is flexible employment, accounting for 11.6%. This indicates that while this group is seeking high-quality positions, they still have a strong desire to enter the system or continue their studies.

Table 7. Distribution of Slow Employment Status among Graduates with Different Educational Backgrounds (%).

Educational level	Active job seeker	Exam preparation type	Flexible employment	Repair type	total
Associate degree (N=844)	54.5	13.2	26.2	6.1	100.0
Undergraduate (N=542)	36.1	53.7	7.9	2.3	100.0
Postgraduate degree or above (N=95)	50.5	35.8	11.6	2.1	100.0

5.4 Differences in the slow employment status of graduates from different family economic backgrounds

Household economic conditions have a significant impact on the distribution of slow employment status (see Table 8). From registered poor/ low-income /extremely poor families (especially those with special difficulties), to families with general difficulties and ordinary families, a continuous spectrum is presented, showing "a decreasing proportion of flexible employment and an increasing proportion of those preparing for exams".

Students from families facing extreme financial hardship are forced to enter the job market earlier due to economic pressure. The highest percentage of these students actively seek employment, followed by those seeking flexible employment, while the lowest percentage choose to prepare for exams. Their employment choices are clearly driven by short-term livelihood needs, with a greater inclination to enter the labor market directly, even if it's through flexible employment, to earn income as quickly as possible.

Students from generally disadvantaged families are relatively evenly distributed in terms of their circumstances, with the highest proportion actively seeking employment. Those seeking flexible employment and those preparing for exams fall between families with special difficulties and ordinary families, reflecting a transitional choice between immediate employment and long-term development.

Students from ordinary families have a stronger economic buffer, with the highest proportion actively seeking employment, followed by those preparing for exams, and the lowest choosing flexible employment. Their significantly higher proportion of those preparing for exams indicates that this group has the resources to make longer-term investments in human capital; meanwhile, direct employment remains their primary choice.

Table 8. Distribution of Slow Employment Status among Graduates from Different Family Economic Backgrounds (%).

Family economic situation	Active job seeker	Exam preparation type	Flexible employment	Repair type	total
Families facing special difficulties (N=102)	48.0	15.7	29.4	6.9	100.0
Families facing general financial difficulties (N=329)	52.3	23.1	20.7	3.9	100.0
Typical families (N=1049)	45.8	33.1	16.8	4.3	100.0

5.5 Summary

In summary, the phenomenon of "slow employment" among college graduates in Hebei Province is no longer an isolated case; it is highly differentiated. Examination preparation and flexible implementation are two main forms. One is to seek stability in the system, and the other is a transitional approach that conforms to the reality of the market. Education and family economic status have great influence on the choice of slow employment. It's easy for students from ordinary families to choose "delayed employment" to prepare for the exam. On the other hand, graduates from vocational college and students from economically disadvantaged families either go to the market early or choose flexible employment. Because of these differences, employment services should not use the method of "one-size-fits-all" approach, but should provide accurate help according to everyone's situation.

6. ANALYSIS OF GRADUATES' VALUE ORIENTATION, JOB-SEEKING BEHAVIOR, AND EMPLOYMENT QUALITY

Based on the descriptive statistics and classification of slow employment status just mentioned, this chapter further focuses on the employment values, job-seeking behavior characteristics, and employment quality of the already employed group. Here, we will find out how values affect the decision of slow employment and what are the behavioral differences of each group.

6.1 Analysis of Employment Value Orientation

Based on the factor analysis results of 244 samples in the first phase, the employment value orientation of graduates can be summarized into three dimensions: stability and security orientation, development and achievement orientation, and environmental diversity orientation. The scores and recognition levels of each dimension are shown in Table 9.

Table 9. Scores of each dimension of employment value orientation (N=244).

Dimension	mean	Standard deviation	Example of a question
Stability and security orientation	4.21	0.67	Job stability and security, salary and benefits, and parents' expectations for working within the system.
Development Achievement Orientation	3.98	0.72	Career development opportunities, alignment with personal interests, and the pursuit of a perfect job
Environmental pluralism	3.85	0.69	Work location and environment, social prestige, and the definition of success are diverse.

The results show that graduates have the highest level of agreement with the orientation towards stability and security, significantly higher than the other two dimensions. This explains, from a value perspective, why "exam preparation" has become the mainstream choice—stability and security are the core demands of graduates.

Meanwhile, the second phase of macroeconomic data further confirmed this conclusion: as many as 58.04% of unemployed graduates chose public administration positions such as civil servants and public institutions as their first choice for career path, while only 6.69% were willing to try the platform gig economy (see Table 10).

Table 10. Career Direction Preferences of Unemployed Graduates (N=1480).

Career direction	Number of people selected	Percentage (%)
Civil servants/public institution staff and other public administration positions	859	58.04
Social service positions such as education, medical care, and health services	621	41.96
Internet/software development/big data and other information technology positions	352	23.78
Finance/legal/business services and related positions	298	20.14
Emerging industries such as short videos/live streaming/content creation	186	12.57
Jobs in advanced manufacturing industries such as smart manufacturing and industrial internet	174	11.76
Platform gig economy jobs (food delivery/ ride-hailing, etc.)	99	6.69

6.2 Job-seeking behavior analysis

The job-seeking behavior of unemployed graduates exhibits a typical characteristic of "high willingness, weak action." Survey data (see Table 11) shows that graduates have a high average score in agreeing with the desire to "find a job as soon as possible." However, in terms of specific behaviors, the agreement on actively submitting resumes is very low, with 32.86% of graduates having an ambiguous attitude; nearly 60% of graduates submitted 10 or fewer resumes, with 17.7% submitting none; regarding interview participation, 77.09% of graduates have participated in interviews, with 30.13% having participated in more than 3. However, 22.91% have never participated in an interview, this group mainly concentrated on those preparing for exams or those seeking respite.

Table 11. Job Seeking Intention and Behavior Scale Scores (N=1480).

Questions	Mean	Percentage of Agreement (%)
Hoping to find a job as soon as possible	4.18	72.16
Clear understanding of future job and industry direction	3.74	34.81*
Actively search for job information	3.92	—
Adjust your resume according to job requirements.	4.02	—
Start actively submitting resumes	3.68	32.86*

Cross-analysis (see Table 12) shows a significant divergence in job-seeking behavior among the four groups: the proactive job seeker is the most active, with a high degree of match between job-seeking intentions and behavior; the flexible employment group has the highest interview participation, but their resume submissions are relatively conservative, reflecting their steady "job hunting while working" strategy; the test preparation group's job-seeking behavior is significantly delayed, with job-seeking activities basically suspended during the test preparation period; and the adjustment group exhibits a contradictory characteristic of "low submissions, high interviews," which may stem from a cautious adjustment after multiple setbacks.

Table 12. Comparison of Job-Seeking Behaviors of Graduates in Different Statuses (%).

State type	0 copies submitted	Send 1-5 copies	Send 6 or more	Never interviewed	1-2 interviews	More than 3 interviews
Active job seeker	12.3	35.5	52.2	18.2	48.5	33.2
Exam preparation type	32.3	47.2	20.5	40.4	42.2	17.4
Flexible employment	8.0	44.4	47.6	8.0	54.9	37.1
Repair type	15.1	35.1	49.8	18.9	36.2	44.9

6.3 Analysis of the employment quality of the employed group

Based on the employed sample from the first phase, the quality of their employment was analyzed (see Table 13). Employment quality was measured from both objective indicators and subjective feelings.

Objective employment quality data shows that: monthly income is mainly concentrated in the range of 3,001-5,000 yuan and 5,001-7,000 yuan; 66.67% of employees have paid all five social insurances and one housing fund, 14.58% have paid some, and 18.75% have not paid any; the term of labor contracts is mainly 1-3 years and indefinite.

Subjective employment quality results show that the job-to-major/interest match and satisfaction scores are relatively high. However, the average score for “whether the current job is helpful for long-term career development” is low, with only 58.33% believing it is “helpful” or better, significantly lower than the match and satisfaction scores. This indicates that employed graduates are reasonably adaptable to their current positions, but generally hold reservations about their long-term development value.

Table 13. Employment Quality Indicators for Employed Groups (N=48).

Index	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Monthly income	3000 yuan and below	6	12.50
	3001-5000 yuan	20	41.67
	5001-7000 yuan	15	31.25
	7001-9000 yuan	5	10.42
	More than 9001 yuan	2	4.16
Five social insurances and one housing fund	Pay in full	32	66.67
	Partial payment	7	14.58
	No payment	9	18.75
Long-term development assistance	Helpful (4-5 points)	28	58.33
	Average (3 points)	12	25.00
	Not very helpful (1-2 points)	8	16.67

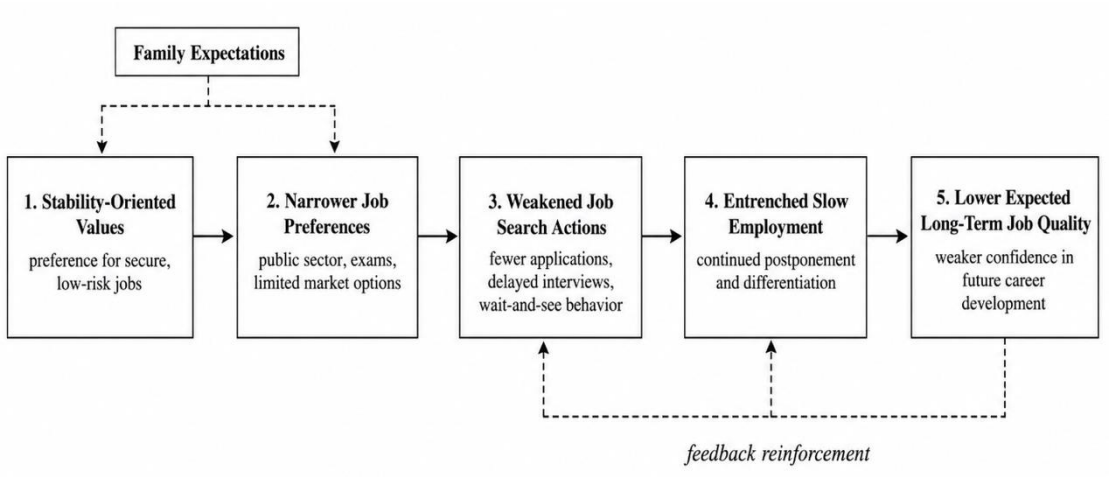

Figure 1. Mechanism of the relationship between slow employment value orientation, job-seeking behavior and long-term employment quality.

As shown in the figure 1, the internal mechanism of the formation and continuation of slow employment among graduates is as follows: Under the combined influence of family expectations and the value orientation of stable security, graduates' job choices gradually concentrate on low-risk positions such as civil servants and public institutions, correspondingly narrowing the market-based job search space. If the work preference becomes stronger, the job-hunting behavior will become weaker. Slow employment will last for a long time and is prone to differences in the form of insufficient resumes, late interviews and increased actions to observe the situation. At the same time, people who have worked lack confidence in their long-term career, which makes unemployed graduates eager to have a "high-quality start", thus forming an interactive cycle between slow employment and long-term employment quality expectations.

6.4 Comprehensive Discussion

To sum up, the slow employment situation of Hebei Province university graduates can be seen from three aspects: value, behavior and results. In terms of value, graduates like stable jobs, and more than half of them will prefer government-affiliated jobs. Under the pressure of family expectation, "exam preparation" became the right choice. In action, there is a "brake of action": although I want to work strongly, I will postpone the application and interview first. Those who are preparing for the exam give up looking for a job, while those who are looking for a freelance job "wait while working". This different action consolidated the slow employment situation. From the results, people who have jobs have no confidence in long-term development, and those who have no jobs will have a stronger "uncompromising" mood.

Finally, backward employment is not a passive escape. Under the restriction of specific value and reality, graduates choose their own answers. To guide backward employment to good employment, we need to solve their value desire, insufficient skills and growth anxiety.

7. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

In order to make up for the deficiency of quantitative analysis, this study conducted in-depth interviews with 20 typical slow-employment graduates. Through the analysis of coding and theme, their value logic, behavior strategy and structural difficulty are revealed, which supplements and deepens the results of quantitative research.

7.1 Interview Design and Sample Overview

Based on the data of the initial stage of this survey, this paper analyzes four points: unemployment status, value orientation, professional background and reasons for unemployment, ultimately identifying 20 respondents (S01-S20). Among them, 5 were from junior colleges, 13 from bachelor's degrees, and 2 from master's degrees; 11 from humanities and social sciences, 7 from science and engineering, and 2 from economics and management; 13 were preparing for exams, 3 were actively seeking employment, 2 were in flexible employment, and 2 were employed or transitioning to entrepreneurship. The sample covers the main groups and is highly representative.

Table 14. Basic Information Statistics of Respondents (N=20).

Serial Number	Education	Professional Categories	Place of Origin	Slow Employment Status
S01	Associate Degree	Construction Engineering	Baoding, Hebei	Employed (with family arrangements)
S02	Undergraduate	Business Administration	Yuncheng, Shaanxi	Preparing for the civil service exam while simultaneously seeking employment.
S03	Undergraduate	Veterinary medicine	Shijiazhuang, Hebei	Full-time postgraduate entrance exam preparation for the second time
S04	Undergraduate	Animal Science	Shijiazhuang, Hebei	Full-time preparation for the second attempt at postgraduate entrance exam, with a Plan B
S05	Associate Degree	Mechanical manufacturing	Chengde, Hebei	Entrepreneurial Exploration Phase
S06	Undergraduate	English	Tianjin	Full-time student preparing for postgraduate entrance exam (second attempt, switching majors)
S07	Undergraduate	economics	Yongzhou, Hunan	Government internship + civil service exam preparation
S08	Undergraduate	Clinical Medicine	Zhangjiakou, Hebei	Full-time postgraduate entrance exam preparation, supplemented by civil service exam preparation
S09	Undergraduate	computer	Hebei	Full-time preparation for civil service/public institution recruitment exams
S10	Undergraduate	School of Mathematics and Physics	Xingtai, Hebei	Full-time postgraduate entrance exam preparation, no job preparation
S11	Undergraduate	Film and television photography	Liaoning	I have secured a job within the system (pending signing of a contract).
S12	Undergraduate	Industrial Automation	Baoding Hebei	Actively seeking employment (has had brief work experience).
S13	Undergraduate	Business Administration	Hebei	Government internship + simultaneous job search
S14	Undergraduate	Applied Statistics	Hebei	Taking the postgraduate entrance exam twice and starting a business in parallel
S15	Undergraduate	Applied Statistics	Baoding, Hebei	Taking the postgraduate entrance exam for the second time, planning to seek employment after the exam.
S16	Undergraduate	Accounting	Handan, Hebei	Focus on civil service exams, with job hunting as a secondary option.
S17	master	literature	Cangzhou, Hebei	Full-time preparation for civil service/public institution recruitment exams (second attempt)

Table 14. (continued) Basic Information Statistics of Respondents (N=20).

Serial Number	Education	Professional Categories	Place of Origin	Slow Employment Status
S18	Undergraduate	Chinese Language and Literature	Zhangjiakou, Hebei	Full-time preparation for the civil service exam (second attempt)
S19	Associate Degree	Legal Affairs	Xingtai, Hebei	Government internship + civil service exam preparation
S20	Associate Degree	Legal Affairs	Handan, Hebei	Full-time market-based job seeking

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured outline via telephone, averaging 25 minutes in length, and were recorded in their entirety, resulting in a text database of approximately 150,000 words. A thematic analysis method was employed, following a three-tiered process of open-ended coding, axial coding, and selective coding, systematically coding all 20 interview samples to saturation and extracting core categories.

7.2 Coding System and Thematic Structure

After systematic coding, a total of 52 initial concepts were extracted, integrated into 12 subcategories, and finally summarized into 4 core themes. The coding structure is detailed in Table 15.

Table 15. Interview Topic Coding Structure.

Core Theme	Subcategories	Initial concept	Frequency of mention (N=20)
Value orientation: Preference for institutional stability	Obsession with the System	"As long as you pass the exam, that's fine."	16
		"Most stable employment"	
	Internalization of family expectations	"Parents want stability."	14
		"The whole family's expectation"	
	Risk aversion tendency	"I dare not work for a private company."	12
		"Fear of layoffs"	
Decision-making logic: Strategic delay and adaptive confusion	Rational planning type	There is a way out.	6
		"The plan is clear"	
	Passive and confused type	"I don't know what I can do."	10
		"Take it one step at a time"	
	Path adjustment type	"After failing to be recruited into the military, I turned to job hunting."	4
		"Failed the postgraduate entrance exam, turned to civil service exam"	
Structural barriers: Professional-market mismatch	Narrowing of professional employment	There are no jobs for liberal arts graduates.	14
		"Mismatch between major and job"	

Table 15. (continued) Interview Topic Coding Structure.

Core Theme	Subcategories	Initial concept	Frequency of mention (N=20)
Systemic gaps: Employment support disruptions	Information fragmentation	"Information is too scattered" "Cannot find the recruitment portal"	13
	Lack of internship experience	"Resume lacking highlights" "Lack of practical experience"	15
	Lagging guidance from universities	"We don't have any experience to share this year."	9
	Lack of tracking of students leaving school	"No one will care about me after graduation."	8
	Difficulty in verifying job information	There are many fraudulent companies online. "Afraid of making a mistake"	7

7.3 Core Theme Analysis

Interviews revealed that "stability" was the core demand of respondents when choosing a career, with a clear institutional focus: government jobs, positions in public institutions, state-owned enterprises, and teaching. Sixteen out of 20 respondents have this preference. After further investigation, it is found that this kind of stable mood is the result of the combination of family expectations, comparison with classmates and feelings of risk. The path chosen by students has produced a sample effect, and the widespread anxiety about market work has intensified the civil servants' yearning for work. In particular, the "government obsession" is very noticeable among liberal arts students. They think that the value of liberal arts knowledge in the market is not high, and civil service exams is the "most suitable" road. Through interviews, it was found that there were differences in some slow-employment groups. Most of the 30% people are "people who make plans rationally". They think that slow employment is for future strategic investment, and they are also considering alternative plans while studying for exams. The remaining 50% people are "passive and confused people", and their job-hunting activities are backward, and they have neither job-hunting skills nor preparatory plans. In addition, about 20% people belong to the "road adjustment type", because of unexpected things like falling into postgraduate entrance exams, they have no choice but to change their direction and are not prepared. This difference is similar to the difference between "exam learning type" and "adjustment type" in quantitative analysis, which shows that the judgment is an important factor to judge whether slow employment is smooth or not.

Respondents generally believe that their unemployment is a structural reason for their helplessness, which is mainly manifested in three aspects: mismatch between professional supply and market demand, scattered information and access barriers, and insufficient internship experience. The first is the mismatch between professional supply and market demand: the number of positions in humanities and basic sciences is limited, but the number of graduates is too much and the competition is fierce. Second, information and access barriers: recruitment information is distributed on various company websites, public accounts, and recruitment platforms, and there is no unified portal, so graduates can systematically grasp the opportunity information. Third, the lack of internship experience has caused the dilemma of not being able to prove their abilities: 15 respondents admitted that the lack of high-quality internship experience has led to their resumes being "no bright spot" and being at a disadvantage in the selection process. These three dilemmas are intertwined, which makes graduates fall into a vicious circle of "inability to get information → poor opportunities".

Respondents generally have a poor evaluation of the employment support services of universities and society. There are two big problems: "delay" and "interruption". The so-called lateness means that some universities will hold employment briefings only after graduates leave campus, which is of no real help to those who are about to graduate now. Interruption

means that after graduation, students lose contact with the university and can't get continuous support. Many interviewees said: "After graduation, no one asked them about themselves." As a result of this interruption, students who are troubled by not finding a job become more isolated. Especially those who can't take the initiative and feel confused about the future, the risk of long-term unemployment may be even greater.

7.4 Typical Type Profiles

Based on three dimensions—decision quality, goal clarity, and alternative solutions—respondents can be categorized into three typical types. The "goal-focused" type focuses solely on exam preparation, resulting in high-quality decisions but concentrated risk. The "rational planning" type designs alternative solutions while preparing for the exam, demonstrating strong risk resistance. The "passive and confused" type lacks clear planning and alternative solutions, and is the group most in need of targeted assistance. Details of the characteristics of these three types are shown in Table 16.

Table 16. Typical Types of Slow Employment.

Type	Decision Quality	Target Clarity	Alternative Solutions	Representative of The Interviewees
Goal-focused	high	Clear	none	S19
Rational planning type	high	Clear	have	S04
Passive and confused type	Low	Vague	none	S11

7.5 Integration of qualitative findings and quantitative results

In-depth interviews and quantitative analysis form an effective triangular corroboration. At the value level, "stability first" verifies the conclusion that "stability security orientation" scored the highest; at the group differentiation level, "rational planning type" and "passive confusion type" correspond to the differences in job-seeking behavior and perception of difficulties between "exam preparation type" and "rest and adjustment type"; at the structural barrier level, the interview findings of "weak professional matching," "fragmented information," and "lack of internships" are highly consistent with the quantitative attribution; at the systemic absence level, the guidance lag and lack of follow-up revealed by the interviews explain the high proportion of "employment service needs."

In summary, delayed employment is an adaptive response of graduates to structural constraints and a lack of support, under the guidance of stable values. Those who rationally plan may transform this into human capital investment, while those who passively feel lost face the risk of long-term unemployment. This finding provides a basis for categorized interventions.

8. RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Research Conclusions

This study systematically characterized the scale, structure, value orientation, job-seeking behavior, and employment quality of college graduates in Hebei Province who are slow to find employment through a large-sample questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews, and drew the following main conclusions.

First, delayed employment has become a significant phenomenon among college graduates in Hebei Province, exhibiting high internal differentiation. Among the 2025 graduates who have not yet found employment, the highest proportion are actively seeking employment, followed by those preparing for exams, while those seeking flexible employment or taking a break are fewer. This indicates that "delayed employment" encompasses various forms such as "actively delaying," "passively waiting," and "transitional employment." Furthermore, academic qualifications and family economic conditions are key variables; undergraduate students and students from ordinary families are more inclined to prepare for exams and "delay employment," while vocational college students and students from disadvantaged families enter the job market earlier or choose flexible employment.

Second, graduates' employment values exhibit a "stability and security priority" characteristic, with a strong preference for positions within the system and a path dependence. Factor analysis shows that the score for stability and security orientation is significantly higher than other dimensions. More than half of the unemployed graduates choose civil service

or public institutions as their first choice. In-depth interviews also reveal that this preference is the result of a combination of family expectations, peer comparisons, and risk aversion. Liberal arts students, in particular, are trapped in a path dependence of "weak professional matching—obsession with the system—multiple rounds of exam preparation," with some having prepared for the exam for more than two consecutive years.

Third, job-seeking behavior exhibits a significant breakpoint of "high willingness, weak action," with marked differences in behavioral strategies among groups. Although most graduates hope to find employment as soon as possible, their actual actions lag behind. Those preparing for exams completely halt their job search, those seeking flexible employment "work while waiting," and those taking a break display a contradictory characteristic of "low applications, high interviews." This gap between willingness and action forms the behavioral basis for the continued slow employment .

Fourth, the occurrence and persistence of slow employment is the result of both structural difficulties and systemic deficiencies, rather than individual apathy. Attribution analysis shows that 46.28% of graduates believe they lack professional skills or practical experience, 30.38% report a scarcity of jobs, and 23.88% lack internship experience. Interviews also reveal a triple obstacle: a mismatch between professional supply and market demand, fragmented information, and a lack of internships. Meanwhile, university career guidance suffers from both lag and discontinuity, collectively creating a negative cycle.

Fifth, people who have already worked have no confidence in their long-term career growth, which is also the reason why the idea of "no compromise" will not disappear. Because they are uneasy about the quality of the starting point, graduates who have no jobs should wait for the "better solution" instead of accepting jobs that can be obtained immediately but can't see the future. The "get a job first" approach with no growth prospect can not reduce slow employment well.

Sixth, everyone's situation in the group of slow employment is very different, and the idea and quality of decision-making are important factors to distinguish the final result. Through the investigation and interview data, those who work in a planned way think that slow employment is a strategic investment in the future, and they are also considering other methods while studying the exam. The group that always feels confused is slow to find a job and is not prepared to deal with sudden things. The road adjustment group is those who have to change their work direction because of unexpected things. Therefore, the response to slow employment needs to be carried out in different ways according to everyone's decision-making ability and risk level.

8.2 Countermeasures and Recommendations

Based on the above conclusions, this study gives systematic suggestions from three levels: a student, higher education institutions and government and society.

1. Individual student level

Students should use the career assessment tools by themselves to clarify their importance and good things. It's not good to just chase after postgraduate or civil service exams like everyone else. Students who explicitly decide to prepare for these exams must also make a "market-oriented employment contingency plan". In case I failed in the exam, I made a clear decision on my job-hunting plan and what to do. At the same time, I supplement my own experience in internship and lack of skills, and use online courses and school resources to obtain basic skills micro-certificates. Expand your job choices in this way, and don't just rely on a framework.

2. Higher education institutions level

First, create hierarchical files and dynamic management mechanism for slow employment. Through questionnaire and counselor's evaluation, students who plan to apply for jobs are separated from students who are passive and have difficulties. Support according to the difference of each student, and assign a dedicated career mentor to the latter students. Secondly, deepen the integration of industry and education, correct the shortage of practice, promote embedded courses and short-term practice, and start vocational education from the second and third years of college. The third is to increase employment support after graduation, establish a tracking mechanism, and continue to follow up students who have not found jobs for 6 to 24 months after graduation, and do a good job introduction and psychological counseling. Fourthly, it is necessary to accurately transmit employment information, establish a labeled employment information database, summarize school resources, introduce jobs suitable for students of liberal arts and vocational college, and narrow the information gap.

3. Government and social levels

First, implement classified employment support policies. Grant social security and internship subsidies to the graduate of disadvantaged families to undermine the locking effect of flexible employment. For those who are preparing for civil service exams, introduce the market-oriented positions before and after the examination results are published, and guide them to consider other plans. Provide one-on-one career counseling and psychological support for those who need to regroup. Next, we will create a provincial-level dynamic monitoring and early warning platform for "slow employment". Summarize the data of student status and social security, track the employment situation within 24 months after graduation, start the three-color early warning system of "red", "orange" and "yellow", do a good job in tiered recommendations for job training, telephone interview and one-on-one assistance. Third, optimize job supply and information integration, publish the "Catalogue of Young Talent Demand in Strategic Emerging Industries" and establish a provincial employment information aggregation platform. To reduce the cost of finding a job, the fourth is to strengthen the construction of the employment market environment and the guidance of consciousness, crack down on false recruitment information, spread various professional values through media and parents' workshop, and alleviate the anxiety that "only permanent position is right".

8.3 Research Limitations and Prospects

This study has the following limitations: First, sample covers eight representative universities of Hebei Province, but does not include all types of universities, so its repetition is second. Because employment quality analysis can't track the long-term career development of slow-employment group vertically according to cross-sectional data, there is a causal relationship. Finally, the sample size of in-depth interviews is relatively small, and some types of representativeness may not be enough. In the future, research will expand the coverage of sample and conduct comparative studies across multiple provinces. You can use the longitudinal tracking design to continue to observe the long-term career development trajectory of low-scale production groups. Explore the relationship structure between slow employment and mental health, social adaptation and other variables to create a more perfect youth employment support system providing empirical evidence.

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