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From "employment placement" to "career empowerment": the transformation and reconstruction of the career education paradigm in higher education

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Abstract. Current employment work in higher education faces a deep paradox: institutional supply and resource input continue to increase, yet graduates' employment anxiety and career confusion have not been alleviated correspondingly. The crux lies in the fact that the dominant logic of university employment work remains a "placement logic"—centered on job matching, contract signing rate improvement, and process management, positioning students as objects to be placed rather than subjects of career construction. Drawing on Amartya Sen's capability approach, this paper proposes that university employment work should shift from "employment placement" to "career empowerment", fostering students' autonomous capacity to construct their careers in an uncertain professional world through three mechanisms: cognitive empowerment, relational empowerment, and action empowerment. This shift is not merely a technical adjustment of working methods but a fundamental reconstruction of the philosophy of career education.

Keywords: university employment work, career empowerment, capability approach, paradigm shift

1. Introduction

The employment problem of college graduates has never been a purely indicator-based issue, but it is being increasingly indicatorized. Contract signing rates, destination fulfillment rates, major-job matching rates, and the proportion of high-quality employment—these figures constitute the core yardsticks by which education administrative departments assess universities, universities assess schools, and schools assess counselors [1]. Under the cascading pressure, employment work has been compressed into a "battle" revolving around numbers.

Having served as a counselor at a local university for many years and participated in the entire employment work process, the author deeply feels one phenomenon: the higher the "administrative temperature" of employment work, the weaker the "sense of agency" among students. The university meticulously organizes job fairs, yet attendance is sparse; counselors push job information one by one, but responses are few; career guidance courses are fully scheduled, yet students remain flustered during the job-hunting season. It is not that students are not anxious; rather, they are positioned as "being arranged" throughout the entire employment process—arranged to attend lectures, arranged to submit resumes, arranged to sign agreements. When

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employment work treats students as objects to be "placed", students subconsciously treat employment as a "task to be completed" rather than a "life choice to be actively constructed".

This placement logic had its historical rationality. In the stage of elite higher education, when graduates were in short supply, employment work only needed to serve as a bridge for "information matching"; in the early stage of mass higher education, when the job market was still dominated by stable positions and career paths were relatively predictable, the placement logic could still cope [2]. However, what students face today is a highly uncertain professional world: accelerated technological iteration, blurred industry boundaries, the rise of flexible employment, and the normalization of career transitions. In such an environment, any "placement" can only solve temporary job matching but cannot address the repeated career choices that will arise throughout one's life. The core task of university employment work must shift from "helping students find a job" to "helping students acquire the ability to find direction".

2. Theoretical perspective: viewing career education through the capability approach

Amartya Sen's capability approach, proposed in Development as Freedom, provides an analytical framework that extends far beyond economic indicators for understanding employment issues. Sen's core proposition is that a person's condition should not be measured solely by the resources they possess or the outcomes they achieve, but by their "capabilities"—that is, the substantive freedom an individual actually has to choose a way of life they have reason to value [3]. A person with a job that they can only passively accept and that offers no development possibilities may not have higher capabilities than a person who is temporarily unemployed but possesses multiple options and the capacity for transition.

Introducing this perspective into university employment work means that the criteria for evaluating employment work effectiveness require fundamental adjustment. Employment rates measure the result of "having been placed", but cannot distinguish whether such placement is based on students' autonomous choice or passive compromise, nor can they reflect students' adaptability and choice space when facing future career changes. A student who signs an agreement after repeated persuasion by a counselor and a student who actively chooses the same position after rational exploration are identical in the statistics table, yet their sustainability of career development is fundamentally different.

The capability approach requires the focus of employment work to shift from "outcome states" to "capability construction". Specifically, students' career capabilities include at least three dimensions: cognitive self-awareness and understanding of the professional world, relational access to information and utilization of social networks, and action-oriented goal setting and strategic adjustment. These three dimensions together constitute the foundation for students to continuously make meaningful career choices in an uncertain professional environment. The fundamental task of employment work is to systematically cultivate these three capabilities, rather than merely completing temporary job matching during the graduation season.

3. The practical manifestations and functional limits of the placement logic

The placement logic manifests in three typical forms in university employment work, each revealing deep functional limitations in practice.

Indicator-driven goal displacement: When contract signing rates become the core assessment indicator, the substantive content of employment work is easily replaced by numerical logic. Universities sign "employment responsibility pledges" with schools, counselors are assigned individual responsibilities, and employment

work becomes "working for the numbers". The author experienced a typical case: a student received two admission notices—one a grassroots position related to his major but with lower pay, the other a sales position completely unrelated to his major but with considerable income. Under the pressure of contract signing rates, no one cared which was more suitable for him, only which could be "confirmed" more quickly. Indicators are originally a reflection of work effectiveness; once they become the purpose of the work itself, goal displacement occurs—means devour ends. This logic of reducing students to "resources to be allocated" shares a deep affinity with Marx's critique of treating labor power as an exchangeable commodity [4].

The service illusion of information push: The "informatization upgrade" of employment services is often regarded as the main means to improve work effectiveness. Recruitment information platforms, intelligent matching systems, and precise WeChat group pushes—technological means are becoming increasingly advanced, but the gap between information arrival rate and actual utilization rate is enormous. The reason is that information without cognitive preparation is useless. A student who is unclear about their career direction will only become more confused when faced with massive job pushes, and may even evade due to "choice overload". The placement logic assumes that "information asymmetry" is the core difficulty in employment, but the reality is that the more symmetric the information, the more it exposes the deeper problems of students' "self-awareness asymmetry" and "decision-making capability asymmetry".

The administrative inertia of process management: Employment work is arranged as a standardized assembly line: career guidance courses in the junior year, mobilization meetings in the senior year, recruitment in autumn, and a sprint for signing in spring. The smoother this assembly line runs, the more it may conceal differences in student needs. A student with a clear career direction and a completely confused student are arranged to participate in exactly the same guidance activities; the former finds it a waste of time, while the latter finds it superficial. Standardized processes can complete the administrative task of "employment management", but can hardly undertake the educational function of "career education".

4. Career empowerment: the paradigm reconstruction of career education

The shift from placement to empowerment centers on rebuilding the goal system and practice path of employment work around the growth of student agency. Specifically, it includes three levels of empowerment mechanisms.

4.1. Cognitive empowerment: helping students gain the dual vision of "understanding themselves" and "understanding the world"

Self-awareness and career awareness are two prerequisites for career decision-making, yet current college students are generally in a state of vagueness on both. The key to cognitive empowerment is not instilling theoretical models of career planning, but creating reflective situations that allow students to "be surprised by themselves". When guiding a career course, the author once designed an exercise: students were asked to write down their "three most engaged moments" over the past three years, and then analyze them from three dimensions—time allocation, ability utilization, and value satisfaction. For the first time, many students realized that the things they were truly engaged in completely contradicted their verbally declared "career goals". This kind of cognitive reconstruction based on one's own experience is far more profound than any interpretation of assessment reports. In terms of understanding the professional world, rather than organizing large-scale "career planning lectures", it is better to have students conduct in-depth interviews in small groups with alumni who graduated five years ago, genuinely understanding the daily texture and deeper logic of a

profession. The purpose of cognitive empowerment is to move students from "knowing the names of some professions" to "understanding the relationship between themselves and the professional world".

4.2. Relational empowerment: from "information transmission" to "social capital construction"

The acquisition of employment information has never been merely a technical issue; it is fundamentally a relational issue. Granovetter's classic research shows that weak ties have higher information value in job searches than strong ties [5]. However, the current mode of employment information transmission in universities is essentially a "broadcast model"—the university uniformly releases information and students passively receive it. This model ignores the substantive role of relational networks in employment. Relational empowerment requires employment work to serve as a "scaffold" for expanding students' social networks. At the school level, establish a normalized connection mechanism between alumni and current students—not just occasionally inviting a few distinguished alumni to give lectures, but enabling each student to have structured conversations with at least three alumni from different fields before their junior year; at the peer level, encourage the establishment of "career information mutual aid circles" among senior and junior students, allowing students returning from internships and successful job seekers to become the most vivid information nodes. The essence of relational empowerment is to transform students from "terminal receivers" of organizational relationships into "active constructors" of relational networks.

4.3. Action empowerment: replacing the placement presupposition of "one step to the right position" with "small-step experimentation"

The placement logic implicitly assumes that finding a "good job" is the endpoint of employment. But the reality of career development is precisely the opposite: the first job is merely one node in a long career, and its significance needs to be gradually revealed through subsequent choices and adjustments. Action empowerment requires legitimizing and institutionalizing "trial and error". Currently, the internship system in universities is mostly concentrated in the senior year, aims at "preparing for signing", and is disconnected from daily teaching. A more effective arrangement is to encourage students to engage in "fragmented career experiences" from their sophomore year: a short-term industry observation, a vacation position practice, or a cross-disciplinary project participation. These experiences need not directly lead to employment, but can help students gradually revise their career imaginings and narrow the gap between perception and reality. The evaluation criterion for action empowerment is not "whether it helped with signing", but "whether it promoted students' learning and adjustment through action".

5. Institutional support: enabling the empowerment logic to take root

If the paradigm shift remains only at the conceptual level, it will soon be pulled back to its original form by the inertia of old assessments. The implementation of career empowerment requires at least two institutional changes.

Redesigning the evaluation system: Shift the focus of employment work evaluation from "one-time outcome indicators" to "process-oriented capability indicators". Specifically, dimensions such as "assessment of career course learning outcomes", "tracking of internship experience quality", and "graduates' career adaptability six months after graduation" can be added, downgrading "contract signing rate" from a rigid assessment indicator to a reference datum. At the same time, within universities, employment work should be transformed from the "single-handed combat" of the student affairs system into a collaborative task involving

teaching, practice, alumni relations, and other systems, so that "career education" is truly embedded in the entire talent cultivation process.

Repositioning the role of counselors: Counselors are the direct executors of employment work, but under the placement logic, their role has been narrowed to "signing mobilizer" and "data entry clerk". Under the empowerment logic, the professional task of counselors should be "facilitators of career dialogue"—not telling students what to choose, but helping students learn how to choose. This requires counselors to possess professional competence in career counseling, rather than merely administrative abilities familiar with employment procedures. Career counseling training for counselors should become an important component of team building, enabling them to undertake the educational functions of cognitive empowerment, relational empowerment, and action empowerment.

6. Conclusion

University employment work stands at a juncture requiring deep reflection. The indicator-driven placement logic once played a historical role, but in an uncertain professional environment, its functional limits have been fully exposed. The shift from "employment placement" to "career empowerment" is not a simple negation of existing work but a recalibration of goals: the fundamental value of employment work lies not in "sending students out" during the graduation season, but in "growing them up" throughout their university career—cultivating the cognitive ability, relational resources, and action courage to face an uncertain world. This is precisely what distinguishes career education from talent agencies, and it is the inherent meaning of higher education's educational mission.

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