| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Research on Pathways to Enhance Employment Quality for Graduates from Applied Universities under the "Skill Matching" Perspective

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| **ABSTRACT**

Amid rapid technological change and evolving industrial structures, graduates from applied universities in China face growing employment challenges, marked by structural mismatches, low starting salaries, and limited career development. Drawing on existing research and recent labor market data, this study analyzes how skills mismatches—particularly gaps between university training and industry demands—serve as the core mechanism undermining employment quality. The findings indicate that insufficient practical training, weak university-enterprise collaboration, and inadequate evaluation and support systems exacerbate misalignment between graduate competencies and job requirements. To address these issues, the study proposes a skills-matching-oriented optimization framework, including curriculum reform integrating practical and cross-disciplinary training, strengthened collaborative talent cultivation with enterprises, enhanced employment guidance and dynamic skills tracking, and multi-stakeholder incentives supported by policy measures. These strategies collectively aim to improve job-skill alignment, elevate initial job performance, and support sustainable career development. The study offers theoretical insights and actionable guidance for universities and policymakers seeking to improve graduate employment quality.

| **KEYWORDS**

Applied university graduates; Employment quality; Skills matching

| **ARTICLE INFORMATION**

1. Introduction

Amid the rapid evolution of high-tech industries and changing industrial patterns, university graduates face increasingly complex employment challenges. According to the 2023 Mid-Year Report of the China Macroeconomic Forum, the youth unemployment rate (ages 16–24) in China rose sharply from 5.4% in May 2018 to 20.8% in May 2023, suggesting that youth employment difficulties may persist for the next decade. Additionally, the 2023 Spring Recruitment Talent Migration Report indicates that 49.71% of graduates from the 2022 autumn recruitment cohort planned to change jobs, highlighting both the instability of youth employment and the urgency of enhancing employment quality.

In response to these challenges, policymakers and universities have actively sought solutions. In December 2023, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security convened a conference on graduate employment and entrepreneurship, emphasizing the crucial role of universities in facilitating employment. Recently, universities have pursued teaching reforms aimed at improving talent cultivation quality. For instance, Tongji University launched the "Talent Cultivation Quality Improvement Project," while Sichuan University emphasized "enhancing monitoring feedback and coordinated reforms to elevate quality." These initiatives share a common goal: to narrow the gap between talent cultivation and labor market demands.

However, feedback from the job market indicates that graduates continue to face a core obstacle in the job search process—skills matching. Skills matching refers to the extent to which an individual's skills, abilities, and experience align with job requirements. As a vital component of the national talent pool, the degree of skills matching among university graduates not

only affects their employment quality but also bears on industrial upgrading and economic development. Therefore, based on an analysis of the employment status of graduates from applied universities in China, this study proposes coordinated optimization measures from the perspective of skills matching, with the aim of improving employment quality and alleviating structural employment contradictions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research on Employment Quality

Employment quality has emerged as a key concept for evaluating labor outcomes and has attracted considerable attention in labor economics, human resource management, and higher education research.

International studies have constructed multi-dimensional frameworks for employment quality, emphasizing not only income but also labor market security, working conditions, and other factors (Cazes et al., 2015). Sehnbruch (2020) proposed a multi-dimensional approach to assess employment quality in Latin American developing countries, highlighting disparities in performance and underscoring the need for policymakers to consider non-traditional factors.

In China, scholars have adapted these frameworks to develop a multi-dimensional measurement system encompassing income, social security, satisfaction, and career development. For example, studies using provincial panel data combined with entropy weighting method and cluster analysis have revealed significant regional disparities in employment quality, considering income levels, social protection, and job stability (Pan et al., 2024). Ding (2021) noted that high-level skilled positions are under-supplied in central and western regions, prompting talent migration toward the southeastern coastal areas. Furthermore, the emergence of the digital economy has brought the "digital skills gap" into focus, with research indicating mismatches between employees' digital skills and job requirements (Yang et al., 2025).

2.2 Skills Matching and Employment Quality

The relationship between skills matching and employment quality has been extensively studied.

Internationally, Becker (1964) proposed in his human capital theory that education and skill investments enhance labor productivity, yet misalignment between education and skill structures can reduce labor returns, providing a theoretical basis for studying skill mismatches. Subsequent research has examined over-skilling, under-skilling, and skill mismatches. Guvenen et al. (2015) argued that multi-dimensional skill mismatches can hinder wage growth and impede career mobility. Badillo-Amador (2013) further demonstrated that skill mismatches significantly reduce wage returns and diminish job satisfaction.

In China, researchers have examined skill mismatches in the context of structural labor market constraints. Wen et al. (2023) found that skill mismatches increase job turnover, while Lin (2023) reported that mismatches reduce job satisfaction and elevate turnover intentions. Skill mismatches also have broader consequences, including lower productivity, weaker innovation capacity, and higher operational costs for enterprises. Large-scale mismatches can exacerbate unemployment and slow economic growth. Thus, skills matching affects both individual career outcomes and national competitiveness.

Despite extensive literature on the "skills matching-employment quality" nexus, a systematic framework in the context of applied universities remains underdeveloped. This study aims to fill this gap by examining strategies for enhancing employment quality from a skill matching perspective, with both theoretical and practical significance.

3. Employment Quality Status of Applied University Graduates

3.1 Structural Contradictions Due to Low Job-Major Alignment

Structural contradictions in graduate employment have become increasingly prominent. In 2024, China had 11.79 million graduates, with Zhaopin data reporting a unit employment rate of 55.5%, down 2.1% from 2023. Graduates from applied universities exhibit particularly low alignment with major-related positions; only approximately 48% enter positions closely related to their field within six months of graduation.

This mismatch stems from a disconnect between educational supply and industry demand. Although applied universities emphasize practical courses, they often focus on simulations and campus projects, offering limited exposure to authentic workplace scenarios. Emerging industries and modern services demand cross-disciplinary competencies, including data analysis, technical operations, and cross-department collaboration, in which graduates are often deficient. Consequently, many graduates cannot perform core job tasks immediately, creating a "foundation-heavy, frontier-sparse" and "theory-intensive, scenario-light" situation (Wang et al., 2025).

Information asymmetry further exacerbates low alignment. Employers largely assess skills via resumes, certificates, and interviews, which poorly capture actual capabilities. The absence of effective feedback mechanisms prevents universities from timely updating curricula, perpetuating structural mismatches.

3.2 Low Starting Salaries and Limited Career Development

The China Graduate Employment Salary Survey (2023) reports that the average starting salary for applied university graduates is 4,320 RMB/month, below the 4,800 RMB/month for comprehensive university graduates. Low starting salaries constrain both immediate earnings and long-term career growth.

This issue primarily arises from skill mismatches. Job competency theory posits that closer alignment between employee abilities and job requirements enhances performance and promotion potential (Spencer et al., 2008). Applied university graduates often lack practical experience, resulting in deficiencies in communication, problem-solving, and stress management. Career motivation and value misalignment further reduce engagement and increase turnover, limiting skill accumulation and employer willingness to invest in training.

3.3 Systemic Contradictions Due to Incomplete Evaluation and Support Mechanisms

Current employment quality evaluation systems and market support mechanisms are inadequate, limiting systemic guarantees for skills matching. Only about 37% of universities have long-term tracking systems for graduate employment quality, and applied universities often focus solely on employment rate and major alignment, neglecting salary, career potential, and skill-job fit.

Shortcomings in market and policy support exacerbate structural issues. University-enterprise collaborations and internships are often short-term and superficial, failing to provide sustained skill feedback. Public employment services lack targeted guidance, leaving graduates without systematic support for skill enhancement, career planning, or job information. Only about 28% of graduates receive career guidance or skill training opportunities.

Even employed graduates frequently experience persistent skill-job mismatches, leading to stagnation in career development and skill accumulation, reducing overall employment quality. The core systemic issue lies in insufficient coordination among universities, enterprises, and government in information sharing, training, and employment evaluation, hindering comprehensive improvements in graduate employment quality. Figure 3-1 illustrates the analysis of employment status.
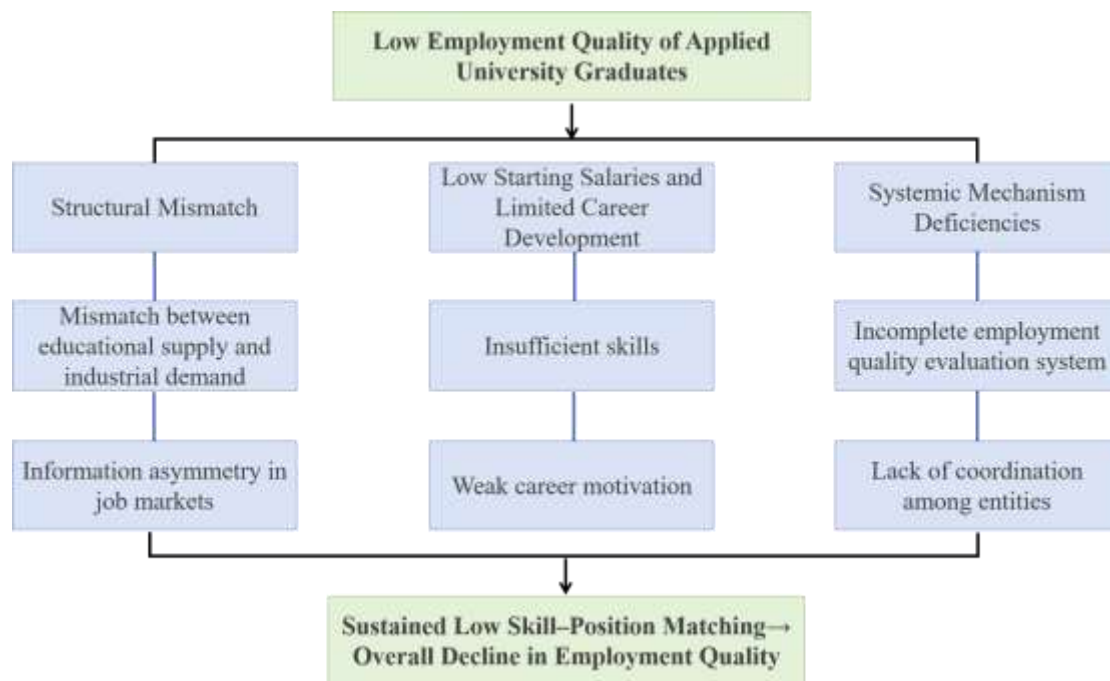

Figure 1 The status of employment quality

4. Employment Quality Optimization from a Skills Matching Perspective

4.1 Optimizing Curriculum and Practical Training

Employment quality is affected by curriculum-job mismatches. Most curricula are theory-heavy, with limited practical components, leaving graduates insufficiently prepared in project management, technical application, and teamwork. This extends adaptation periods, reduces initial performance, and constrains career development.

Universities should optimize curricula to integrate theory and practice. This includes offering cross-disciplinary and frontier technology courses, exposing students to multi-dimensional skills such as data analysis, technical applications, project management, and teamwork. Practical experience should be embedded via enterprise projects, joint labs, and simulated

management tasks. Curricula should be dynamically updated to align with industry skill demand. This dual-track optimization enhances professional skill alignment, improving employment matching and initial job performance.

4.2 University-Enterprise Collaborative Training

Competencies depend not only on knowledge but also on situational awareness, communication, teamwork, stress management, and motivation. Graduates often lack these due to gaps between campus teaching and workplace scenarios.

Universities should collaborate with enterprises to integrate real-world practice into education. Joint course design, training modules, and projects allow students to encounter authentic work challenges. Enterprises can provide targeted internships, pre-job training, and rotations, enabling graduates to accumulate experience and improve competencies. A closed-loop of "campus training—enterprise practice—feedback" fosters situational skills, teamwork, adaptability, motivation, and confidence, shortening adaptation periods and supplying enterprises with job-ready talent.

4.3 Employment Guidance and Skills Tracking

Optimizing skills matching requires market support. Current career guidance focuses on resumes, interviews, and job postings, lacking systematic assessment, career planning, or job matching services.

Universities should implement dynamic skill assessment and tracking systems, evaluating graduates' skills, job fit, and career trajectories, feeding results back into curricula and practice. Systematic career guidance—including job analysis, skill enhancement recommendations, and planning—helps students select suitable positions. Alumni networks and enterprise feedback enable long-term tracking, reducing information asymmetry and matching costs, enhancing employment efficiency, stability, and continuous skill accumulation.

4.4 Multi-Stakeholder Incentives and Policy Support

Skills matching improvement relies on multi-level incentives and policy support. Universities can encourage participation through rewards, credit recognition, and priority placement. Enterprises can provide paid internships, rotations, and career paths. Government policies and funding can support collaborative training, project grants, and employment incentives.

Through coordinated mechanisms among policy, education, enterprises, and students, skills matching improves, enhancing initial employment quality, career potential, and the supply of high-quality talent, while supporting regional industrial upgrading and economic growth.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzed the causes of declining employment quality among applied university graduates from a skills matching perspective and proposed optimization strategies. Skill mismatch is the central mechanism, rooted in delays between university supply and industry demand, gaps between practical ability and job requirements, and labor market information asymmetry. Graduates' competencies often do not fully align with job requirements, limiting performance and career development.

Proposed strategies include: (1) optimizing curricula and practical training; (2) establishing university-enterprise collaborative training to enhance situational competencies; (3) implementing employment guidance and skills tracking systems to improve job selection and market adaptability; and (4) leveraging incentives and policy support to promote multi-stakeholder coordination.

These strategies can effectively alleviate skill mismatches, enhance employment quality and career potential, provide enterprises with high-quality talent, and promote regional industrial and economic development. This study offers practical and theoretical guidance for university talent cultivation reforms and employment policy formulation.

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