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Factors Affecting the Employability of Final-Year Undergraduate Students in Kunming, China

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Abstract

Purpose: The study examines the key determinants influencing the employability of final-year undergraduate students at Yunnan Technology and Business University, Kunming, China. This research integrates multiple theoretical frameworks and empirical literature to construct a comprehensive model that explores the impact of communication skills, academic performance, social mobility skills, and general attitude on graduates' employability. **Research design, data and methodology:** The study employed a quantitative approach with a multi-stage sampling technique to ensure a representative sample across four majors. The primary data collection instrument was a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, validated through expert assessment and a pilot test to ensure reliability. 360 completed questionnaires were analyzed to test the proposed hypotheses and explore the causal relationships between the identified factors and graduate employability. **Results:** The research findings confirmed that Communication Skills, Academic Performance, Social Mobility Skills, and General Attitude significantly influence the employability of final-year undergraduate students. The results demonstrated substantial effects of these factors on graduates' workforce readiness, reinforcing their critical role in preparing students for labor market integration. **Conclusions:** The empirical findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to enhance academic training, career development programs, and skill-building initiatives that address labor market expectations.

Keywords: Employability, Final-year Undergraduate Students, Communication Skills, Academic Performance, Social Mobility Skills

JEL Classification Code: A22, D91, E24, I23, J20

1. Introduction

The employability of university graduates has become a critical issue in China's evolving labor market. Amid rapid industrial transformation and persistent youth unemployment, graduates are increasingly expected to demonstrate not only academic knowledge but also a diverse range of soft and technical skills to secure sustainable employment (The Economist, 2024; Zhou, 2024). Final-year undergraduate students at Yunnan Technology and Business University in Kunming face multiple challenges securing employment, including increasing competition, shifting employer expectations, and technological advancements. In addition, economic fluctuations and a continued mismatch between university curricula and labor market demands have further exacerbated the employment difficulties faced by Chinese graduates (Li & Yang, 2022; Zhang & Zou, 2013).

Yunnan Technology and Business University, a regional private institution, has recently introduced employability-related courses and implemented career development programs to bridge this skill gap. However, existing approaches face significant limitations regarding practical training opportunities and industry relevance. A preliminary

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evaluation was conducted to assess these shortcomings, identifying two major concerns: a lack of applied learning experiences and the insufficient development of essential soft skills such as communication and adaptability.

This study is grounded in the growing need to enhance students' transition from education to employment. The research problem addressed here is that, although higher education institutions are increasingly investing in employability initiatives, there remains a gap in understanding how specific factors—such as communication skills, academic performance, social mobility skills, and general attitude—contribute to final-year students' readiness for employment (Wan & Liu, 2024). Prior studies have often overlooked the transitional challenges unique to final-year students, particularly in the context of regional private universities in China (Zhang & Zou, 2013).

The significance of this study lies in its potential to support curriculum design and policy decisions at both institutional and provincial levels. By identifying key determinants of employability among final-year students, the study can help develop more targeted interventions that align graduate attributes with employer expectations (Li & Yang, 2022). This research focuses specifically on final-year undergraduate students because they represent a transitional group facing immediate pressure to secure employment. They are at a critical decision-making stage, and their career outcomes are directly influenced by their readiness and access to support mechanisms (Wan & Liu, 2024).

The main objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to examine the influence of communication skills, academic performance, social mobility skills, and general attitude on employability; (2) to analyze the causal relationships between these factors and workforce readiness among final-year students; and (3) to propose practical recommendations for enhancing employability-focused strategies in higher education. Therefore, identifying practical strategies to enhance the employability of final-year undergraduate students at Yunnan Technology and Business University has become a pressing concern that requires collaborative efforts from educators, policymakers, and industry leaders.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Communication Skill (CS)

Communication skills are widely acknowledged as a fundamental component of graduate employability, with numerous studies emphasizing their crucial role in the labor market. Heckman and Kautz (2012) highlighted that non-cognitive skills, particularly communication, are instrumental in enhancing teamwork, problem-solving, and professional interactions. Similarly, Robles (2012) identified communication skills as one of the top attributes sought by employers, reinforcing their significance in workplace effectiveness. The absence of strong communication skills has negatively impacted employment opportunities. Klaus (2010) argued that inadequate communication proficiency can be a major barrier to securing employment, advocating for enhanced communication training within educational institutions. Bridgstock (2009) further stressed that communication is a core employability skill, with employers prioritizing candidates who demonstrate strong interpersonal abilities.

Beyond traditional higher education contexts, solutions from business leadership and healthcare domains emphasize scenario-based training and simulation for communication development (e.g., Goleman, 2013; Leonard et al., 2004). Integrating these cross-sectoral practices into academic curricula could deepen students' ability to communicate in high-pressure, real-world environments.

Compared to prior studies that merely advocate communication importance, this research uniquely contextualizes it within the transition stage of final-year students—a demographic underexplored in employability literature—adding new insights into how last-year preparedness directly translates to workforce integration. Given these findings, the study proposed the following hypothesis:

H1: Communication Skills (CS) have a significant impact on Final-year Undergraduate Students' Employability (FUSE).

2.2 Academic Performance (AP)

Academic performance has traditionally been regarded as a key predictor of employability, with empirical evidence linking higher academic achievements to better employment outcomes. Yorke (2006) suggested that academic performance is a benchmark for employers to assess candidates' potential and work ethic, influencing hiring decisions. Similarly, Harvey (2001) argued that strong academic records are often associated with higher competency levels and preparedness for professional roles. Tomlinson (2008) emphasized that academic credentials function as a primary screening tool in recruitment processes, with employers favoring candidates with higher grades and strong academic backgrounds. Roth and Clarke (1998) also found that employers frequently use academic performance to indicate job-related capabilities, reinforcing its significance in employability assessments.

While academic achievement is often assumed sufficient for employability, models from engineering and technology education advocate for blended academic-industry metrics, such as capstone project performance or innovation outputs,

as better predictors (Chen et al., 2021). Incorporating such holistic measures in the current study provides a novel academic lens for assessing readiness.

Compared with existing studies that focus broadly on grade-based employability, this research contributes a differentiated perspective by isolating final-year performance and linking it with immediate employment prospects, providing theoretical and practical value for university assessment policies. Given this extensive body of research, the study proposed the following hypothesis:

H2: Academic Performance (AP) has a significant impact on Final-year Undergraduate Students' Employability (FUSE).

2.3 Social Mobility Skills (SMS)

Social mobility skills, including networking, adaptability, and professional relationship-building, enhance employability. Brown and Hesketh (2004) emphasized that graduates with well-developed social mobility skills are more adept at navigating labor market challenges, leading to improved employment prospects. Greenbank (2014) highlighted that social mobility skills enable graduates to access a wider range of job opportunities, increasing their employability potential. More recently, Smith et al. (2021) found that employers consider social mobility skills as a key factor in hiring decisions, as these skills demonstrate a candidate's ability to integrate into diverse professional settings. Furthermore, Tomlinson (2008) observed that employers often view social mobility skills as indicators of long-term potential and leadership capabilities.

The concept of social capital from sociology and career counseling fields introduces novel frameworks such as 'weak ties' theory and structured networking environments (Granovetter, 1973), that can be adapted to higher education to help students build access to wider professional opportunities. This interdisciplinary integration broadens the scope of employability models.

Compared to conventional employability literature that treats social mobility skills as soft skills, this study operationalizes them through final-year interventions, offering concrete, testable pathways for application and expanding the methodological contributions in student career-readiness studies. Based on this evidence, the study proposed the following hypothesis:

H3: Social Mobility Skills (SMS) have a significant impact on Final-year Undergraduate Students' Employability (FUSE).

2.4 General Attitude (GA)

General attitude, encompassing motivation, resilience, and adaptability, has been widely recognized as a key determinant of employability. Fugate et al. (2004) asserted that a positive attitude enhances employability by fostering adaptability and perseverance in job-seeking efforts. Similarly, Robinson and Stubberud (2014) found that employers highly value candidates with a proactive and positive mindset, as these traits often correlate with strong work ethic and collaboration skills. More recent studies have reinforced these findings. Jackson (2021) demonstrated that graduates with an optimistic and growth-oriented attitude are more likely to pursue continuous learning and professional development, enhancing their employability. Helyer and Lee (2020) also noted that a constructive general attitude improves job performance, enabling graduates to navigate complex work environments more effectively.

Emerging literature in clinical psychology and resilience training has explored interventions such as cognitive-behavioral techniques and growth mindset education (Dweck, 2006) to foster employability attitudes, practices which can be adapted into university curricula to improve mental readiness for job search challenges.

This study provides fresh empirical evidence by applying such principles specifically to final-year students, thereby contributing new theoretical and practical insights into how attitude-building can be timed and targeted for maximum workforce impact. These findings collectively supported the importance of general attitude in shaping employment outcomes, leading to the following hypothesis:

H4: General Attitude (GA) has a significant impact on Final-year Undergraduate Students' Employability (FUSE).

3. Research Methods and Materials

3.1 Research Framework

The researcher applied three theoretical models to develop the conceptual framework. The first model, proposed by Hosain et al. (2021), presents a comprehensive graduate employability model, incorporating academic performance, technical skills, personality traits, teamwork and communication, leadership and problem-solving skills, and motivational skills, all contributing to career readiness. The second framework, developed by Hossain et al. (2020), illustrates a three-dimensional employability skills model, encompassing social mobility skills, technical employability skills, and soft skills—key competencies for navigating the job market. The third model, from Abbas et al. (2021), introduces a multi-tiered framework, categorizing explicit and tacit knowledge, hard and soft skills, and key employability attributes, including professional attitude, ethics, and emotional stability. All three theoretical models support and contribute to the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1.

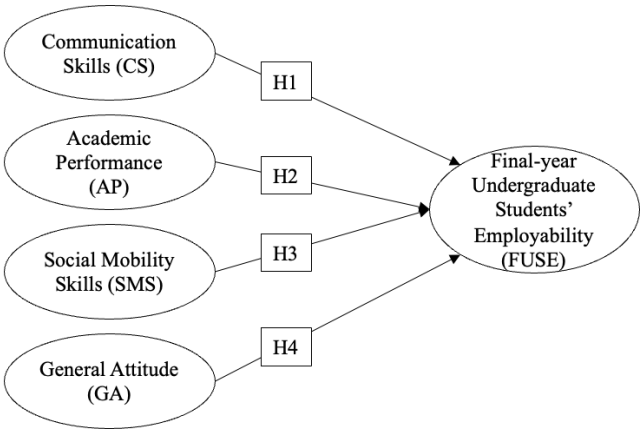

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3.2 Research Methodology

The research process comprised four stages. First, an initial survey was conducted with 360 final-year undergraduate students to collect data on the current levels of both the independent and dependent variables. Next, multiple linear regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses and identify significant relationships between the variables. In the third stage, known as the Intervention Design Implementation (IDI), a 12-week intervention program was implemented with 40 students to enhance their employability skills. Finally, a paired-sample t-test was conducted to compare the pre-IDI and post-IDI results and evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

3.3 Research Population, Sample Size, and Sampling Procedures

3.3.1 Research Population

This study selected 360 final-year undergraduate students from Yunnan Technology and Business University, Kunming, China, as the research population for the survey. With five independent variables identified in this study, the minimum sample size calculated was 70 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To mitigate potential issues of non-response or incomplete data, the sample size was set to 360. The total Yunnan Technology and Business University's student population in 2024 is approximately 18,000, and the research sample accounts for 2% of the overall student body.

The questionnaires were distributed through social media platforms such as WeChat and QQ, links to the survey hosted on "WENJUANXING", and all responses were collected and reviewed. After careful validation, 360 responses were confirmed as valid for analysis. This sample was chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing employability among final-year undergraduates and to ensure that findings are generalizable to the broader student population at Yunnan Technology and Business University.

3.3.2 Sample Size

A pilot survey was conducted with 40 randomly selected students to assess the reliability of the research instrument. Following the pilot test, 360 final-year undergraduate students from Yunnan Technology and Business University, Kunming, China, were identified as the research population. After data collection and validation, 360 valid responses were obtained.

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to further investigate the relationship between the independent variables (Communication Skills, Academic Performance, Social Mobility Skills, and General Attitude) and the dependent variable (Employability of Final-year Undergraduate Students). Additionally, 40 voluntary students were selected for participation in the Intervention Design Implementation (IDI) phase.

3.3.3 Sampling Procedure

The study employed a multi-stage sampling approach, as detailed below:

Sampling 1: Pilot Survey and Pilot Test

A total of 40 students were randomly selected to participate in the pilot survey. These students were asked to complete the questionnaire and provide feedback to ensure the instrument's reliability.

Sampling 2: Pre-Survey

360 final-year undergraduate students from diverse academic backgrounds were chosen for the pre-survey phase. The questionnaire was distributed in both printed and online formats. After data verification, 360 responses were confirmed as valid for further analysis.

Sampling 3: IDI (Intervention Design Implementation)

40 voluntary students were randomly selected to participate in the IDI phase to assess the impact of targeted interventions on employability outcomes.

3.4 Research Instruments

3.4.1 Questionnaire Design

The survey questionnaire was developed following a three-step process:

Identifying Questionnaire Sources: The initial questionnaire framework was adapted from three openly published studies: Amundsen and Martinsen (2015), Houghton and Neck (2002), and Neubert and Wu (2006).

Adjusting and Contextualizing the Questionnaire: The questionnaire was refined and tailored to suit the Chinese university student context, ensuring relevance to the research population at Yunnan Technology and Business

University.

Implementing the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC): A panel of independent experts assessed the questionnaire's validity using the IOC method.

3.4.2 Questionnaire Components

The questionnaire comprised three key sections. The first section featured screening questions designed to filter out respondents who did not meet the research criteria. The second section collected basic demographic information, including gender, age, birthplace, and other background details relevant to the study. The third section focused on pre-survey questions aimed at evaluating the current levels of the independent and dependent variables, thereby providing a baseline measure for 360 final-year undergraduate students.

3.4.3 IOC Results

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, five independent experts were invited to conduct the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) analysis. Among the experts, two were proficient Chinese professionals with significant experience in English instruction who translated the questionnaire and ensured its relevance to Chinese university students. The third expert, an experienced academic in entrepreneurship, assessed the questionnaire's alignment with the current conditions of Chinese university students. The remaining two experts were professors from the Faculty of Education, who evaluated the questionnaire from an educational administration perspective. Each expert rated the questionnaire items using the IOC scale: +1 (Congruent), 0 (Questionable), and -1 (Incongruent).

This IOC evaluation found that out of 18 items, no one was below the acceptable threshold of 0.5. Consequently, after the validity testing, the questionnaire retained 18 items.

3.4.4 Reliability and Validity

A structured questionnaire was used as a research instrument to measure the four independent variables and the dependent variable. The questionnaire was validated using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) and tested for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha. The pilot test results indicated high reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.7 for all variables as presented in Table 1 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 1: Pilot Test Result (n=40)

Variable	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Strength of Association
Communication Skills (CS)	4	0.843	Good
Academic Performance (AP)	3	0.786	Acceptable
Social Mobility Skills (SMS)	4	0.889	Good
General Attitude (GA)	4	0.736	Acceptable
Final-year Undergraduate Students' Employability (FUSE)	3	0.814	Good

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographic Profile

This study employed a stratified random sampling technique to ensure a representative sample of 2024 graduates from Yunnan Technology and Business University in Kunming, China. The data collection targeted four majors: Business Administration, Mechanical Engineering and Automation, Nursing, and Physical Education. Parents' education level and family's monthly income were included as demographic indicators to reflect students' socioeconomic background, which may influence their access to career resources, skill development opportunities, and overall employability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). 360 valid questionnaires were successfully collected, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic Profile

Entire Research Population (n=360)		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	104	28.9
	Female	256	71.1
Origin of Student	Rural	214	59.4
	Urban	146	40.6
Only Child	Yes	117	32.5
	No	243	67.5
Family's Monthly Income	Less than 2,000 yuan	15	4.2
	2,000 to 4,000 yuan	105	29.2
	4,000 to 6,000 yuan	188	52.2
	More than 6,000 yuan	52	14.4
Parents' Education Level	Primary School and Below	50	13.9
	Junior High School	72	20.0
	High School / Technical Secondary School	138	38.3
	Junior College	68	18.9
	Bachelor's degree or Above	32	8.9

4.2 Multiple Linear Regression

Multiple linear regression was conducted to assess the impact of the independent variables—Communication Skills (CS), Academic Performance (AP), Social Mobility Skills (SMS), and General Attitude (GA)—on the dependent variable, Final-year Undergraduate Students' Employability (FUSE). The analysis aimed to determine the significance and strength of these relationships, thereby validating the proposed hypotheses.

Table 3: The Multiple Linear Regression Results of CS, AP, SMS, and GA on FUSE

Variable	Standardized Coefficients Beta Value (β)	t-value	p-value	R	R^2
CS	0.163	3.374	<0.001	0.593	0.351
AP	0.324	6.064	<0.001		
SMS	0.170	3.562	<0.001		
GA	0.130	2.602	0.010		

Table 3 illustrates the relationships between the independent and dependent variables, Final-year Undergraduate Students' Employability (FUSE). The regression results indicated that the four predictors explained 35.1% of the variance (R^2=0.351, F(4,355)=48.1, p<0.001). Significant values (P <0.05) were found for all variables, suggesting that Communication Skills (CS), Academic Performance (AP), Social Mobility Skills (SMS), and general attitude (GA) had significant impacts on Final-year Undergraduate Students' Employability (FUSE). Among these, Academic Performance (AP) had the highest impact with a beta value of 0.324, while general attitude (GA) had the least impact with a beta value of 0.130. Thus, the results supported all four hypotheses.

Given these conditions and the results from the multiple linear regression analysis, the authors subsequently implemented the IDI test to evaluate the four hypotheses and analyzed the outcomes based on the following assumptions.

H5: There is a significant difference in Communication Skills (CS) between pre- IDI and post- IDI stages.

H6: There is a significant difference in Academic Performance (AP) between pre- IDI and post- IDI stages.

H7: There is a significant difference in Social Mobility Skills (SMS) between pre-IDI and post-IDI stages.

H8: There is a significant difference in General attitude (GA) between pre-IDI and post-IDI stages.

H9: There is a significant difference in Final-year Undergraduate Students' Employability (FUSE) between pre- IDI and post- IDI stages.

4.3 IDI Intervention Stage

The detailed design of the IDI Stage spanned 12 weeks. The IDI plan included the schedule, participants, purpose of the intervention, tools, and procedures outlined below in Table 4.

Table 4: IDI Timeline and Activities

No.	Time and Duration	Implementation Keywords
1	Week 1	Establish research group Define objectives SWOT analysis
2	Week 2 – Week 5	Develop theoretical foundation
3	Week 6 – Week 7	Emotional regulation and cognitive development
4	Week 8 – Week 9	Opportunity identification and practice
5	Week 10 – Week 12	Conduct interviews and summaries

4.4 Results Comparison between Pre-IDI and Post-IDI

Table 5 presented the results of the paired-sample t-test comparing the Pre- and Post-IDI scores across the four key constructs.

Table 5: Paired-sample T-test Results

Variable	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Communication Skills				
Pre-CS	3.22	0.661	-7.63	<0.001
Post-CS	3.99	0.0893		
Academic Performance				
Pre-AP	3.33	0.955	-5.39	<0.001
Post-AP	4.14	0.167		
Social Mobility Skills				
Pre-SMS	3.49	0.92	-4.58	<0.001
Post-SMS	4.17	0.181		
General Attitude				
Pre-GA	3.54	0.781	-6.03	<0.001
Post-GA	4.23	0.241		
Final-year Undergraduate Students' Employability				
Pre-FUSE	3.33	1.10	-5.39	<0.001
Post-FUSE	4.21	0.195		

The results demonstrated statistically significant improvements across all four constructs ($p < 0.05$), confirming that the interventions had a measurable impact on students' employability-related skills. The effect sizes (Cohen's d) for all variables were moderate to large, further reinforcing the practical significance of the improvements.

Communication Skills (CS) exhibited the largest improvement ($t = -7.63$, $p < .001$), indicating that mock interview simulations and professional communication training were particularly effective.

Academic Performance (AP) showed a smaller but statistically significant increase ($t = -5.39$, $p < .001$), reflecting the impact of case study-based learning and industry collaborations.

Social Mobility Skills (SMS) also improved significantly ($t = -4.58$, $p < .001$), highlighting the benefits of mentorship programs and networking events.

General Attitude (GA) exhibited substantial growth ($t = -6.03$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that career coaching and goal-setting workshops had a meaningful impact on students' career confidence.

Final-year Undergraduate Students' Employability (FUSE) exhibited a significant improvement ($t = -5.39$, $p < .001$), indicating that the intervention program effectively enhanced students' confidence and preparedness for the job market. The notable increase in mean scores from 3.33 (SD

= 1.1) to 4.21 (SD = 0.195) suggests a substantial positive impact on students' perceived employability.

These findings empirically validate the effectiveness of structured interventions in improving the employability of university final-year undergraduate students. The next section of the study explores long-term implications and recommendations for sustaining and expanding these improvements.

5. Conclusions and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusions

This study highlights the importance of communication skills, academic performance, social mobility skills, and general attitude in determining the employability of final-year undergraduate students. The multiple linear regression and paired-sample t-test results demonstrate that targeted interventions can significantly enhance students' readiness for the job market.

This section discussed the major conclusions of the study based on the results obtained from the pre-IDI and post-IDI analysis, statistical tests, and qualitative interviews. The findings provided a comprehensive understanding of how these four key factors influence the employability of final-year students. This emphasis on final-year students is particularly important, as they represent a critical population at the threshold of entering the labor market, facing immediate employment challenges.

The study concluded that the Intervention Design Implementation (IDI) successfully enhanced graduates' readiness for the job market, aligning with existing research on employability development. These findings highlight the need for continuous career guidance in universities to help students develop resilience, adaptability, and long-term career strategies.

5.2 Recommendations

Universities should integrate structured employability training into their curricula. This study showed that interventions such as mock interviews, public speaking exercises, and resume-writing workshops significantly improved students' communication skills. Incorporating these training sessions into both core and elective courses, alongside opportunities for presentations, peer feedback, and role-playing exercises, is recommended. Institutions should also expand applied learning by partnering with industry to offer internships, case studies, and project-based assignments, which help bridge the gap between theory and practice. Furthermore, developing mentorship and networking programs that connect students with alumni and professionals—especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds—can enhance career opportunities (Tomlinson, 2017).

Career development centers should offer personalized support through goal-setting workshops, career coaching, and psychological resilience training to encourage proactive job seeking. Providing career assessment tools, structured mentorship programs, and regular career fairs can further enhance students' real-world exposure. Regularly collecting feedback from students, faculty, and employers will enable these centers to adjust their programs and stay aligned with industry needs (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

Policymakers must recognize employability training as a vital component of higher education by mandating career development programs that build communication, critical thinking, and networking skills. Allocating funds for internships, mentorship networks, and career placement initiatives—especially for underprivileged students—and promoting university-industry collaborations through financial incentives will help align educational outcomes with labor market needs. Establishing national benchmarks for employability outcomes can further guide program development (Cole & Tibby, 2013).

Employers are encouraged to collaborate with universities to enhance graduates' job readiness by participating in guest lectures, career workshops, and real-world projects. Internship programs should offer meaningful responsibilities to build practical skills in problem-solving and teamwork. Additionally, adjusting recruitment strategies to emphasize soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and leadership can ensure graduates are well-prepared for professional environments (Yorke & Knight, 2007).

5.3 Limitation and Further Study

Several limitations may have influenced the findings. First, the study's generalizability is restricted since it was conducted at Yunnan Technology and Business University in Kunming, China, with a specific student group; thus, the results may not apply to other institutions or regions with different contexts. Future research should involve multi-institutional studies across China and internationally to identify patterns and contextual differences.

Second, the study measured employability improvements only over a short 12-week period, without assessing long-term impacts on career success, job retention, or professional growth. A longitudinal approach is needed to determine the sustainability of these improvements.

Finally, the heavy reliance on self-reported data and the focus on four specific constructs suggest that future research should broaden the framework and incorporate additional

factors such as digital literacy, emotional intelligence, and employer perceptions, as well as objective indicators such as actual employment outcomes, for a more comprehensive understanding.

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